# Is Your Curriculum Common Core–Ready?

*Education leaders can use these strategies to ready their curriculum for Common Core implementation.*

**From "10 Tips for Migrating Your Curriculum to the Common Core"**

In 2013, the Center on Education Policy (CEP) surveyed deputy state superintendents of education on a wide range of issues. The responses reveal widespread acknowledgment that the Common Core standards are more rigorous than previous, individual state standards, and they will be instrumental in improving students' English language arts and mathematics skills (www.cep-dc.org).

That said, the 38 states that responded to the CEP survey also acknowledged that implementing the standards will require substantial changes in curriculum and instruction. One of the key reasons for those changes is the way in which the new standards overlay a demand for not just rote memorization of facts but for an understanding of material deep enough for students to effectively integrate and apply the learned knowledge. The Partnership for the Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) and the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) are developing instruments to measure that integration and application.

Although the goal of the Common Core standards—to achieve student readiness for college or work in a technologically advanced global economy by the end of high school—is clear, what's less clear is how district and local

administrators, educators, and other staff will make the transition. Some key questions remain:

- How do the new standards differ from a state's existing standards?
- What methodologies or approaches can best address the challenges to administrators, teachers, and students of stepping up to more rigorous standards?
- Where the standards describe new skills and content for students to learn (and for teachers to teach), will funds be allocated for new curriculum and materials?
- What kinds of professional development will teachers need, especially when it comes to helping them lead students to the higher-order thinking and independence the Common Core standards demand?
- Who will pay for the training, and how will time be carved out for educators to participate in it?
- How will students be assessed, and what are the consequences for failing to meet the new requirements?

Those questions and many more are foremost as states prepare to fully implement the Common Core standards. Curriculum developers and education leaders can use the following 10 strategies to move quickly from wherever their starting point may be to achieving compliance with the Common Core standards.

## 1. Identify and Engage All Stakeholders

Many schools and districts make a common misstep as they begin to adopt the Common Core standards, say experts: they don't include all key stakeholders at the start—from teachers, administrators, and district leaders to support staff and parents.

"I worry about states and districts that, with a small group of people, take on the responsibility of what we might call aligning the Common Core to their standards," says Carolyn Felux, education director of Math Solutions, a company founded by renowned math educator and author Marilyn Burns. Math Solutions is dedicated to improving math instruction in grades K–8.

Felux says it is especially important for teachers to participate in the process of comparing existing standards with the Common Core standards and in developing strategies for ensuring that curriculum content, delivery, and assessment will meet the new expectations. They shouldn't just be handed a new binder of standards.

However, it is not only those who deliver the instruction who need that kind of knowledge and experience; district leaders, administrators, and parents must also be included.

"Some districts provide information just for the teachers," says Jennifer Brinson of Common Curriculum Consulting.

They plan training and staff development for their teachers, and somehow administrators and district leaders get left out of that loop. The thinking is often that these people don't have to deliver the information, so they don't need to be involved in the training. But what districts ultimately realize is that this plan does not work out very well, because now the people who are charged with making decisions or charged with being the liaison between the schools and the community don't have the knowledge, vocabulary, and understanding to bridge that gap.

Brinson adds that parents must also be involved from early on, but that the message about Common Core standards as they apply to the school and the school district must be separated from discussions about individual students. "It's very important to get parents involved, to help them understand what the changes are and why the changes are occurring," she asserts.

Of note, districts need to ensure that all parents and guardians have access to information about the Common Core standards and their implementation by providing that information in a variety of formats.

## 2. Perform a Gap Analysis

One of the first and most essential approaches that schools and districts pursue is to determine how their state standards differ from the Common Core standards, especially where gaps between the two sets of standards occur. For example, do the state standards address a particular skill at Grade 3, whereas the Common Core standards address that skill at Grade 4? Do the Common Core standards contain content that existing state standards do not covered at all? Conversely, do the existing standards cover content that the Common Core standards do not mention?

Experts recommend that schools create teams to conduct the gap analysis or to be the point people for analyzing any gap analyses that districts or state departments of education may already have conducted.

Michael Horning Jr., president of 3rd Learning, an education technology company that spun off from the University at Buffalo, says it's important for schools to conduct such a standards "crosswalk" in order to develop an intimate knowledge of the new standards and how they compare with existing standards:

You actually do two crosswalks: One would go from your current standards to the Common Core, and the other would go from the Common Core back to your current standards. Not all existing standards will connect with standards in the Common Core, and, likewise, not all Common Core standards will connect with existing standards. This procedure will show you where different standards have moved from one grade to another and whether some have been newly added or eliminated altogether.

Once a gap analysis has been completed, educators at the local and district levels can identify (1) where materials and resources need to be shared between and among

students are empowered to apply their knowledge effectively in real-world situations, says Marji Freeman, director of professional development at Math Solutions.

"With Common Core, students are expected to apply higher-order thinking and be able to argue points and back up their arguments with data and evidence," explains Freeman. "Many teachers were not taught this way, which makes it a challenge for them to teach this way. Professional development that provides experiential training will give teachers the tools they need to support students in this newer model of thinking and learning."

