

Transitioning to the Common Core State Standards and Next-generation Assessment Models:

A district-level survey of educator preparedness and implementation recommendations

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Author note

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### Abstract

As states work toward implementing the Common Core State Standards and adopting next-generation assessments from the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) and Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC), educational leaders will benefit from understanding levels of teacher preparedness and resource needs. To what extent are teachers prepared to create instructional contexts and classroom assessments compatible with the Common Core and next-generation assessments? What resources do educators need to make this transition? A district-level survey of teachers revealed levels of preparedness, areas of concern, and specific resource needs. The implementation recommendations presented are based upon the results of the survey and a school-level action plan.

*Keywords:* Common Core State Standards, next generation assessment, Smarter Balanced, collaboration, teacher leaders, professional learning communities

Transitioning to the Common Core State Standards and Next-generation Assessment Models: A district-level survey of educator preparedness and implementation recommendations

The Common Core State Standards represent a significant shift in education in the United States. Adopted by 45 states, the District of Columbia, and four U.S. territories, the Common Core is a catalyst for nation-wide change. The new standards move students and teachers beyond fact-based declarative knowledge toward a focus on application-based procedural knowledge. In order to meet the new standards, students must read and analyze complex texts and write intelligently for discipline-specific purposes (National Governors Association, 2010). To achieve these goals, significant changes need to be made to instructional practices and assessments (Porter, McMaken, Hwang, Yang, 2011).

### **Why a Shift in Standards?**

The paradigm shift presented by the Common Core is important because there are significant shortcomings in the educational system in the United States. Many students are not ready to transition to higher education after graduating from high school (Conley, 2008). A 2003 study utilizing data from the United States Department of Education found that nationwide, only 32 percent of the 70 percent of students graduating from high school were prepared for higher education (Greene & Forster, 2003). The result is an estimated 30-60 percent of students requiring remedial courses in order to start their higher education experiences (Complete College America, 2012; Conley, 2008).

Student success rates on four college readiness benchmarks in English, mathematics, reading, and science further quantify the problem. Of all high school graduates who took the ACT test in 2012, 60 percent met only one or two of four college readiness benchmarks (ACT,

Inc., 2012). More concerning, ACT Inc. (2012) reported that 28 percent of tested high school graduates failed to meet a single benchmark. Students who do not meet such standards run the risk of being “shut out of the college market” and face barriers for income and other life opportunities (Greene & Forster, 2003, p. 5).

In order to help students meet the demands of the new standards, many teachers will need to make significant changes to instructional contexts and align assessment practices with the new standards. Traditional assessments – like those heavily reliant upon multiple choice questions – do not satisfy the Common Core because they generally fail to assess higher-order thinking and are often disconnected from strategies used in the real world (Wiggins, 1991). Traditional assessment formats do not allow students to demonstrate their abilities to compose informational, argument, and narrative writing. This is problematic because the Common Core anchor standards heavily emphasize writing (National Governors Association, 2010). Most states are moving toward the use of next-generation assessments that student abilities in these areas. Twenty-six states have aligned with the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) and 18 states plus the District of Columbia chose the Partnership for Readiness in College and Career.

With the transition to the Common Core and state-level next-generation assessments already underway, there is concern that teachers are not prepared for this magnitude of change. In order to successfully implement the new standards, a considerable transformation needs to take place:

... teachers will need to know the standards; they will need the background content knowledge and the professional commitment to teach the standards to students; and they will need to have mastered instructional strategies that help them assist students of all

abilities and ages in attaining much higher standards than have previously been in place. (Ewing, 2010 in SMTI & TLC Working Group on Common Core State Standards, 2012, p. 3)

This may be a daunting task. Existing research indicates that many educators are not ready for the changes presented by the Common Core (Alberti, 2013). The Common Core represents a considerable shift in cognitive strategies used by students, pedagogical approaches of teachers, and changes to subject matter in areas such as mathematics (Porter, McMaken, Hwang, Yang, 2011). In my experiences working with teachers and administrators around the state of Idaho, this is clearly the case. While many teachers see the benefit of the Common Core and are eager to get started, they need assistance. Administrators face similar challenges. In a workshop session that I facilitated at the annual conference of the Idaho Association of School Administrators last July, participants posed a wide range of questions about how to support teachers as they undertake this transition.

