

Increasing district capacity to implement the Common Core

IT BEGINS WITH A PARTNERSHIP

In this second issue of a special three-part series, the Center for the Future of Teaching & Learning (The Center) continues to report on what California district leaders have to say about how they are advancing Common Core in their districts and the kinds of assistance they seek in support of standards implementation.

Since adopting the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in 2010, California has given districts significant flexibility in how they support teachers in implementing the standards. This flexibility, along with vastly differing local and regional contexts, has resulted in a wide variety of district-level approaches to training teachers in content knowledge and pedagogical strategies aligned to the CCSS (which are now also known as the California Standards*). From a small rural district in the northern reaches of the state to a large urban district on the coast, local education agencies across California have experienced unique successes and challenges in providing professional learning to help teachers prepare the state's six million K–12 students to meet the rigorous California (CA) Standards in mathematics, English language arts, and content-area literacy.

In this second of a three-part *CenterView* series, The Center continues to report on what we learned from interviews with over 40 district leaders across California in which we asked for their perspectives on implementing the CA Standards. This issue focuses on various ways districts have worked to scale their implementation of the CA Standards and deepen their teachers' pedagogical content knowledge of the standards — from drawing on the expertise of external technical assistance providers to developing internal resources, such as teacher leaders that can provide instructional leadership. The issue concludes with strategies that technical assistance providers can use to better assist districts with their current professional learning and resource development needs as they strengthen their implementation of the CA Standards.

Drawing on external expertise

How districts select technical assistance providers

Overwhelmingly, district leaders tell us that the need for *expertise* is a key driver for investing district funds and time in technical assistance, including professional learning, to deepen educators' knowledge of the CA Standards and to help districts scale their implementation. We learned that districts typically prefer to draw on internal capacity to develop instructional leaders and teacher leaders who can train and support other teachers — as this approach generally offers districts more control and flexibility. However, when internal capacity for this type of support is lacking, districts

* The CA Standards encompass standards for all content areas, including science, social sciences, English language development, and world language. However, in this *CenterView* issue, the CA Standards refer specifically to the CCSS for English language arts and mathematics, as that was how the CA Standards were framed in the study interviews.

reach out to external technical assistance providers, including state education agencies, county offices of education (COEs), non-profit and for-profit organizations, independent consultants, and institutions of higher education (IHEs). This strategy was especially common when districts were first getting started in rolling out the standards and building internal knowledge of them.

When district leaders have chosen to invest in external expertise to help with standards implementation, they indicate that three primary factors influence how they select their technical assistance providers:

- **District leaders' professional networks.** A significant number of district leaders from the study have been in their current positions less than two years. The majority have worked in their district in other capacities and have pre-existing partnerships with external providers who had delivered previous technical assistance to the district. Accordingly, district leaders often leverage these established relationships to continue advancing and improving standards implementation in their district. It's unclear, however, if the providers in these established relationships are always the best option for providing the right kinds of information to meet district needs.
- **District's geographic proximity to providers.** Districts in metropolitan areas have more access to nearby resources and technical assistance providers than rural districts. With fewer opportunities for external local support, rural and smaller districts often turn to their local county office of education (COE) and the Internet for needed support.
- **Readily available technical assistance from county offices of education.** Most district leaders we interviewed report that when they were in the early stages of implementing the CCSS, they particularly relied on their local COE for support. Overall, district leaders have been pleased with the technical assistance provided by their COE and they express a desire to continue working with the COE to develop ongoing professional learning to help them progress in their implementation of the CA Standards.

"We ask, 'Where have you done this before? Did that district look like us?' We look for people who take the time to understand who we are. We do not do off-the-shelf."

– District leader

Districts seek partnerships with technical assistance providers

By far, district leaders are most satisfied with technical assistance providers who have a responsive, collaborative relationship with the district. District leaders want to know that providers will listen, consider the unique context of their district, and tailor services to meet the district's particular needs — in essence, to work as partners.

District leaders also indicate that they seek providers who are experts in adult learning theory and are able to apply those principles to help districts develop teacher leaders who can, in turn, facilitate professional learning and lead peers in collaborative efforts. Districts identified those two abilities — flexibility to address contextual needs and expertise in adult learning — as key factors for high rates of satisfaction with providers.

Overall, most districts report being "neutral" to "satisfied" with services by technical assistance providers in support of standards implementation. When asked to rate satisfaction levels of internal providers and external providers, districts were most pleased with the services from internal providers. Ultimately, district leaders seek collaborative partnerships that enable them to co-create plans with the provider, implement the plans with provider support, and receive help to build the district's internal capacity.

"We look for providers that truly partner with us, have regular conference calls, and ask 'Have we met your goals?' — rather than just presenting and leaving."