The specific training teachers will require revolves around better strategies to draw students into classroom discussions, according to Susan Gertler, chief academic officer at Achieve3000, a company offering differentiated online instruction. "To reach the college and career readiness levels in Common Core, we have to think about how to develop students' listening and speaking skills, as well as their reading and writing skills," says Gertler. "One way to accomplish that is to create an environment in which discussions are going on in the classroom—discussions in which everybody is truly participating. It's critical that we provide professional development that empowers every teacher to achieve this."

grade levels, (2) where materials and resources are absent altogether, and (3) how materials and resources must be differentiated to enable all students to access the curriculum aligned with the new standards.

Districts and schools will need to ensure that they have all the resources available—including training, curriculum materials, and appropriate assessments—to scaffold students and enable their progress.

## 3. Provide Professional Development

Although there are areas of disagreement when it comes to the Common Core standards, most would agree on one point: a key to a smooth transition is purposeful, pragmatic professional development for educators.

According to the CEP survey, states that have adopted the Common Core standards are taking various actions to help teachers master the new standards and use them to guide instruction. All of the states that responded to survey questions about teachers are developing materials for professional development, and all are carrying out statewide professional development initiatives for teachers about the new standards.

Of the 38 Common Core–adopting states that responded to the survey (including the District of Columbia),

- 27 are aligning the content of teacher preparation programs with the CCSS.
- 25 are modifying or creating educator evaluation systems that hold educators accountable for student mastery of the standards.
- 23 are developing and implementing new-teacher induction programs to help new teachers master the standards.

One of the most important elements educators will need to learn is how to deliver instruction so that

## 4. Visualize the Standards' Full "Trajectory"

Experts agree that it's important to look at any educational standard vertically. Don't look at only the grade you teach or the grades for which you serve as an administrator. Rather, look at (at least) a grade below and a grade above to determine what students should have already learned and what will be expected of them next. The Common Core standards, in particular, are oriented in that fashion.

For example, the Common Core standards are divided into strands, each of which is "anchored" by a College and Career Readiness (CCR) standard that defines general, cross-disciplinary expectations that are identical across six grades (K–5 or 6–12). Those CCR anchor standards must be met to prepare students to enter college and workforce-training programs ready to succeed. Students advancing through the grades are expected to meet each year's grade-specific standards while working to meet the more general expectations described by the CCR anchor standards.

The Common Core documents are laid out to clearly identify what students should have already learned and what they will learn after a particular grade. In addition, there is a common progression of standards (and of language describing the standards) throughout grade levels, a feature that has not always been included in individual state curriculum frameworks.

Several interviewees pointed out that once curriculum corresponding to the Common Core trajectory is established, students can be assessed using the same measure in which the standards' literacy objectives are defined—Lexile bands. Using Lexile bands adds precision to the question of "from where my students come" and enables more effective use of differentiated instruction techniques to empower students to achieve the Common Core's literacy objectives. Research has proved the efficacy of differentiated instruction to accelerate students' reading achievement.

Brinson recommends that educators team to evaluate their current learning materials and questioning models and to determine the changes necessary to meet the expectations of the Common Core standards. "Look at your current work—the assignments, the tasks, the questioning—and dissect them against what is going on," she adds.

## 5. Think about How Standards Cross Curricular Disciplines

With the Common Core standards, reading, writing, speaking, listening, and language standards apply across content areas. Curriculum, therefore, needs to enable those standards to be addressed and assessed, regardless of the discipline. Likewise, students must be provided with materials that will enable them to access content whatever their reading level.

Educators and consultants say the new standards will require an entirely new level of collaboration among grade-level and interdisciplinary teams. "It's important to promote cross-curricular conversations among teachers, and between them and those who write the curriculum, to see that curriculum does not occur in a vacuum," says 3rd Learning's Horning. "The Common Core standards force these cross-curricular conversations among teachers. I'm not just teaching English; I'm not just teaching science; I'm not just teaching math. I'm also responsible for the inclusion of these Common Core standards."

Though rare in middle and high schools, our interviews revealed instances where science and language arts teachers, for example, already coordinate the use of differentiated instruction so that science readings are used to help spur literacy gains, while simultaneously enabling the science teacher to accelerate the pace of instruction. Moreover, in such scenarios, students' improved domain-specific literacy boosts mastery of the content standards.

The key to that integrated instruction approach, educators state, is regular meetings where teachers work together to share their understanding of the content and how to teach it so that students can learn the material.

A challenge to the approach, however, is in the availability of the materials required, and their quality. "Schools will be challenged to make sure they provide materials that are rich enough, engaging enough, and relevant enough to draw students into classroom discussions," says Gertler of Achieve3000. She adds, "One answer is to focus materials on real-world events that students have opinions about and to create a routine that pushes students to express their opinions. We have to make sure to provide teachers with the supporting materials they need to have these engaging discussions and debates in the classroom."

Another challenge is time. An elementary school teacher in Massachusetts told us: "We actually welcome the increased rigor that the Common Core standards will bring. There's some concern, though, about where to find the time and the mind share to effectively make the shift. Districts and building principals really need to be thinking about how to enable staff to work together and be trained in such a way that Common Core is paid much more than just lip service, or the transition will take a long, long time."

