

At the Center of the Common Core

Principals share solutions, tips, and top resources for school-level implementation.

While the 2011-2012 school year offered educators a sketch of the Common Core State Standards and how they would impact teaching and learning, this year that painting takes shape. Many states and districts are well on the way to implementing the standards—but the process is complex, especially for the school leaders who shoulder the task of preparing an entire school community for the shift. *Principal* sat down with four principals from different corners of the country to gauge where administrators stand with implementing the standards. Despite many challenges—orchestrating major shifts in teaching, instituting new assessments, and facilitating staff development—principals report that the process has offered great rewards.

How are you creating a Common Core vision and roll-out plan for your school?

Jessica Johnson: I think that we are all trying to determine the best way to roll out the Common Core State Standards with our faculty while we're still learning them ourselves.

In Wisconsin, we are transitioning from having grade-level academic standards (at grades 4, 8, and 10), so we appreciate having clearer, higher, internationally benchmarked standards at each grade. But this means many changes in curriculum and expectations at each grade level. Our state is made up of many small, rural districts that leave principals, along with the many other hats they wear, in charge of curriculum and professional development.

While digging into the standards in our building, we have found that the math standards are the biggest change for our students. We have to find ways to compensate for the gaps in learning as we transition from our previous standards to the Common Core.

Kaivan Yuen: We are approaching this in phases, this year being the awareness phase, where we provide teachers with a general overview of the Common Core, Smarter Balanced assessments, and some of the expectations for a shift in pedagogy.

MEET THE PANEL



Hester Chandley Alfred
Assistant Principal,
Caroline
Sibley School,
Calumet City,
Illinois



Jessica Johnson
Principal,
Dodgeland
Elementary School,
Juneau, Wisconsin



Kaivan Yuen
Principal,
Jefferson
Middle School,
San Gabriel,
California



Don Sternberg
Principal,
Wantagh
Elementary School,
Wantagh,
New York



Next year, we will begin the professional development and training phase, where we will get everyone on the same page. The school district has made this a priority and will work with schools to train staff. We will also send teachers to Common Core workshops outside of the school and district. In the third year, we will be in the implementation phase, where we expect everyone to begin shifting the way they teach to address the new standards.

What shifts in teaching and learning strategies do you anticipate? What corresponding professional development will be needed?

Don Sternberg: We are in the midst of a paradox. The Common Core expects that we think, reflect, and lead our students to create knowledge. Our state assessment system encourages reactive, fear-based, rote teaching in order to achieve a good “teaching score.” I do not think these

two concepts can coexist. The greatest challenge for current principals is to keep teachers’ eyes on the prize—knowledge building—rather than teacher evaluations.

Johnson: To meet English language arts standards, teachers will need to incorporate opportunities for students to learn content from a variety of texts (not just a “hunt for information, fill in the blank” worksheet), and explain their learning verbally and in writing. For teachers used to instructing with

traditional workbooks, this will be a paradigm shift. For math instruction, the biggest change is building conceptual understanding versus fact fluency and procedural knowledge. For schools using a traditional math textbook focused on solving the math problems, this type of instruction will require teachers to gain deeper understanding of the mathematical practices and skills.

Sternberg: One of the biggest challenges that we will encounter in mathematics is the teachers' unfamiliarity with the content. The Common Core will begin to "push down" concepts from the prior year, which may leave teachers feeling anxious.

Hester Chandley Alfred: The number of objectives needed to reach a standard may change. There may be a change in the amount of time spent on certain lessons to reach the standards and objectives. Some concepts may be taught at a different time during the year, taught more intensely, or not taught in the current grade level but in a different one. It comes down to deciding what a student needs to know instead of what's nice for a student to learn.

Yuen: The professional development that will be needed is how to integrate subject matter and how to create lessons that challenge students, and at the same time are meaningful and relevant to students' lives.

How have you begun to prepare your entire staff, including teachers of nontested subjects like PE or art, for Common Core implementation?

Yuen: We have devoted a portion of our staff meetings to Common Core awareness and training. We are fortunate to have many experts on site who have participated in state and national Common Core committees. I tapped these expert teachers to help lead professional development. We have also sent numerous teachers to workshops outside of the school.

Johnson: We have K-12 professional learning community groups that met

One of the biggest challenges we will encounter in math is the teachers' unfamiliarity with the content.

on our professional development days throughout this past school year and have discussed literacy across the disciplines. Our PE, music, and art teachers have learned ways (and often come up with great ideas) to integrate reading and writing in their classrooms.

What advice do you have about carving time out of already busy schedules to work in teams on implementation strategies?

