Implementing Common Core State Standards in California: A Report from the Field

Stanford University:
Milbrey McLaughlin
Laura Glaab
Isabel Hilliger Carrasco

June 2014

PACE

Implementing Common Core State Standards in California: A Report from the Field

Stanford University:
Milbrey McLaughlin
Laura Glaab
Isabel Hilliger Carrasco[1]

PACE

http://www.edpolicyinca.org

The implementation challenge

California's State Board of Education adopted the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in August of 2010. The CCSS have been adopted by 45 states across the country. They aim to articulate consistent, clear standards for what students are expected to learn and be able to do in mathematics and English Language Arts from kindergarten through Grade 12, and to focus educators' attention on "fewer, higher, and deeper standards."[2]

According to State Board of Education President Michael Kirst, "This changes almost everything."[3] The CCSS implicate every aspect of teaching, learning and assessment. In contrast to the scripted curricula and multiple choice assessments of the past, students will need to demonstrate an understanding of core ideas, carry out research and inquiry related to real world tasks, collaborate in problem solving, and communicate their use and interpretation of evidence in clear, compelling ways. To support the learning and skill development sought by CCSS, teachers' classroom ap-

proaches will need to provide opportunities for students to engage in problem-solving, and construct evidence-based arguments. Teachers must move away from traditional practices that place them in the role of 'sage on the stage' and reward students for rote memorization. School leaders must support their teachers as they make these transitions, while engaging parents and community members in new ways. The practices and activities that faithful implementation of the CCSS would require are a long stretch for most California educators, and run contrary in many respects to deep-rooted features of teaching and learning in the United States.

The adoption and implementation of the CCSS coincides with the implementation of the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF), which shifts responsibility and accountability in California's education system from the state to local schools and school districts. The decentralization of authority under LCFF means that strategies for CCSS implementation and decisions about the allocation of resources to support implementation

---

[2] Kirst 2013

[3] ibid

must be made at the local level, in consultation with parents and the broader community. The state still has some key roles to play, as we discuss below, but most key decisions about CCSS implementation are left up to local actors.

One natural consequence of decentralized governance is wide variation across schools and school districts in both the pace and scale of implementation efforts. Good will toward CCSS is found almost everywhere in California, but the state's nearly 1,000 school districts vary dramatically in terms of demographics, wealth, politics, and location, and variation on these dimensions is closely tied to differences in teachers' experience and capacities, available technical and human infrastructure, resources to support professional development and materials acquisition, and students' learning needs. These differences in turn shape the challenges and opportunities that local educators face in developing CCSS implementation strategies.

For instance, CCSS implementation in small, low-wealth Central Valley districts serving high numbers of ELD students is a fundamentally different undertaking than CCSS implementation in the high-wealth districts of Silicon Valley. Likewise, large urban districts wrestle with significantly more complicated logistical and strategic implementation challenges than do smaller and more homogeneous suburban districts.

In this report we present some initial findings on the early implementation of CCSS in California. We first report on our interviews with educators in all regions of the state, and on their views of how implementation is proceeding in their schools and districts. We then review some of the key challenges that local educators identify as they move forward with CCSS implementation, and highlight areas where districts, schools and counties will require more or different support as they continue their implementation efforts. We conclude with some observations on the current state of implementation in California, and what it will take to ensure that implementation of the CCSS leads to lasting improvements in the quality of teaching and learning in California's schools.

Talking with the field

To develop a picture of early CCSS implementation in California we talked with educators in diverse settings across the state, including school districts and charter schools in rural and northern California, the Central Valley, the Inland Empire, Southern California, and the Bay Area (see Figure 1). We spoke with educators in 10 County Offices of Education (COEs) and 20 districts, administrators of four Charter Management Organizations, and representatives from two state level organizations about their perspectives on CCSS implementation.

We asked district administrators how they had allocated the funds that the state provided to support CCSS implementation. What was their strategic approach to CCSS implementation? What challenges had they faced, and what resources had they found valuable or lacking? We asked COE administrators about the implementation responses they saw in their counties, and about their approaches to working with districts. What kinds of resources were they able to provide? Where were the areas of greatest need? We asked charter school administrators about the CCSS responses of their schools, and about the implementation strategies they pursued. In addition to our interviews we attended several meetings that sought to offer guidance and assistance to educators and their constituents as they grappled with CCSS implementation. This group of respondents and observations by no means represents a "scientific" sample of California districts, charters and COEs, but it does include information from a wide range of regional and local contexts.

