



GETTING COMMON CORE RIGHT

WHAT WE'VE LEARNED

Five years ago, states began to adopt the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). The standards were developed through a collaborative and bipartisan process led by the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers with input from a wide range of educators and researchers.

Today, 43 states, DC, four territories and the Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA) have the standards in place.

The Common Core standards are an important piece in our nation's drive to ensure that every child graduates from high school ready for success in college and in a career. Such standards help navigate the growing issues of transiency in the United States, ensuring that as children move, from school district to school district or state to state, what is learned in a given grade is the same, regardless of zip code. The standards make it possible that in the United States, a fifth grade education means the same thing in Oregon as it does in Mississippi as it does in Massachusetts.

The Voices of Practitioners and Community Members

From the beginning, educators, parents, school boards, principals and community leaders have voiced genuine concern about the narrow focus on the standards themselves and the assessments aligned to them. They called for greater attention to how those standards are unpacked and translated into classroom instruction at all grades. They asked when strong instructional materials and professional development truly aligned with the standards would be put into place in their schools and communities. They asked to be given a meaningful role in the implementation process.

Beginning in early 2014, a number of organizations and education leaders reiterated the need for a careful approach to implementation and called for a delay on high-stakes consequences tied to standardized tests aligned to the standards, including the **American Federation of Teachers (AFT)**, the **National Education Association (NEA)**, the **Learning First Alliance (LFA)** and the **Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation**.

In April 2014, Learning First Alliance (LFA) took the rare step of issuing a statement representing the unanimous opinion of all 14 of its member organizations, representing more than 10 million parents, teachers, school board members, building principals, superintendents, district leaders and community leaders:

“The Learning First Alliance believes that Common Core State Standards have the potential to transform teaching and learning and provide all children with the knowledge and skills necessary for success in the global community.

To meet this potential, teachers, administrators, parents and communities are working together to align the standards with curriculum, instruction and assessment. Their work—which includes providing the pre-service and professional learning opportunities educators need to effectively teach to the standards, making necessary adaptations to implementation plans as work progresses and field-testing efforts to ensure proper alignment—will take time.

Rushing to make high-stakes decisions such as student advancement or graduation, teacher evaluation, school performance designation or state funding awards based on assessments of the standards before they have been fully and properly implemented is unwise. In light of recent developments, we suggest a transition period that respects the time good implementation requires.”

GETTING IT RIGHT

LFA recognizes that there is more to successful implementation than simply more time—and that effective implementation is already occurring in states large and small and in communities urban, suburban and rural. There are a number of similarities as to why their work is successful.

That is why LFA set out on a national search for successful CCSS implementation practice, an initiative focused on what states and districts are doing to “get it right.” Working with its member organizations, the Alliance began to identify those places that are demonstrating best and promising practice on implementation, seeking to capture their stories so that other states and districts can learn from their experiences over the past five years.

WHAT IT TAKES

Based on the first set of **Get It Right** stories, LFA has identified common strategies shared by these states and districts. From these experiences, we are able to see what has worked in CCSS implementation—and why it has worked. These lessons provide an important blueprint on how to take advantage of extra implementation time and make sure we are acting in the best interests of children, families, educators and the community at large.

From large states like California to small states like Delaware, and from districts like Toledo (OH) and Joplin (MO), there are three key lessons we can take from **Get It Right** on CCSS implementation:

- The need to **engage a broad community**—including teachers, parents, school boards and community leaders—from the start of implementation;
- The importance of **separating the standards from the assessments**, helping all stakeholders understand what they mean and how they apply to the classroom; and
- The imperative of **taking the time to get it right**, realizing implementation is a multi-year process that requires real attention to instructional materials, lessons, high-quality professional development and community engagement.

Engage A Broad Community

Throughout conversations with practitioners and leaders at the school, district and state level, the value of integrating all key stakeholders—including teachers, families and others—in the process of standards implementation was repeatedly reinforced.

From the start, **Kentucky** has engaged teachers, district leaders, higher education institutions, the business community and the early learning community in the implementation process. Teachers have been surveyed regularly to gauge their concerns and needs, and a communication plan has been in place since early on that has included outreach to parents and businesses.

“As people learn more about the work we’re doing and see the curriculum implemented, all of a sudden it’s not the scary thing.”

Dr. C.J. Huff, superintendent, Joplin Schools, Missouri

“Keep in mind that...our standards in Delaware haven’t changed since the 90s. This was a big shift, a big change not only for our students, our educators but for our parents, and it was really important to get them to understand not only why we were making this change but how we were making the change and how we were going to engage them along this process.”

