

## California Standards Implementation: WestEd Insights

### BACKGROUND

In fall 2015 the California State Board of Education partnered with WestEd to coordinate a statewide survey of California teachers, principals and district leaders to gather information about current implementation of the state's ELA and mathematics standards and associated supports.<sup>1</sup> To most accurately represent the perspectives of educators across the state (given the survey response rates),<sup>2</sup> in December the California State Board of Education asked WestEd to assemble and present the survey findings alongside the lessons it has learned across its other research and technical assistance initiatives underway on this topic. For example, this fall WestEd also conducted focus groups with 72 teachers in 29 California districts and structured interviews with 41 California district leaders, and the organization has been monitoring standards implementation in several networks of school districts across the state as well. Today's presentation describes the findings that emerged across these various projects and other recent relevant research, and provides a broad perspective on implementation progress in the state's schools and districts. Specifically, these findings provide a snapshot of California educators' perceptions between September and December 2015.<sup>3</sup>

### KEY FINDINGS

***There is goodwill towards the standards among practitioners.*** Between 56 and 92 percent of responding teachers and principals agreed, on separate survey questions, that California's current standards are more rigorous than previous standards, that the standards make learning more relevant to students' everyday lives, and that the standards will positively impact the degree to which students are prepared for college and careers.<sup>4</sup> (Although results varied somewhat by question and educator group, the highest proportion of responding teachers or principals who disagreed with any of these statements was 25 percent.) These results align with other recent survey-based research in other states that found that teachers and principals are embracing the new standards (Kane et al., 2016).

***California's districts are implementing standards in different ways and on different timelines.*** The majority of California district leaders interviewed indicated that their districts chose to phase-in implementation by subject area or grade span (often piloting their new approaches) rather than universally implementing changes, but the latter approach was more common among rural districts. When asked on surveys to rate the strength of their district's progress in implementing the new standards in classrooms, 70 percent or more of district leaders rated their progress as good/excellent (although approximately 10 percent more respondents rated their progress as good/excellent in English-Language Arts than in Math).<sup>5</sup> In addition, educators

reported feeling less prepared to ensure that their English learners meet standards, and are seeking additional support in this area — with principals and district leaders highlighting a need for more training for teaching the state’s new ELA/ELD standards and framework.

***School leaders need to develop new knowledge and capacity about curriculum, instruction, and assessment.*** School leaders play a vital role in standards implementation, and in surveys a significantly lower proportion of teachers than district leaders agreed that their principals were well prepared to implement the standards. The district leaders interviewed by WestEd suggested that school leaders have not yet been targeted with the same level of standards-focused professional development as teachers.

***Educators are seeking more structured time to learn and implement standards-based practices.*** Responding district leaders reported on surveys that a lack of time was a bigger barrier to standards implementation than funding or support provider options, and every district interviewed cited time constraints as a barrier to standards-focused professional learning.<sup>6</sup> In addition, fewer than 1 in 4 responding teachers agreed in surveys that they have “adequate time to successfully implement” the state standards. To confront these challenges and provide more time for standards-focused professional learning, some California districts are adjusting schedules, through, for example, implementing early release or late start days, procuring external funding to provide substitute teachers, or rotating teachers on special assignment back in the classroom.

***Educators are seeking quality standards-aligned instructional materials (particularly in English-Language Arts) as well as interim/diagnostic assessments.*** Interviewed California district leaders cited a lack of quality, standards-aligned instructional materials (curriculum and assessments) as a key standards implementation challenge, with districts varying in their approaches to buying, reviewing, and/or creating materials. In surveys, the instructional materials that district leaders rated as currently *least* aligned to California’s new standards were their English-Language Arts textbooks, the English-Language Arts curriculum selected or developed by their districts, and school- or teacher-created summative assessments. (The list of California State Board of Education-adopted instructional materials in ELA/ELD was made available in November 2015, late in the survey administration window.) In addition, teachers expressed particular concerns in focus groups about their ability to viably assess their students’ progress under the new standards during the year, and cited a need for both access to and training on diagnostic assessments. The assessments used to understand student learning during the year are a key priority for districts, and teachers need support to engage in the formative assessment process in ways that lead to deeper learning (Perry et al., 2015).

***Teachers are relying on peer-developed materials.*** In focus groups, California teachers indicated that their fellow teachers (including peers online) are a primary source for

instructional materials. This aligns with recent survey research across five other states currently implementing Common Core State Standards (Kane et al., 2016), which found that teachers are often relying on instructional materials either created by their school/district colleagues or available from online platforms.