Figure 1.
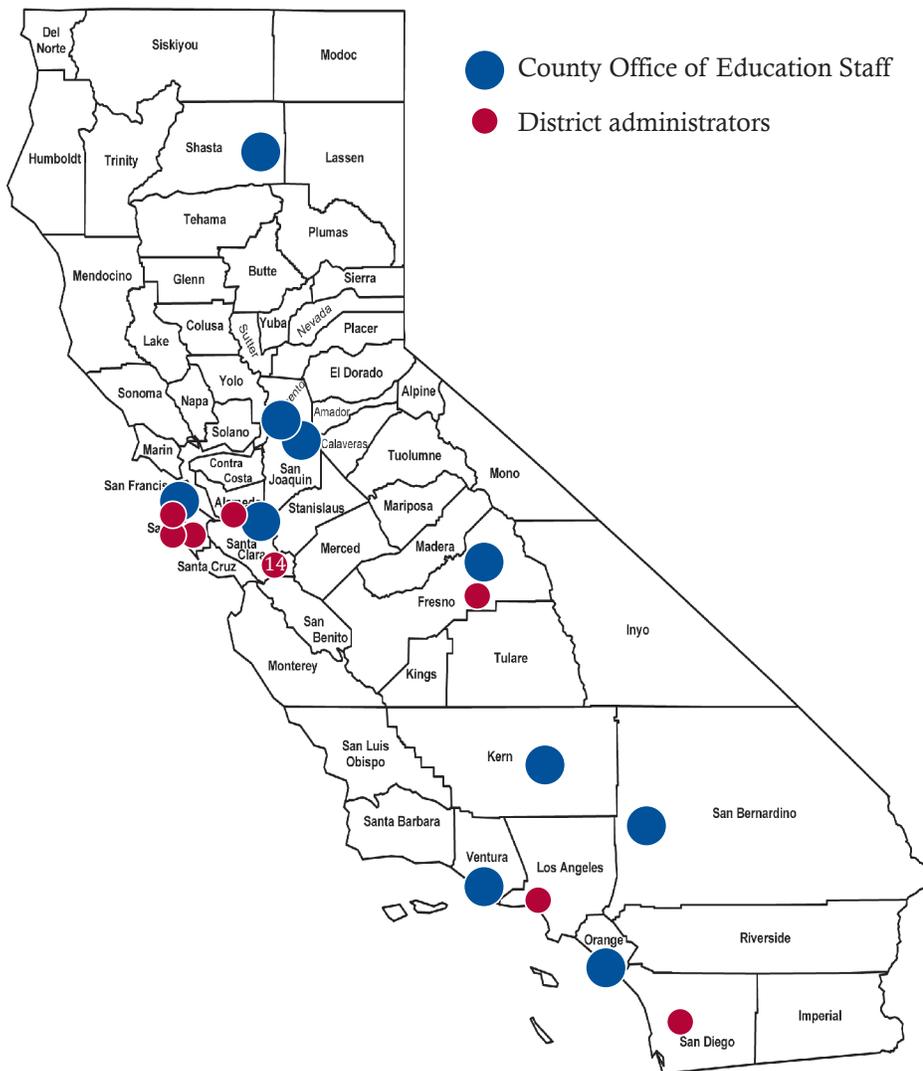
Overall response to CCSS in California

Enthusiasm and Anxiety.

Across California, administrators and teachers are uniformly enthusiastic about the CCSS. They are excited about the instructional changes they portend, and they believe that the CCSS will make an important and positive difference for students. As a Central Valley COE administrator put it: "Teachers think teaching is going to be fun again." Several charter school administrators saw CCSS as consistent with their college-ready focus, and "the best thing for it."

At the same time, administrators and teachers were uniformly anxious in the face of the many implementation uncertainties associated with the CCSS. In the words of one teacher, CCSS are "liberating in so many ways but also overwhelming and frightening." According to a superintendent, "This is one reform where I don't have to fight my staff about whether to go forward… most are on board. They just don't know what to do. Most want to do the right thing; they just don't know what it is."

New Partnerships and Relationships.

Most districts and charters are in early stages of CCSS implementation, and it is too soon to tell whether CCSS implementation will lead to hoped-for changes in teaching and learning. An early and constructive consequence of CCSS implementation is evident everywhere across the state, however, as new partnerships and relationships are being created to inform and support implementation efforts.

Educators speak about these new relationships in positive terms. Shared uncertainties about the transition from familiar strategies and materials to the brave new world of CCSS have prompted many California educators to seek

out colleagues and establish contacts with organizations new to them. For instance, practitioners across the state point to enhanced teacher collaboration as an immediate, constructive consequence of CCSS implementation, and underscore the many benefits of teachers working together to develop strategies and materials consistent with the CCSS.

A wide variety of professional, organizational and cross-sector collaborations have sprung up among public and private organizations, special interest and advocacy groups, and local philanthropies to tackle CCSS implementation. These collaborations are mostly local. They are shaped and animated by local resources, and by local needs and opportunities. In San Joaquin County, for example, curriculum directors from local school districts meet almost twice as often now as they have done in previous years to discuss changes in their districts and progress with CCSS materials. In the resource-strapped Central Valley three counties have pooled resources to provide CCSS training and materials. In the newly established East Side Alliance in San Jose the East Side Union High School District has joined together with its seven feeder elementary schools. They are working to establish common standards and aligned course content and instructional approaches across the grades, starting with integration of the new CCSS math standards. Many districts and charter schools are working with their COE in new ways, or for the first time, as they take up CCSS implementation.

New partners are also at the table. Educators in one southern California district pointed to the productive relationships formed with local businesses to support CCSS implementation. Several districts are working with their local community colleges to align curricula and build capacity. In Santa Clara County, for example, Foothill College has provided integrated technology training for teachers.

Different starting points, different implementation issues

As CCSS implementation has gotten underway, California school districts face parallel but also substantially different implementation challenges. Local context has a decisive influence both on the problems that educators must address and on the adequacy of their responses. In all parts of the state educators spoke of CCSS implementation as a learning process, but different districts began the implementation process in different stages of understanding and readiness. As more than one practitioner commented, districts did not necessarily share the same understanding of CCSS and its implications for teaching and learning. Beyond this, of course, access to resources to support the development of curriculum and instructional strategies aligned to the CCSS differed widely across different classes of districts.

District wealth was a key consideration in local decisions about how to get started. In 2013 the California Legislature appropriated $1.25 billion to support the transition to CCSS. Districts were permitted to spend these funds in three broad areas—technology, instructional materials, and professional development—but the allocation of funds across areas varied widely. Districts that rely heavily on state funding had reduced staffing severely in response to the state's recent fiscal crises, and many of these districts used the CCSS funds to restore class sizes and staffing to their prior levels. In districts that lacked computers and IT supports technology purchases were a priority, to get ready for the upcoming SBAC computer-based assessments. In high-wealth districts that had already updated their technology, in contrast, most of the CCSS funds were spent on professional development, sending teachers to conferences and bringing in consultants.