A recent study conducted by the Center on Education Policy (CEP) confirmed the issue of teacher preparedness by highlighting the struggles of thirty-five states adopting the Common Core. Educators consistently reported that the new standards were more rigorous than previous standards (Kobler & Rentner, 2012). The consensus was that significant changes to curriculum and assessment would be needed for the standards to be successfully implemented (Kobler & Rentner, 2012). Other studies support the CEP study's findings, indicating that 50-80 percent of surveyed teachers were unprepared to teach the new standards (Scholastic & Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2012; Lestch, 2012; Schmidt, 2012).

### **The Challenges of Next-Generation Assessments**

The Common Core necessitates moving away from traditional assessment formats, such as those predominantly composed of multiple choice items. This style of assessment is commonly used in high-stakes testing situations. The inability of multiple choice items to accurately measure student achievement has been proven problematic across a wide range of situations (Bond, n.d.; Haney & Madaus, 1989; Levine, McGuire, & Nattress, 1970; The University of California at Los Angeles, 1990; Wiggins 1990, 1993). One claim argues that multiple choice questions can even inflate student scores (Haynie, 1994). Did a student understand the subject matter or simply recognize the correct answer because it was presented among answer options?

Multiple choice assessments probe student knowledge at the lower levels of Bloom's taxonomy (revised modern version) – remembering and understanding (Anderson et al., 2001; Cranton, 2000 in Seaman, 2003). This style of assessment, including a sampling of state assessments and the NAEP, is poorly aligned with the Common Core for this reason (Porter, McMaken, Hwang, Yang, 2011). Of traditional state-level math assessments analyzed during a 2011 study, alignment with the Common Core ranged between .10 and .31, with 1.0 representing perfect alignment (Porter, McMaken, Hwang, Yang, 2011). For English language arts, the range was .07-.32. The NAEP fared similarly, with an alignment range of .28 and .21 for the grade 4 and grade 8 math assessments. In English language arts, the range for the same subject areas was .25 and .24, respectively (Porter, McMaken, Hwang, Yang, 2011). The Common Core emphasis on application over knowledge recall cannot be assessed by multiple choice tests (Fuhrman, 1996 in Seamon, 2003).

How prepared are teachers to create classroom assessments that meet the Common Core and help prepare students for the Smarter Balanced Assessment? Some of the challenges presented by next-generation assessments became more concrete during a recent workshop I facilitated for a group of grade 2-11 teachers. Teachers spent more than an hour clicking through the sample SBAC assessment for their grade level and taking notes on challenges they noticed and strategies students would need. The ensuing whole group discussion raised many questions about how to teach those strategies and adapt the SBAC for classroom use. Teachers felt burdened about their responsibilities and the challenge placed before them. This was especially true regarding English language learners and students receiving special education services.

While the SBAC contains selected response (multiple choice) and constructed response (short answer) questions, students will be expected to complete extended response tasks (5-20 minutes) and performance tasks (120+ minutes) (Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium, 2012). SBAC performance tasks require students to compose informational, narrative, or argumentative writing supported by textual evidence. For example, one fourth grade performance task sample released by the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium begins by prompting students to watch a video, view three images, and read two articles about Civil War quilts (Oregon Department of Education, n.d.). Next, students are tasked with taking notes about the resources and responding to a series of questions. Last, students are instructed to plan, draft, and revise an informational essay summarizing the importance and history of the topic. Instead of asking students to recall facts from memory, the assessment requires students to apply reading and writing strategies to a specific context for an authentic purpose. This is a significant change from traditional assessment items that ask students to demonstrate factual knowledge about subject matter by selecting a correct answer (a,b,c,d).