## 6. Create a Repository of Lesson Plans and Other Resources

As noted earlier, the migration to the Common Core standards may require educators to teach new material in new ways. But before teachers start developing lesson plans from scratch, a concerted effort should be made to pool knowledge, materials, and resources.

For example, teaching the distributive property in math may be new to one teacher, but chances are good that another teacher within the building, or even the district, has taught the concept and has materials that will form at least a foundation for developing curriculum aligned with the new standards.

Although districts may be unable to formally endorse such materials, Common Curriculum Consulting's Brinson recommends that they provide space on their intranets for educators to share those materials, as well as a forum for discussing best practices and lessons learned.

"With the move to Common Core, teachers may find themselves teaching things they have never taught before and not teaching things they have taught for years," says Brinson. "To ensure that teachers are not creating or buying materials that already exist among their colleagues, dedicate part of a Website to the Common Core, including a separate piece for teachers. They can upload lessons, units, and so forth. None of it may be vetted, but teachers are expected to use their professional judgment."

That type of repository will go a long way toward filling some of the curricular gaps that will no doubt appear as teachers start to develop lessons and instructional strategies aligned with the Common Core standards.

## 7. Consider *All* Students' Needs

The National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers believe that all students should be held to the Common Core standards, including English-language learners and students with disabilities. Educators will need to identify the services, accommodations, classroom support, and resources that will be needed to make Common Core standards accessible to special-education students and English-language learners.

The Common Core standards make those requirements explicit in two documents: *Application of Common Core State Standards for English Language Learners* and *Application to Students with Disabilities*.

Given the requirement that all students, regardless of their individual circumstances, must learn the same curriculum, with the same content demands and skill requirements, technology that provides the scaffolds and the differentiation that are needed to make every student successful may quickly evolve into a solution of choice. Many districts and schools have already started to meet the challenges of English-language learners and special-needs students through the use of differentiated online instruction solutions that can be applied in various settings, that can meet the varied needs of student populations, and that can ease the demands on teachers.

In conformance with all legal requirements and to meet the expectations and increased rigor of the Common Core standards, schools and school districts must ensure that all students have the ability to access the same curriculum through multiple means of learning, and they must provide meaningful opportunities for students to demonstrate their knowledge.

Experts agree that doing so will require close and ongoing collaboration among education leaders, general-education and special-education teachers, and parents and guardians, especially when it comes to reviewing and updating the goals and objectives of students' individualized education programs.

## 8. Follow the Leading Assessment Consortia

One of the big questions about the Common Core standards is what assessments will be used to measure the progress of students, schools, districts, and states.

Most states have aligned with one or the other of the two consortia: PARCC and SBAC. Interviewees recommend that educators and parents follow the work of the consortia as the assessments are developed.

PARCC, for example, offers newsletters, webinars, and other resources that provide insight into its progress, including calls for and response to public feedback. The PARCC assessment has recently completed its design phase and is now in development, with pilot and field testing under way, and full operational administration of PARCC assessments is expected in the 2014–15 school year.

The SBAC likewise provides a rich set of materials and resources that offer insight into the development of its assessments, including work plans and procurement updates. It's working along a schedule similar to PARCC's. Full implementation is planned for 2014–15, with ongoing follow-up research and evaluation.

## 9. Provide Common Core Information in Many Formats

Experts agree that a key to effective migration of curriculum is to ensure that all stakeholders have access to information on demand and in a variety of formats, including text, webinars, and videos.

Further, extra effort is needed to ensure that everyone who needs to know, knows. One educator explains that her school formed a committee for migrating existing literacy curriculum to the Common Core. The committee's first task was the crosswalk. After investing much time and engaging members of the respective grade-level teams, the committee discovered that its state department of education had already done the job. Although the committee members certainly learned through the process, they could have focused their efforts on other aspects had they known about the resource.

Experts recommend dedicating space on district and school Websites to that type of information, as well as recommendations for education leaders on how the information can be leveraged to meet the Common Core standards goals of districts and schools.

## 10. Step Back and Reflect

One of the hallmarks of a good teacher is the ability to reflect. Did that lesson work for that student? Why or why not? How can I differentiate the material to help the student fully understand?

The shift to the Common Core standards is one of the most significant changes in education in many years, and that kind of thoughtful reflection needs to be part of the migration efforts—now and over time.

"It's best to avoid the idea that I am going to just do what I have always done and just tweak it," says Brinson. "If we approach the Common Core that way, we're missing a huge opportunity as educators. It's important to step back and assess what these changes really mean, so we can make the kinds of changes that really mean something—how we change our curriculum and methodologies to meet the new standards. Some districts are already on this trajectory, but for others it will take a lot of reflection."

Finally, suggests Achieve3000's Gertler, part of that reflection should be about differentiating between short- and long-term plans for change. "The change is not going to happen immediately; states, districts, principals, and teachers should all consider thoughtfully and strategically what must be changed immediately and what can wait."

This article is based on the Achieve3000 white paper, "10 Steps for Migrating Your Curriculum to the Common Core," available at www.achieve3000.com/resources/white-papers.