Districts, schools and COEs also started work on CCSS implementation at different times. Some districts began developing CCSS

aligned units and assessments when the standards were first adopted in 2010. Other districts started later, but still had around a year of CCSS experience prior to the 2013-14 school year. Still others have just begun to think about what the CCSS will mean for their teachers and students and plan on introducing the standards in 2014-15. Districts that started early on implementation have built a good amount of the human capital and materials necessary to provide CCSS aligned instruction across the grades. Many of the late-responding districts were slow in getting started because they are stretched thin in terms of resources and capacity, or because of top leadership changes.

Charter Management Organizations face additional issues that are specific to their charter status. Currently in California there are 1,130 charter schools that enroll more than 500,000 students. Charter schools have significantly greater autonomy than traditional public schools in decisions about hiring, resource use, and other management practices, and their attractiveness to prospective students depends at least in part on the effectiveness of their particular educational "brand" as measured by standardized test scores. The approaches to teaching, learning and assessment encouraged by CCSS consequently pose challenges for many California charter schools, including especially those where success has been associated with more prescriptive instructional models, or with exceptional student performance on the California Standards Tests (CST).

Despite significant differences in readiness for and understanding of CCSS, however, practitioners in all settings across the state voiced similar concerns about the challenges that successful implementation will bring.

Common implementation concerns

Our interviews with California educators yielded two universal and predictable complaints. On the one hand, practitioners say that all aspects of CCSS implementation have been hampered by a lack of time. They have too little time to provide professional development, too little time to work on developing new curricula and instructional materials, and too little time to communicate with teachers, parents, and school board members. As one said: "Time, or lack thereof, appears to be the common enemy." On the other hand, practitioners felt that their implementation efforts were complicated by the broader ambiguities and uncertainties associated with CCSS. Many likened the first year of CCSS implementation to "building a plane while flying it" or "taking a hike without a map or compass." Beyond these general concerns, the main obstacles to successful CCSS implementation identified by our respondents across county, district and school settings had to do with shortfalls in materials, capacity and preparation.

Curriculum and Materials

Curriculum development. California's rollout of the CCSS began in earnest in the summer of 2013. In keeping with the decentralization of education decision-making under the LCFF, the state's role in CCSS implementation has been minimal by design. Responsibility for decisions about what and how to teach, how to get instructional resources into the hands of teachers, how to provide professional development, and how to organize effectively within and across districts to implement the CCSS across grades and schools have been left to local educators. This responsibility is a demanding one. As former state superintendent Bill Honig wrote, "The Common Core State Standards state what students should master, but they are not a curriculum. Jumping from the standards to create lesson plans misses a crucial middle step of developing a coherent curriculum…the complex work of creating a local curricular framework for the district."[4]

---

[4] Honig 2014

Many local leaders lamented the general absence of district frameworks and a comprehensive vision for teaching and learning. One observer pointed to the "unitization" of curricula being developed in the absence of a general district scope and sequence. "A unit here, a unit there—they don't reflect an overall vision of instruction." Few districts have developed a comprehensive design to inform instruction, and the modules selected by teachers do not always add up to a coherent approach to teaching and learning.[5]

Insufficient materials. Frustration with the availability and quality of CCSS compatible materials topped the list of practitioners' implementation concerns.[6] Educators in low-wealth, high-wealth, rural and urban settings complained that too few materials existed to inform curriculum development, that the materials that did exist were of uncertain quality and CCSS alignment, and that no information was available about the assessments that would be used to appraise learning and teaching under the new standards. Complaints about publishers' offerings emerged across the state. One superintendent echoed the views of many: "Publishers rushed, the materials really haven't changed that much. The state-adopted materials are not that great. Feels a bit like hurry up and wait from the state." Researchers who have looked into publishers' offerings that claim to be compatible with the CCSS support practitioners' views.[7]

Some districts and COEs, especially those who started early on CCSS implementation, have made use of instructional and training materials developed elsewhere, including for example materials from New York State, Kentucky and Teachers College. Even when they were aware of CCSS resources developed elsewhere, however, many practitioners were reluctant to make use of them because of uncertainty about their applicability to the California policy context or their own settings, or because they lacked the basic understanding of CCSS that these resources assumed.

A related annoyance has to do with the flood of materials and invitations to workshops that fill practitioners' inboxes with promises to support CCSS implementation. One superintendent said he got at least one email every ten minutes from vendors offering materials. "Are they any good? Have they been vetted? By whom?" A charter school administrator said: "We don't know who to trust—who is any good." Both administrators and teachers said they had neither the expertise nor the time to assess the ceaseless torrent of instructional units, classroom projects, workshops and other 'Common

---

[5] An October 2013 survey undertaken by the California County Superintendents Educational Services Association and the Consortium for the Implementation of Common Core State Standards found that only around one-third of districts around the state had created a scope and sequence for CCSS in either math or English Language Arts. Our conversations support this estimate.

[6] The state has been active in anticipating practitioners' concerns about CCSS-compatible materials. The math framework was adopted by the SBE on November 2013: http://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/ma/cf/draft2mathfwchapters.asp. Thirty-one textbooks have been reviewed and adopted as CCSS-aligned, and an advisory to local school boards from the CDE followed: http://www.cde.ca.gov/nr/ne/yr14/yr14rel6.asp. For many practitioners, however, these mathematics resources came too late to inform local planning and curriculum development which had gotten underway in the fall, and the list of 31 state-adopted texts provided too little guidance to inform local decisions about which text to adopt. The ELA/ELD draft framework will go to the SBE for adoption in July: http://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/rl/cf/elaeldfrmwrkchptrs2014.asp.