If teachers do not yet feel prepared to teach the Common Core, to what extent are they ready to create next-generation assessments, such as literacy-based performance tasks, that measure student progress toward meeting the new standards? At the time of publication, existing data about this topic was nearly non-existent. An exhaustive search of the literature revealed no surveys concerning teacher preparedness for creating next-generation classroom assessments. Educational leaders need to understand teacher preparedness so they can facilitate the implementation process. What levels of preparedness exists, what concerns do teachers have, and what resources are requested in order to enact change?

### **Survey Methodology**

To assess educator preparedness for implementing the Common Core and creating next-generation classroom assessments, I conducted a district-level survey of educators. The participating school district educates more than 35,000 students in 49 schools. Schools range in size from 300 to 2,000 students. Elementary schools service grades K-5, middle schools grades 6-8, and high schools grades 9-12. Over 70 different languages are spoken by the district's students. The school district spans parts of two counties and five municipalities ranging in population from approximately 10,000 to 210,000 people. The surrounding metropolitan statistical area has a population of 615,561 people according to data from the 2010 United States Census. The district employs approximately 1,900 certified teachers.

All certified teachers in the district were invited to participate in the survey via district email. The survey was conducted using the school district's survey tool – K12-Insight – a web-based platform utilized for a variety of employee surveys. The survey was categorized as semi-anonymous. Results could be filtered by respondent, but no data was collected with regard to

email address, name, or school. Respondents were provided an opportunity to enter a prize draw for one of one hundred USB jump drives to be raffled upon completion of the survey. The jump drives were donated by a non-profit educational foundation.

In choosing to incentivize the survey, consideration was given to concerns regarding bias. After careful analysis, there were appeared to be no real concerns about using incentives for this survey, which is often the case with a variety of survey topics (Council of Professional Associations on Federal Statistics, 2008). While some researchers suggest that response rate may not increase dramatically when respondents are offered a prize draw, I employed this strategy to maximize participation due to the length of the survey and anticipated response time (Cobanoglu & Cobanoglu, 2003). Thirty-seven percent of survey respondents entered their names and email addresses in the USB jump drive prize draw form.

The survey questionnaire was divided into three sections: demographics and collaboration, the Common Core, and next-generation assessments. Survey questions were predominantly formatted with a five-point Likert rating scale designed to probe knowledge, frequency, and extent of implementation efforts. One open-ended response (up to 400 characters) was included in both the Common Core and next-generation assessment sections of the survey to offer respondents an opportunity to express potential concerns. The survey consisted of 34 questions. The complete survey questionnaire can be retrieved at the author's web site at [web address].

When evaluating survey results, responses in the two highest categories of the Likert scales (*prepared/highly prepared, informed/highly informed, frequently/very frequently*) were considered appropriate levels of activity. Responses in lower categories (*highly*

*unprepared/unprepared/somewhat prepared, highly uninformed/uninformed/somewhat informed, never/rarely/occasionally*) were considered not appropriate. For example, it is not enough for teachers to *occasionally* discuss implementing the Common Core and feel only *somewhat informed* about the standards that apply to their specific subject area.

### Survey Results

The survey was delivered to 1,895 email recipients on Tuesday, February 26, 2013. Respondents were given a two week window to complete the survey, with an option to save and return to the survey at any time during the window. Three hundred responses were received in the first week. A reminder email was sent after one week. One hundred and seventy-nine additional responses were received during the second week of the survey window. The 479 responses represented a 25.1 percent participation rate and an acceptable level of statistical reliability. A minimum of 330 respondents ( $n$ ) were needed for a 95 percent confidence and +/- five percent confidence interval ( $n = n/1 + n(e)^2$ ,  $330 = 1895/1 + 1895(.05)^2$ ).