Yuen: At our middle school, we are trying to explore schedules that allow for teachers to meet with each other to collaborate. Time is always an issue, but there are ways to create time for the discussion. For instance, we use our leadership team meetings, faculty meetings, staff development days, or even release teachers so that we can talk about Common Core. We just have to place it as a priority.

Alfred: This can be tricky. Implementing Common Core standards will be a time-intensive project. All schools within a district should let representatives from each grade level meet, perhaps after school. This way, all second-grade teachers, for example, from across the district can collaborate on what must be taught and in what order. They can also discuss assessments needed to monitor student progress. Once done, they

can meet with teachers from grades above and below so everyone knows what concepts students are expected to know by year-end.

How is your school or district preparing for new assessments, and how are you using them to map curricula?

Sternberg: For English language arts, we are using the Common Core to establish quarterly skill benchmarks. This allows teachers the flexibility to change texts or supplementary materials, adjust pacing, and generally use their best judgment while still meeting the Common Core standards. In terms of math, we have been mapping the curriculum with the standards. Once the state releases curriculum models, we will have a better idea of the direction the state will move toward.

Alfred: We have formed a curriculum writing task force that is developing new reading and math curricula with assessments based on the Common Core standards and objectives. Districtwide assessments will be based on the objectives and standards within the newly formed curriculum. We are mapping curriculum and corresponding assessments together.

Once the task force has developed quarterly assessments, the assessments will be reviewed and administered

to students in kindergarten through eighth grade. Teachers will be trained on how to access a website to view the assessments before administering. Answers will be placed on a bubble sheet and scanned into a database system. This system allows teachers and administrators to see the assessment results by district, classroom, individual student, or by grade level.

Our district also partnered with a state university to set up a computer program that teachers and administrators can use to view students' assessment scores from standardized tests to enable teachers to drive instruction.

What are your tips for informing parents about the coming changes?

Johnson: This past year, our kindergarten teachers began implementing the Common Core math standards and received some negative feedback from parents about the level of math their students were expected to meet. This was important feedback for us. It made us realize that as we implement the Common Core standards, we need to communicate these changes in learning expectations to parents.

Alfred: We have a Curriculum Planning Council (CPC) that serves as a liaison between the school board and the learning community. This committee, in time, will place the new curriculum on the district website so parents and students will know what is expected of them. Parents are currently involved through membership on the CPC.

Are the standards having an impact on your classrooms now? If so, what have you learned from your early experiences?

Yuen: More and more teachers are embracing technology and using it as a tool to teach critical thinking skills. There have also been talks about integrating different subjects by assigning a common project where different disciplines look at the project from a different perspective. For instance, language arts may look at an essay's

Forging Connections and Finding Resources ONLINE

In our small district, we don't have a curriculum director or resources to bring in an outside source to provide professional development for all staff. But as the school leader, it's critical that I learn the standards myself and learn from other districts that are further along with implementation.

On Twitter, my best resource, I've connected with a variety of principals, curriculum directors, and instructional coaches from other districts and states who have helped me learn about available resources. I've had several Skype chats with the leaders of districts that are further along in implementation, and I continue to gain resources and ideas from them.

Administrators have a lonely job being the only one in their buildings. But you're not alone—your network can expand online to include a wealth of great people with great ideas.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

- [Recommended Common Core Resources from NAESP](http://www.naesp.org/common-core-state-standards-resources)
www.naesp.org/common-core-state-standards-resources
- [What Principals Need to Know About Teaching and Learning Mathematics](http://bit.ly/NMpKL3)
<http://bit.ly/NMpKL3>
- [The University of Arizona's Progressions for the Common Core Math Standards](http://bit.ly/NP9juJ)
<http://bit.ly/NP9juJ>
- [The Teaching Channel's Videos on the Common Core](http://bit.ly/SQmQWp)
<http://bit.ly/SQmQWp>
- [The Hunt Institute's Common Core Videos](http://bit.ly/LJanml)
<http://bit.ly/LJanml>

Jessica Johnson, Principal
Dodgeland Elementary School, Juneau, Wisconsin
<http://principalj.blogspot.com/>

grammar, paragraph structure, and spelling. History may look at the same essay from the content perspective. That way, teachers are working more efficiently.

Alfred: This new initiative involves a lot of work. However, classroom teachers are collaborating like never before. They are sharing knowledge and techniques and observing each other. There is more vertical grade-

level articulation so teachers can help students prepare for the next grade. Collaboration usually breeds innovation, which leads to students learning concepts in numerous new ways.

Sternberg: I am pleased that the Common Core asks us to reflect on our expectations and ask, "Is this enough to adequately prepare students for the rapidly changing world?" 