[7] Researchers concluded, based on page-by-page comparisons of old and new texts, that "most purveyors...have done little more than slap shiny new stickers on the same books they have been selling for years" and warned practitioners of "snake oil salesmen." Molnar 2014.

Core implementation supports' that come their way.

Districts across the state have relied on teachers to identify materials and strategies, which was previously a central office decision. As a result, teachers often find themselves in the unaccustomed role of instructional decision-maker, for which many are poorly prepared. Most have nevertheless accepted this new responsibility, and many practitioners comment positively on the erosion of traditional teacher isolation when teachers are engaged in CCSS curriculum development efforts. As one district administrator put it: "Common Core demands a bottom-up approach beginning with teachers."

Some districts have sought to modify familiar instructional materials to align with CCSS goals and instruction. One superintendent who adopted this strategy said, "I tell my teachers we are going to accomplish this with a lot of small steps and comfort with the changes we make. I tell teachers there is a change in their role, but we are not going back to scratch." This strategy of local adaptation connects teachers to materials they have used in the past as a starting point for developing new curricula, and eliminates the risk of introducing materials of uncertain quality or prematurely adopting "new" text books that are not new at all.

Local educators also highlighted the general inattention to issues and lack of instructional resources associated with specific student populations. Although all students will be included in the new assessments that accompany CCSS, teachers of English learners, special education students, and struggling students generally found little to assist them in planning new classroom approaches. Administrators in districts where these students were scattered across the district, rather than concentrated in particular schools, found themselves particularly at a loss about how to support their teachers.

Implementation Capacity

Worries about local capacity were expressed across the state. These involved questions about teachers' knowledge and skill, as well as the adequacy of system implementation supports in technology and assessment.

Human capital. Teachers figure both as the greatest asset for CCSS implementation and the greatest concern for administrators. Administrators in school districts and COEs expressed fear that many teachers are ill equipped to make the changes necessary to carry out the kind of teaching that the CCSS will require. In particular, they expressed apprehension about the ability of teachers who "grew up in the NCLB era, with

multiple choice bubble tests and scripted curriculum to make that transition. It is a completely different skill set." One COE leader described the necessary change as a "huge mind shift" and a "new way of looking at teaching…. Skills learning will no longer cut it."

Practitioners' misgivings about teachers' capability extend to doubts about their current skills and knowledge. In the view of many administrators thin content knowledge constrains many teachers' ability to support the deeper learning that CCSS aims to encourage, especially in mathematics. One suburban superintendent said: "Open Court and other reforms of the past were touted as being 'teacher proof.' CCSS is almost the exact opposite! A constructivist approach to instruction takes a lot of skill and a highly competent teacher. In general, teachers' capacity is low now."

Administrators report that even experienced teachers who work with sample CCSS problems struggle to find the solution, which raises serious questions about their ability to teach the required skills to their students any time soon. Younger teachers have little experience with curriculum design and development. Many would agree with one superintendent's view that "New teachers will have a difficult time with this new implementation, but

I don't believe that our long-term staff has the necessary skills either." An urban administrator put it bluntly: "My biggest problem is human capital. My teaching force is just not up to it…70 percent of them."

A spring 2014 poll found that three-quarters of the respondents, including four-fifths of parents, are concerned that teachers are unprepared to implement Common Core.[8] Teachers generally agree with this assessment. They express anxiety not only about the new skills they need and the lack of useful instructional materials, but also about the "huge cultural shift required. We are still struggling with the compliance culture."

Concerns about teachers' competence to deliver the CCSS extend to the teacher preparation pipeline. Administrators, especially those in urban districts who must hire scores of teachers each year, pointed to the "patchwork" of teacher training programs and the uneven attention that different programs give to preparing teachers for instruction suited to the CCSS.[9] Some district administrators found CSU teacher training faculties to be "unresponsive" to their needs, and slow to offer preservice training in CCSS supportive instructional strategies. One urban administrator cited the significant costs associated

with "remediating" the teachers who entered his district from local teacher preparation programs: "I would like to see the state undertake a major teacher education initiative—that may be the most important component of Common Core implementation in the long run."

We also uncovered worries about local administrators' ability to design and lead change, and to support teachers' efforts. Like teachers, superintendents and principals are used to the prescriptions associated with NCLB and to managing their schools and districts in response to clear rules and expectations. Many have no experience with the more ambitious teaching and learning goals associated with the CCSS.

Technology. Worries about the adequacy of technology surfaced in most districts and counties across the state. ACSA's 2014 survey of their members reinforced these concerns. Administrators asked for more technology support,[10] and their worries centered on the adequacy of local technology and connectivity to support SBAC assessments. Not surprisingly, however, differences in context mediated worries about technology. Districts with a well-resourced IT and technical infrastructure had few concerns about the technology per se, and focused instead on students' computer capabilities.

Low wealth and small districts in contrast faced significant shortfalls in both hardware and bandwidth. For example, an Oakland teacher said that she thought "one of the biggest obstacles to successful implementation is the lack of necessary technological resources in our schools."[11] Commenting on the challenges faced by nearby superintendents leading three small districts, the superintendent of a technologically well-equipped district said: "They have nothing. They have absolutely no help with hardware, teacher training on computers, and so on. It is impossible. In [one district], the superintendent relies on the principal of her elementary school to be the district's IT support."