### Demographic Results

Table 1

#### *Teaching Experience of Survey Respondents*

<u>Years Teaching Experience</u>	<u>Number of Respondents</u>	<u>%</u>
0-5	91	19.0
6-10	105	22.0
11-15	121	25.3
16-20	75	15.7
21-25	44	9.2
26+	42	8.8

Table 2

#### *Primary Subject Taught by Survey Respondents*

<u>Primary Subject</u>	<u>Number of Respondents</u>	<u>%</u>
Language Arts	61	12.3
Mathematics	53	10.6
Science	46	9.2
Social studies/history	28	5.6
Music	6	1.2
Physical Education	7	1.4
Other*	71	14.3
Did not answer**	226	45.4

\* Respondents were given an opportunity to type a different subject area

\*\* Elementary teachers were not required to select a subject area since elementary teachers typically teach multiple subjects

The first set of survey questions were designed to determine demographic information about grade level, subject, and years of experience in teaching. Elementary (K-5) teachers represented the largest group, with 207 respondents (43%). Middle school (6-8) teachers were next with 156 respondents (33%). The smallest group was high school (9-12) teachers with 116 respondents (24%). A variety of subject areas were represented. Readers should note that K-5 teachers were not asked to specify a subject area because elementary teachers typically teach multiple subjects. Middle and high school teachers were allowed to select “other” and enter a subject not listed. Just over 14 percent of teachers chose this option, reporting mainly technical and elective courses, library, and special education. Some teachers chose this option to indicate that they teach two or more subjects. Although teachers with a wide range of experience responded to the survey, approximately 50 percent of teachers had 6-15 years of teaching experience.

### **Collaboration Results**

The teachers surveyed in this project work in a district that has adopted a formal collaboration model. Teachers participate in professional learning communities (PLC) as described by Richard DuFour and Robert Eaker (1998) in their book *Professional Learning*

*Communities at Work: Best Practices for Enhancing Student Achievement.* The district provides teachers with dedicated collaboration each Wednesday morning prior to the start of the school day. Collaboration time is intended for teachers to plan instruction and assessments to increase student learning. The second set of survey questions addressed the use of PLC collaboration time.

Table 3

<i>Participation in Weekly Professional Learning Communities (PLC)</i>		
<u>Participation Rate</u>	<u>Number of Respondents</u>	<u>%</u>
Never	12	2.5
Rarely	25	5.3
Occasionally	37	7.8
Frequently	106	22.2
Very frequently	296	62.2

Table 4

<i>Focus of PLC Time Spent on Various Tasks</i>			
<u>Participation Rate</u>	<u>Common Core</u>	<u>Next-gen Assessment</u>	<u>Student Materials</u>
Never	7.8 %	22.5%	5.5%
Rarely	12.9%	18.3%	11.6%
Occasionally	27.0%	29.7%	28.2%
Frequently	30.6%	18.9%	30.7%
Very frequently	21.7%	10.5%	24.0%

A large percentage of respondents participated frequently in weekly PLC collaboration. However, the use of PLC time varied. Teachers reported working with the Common Core; next-generation assessments; and creating materials for student use. But, in each of these three areas, approximately 50 percent of teachers spent only occasional time focusing on these tasks. The lowest of these areas was the topic of next-generation assessments with over 70 percent of teachers only occasionally working to create Core-compatible assessments in their PLC groups.

Table 5

*Building In-service Professional Development focus on PLC Time for Creating Student-centric resources (learning activities, lessons, assessments)*

<u>Participation Rate</u>	<u>Number of Respondents</u>	<u>%</u>
Never	52	11.0
Rarely	115	24.3
Occasionally	143	30.2
Frequently	112	23.7
Very frequently	51	10.8

The survey also asked respondents how frequently in-building professional development opportunities involved PLC collaboration time for teachers to create student-centric resources. A high percentage of teachers indicated that these types of opportunities were not frequently offered in their buildings. Approximately 65 percent of teachers reported only occasional opportunities. Overall, the collaboration results revealed significant opportunities to focus efforts for using PLC time to facilitate the Common Core and create next-generation assessments.

### **Common Core Results**

One of the primary focuses of the survey was to assess teacher preparedness for implementing the Common Core. Teachers responded to a series of questions about their familiarity with the Common Core, classroom implementation efforts, participation in related professional development opportunities, and resource needs. An open-ended question was also included so participants could provide more specific feedback about the Common Core and their concerns.