***There is room to expand awareness, appreciation, and support for the state’s Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) Digital Library and Interim Assessments.*** While many of the interviewed district leaders are only in the beginning stages of accessing the state’s Smarter Balanced Digital Library, they suggested that their instructional coaches, teachers on assignment, and teacher leaders are accessing it more meaningfully. The majority of interviewed district leaders reported not yet using the Smarter Balanced Interim Assessments as of fall 2015. In surveys, approximately half of responding teachers reported that they had received Digital Library resources, but in separate questions fewer than 1 in 3 respondents reported participating in training about either the Digital Library or Interim Assessments. Among the teachers who reported receiving Digital Library resources, more than 75 percent rated the support as at least somewhat helpful, with the Digital Library more often rated helpful among math and secondary teachers, as well as among rural teachers.

***While standards-focused professional development is occurring, educators emphasized the need for more consistent, job-embedded training.*** District leaders indicated on surveys that their most sought-after implementation support is standards-focused professional development for teachers, and focus groups with teachers suggested that there is significant variability in the quality and types of professional learning experiences that teachers are accessing. Moreover, although approximately two-thirds of responding teachers agreed, on separate survey questions, that the professional development they received during the 2014/15 school year was well aligned with California’s new standards and that more standards-focused training was needed, lower proportions rated their professional development to date as helpful.

Findings from teacher focus groups and from WestEd’s Math In Common initiative<sup>7</sup> suggest particular benefits from professional development activities that allow teachers to plan collaboratively and view and analyze lessons, student work, and formative assessment results (Perry et al., 2015). In particular, teachers reportedly value seeing other teachers making the shifts in classroom pedagogy required to fully implement the new standards, and want more frequent opportunities to examine and jointly discuss how instruction needs to change. At the same time, recent results from RAND’s American Teacher Panel Survey suggest that in English-Language Arts, such activities might be most productively focused on helping students craft arguments in their writing (Kaufman et al., 2016), while math activities might best be focused on helping students construct math arguments and apply math in the real world (Hamilton et al., 2016).

## REFERENCES

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## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The surveys were extensive, and focused on multiple domains (topics). Today's presentation focuses only on practitioners' perspectives on the content of the California standards, implementation progress, and implementation supports received to date. Results in other topic areas will be disseminated in other formats and to other California audiences (including policy leaders, coalition groups, and membership organizations), as part of a comprehensive dissemination strategy.
- <sup>2</sup> Surveys were emailed to a representative sample of California teachers as well as to the statewide populations of principals and superintendents. Responses were received from 1586 teachers (23% response rate), 1474 principals (20%), and 242 district leaders (29%). Although response rates were low, analyses of the respondent sample indicated that the responding teachers and principals were generally representative of the statewide populations across demographic characteristics, while district officials were from districts that were slightly larger, higher performing, and less economically disadvantaged than the statewide population. This presentation only references survey results that have been weighted against the makeup of the full population (with margins of error included) and align with other data source(s).
- <sup>3</sup> Standards implementation is in progress across California, with practitioners regularly engaging with newly-released materials and supports. For example, the list of State Board-adopted instructional materials in ELA/ELD was made available to California educators in November 2015, late in the statewide survey's administration window.
- <sup>4</sup> Teachers with five or fewer years of experience tended to agree with these statements in higher proportions (i.e., expressing more positive views of the standards) than more experienced teachers.
- <sup>5</sup> Given that the instructional shifts that will be required to effectively teach the new standards are likely to vary by subject area, it will be important to further study the subject-area pedagogical needs in schools in classrooms. In both subject areas, however, fewer than 20 percent of responding district leaders rated their district's progress in implementing the new standards in classrooms as "poor."
- <sup>6</sup> There was some indication in district leader interviews that time constraints were a bigger barrier in urban districts than in rural districts, whose leaders tended to emphasize funding needs.
- <sup>7</sup> Math in Common<sup>®</sup> is a five-year initiative funded by the S.D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation that supports a formal network of 10 California school districts (Dinuba, Elk Grove, Garden Grove, Long Beach, Oakland, Oceanside, Sacramento City, San Francisco, Sanger, and Santa Ana) as they are implementing the Common Core State Standards in mathematics (CCSS-M) across grades K–8.