This spring's SBAC pilot laid some fears to rest, providing evidence that students are able to handle a computer-based assessment.[12] Worries about technology shortfalls nevertheless remain. Many of this year's technology fixes were pieced together, and do not represent long term solutions. For instance, some schools borrowed computers from nearby schools on

[8] http://www.ppic.org/content/pubs/survey/S_414MBS.pdf

[9] Baron 2014a

[10] Baron 2014b

[11] http://www.goleadershipcenter.org/mt/mt-search.cgi?blog_id=1&tag=Common%20Core&limit=20

[12] See, for example, Noguchi 2014.

a different testing schedule.

Concerns about teachers' technological literacy arose across the state. Many teachers are not comfortable with technology, and are unprepared to use the data that will be provided as part of CCSS assessments. They have not adopted new technology as an instructional tool in their classrooms. Many practitioners nevertheless express enthusiasm for a deeper integration of new technology once the most pressing implementation issues are addressed. A COE curriculum superintendent said, "We used to teach technology, now we need to be able to use technology to teach."

Assessment. Every county, district or charter educator we spoke with pointed to the need for formative assessment tools to gauge classroom progress toward CCSS, and to identify areas where teaching and learning were falling short. At the same time, practitioners expressed uncertainty about the state's role in providing assessment resources. What was coming? When? In order to provide guidance and support some districts and counties have cobbled together their own assessment tools. In San Joaquin County, for example, the COE created their own interim assessments for districts to use. Alameda County and Aspire collaborated to create a bank of CCSS aligned test ques-

tions. According to one district administrator, "Teachers and most district staff have no training that would enable them to correctly evaluate a formative assessment. This would be an opportunity for COEs to develop and support good assessments. Or, provide training for teachers and administrators in assessment."

Charter schools are concerned by the lack of tests they can use to show growth to parents, education leaders and funders. However, one charter administrator called the lack of assessments "both a blessing and a curse. We have had more changes this year as a result of not having assessment—more experimentation." The California Charter Schools Association (CCSA) provided charters with discounted rates for the NWEA MAP test to produce performance indicators for their schools. One growing CMO that had experienced success on the CST plans to administer the old tests at its own expense for at least one more year.

Both charter and public school educators say that Hispanic, Asian and other immigrant parents whose own schooling adhered to the traditional methods CCSS aims to replace often have a difficult time with this shift in assessment strategies. "It doesn't look like what they are used to." "The traditional model worked for them, and those tests of rote learning have boosted

their children's test scores in many instances."

Policy overwhelm. California educators in districts and charters almost uniformly bemoan "policy overwhelm." Regardless of baseline capacity, time, people, attention and energy are all stretched thin by the demands posed simultaneously by CCSS and the state's new school finance policies. The challenge is exacerbated by the planning and stakeholder involvement required by the Legislature's appropriation to support CCSS implementation and also by the LCFF. Districts that are part of the CORE waiver effort face additional challenges, as they must also devise new accountability mechanisms to measure students' progress. Some charter school administrators also expressed overwhelm, though for different reasons. For example, Aspire Public Schools' CEO spoke of stress from "trying to do too much" as they seek to implement the new teacher evaluation system they have been working on for four years and CCSS at the same time.

Preparation

Practitioners point to system-wide needs for professional development and training for teachers, administrators, school board members and even parents. As one administrator put it: "everyone is a novice, no matter how many years

they've been teaching or leading." Practitioners see professional development needs as linked to, but different from, worries about teachers' and administrators' capacity. Across the board, CCSS resources to support professional development generally are judged to be inadequate to the task and often of poor quality.

Insufficient professional development. Professional development programs offered by both COEs and districts are well-intended, and many are well-designed, but educators judge them as generally inadequate to the challenge confronting administrators and teachers.

Administrators say there is little professional development just for them. One district administrator put it this way: "Administrators have never taught or seen what it is they are supposed to supervise. We are going from A to B, but what does B look like?" Including administrators in teachers' professional development can provide some important information about the approaches to teaching and learning required by CCSS, but administrators also need professional development that focuses on their roles as local leaders and supervisors. How will they know how well their teachers are moving to CCSS in their classrooms? How will they know what supports and resources are needed to

support CCSS compatible curriculum and instruction?

Teachers are looking for hands-on, accessible assistance in rethinking their curricula and instructional approaches. In this early stage of CCSS implementation, most districts and teachers have relied on local professional development resources. As Fresno County sought to develop new cohorts of coaches to work through CCSS professional development, for example, they looked into the classroom and identified effective teachers with 7-10 years of experience to lead the way. The COE reports providing three full days of CCSS training for teachers during the summer of 2013. Typically, teachers led the content specific trainings for their colleagues from other districts. Sessions focused on collaborative work on how to bring about the changes in instruction and curriculum that CCSS requires, and what these changes would look like in their classrooms. COE staff noted an increase in administrator participation in these teacher trainings as school leaders sought to gain more information about the challenges facing their teachers in the classroom.

Professional development activities organized by districts varied greatly in format and duration. Some districts increased their professional development commitment from one day to two, one

in the fall and one in the spring, which is hardly adequate preparation for the fundamental changes in teaching that CCSS aims to bring about.

Other districts are doing more. In LAUSD there are somewhere between 300 and 400 Common Core Fellows working to promote and develop CCSS in their schools. District administrators say that teacher leaders within the district have trained thousands of teachers, and outside professional development providers are no longer being solicited. San Mateo Union High School District is already in their third year of teachers on special assignment [TOSAs] leading district curriculum design and work. San Jose Unified School District is using a similar 'home grown' coaches approach to support teachers' transition to CCSS. Large urban districts such as Los Angeles, San Francisco, and San Jose nevertheless struggle both with the challenge of providing professional development and coaches for all of their teachers, and the parallel challenge of monitoring implementation at the classroom level. There are too few experienced coaches to go around.