Table 6

*Extent to Which Participants Have Read and Reviewed the Common Core State Standards*

<u>Participation Rate</u>	<u>Number of Respondents</u>	<u>%</u>
Never	39	8.3

Rarely	23	5.0
Occasionally	114	24.4
Frequently	150	32.0
Very frequently	142	30.3

Table 7

*Extent to Which Participants Feel Informed about the Purpose of and Research Behind the Common Core State Standards and the Common Core Standards for their Specific Subject Areas*

<u>Level of understanding</u>	<u>Common Core (general)</u>	<u>Common Core (subject area)</u>
Highly uninformed	24 (5.4%)	32 (6.8%)
Uninformed	45 (9.5%)	48 (10.3%)
Somewhat informed	165 (35.3%)	147 (31.5%)
Informed	158 (33.8%)	160 (34.3%)
Highly informed	75 (16.0%)	80 (17.1%)

Table 8

*Extent to Which Participants Feel Prepared to Teach Lessons that Meet the Common Core for their Specific Subject Areas*

<u>Level of preparedness</u>	<u>Number of Respondents</u>	<u>%</u>
Highly unprepared	29	6.2
Unprepared	84	18.0
Somewhat prepared	182	39.0
Prepared	132	28.2
Highly prepared	40	8.6

When asked about whether they had read and reviewed the Common Core State Standards, 62.3 percent of participants reported frequent or very frequent exposure, an reasonable level of activity. The remaining 38.7 percent of teachers surveyed may be less prepared. In order to implement the Common Core, teachers need a deep understanding of what the standards require of both themselves and students. This starts with unpacking the standards document and the three appendices (A-C) which highlight the research behind the standards, provide text exemplars and sample performance tasks, and samples of student writing.

Only 49.8 percent of respondents felt informed or highly informed about the purpose of and research behind the standards. A slightly higher (51.4) percentage of teachers felt informed or highly informed about the standards for their primary subject area of instruction. This is problematic because without a sound understanding of the standards, teachers are more likely to misinterpret their intent and engage in misguided implementation efforts:

When a new reform initiative comes around, our instinct as teachers and education leaders is often to buy new tools to support the work. But in a time when the market is offering an enormous range of materials, educators need a secure understanding of the standards so that we can choose our resources wisely. (Alberti, 2013)

There is no lack of teaching resources labeled as Common Core. A Google search for “Common Core lessons” returned 19,400,000 results. This is significant because when asked about sources of learning activities and lesson plans, 47.4 percent of respondents reported frequently or very frequently relying on Internet searches.

The survey results also revealed the gap between reading/reviewing the standards and feeling informed about the standards versus being prepared to teach the standards. Only 36.8 percent of respondents felt prepared or highly prepared to teach the Common Core. There was a 13 percent drop in confidence between teachers having read/reviewed and feeling informed (tables 6 & 7) about the standards versus being prepared (table 8) to teach the standards. This gap suggests the need for professional development to support teachers. Reading the standards is not enough.

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*Exposure of Participants to Professional Development Opportunities Related to the Common Core in Two Different Settings*

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<u>Participation Rate</u>	<u>In-building</u>	<u>Outside of building</u>
Never	59 (12.6%)	116 (24.8%)
Rarely	117 (25.1%)	74 (15.9%)
Occasionally	183 (39.2%)	161 (34.5%)
Frequently	76 (16.3%)	92 (19.7%)
Very frequently	32 (6.9%)	24 (5.1%)

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When asked about professional development related to the Common Core, only 23.1 percent of respondents reported frequent or very frequent participation in Common Core-related professional development within their buildings. Professional development opportunities outside of the building occurred at a similar rate with 24.8 percent of respondents reporting frequent or very frequent participation.

Another concern raised by the survey was the role of building-level leadership in terms of implementation plans. When asked if their building has a Common Core implementation plan, 35 percent of teachers acknowledged having a plan, 12 percent reported having no plan in place, and 53 percent of respondents were unsure whether a plan exists. For effective and efficient implementation to occur, buildings must have a plan in place that provides teachers support through professional development opportunities.