Dr. Terri Hodges, president, Delaware PTA

“You have to involve the practitioners, because if you want a realistic approach to implementing these standards you’re going to have to talk to the individuals who are implementing them on a day-to-day basis. When you talk to those folks, you’ll get a real picture of what is needed.”

Kevin Dalton, president, Toledo Federation of Teachers, Ohio

“As a teacher, it was wonderful to focus on what did my students need to learn and what standards I needed to make sure that they hit.”

Tanya Golden, teacher and leader, ABC Unified School District, California

In **Delaware**, representatives from multiple stakeholder groups have been involved in ongoing workgroups to look at best practices. That has included bringing teachers to the table to talk about their specific needs in terms of professional development, resources and communication supports for speaking with parents and students.

In **California**, teachers, parents, higher education institutions, philanthropies and district leaders have all been intentionally engaged in the process of implementing the standards. The state board of education has worked carefully to align policies across the K-20 sector to increase the prospect of a successful result for students.

Ohio’s teachers unions have been working intensively to ensure that teachers have both voice and sufficient resources in the transition to new standards. Teams of teachers have been engaged in creating curriculum maps for each grade level and subject area since the adoption of the standards in 2010. Public forums have been held for parents at libraries, schools and other venues to discuss the standards and the implementation process.

Separate The Standards From Assessments

Local and state leaders and practitioners echo calls from the national level: the standards must be considered separately from the assessments that evaluate student learning that occurs under them. Stakeholders need to be able to understand what the standards mean and how they get applied to the classroom. And perhaps most importantly, the high stakes decisions that may be associated with testing need to be delayed until the standards and accompanying instructional materials, professional development and other resources are in place.

In **Kentucky**, the state worked with teachers to develop independent statewide assessments based on the new standards that were also aligned to college-readiness exams such as ACT. Leaders are now considering which assessments—beyond multiple choice— can best evaluate the types of skills (problem-solving and critical thinking, for example) that the standards emphasize and that businesses are looking for in new graduates.

California has taken a phased approach to tying teacher evaluation to student performance on CCSS-aligned assessments. The state is also using the Smarter Balanced assessment as a system to support widespread improvement, rather than just a summative test or an opportunity to punish poor performers.

Nationally recognized expert on assessment Linda Darling-Hammond spoke specifically to the need for performance assessments that better measure student achievement and growth, moving beyond multiple-choice standardized tests to assess the skills that college and career ready standards actually ask for, such as communicating in multiple forms.

“The most successful part is that it’s been a process. Most of our districts started three years ago and have rolled it out systematically. ... We have given time for our educators to make the transition from the last set of standards to these standards.”

Dayna Richardson, chair,
Kansas Learning First Alliance

“I think the most important lesson for all of us is to find the time to collaborate. I think the biggest reason we don’t collaborate is because it takes time. Whenever you are creating something, the people doing the work must be the ones creating the output that they’re going to use. And I know that for us, we’ve had more than 144 teachers on Common Core study teams for the past two years. And that’s been very effective in creating support.”

Richard Saldana, teacher and leader,
ABC Unified School District, California

Take The Time To Get It Right

States and districts that are starting to see implementation take root and yield benefit for students have all spent years working to “get it right.” Leaders and practitioners have recognized that this is a multi-year effort and a true process, requiring extensive planning, engagement and discussion, with meaningful roles in the process for key stakeholders.

Kansas adopted the standards in the fall of 2010, and has spent nearly four years implementing them across the state.

Kentucky was the first state to adopt the Common Core, and the process has taken place over four years. They began by convening 500 teachers from across the state to “unpack” the standards. District leaders were brought in to create a specific plan for each district’s implementation.

California’s state board of education is committed to continued work to ensure that all of its thousands of teachers receive sufficient professional development, looking at the 2019-20 school year as a benchmark for a realistic goal for full implementation.

Delaware has spent more than three years building and implementing a detailed timeline for adoption, engaging key stakeholders, setting expectations, looking at the resources needed, considering best practices from other states, and determining how best to serve particular student populations—including English language learners and students from urban and rural communities.

NEXT STEPS

LFA will continue to identify those states, districts and schools that are getting it right, capturing what is working in different contexts and why, and disseminating best and promising practices more broadly.

Many states and districts, like those profiled already, are experiencing successful results from implementation and should be encouraged to continue forward progress. But others are encountering significant obstacles in the process. Thus, LFA will continue to be a voice that encourages states and districts to focus on implementation and the time and attention necessary to do it well. It takes courage for states to advocate for this approach, but the results ultimately will be beneficial to teachers, schools and students.

Finally, LFA is eager to hear from more districts and schools and to highlight their contributions so that others can learn from their experiences. Together, we can maximize the benefit of higher standards and get it right for the next generation of learners.