Small districts have the advantage of being able to involve all of their teachers and administrators in training sessions. LaHonda-Pescadero Unified School District is a small, rural district which serves

a high population of English Learners that has provided five continuous days of professional development for everyone. Charter schools had the most flexibility in allocating time to professional development activities since they are not bound by constraints associated with teachers' contracts. For example, one charter school reported that they had dedicated 40 days to professional development this year.

Practitioners stress the importance of preparing teacher leaders and the scale of the effort that this task requires. Capable teachers who understand CCSS implementation are crucial to progress, but finding educators to lead the movement has proven difficult. At one professional development session, for example, teachers were asked if they knew what "project based learning" was. In a room of about 80 teachers, three raised their hands, and all three had been teaching for more than 15 years.

As important as workshops and professional development gatherings can be in introducing teachers to CCSS aims and strategies, additional and different learning supports are needed. As teachers transition to new practices, county and district leaders highlight the need for in-school training. In Fresno, for example, teachers are receiving one-to-one feedback and coaching to address the concern that teach-

ers need more information about what CCSS looks like in practice. San Mateo County coaches are reportedly spending more time in classrooms now than ever before. A COE educator in southern California commented that large professional development sessions may be the way to get teachers familiar with the CCSS, but subsequent professional development needs to be 'provided in small, just-in-time chunks' and as close to the classroom as possible. This strategy is one that many districts are unable to staff or finance on their own, however.

Sources of Assistance

Educators turned to diverse resources to address these CCSS implementation issues. Many districts and counties, especially small or rural ones, point to online resources as their main source of materials. Practitioners' judgments about the utility of these materials are mixed, however, both because of uncertainty about the quality of online modules or training sessions and because teachers with limited understanding of CCSS goals and approaches have insufficient knowledge (or "conceptual hangers") to make effective use of them.

More than half of the district leaders we spoke with mentioned their COEs as a vital source of implementation assistance, including

materials, training, and coaching. County Offices have provided critical supports for small and rural districts in these material terms, but also in the new regional networks and collaborations that they have facilitated.

Many of the implementation resources deemed most useful were local ones. Bay Area educators cited WestEd's staff and materials as timely and "extremely helpful." Silicon Valley districts drew upon the expertise of the Silicon Valley Mathematics Initiative (SVMI) for training, materials and strategic assistance. For instance, one district asked SVMI to help them administer and score three different Mathematics Assessment Resource Service (MARS) assessments, and local teachers volunteered to test 5,000 students. The superintendent said: "Teachers saw firsthand how students struggled with the required problem solving; this has made a significant difference in our math teachers' understanding of what they need to do to adopt the Common Core."

Implementation Hot Spots

Implementation issues specific to district configuration and subject area surfaced as well. Three issues emerged as implementation hot spots across multiple school districts: middle school curricula and competencies; alignment among and between feeder elementary

schools and their receiving high school; and mathematics.

Middle school squeeze. Worries about middle schools came up across the state. Of particular concern were the educational and practical issues associated with the new mathematics curriculum sequence. As one superintendent put it: "Middle schools are squeezed. How are you going to accelerate kids so they can complete calculus, and feel challenged, and at the same time slow them down so they can be 'proficient' at skills that they have not yet encountered, mathematical reasoning for example." Middle school teachers worried about losing content. One said "If something was an 8th-grade standard and is now a 7th-grade standard, won't last year's 7th-graders be missing curriculum?"

Middle school teachers are also apprehensive about how students will manage the new language, content and expectations they will encounter as CCSS are put in place. "If students have been learning one way for six to eight years, how will they adapt or adjust to new methods? Will they have the skills and knowledge to succeed in more rigorous high school classes?" They also wondered specifically about students' ability to handle the academic language that goes along with a focus on the meaning of ideas, inquiry into real-world problems, and us-

ing evidence to develop and justify a conclusion. "It is not just a big step, for many it is a pole vault… academic language is a foreign language for many," especially ELD and academically at-risk students.

Integration and alignment. Integration and alignment across feeder elementary districts is problematic in many parts of the state. Some feeder and high school districts are collaborating, or are part of a network, but others are not. For instance, in some areas feeder districts are adopting different math curricula. In many areas there are few substantive links among feeder districts or between feeder districts and their high schools. Problems associated with the lack of curricular alignment are a big challenge for high schools. As one high school district administrator put it: "We're left holding the bag. It's assumed that we will pay the costs of getting students to the same page…"

Mathematics. More than one local administrator saw the CCSS in mathematics as the "Achilles heel" of Common Core. Administrators across the state at both district and county levels say that the complex and rigorous math standards that California has adopted will be difficult for teachers to unpack and scaffold appropriately. A superintendent in a relatively high-achieving district commented: "I believe that the most problematic aspect

of CCSS focused implementation is the ability and skills of staff to address the rigorous mathematics standards…they do not have the training or background in effective pedagogy and curriculum, and few teachers have an adequate understanding of the math—including secondary math teachers."

Particularly in higher-wealth districts, the politics of CCSS were focused on mathematics and parents' fears of negative implications for their children's academic progress if districts adopt the integrated CCSS curriculum. Parents worried that their students would be 'slowed down' and not be competitive in the college admissions race. One superintendent reported a parent's question: "Are you going to stop accelerating?" Another said: "My community says 'why change something that was working?'" And another underscored the local politics: "Parents are apoplectic and want to stick with traditional. My staff wants integrated, but the board says 'We don't care what you teachers want.'" District adoption of integrated math in Santa Clara County, for example, split almost entirely by wealth. Basic aid districts stayed with the traditional curriculum and sequence, while lower wealth districts moved to integrated math.