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Table 10

*Extent of Common Core Implementation in Two Different Settings Related to Participants*

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<u>Implementation Extent</u>	<u>In Participant's Building</u>	<u>In Participant's Classroom</u>
Never	22 (4.7%)	40 (8.6%)
Rarely	63 (13.5%)	46 (9.9%)
Occasionally	175 (37.4%)	111 (23.8%)
Frequently	150 (32.1%)	140 (30.0%)
Very frequently	57 (12.2%)	130 (27.8%)

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Many teachers surveyed have not yet thoroughly begun implementing the Common Core. When asked to what extent implementation has taken place in their buildings versus their own classrooms, 44.3 percent of respondents indicated frequent or very frequent implementation efforts at the building level with an increase to 57.8 percent when asked about their own classroom efforts. Many teachers have considerable work to do in the area of implementation. One way for educational leaders to provide teachers support is by assessing resource needs.

Table 11

*Weighted Ranking of Resources that Participants Need for Implementation of the Common Core*

<u>Resource</u>	<u>Weighted Rank</u>	<u>Weighted Rank Score</u>
Time for developing resources	1	2399
Sample lessons/assignments/projects	2	2206
Collaboration opportunities	3	1986
Professional development opportunities	4	1899
Textbooks/primary documents/literature	5	1728
Advice from experienced educators	6	1424
Technology for student use	7	1374

Survey respondents ranked a variety of resource needs related to implementing the Common Core. Time was the highest priority. This should not be a surprise; various articles and studies have documented teacher concerns regarding time. Educators often express concern over being overworked and lacking time to complete even essential tasks such as lesson planning (Birnbaum, 2008; Hendy, 2011; Portland Public Schools, 2012; Toplikar, 2003). The high priority that teachers place on needing sample Common Core materials raises a concern; teachers must be able to create and choose appropriate materials to use (Alberti, 2013). This cannot occur unless teachers have a deep understanding of the standards and the pedagogical knowledge to apply appropriate strategies for teaching and learning.

Teachers also placed high value on collaboration and professional development. As the survey results have revealed (tables 4, 5, & 9), these are areas where significant improvements can be made. Many teachers surveyed did not appear to maximize their use of PLC collaboration time for the purpose of creating student-centric materials to facilitate the Common Core. Likewise, an unfavorable percentage of teachers have participated in professional development activities related to the Common Core. Other survey data has revealed similar concerns about collaboration time and the need for new classroom materials to replace those that fall short of meeting the Common Core (Gewertz, 2012).

Another survey question asked respondents to describe the extent (strongly disagree → strongly agree) to which the seven resources in table 11 were important for implementing the Common Core. Respondents agreed or strongly agreed at a high rate that all of the resources are important, ranging between 75.2 percent (technology for students) and 94.2 percent (time for developing resources). No resources were discounted as being unimportant.

The last survey question regarding the Common Core was an open-ended question in which respondents could type up to 400 characters and describe concerns about implementing the Common Core. Some of these comments have been included below to provide further insight into the concerns of teachers regarding this transition:

- Respondent #9: I have reviewed the CCSS but I do not understand how they apply to subjects other than Math and Language Arts. I do not see how I am to implement these standards in subjects such as Science or History. I do not know what these CCSS look like in those classrooms that are not core content areas.

- Respondent #51: Time: There is not enough time in the day to develop lessons, grade Smarter Balance type tests (formative/summative) and collaborate with teammates. We spend an IMMENSE amount of time on our own (weekends/evenings, grading and preparing at home).
- Respondent #203: It seems that all of the responsibility for implementation is being put on the shoulders of already overburdened teachers. All of the above needs for implementation require more time. There is only so much time in a day, week, school year, etc. We are trying to assemble a plane in flight with student passengers. Let's try not to kill them and ourselves at the same time.
- Respondent #324: My concern is that many teachers are lagging behind because of lack of professional development in the CCSS, yet they are expected to be experts.
- Respondent #422: In elementary we don't have time to teach all of the subject areas, then do interventions for both ELA and math. We also don't get enough time to plan, make pre-assessments, and prepare to teach and assess these areas. Remember we are teaching Writing, Parts of Speech, Reading (all genres), Social Studies, Spelling (Word Study), Science, Math, and Cursive Handwriting. How many hrs./day?