– District leader

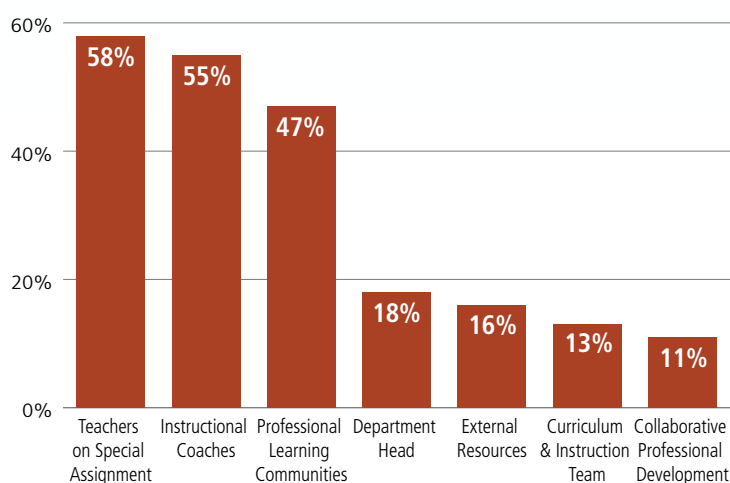
Districts build internal capability

While many districts turned to external expertise in the early years of CCSS implementation, more districts are now tapping into their own internal resources for professional learning, standards-aligned tools and curricula, and guidance in assessment development. Specifically, districts are relying on their teachers on special assignment, instructional coaches, and professional learning communities to provide at least half of the support dedicated to standards implementation in their schools (see figure 1).

Districts have the advantage of knowing firsthand the unique context of their schools and, thus, are often able to offer greater insight and flexibility for meeting specific needs than external organizations. The exception is rural districts, where drawing on internal resources is less common and specialized knowledge is scarcer.

For the most part, districts want to deepen local expertise and increase their own capability, thereby becoming less dependent on the services of outside providers as they advance their work toward achieving full implementation of the standards.

Figure 1. Supports that districts use most often for implementing the California Standards



Source: Insights into California State Standards Implementation (2016), <https://thecenter.wested.org/insights/>

Strengthening internal professional development capacity

The CA Standards have created a new opportunity for teachers to play a significant role in the shared leadership of their district's implementation of the standards.¹ To strengthen their professional learning capacity, districts are relying on teacher-to-teacher connections, such as developing teacher leaders to provide professional learning within the district.

To become teacher leaders — also called teachers on special assignment, instructional coaches, or Common Core facilitators — teachers are trained on pedagogical content knowledge aligned to the CA Standards and are released part- or full-time from teaching responsibilities to support their peers. They work closely with the district's curriculum and instruction team, developing new professional development and instructional materials for the school sites. Teacher leaders can also provide support to site leaders, who may depend on them for instructional leadership or professional learning facilitation. Despite the perceived value that teacher leaders bring to school sites, there are generally not enough of them to reach all the district's teachers consistently or to adequately meet all of the district's professional development needs.

Reclassifying teachers as teacher leaders is generally only possible in large districts where a greater pool of teachers exists. Small, rural districts are less able to reassign teachers away from the classroom, so, instead, they typically concentrate their internal professional learning efforts by leveraging their subject-area departments and existing professional learning communities.

CenterView Action Steps for Technical Assistance Providers

Drawing on input from district leaders, as well as existing practices in standards implementation, we offer the following list of ways that technical assistance providers can help districts increase ownership and ability to support implementation of the CA Standards, develop teacher leadership capacity, and collaborate strategically with service providers throughout the state.

- **Partner with district leaders to increase district capability and ownership.** Think strategically about how to provide technical assistance as a partnership — with the goal of relinquishing ownership to the districts over time. To achieve this goal, assist districts in developing strategic plans that help them gradually increase their internal capacity.
- **Empower districts to monitor their own progress.** Help districts self-assess their standards implementation using tools like the *Local District Common Core Implementation: Progress and Capacity Rubric*,² which addresses categories including systems alignment and change, educator and student supports, and engagement.
- **Develop district capacity for teacher leaders to lead and support effective professional learning and coaching.** Explicitly help districts build the knowledge and skills of both their centralized and site-based coaches and teacher leaders. Help these district staff deepen their leadership skills and implement high-quality peer-to-peer professional learning and coaching.
- **Participate in The Center’s (forthcoming) California Initiative network of external technical assistance providers to leverage expertise and support California districts.** Leverage shared knowledge among local education agencies and technical assistance providers to improve district capacity to implement the CA Standards. This sort of strategic collaboration and knowledge sharing can help technical assistance providers spread effective practices across their client base more rapidly, similar to work currently being performed by the California Collaborative on District Reform³ and the California CORE districts.⁴

For more on this study:

- Go to <https://thecenter.wested.org/>
- Contact Robert Sheffield, The Center’s Director of California Initiatives, at rsheffi@wested.org
- Read the first issue of this series: *Common Core implementation in California: A snapshot of districts’ progress*

Endnotes

1 Barth, R. S. (2013). The time is ripe (again). *Educational Leadership*, 71(2), 10–16.

2 CCSSO and U.S. Education Delivery Institute. (2013). *Local district Common Core implementation — Progress and capacity rubric*. <http://www.csai-online.org/resource/595>

3 California Collaborative on District Reform [website]. <http://www.cacollaborative.org/topics/common-core-state-standards>

4 Knudson, J., & Garibaldi, M. (2015). *Considerations for cross-district collaboration: Early lessons from the CORE districts*. <http://www.air.org/sites/default/files/downloads/report/CORE-Cross-District-Collaboarion-Brief-August-2015.pdf>