Implications for state and local action

Our conversations with practitioners identified five issues as especially critical to the next phase of CCSS implementation in California, and to its long-term success as well. In California's newly decentralized policy system the main responsibility for addressing many of these issues falls to local educators, but our research makes it clear that the capacity to address them successfully is sorely lacking in many parts of the state. Finding effective ways to support and assist schools and school districts in meeting implementation challenges that exceed local capabilities is urgently important if the new standards are to deliver on their promise of improved teaching and learning in California classrooms.

- Curation of CCSS compatible materials.

  Practitioners have neither the skills nor time to vet the avalanche of "resources" coming their way from publishers, vendors and the broad range of workshop providers that jostle for their attention and dollars. Practitioners ask for CCSS relevant classroom materials, but they have little confidence about the value of what is being offered. They need assistance in determining which of the many materials crowding

their inboxes are high quality, relevant to their instructional needs, and something more than a quick re-do of existing texts. Currently responsibility for curation of CCSS materials is unassigned but the task could usefully be taken on by COEs, subject area networks or state appointed committees. In addition to a commentary about the quality and relevance of the many CCSS resources advertised to the field, educators ask for a searchable archive of "promising practices" organized by grade level, content area, and student needs for use by COEs, districts, charters and teachers.

- Quality professional development.

  Professional development to support CCSS implementation presents the most immediate practitioner need. Educators say that large workshop sessions, though perhaps adequate to introduce broad CCSS concepts and strategies, do too little to build teachers' capabilities to adopt and implement new instructional strategies compatible with CCSS. More is needed. All teachers, but most especially math teachers, need hands on, interactive, locally accessible coaching as they make the transition from traditional practices and multiple choice assess-

ments to the learning and skills sought by CCSS. A successful transition to more ambitious goals will require a clear conception of what the new standards mean for teaching and learning. Many teachers will only acquire that understanding through concrete, coached experience with CCSS-aligned materials and instructional approaches. Without a practical, basic understanding of CCSS aims, technology-based professional development resources are less useful to teachers as they work to implement a new curriculum and pedagogy. A conceptual grounding in CCSS goals precedes effective use of web-based resources.

Professional development for administrators is everywhere inadequate. Principals and district leaders will need targeted learning opportunities if they are to acquire a grounded understanding of what CCSS means for them as supervisors and instructional leaders, and how best to support teachers' moves toward CCSS curriculum and pedagogy.

Given the new SBAC tests and CCSS assessment strategies, both administrators and teachers request "assessment literacy" training so they can select and use appropriate formative assessments to better appraise

students' progress.

- More and better communication with parents and the public.

Parent and community outreach is not a back burner issue. Stakeholder support turns on understanding what California's new standards aim to accomplish and why. As experience in other states has shown, public antipathy to or misperceptions about CCSS can derail implementation and undermine essential political support. Yet communication about CCSS has received only minimal attention thus far in California, where it has been pushed aside by other CCSS implementation challenges or the demands of LCFF timetables. Local leaders want materials that principals and district administrators can use to inform diverse parent groups, school board members and community stakeholders about what CCSS aims to accomplish, and about how and why those goals are important to their local communities and students' futures.

- Increased financial and political support for COEs.

COEs occupy a critically important middle position in CCSS implementation. Operating between the state and districts, they are well positioned to pro-vide assistance with challenges including communication to parents and local communities, regional professional development programs, and the collection and dissemination of information about promising local practices. Practitioners have also asked for COE assistance in evaluating vendors' CCSS offerings to ensure that they are high quality and relevant to regional needs. Some COEs have mobilized CCSS implementation networks that connect regional expertise and resources to local needs. In many areas of the state, COEs are the only readily accessible CCSS implementation resource.

Capacity among the state's 58 COEs varies significantly, however. Some COEs employ large numbers of professional staff, and districts in these counties rate their COE highly as a provider of professional development opportunities, technical and instructional assistance, and CCSS implementation supports. Many other COEs are less highly regarded. COEs nevertheless constitute a potentially vital element of CCSS implementation infrastructure, and increased financial and political support from the state could greatly enhance their value to districts, schools, and teachers statewide. Increased state support could include the designation of a small number of exceptionally strong COEs to provide leadership in building the professional capacity of other COEs in their region. The positional importance of COEs as intermediary organizations could be further strengthened by increased collaboration and partnership with the CDE and the soon-to-be-created California Collaborative for Educational Excellence, with the goal of bringing consistency to CCSS implementation in all parts of the state.

- Review and strengthen pre-service teacher education programs.

CCSS-focused teacher training is spotty across California's public and private pre-service teacher education programs. Some programs have worked with districts to provide CCSS relevant training. Many others have not, however. In most teacher education programs incentives or resources for faculty to incorporate CCSS-aligned pedagogy in existing pre-service courses are scarce, or entirely lacking. District officials, particularly those from urban areas, describe a disconnection between teacher education programs and the needs of the K-12 system. In their view, higher education is not always

knowledgeable about or responsive to their instructional priorities, especially in a time of rapid change and raised expectations.

Closer connections between teacher preparation programs and K-12 systems are necessary to address the current mismatch between what new teachers are prepared to do and the demands of CCSS implementation. Useful strategies might include convening teacher educators from diverse institutional settings—CSUs, community colleges, UCs, privates—to reach agreement on what teacher preparation programs need to offer, and encouraging partnerships between higher education and K-12 around the skills and expertise new teachers should bring to the classroom. Closer cooperation between the CTC and the SBE could help to build shared understanding about issues and opportunities in California's pre-service teacher education programs, and about the steps that would be required to prepare new teachers to deliver on the promise of CCSS. Independent teacher education groups such as the New Teacher Center might also have a role to play.