As the survey results have demonstrated, implementing the Common Core is a complex multifaceted endeavor with significant roadblocks. Teachers need a better understanding of the Common Core standards, opportunities for professional development, and resources to facilitate change. Organizational change rarely occurs without elements of resistance (Evans, 1996) and the transition to the Common Core should be no exception. As educators find themselves asked to modify or discard existing classroom materials and create new assignments, assessments, and

projects, what problems might occur? Consider the following example from Aspy, Aspy, and Quinby (1993):

Emery Wilson, Dean of the University of Kentucky School of Medicine, described the classic confrontation between new and traditional teaching methods: “Changing the curriculum is like moving a graveyard. Faculty members have lectures prepared, and some don't want to do the added work of changing the way they teach.” (Gil 1992)

This anecdote pertains to medical school, but data suggests that similar issues may occur within the K-12 spectrum. For example, in one recent survey about the Common Core, only 25 percent of math teachers indicated a willingness to quit teaching topics removed from their curriculums due to changes related to the Common Core (Schmidt, 2012).

### Next-generation Assessment Results

Table 12

*Frequency of Use of Different Question Types in Classroom Assessments*

<u>Rate</u>	<u>Mult. Choice</u>	<u>Fill-in-blank</u>	<u>Matching</u>	<u>Short Answer</u>	<u>Prfm. Task</u>
Never	7.9%	6.3%	11.0%	3.5%	3.3%
Rarely	21.0%	17.2%	25.7%	7.9%	9.6%
Occasionally	33.4%	33.3%	36.3%	26.5%	23.4%
Frequently	27.7%	33.3%	21.7%	43.1%	31.3%
V.frequently	10.0%	9.9%	5.3%	19.0%	32.4%

Educational leaders can benefit from understanding the types of assessments taking place in their buildings. For example, 63.7 percent of respondents reported frequently or very frequently using performance task items in their classroom assessments. A logical step would be to examine examples and determine to what extent these existing performance tasks are aligned with Core-compatible next-generation assessment models. Some teachers may have promising

material to work with as opposed to needing to start over from scratch. The survey also revealed the use of lower-level tasks such as multiple choice, fill-in-the-blank, and matching. To what extent do these questions comprise classroom assessments and how can these teachers further incorporate higher-order performance tasks in their classroom assessments to measure student achievement in the context of the Common Core?

Table 13

*Extent to Which Participants Have Read and Reviewed Information about the Smarter Balanced Assessment\**

<u>Participation Rate</u>	<u>Number of Respondents</u>	<u>%</u>
Never	155	33.6
Rarely	89	19.3
Occasionally	134	29.1
Frequently	64	13.9
Very frequently	19	4.1

\* Smarter Balanced Assessment is the state-level assessment in the author's state of employment so survey questions did not address the PARCC assessment used in other states

Table 14

*Extent to Which Participants Feel Informed about the Philosophy Behind the Smarter Balanced Assessment*

<u>Level of understanding</u>	<u>Number of Respondents</u>	<u>%</u>
Highly uninformed	88	19.1
Uninformed	113	24.5
Somewhat informed	159	34.4
Informed	80	17.4
Highly informed	21	4.6

Table 15

*Extent to Which Participants Feel Prepared to Create Classroom Assessments that are Aligned with the Smarter Balanced Assessment*

<u>Level of preparedness</u>	<u>Number of Respondents</u>	<u>%</u>
Highly unprepared	97	21.0
Unprepared	169	36.7
Somewhat prepared	154	33.4

Prepared	32	6.9
Highly prepared	9	2.0

Table 16

*Extent of SBAC-compatible Classroom Assessment Implementation in Two Different Settings Related to Participants*

<u>Implementation Extent</u>	<u>In Participant's Building</u>	<u>In Participant's Classroom</u>
Never	152 (33.0%)	173 (37.4%)
Rarely	136 (29.6%)	106 (23%)
Occasionally	124 (27%)	122 (26.5%)
Frequently	42 (9.1%)	45 (9.8%)
Very frequently	6 (1.3%)	15 (3.3%)

The results of several survey questions about assessment suggest a cause-effect relationship. Tables 13-16 communicate the outcomes of these questions. A high percentage of survey respondents reported utilizing performance tasks in their classroom assessments, yet a low percentage of teacher felt they understood next-generation assessments like the SBAC. As a result, educators may not be very prepared to create Core-compatible performance task assessments for classroom use. The problem is significant; fewer than 10 percent of survey respondents felt prepared or highly prepared to create classroom assessments that support the Common Core.