CCSS implementation: a long-term process at a critical juncture

California districts are still in the early stages of CCSS implementation, which remains a work in progress by all accounts.[13] In some critical areas, however, it is already evident that California's experience differs in important ways from the experiences of other states. A spring 2014 poll found strong backing for CCSS among Californians—teachers, administrators, parents and community members.[14] Likewise, more than 300 California nonprofits, businesses and children's groups signed a statement of "deep and broad support" for CCSS in spring 2014.[15] This affirmative reception stands in contrast to the negativity and backlash that the CCSS have encountered elsewhere. Rather than perceiving the new standards as constraining their autonomy, for instance, California teachers generally see CCSS as professionalizing, and as a welcome change from the rote instructional emphases and high stakes accountability that characterized the No Child Left Behind era. Even in districts with a significant Tea Party presence we heard little talk of the CCSS as "Obamacore" or as an overreach by the federal government. California teachers and administrators understand CCSS implementation as a local chal-

lenge, and not as "an attack on local decision making."[16] Paul Warren and Patrick Murphy have written that "California's transition to the CCSS has gotten off to a slow start"[17] but this slow start may prove to be an important advantage over time. In starting slow California has sidestepped many of the disputes and conflicts that have emerged in states such as New York or Maryland over issues such as teacher evaluation and testing.

The suspension of state testing played an important role in heading off the strident criticism of CCSS heard in other states. Some education wags dubbed 2013-14 a "snow year" for teachers. The State Board of Education put CST testing on hold so practitioners could learn about CCSS and experiment with new curricula and instructional strategies without fear of negative consequences.

In 2014-15, however, teachers, administrators, students, parents

---

[13] Warren and Murphy 2014

[14] http://www.ppic.org/content/pubs/survey/S_414MBS.pdf

[15] Fensterwald 2014

[16] Gewertz's (2014) account of CCSS implementation at year four highlights the hostility among educators and the general public associated with perceptions of Common Core as federal intrusion into local educational affairs.

[17] Warren and Murphy op cit.

and the public will have concrete information about how and how effectively the CCSS have been translated into new instructional practices. The urgent question is whether the good will toward CCSS that now exists can be sustained if the implementation concerns expressed by the field are not addressed. The transition to CCSS remains a local responsibility, but schools, districts, and counties will carry it out well or poorly depending on the highly variable resources, capacity and preparation at their disposal.

Equitable and consistent CCSS implementation across the state will require a state strategy to support implementation across all of California's economically, demographically and geographically disparate district contexts, especially those where needs are greatest and local capacities are most limited. The state's move to increase local autonomy means that right now every district is on its own as it moves to implement CCSS, but local control cannot take the place of a statewide plan. The success of CCSS statewide will require a coherent policy infrastructure, along with resources to support local implementation choices and respond to areas where local capability is weak. Unless the state gives serious, sustained attention to local implementation needs it would be unsurprising next year

to find support for CCSS weakening around the state, as the gaps between districts that are moving ahead aggressively with CCSS implementation and those that are struggling to get started grow even wider. Today's initial enthusiasm may be corroded by educators' frustrations if the resources provided to support their well-intended implementation efforts are inadequate, and stakeholders may find themselves dissatisfied with the early results of CCSS implementation. This next phase of CCSS implementation activities is strategically critical. Ensuring that local implementers receive the supports and resources they have called for is a necessary condition for the success of CCSS in California.

References

Baron, Kathryn. (2014a) Patchwork Approach to Common Core in Teacher Preparation Programs. EdSource. January 12.

Baron, Kathryn. (2014b) The survey says: Superintendents want more tech funding. EdSource. March 18.

Fensterwald, John. (2014) Hundreds of organizations sign statement backing Common Core. EdSource. June 5.

Gewertz, Catherine. (2014) Common Core at Four: Sizing Up the Enterprise. Education Week. April 23.

Honig, Bill. (2014) Coherent and sequenced curriculum key to implementing Common Core Standards. Commentary. EdSource. January 29.

Kirst, Mike W. (2013) The Common Core Meets State Policy: This Changes Almost Everything. Policy Memorandum. Stanford University Graduate School of Education. Policy Analysis for California Education. March.

Molnar, Michele. (2014) Research questions Common-Core claims by Publishers. Education Week. March 3.

Noguchi, Sharon. (2014) California students' verdict on new tests: Tech is a breeze, content is tougher. San Jose Mercury News. March 28.

Warren, Paul, and Murphy, Patrick. (2014) Implementing the Common Core State Standards in California. Public Policy Institute of California. April.

About Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE)

Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE) is an independent, non-partisan research center based at Stanford University, the University of California, Berkeley, and the University of Southern California. PACE seeks to define and sustain a long-term strategy for comprehensive policy reform and continuous improvement in performance at all levels of California's education system, from early childhood to post-secondary education and training. PACE bridges the gap between research and policy, working with scholars from California's leading universities and with state and local policymakers to increase the impact of academic research on educational policy in California.

http://www.edpolicyinca.org

About the Authors

Milbrey McLaughlin is the founding director of the John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities, Co-director of the Center for Research on the Context of Teaching, and David Jacks Professor of Education and Policy, Emerita, in the Graduate School of Education, Stanford University.

Laura Glaab and Isabel Hilliger Carrasco are students in the Policy, Organization, and Leadership Studies (POLS) Master of Arts program in the Graduate School of Education, Stanford University.