Because survey respondents indicated low levels of understanding and preparedness, it should come as no surprise that the use of next-generation assessment models is also occurring at low levels. Only 10 percent of respondents indicated frequent or very frequent use of next-generation assessments in their classrooms. An important professional development consideration would be giving teachers exposure to next-generation assessment models to help them understand how to measure student achievement in the context of the Common Core.

Table 17

*Exposure of Participants to Professional Development Opportunities Related to the Smarter Balanced Assessment in Two Different Settings*

<u>Participation Rate</u>	<u>In-building</u>	<u>Outside of building</u>
Never	204 (44.3%)	215 (46.6%)
Rarely	124 (27%)	121 (26.3%)
Occasionally	93 (20.1%)	83 (18%)
Frequently	34 (7.4%)	34 (7.4%)
Very frequently	6 (1.2%)	8 (1.7%)

While the survey results revealed a host of concerns regarding assessment preparedness, there are some simple solutions. Fewer than 10 percent of respondents reported participating regularly in professional development opportunities related to assessment. Educational leaders need to seek professional development opportunities for their teachers. If meaningful growth opportunities are provided, increases in teacher understanding, preparedness, and use of next-generation assessments should occur.

Table 18

*Weighted Ranking of Resources that Participants Need for Implementation of New Smarter Balanced-Compatible Assessments that Support the Common Core*

<u>Resource</u>	<u>Weighted Rank</u>	<u>Weighted Rank Score</u>
Time for developing assessments	1	1967
Sample assessments	2	1910
Professional development opportunities	3	1748
Collaboration opportunities	4	1670
Advice from experienced educators	5	1251
Technology for student use	6	1113

Respondents ranked resource needs for creating next-generation assessment for classroom use. Teachers ranked time as the highest need with samples and professional development opportunities following closely after. Technology was considered the lowest priority. Survey respondents were also asked to what extent (strongly disagree → strongly agree)

they felt each resource was needed. Most respondents agreed or strongly agreed that all resources are needed, ranging from 67.6 percent (technology for student use) to 94.0 percent (time for developing assessments).

Respondents were also provided an opportunity to complete an open-ended question about their concerns regarding next-generation assessments. These responses largely focused on resource needs and concerns over student abilities:

- Respondent #14: Students do not come with grade level foundation skills. I'm always back-filling skills that should have been learned in elementary grades. Students are not critical thinkers. They don't do well with deeper level questions or multiple step problems. Smarter Balanced Assessments are very hard for them.
- Respondent #49: Time to administer them as well as grade them. TIME! I love the assessment style- would love more time to create them.
- Respondent #68: Same as my prior answer- If we're going to do this, please do not expect us to research and generate for free on our own time. I believe most educators will get it if some examples are shown to them and some structured time to work on the assessments as well as collaborative opportunities are provided.
- Respondent #121: That teachers will be recreating the wheel developing assessments when the district has access to places and publishers whose very job it is to create quality assessments. I teach, I don't have my masters in data analysis and test creation.
- Respondent #202: My concern is that teachers will be left to figure out how to create SBAC type assessments on their own. That time will not be given for teachers to learn and develop the skills needed in order to construct reliable and valid assessments. That training will be limited to only small groups and offered infrequently.

- Respondent #281: We have to understand them inside and out before we can develop and help students obtain the skills to prepare for them. It will take some time to understand them before we can even develop them.
- Respondent #473: How will I get disengaged learners to even attempt to answer the questions on the assessments? How do I get students who have a difficult time thinking for themselves to even attempt to complete a task and/or assessment?

The survey results revealed that there is considerable work to be done in the area of assessment. While traditional tests can be scored quickly and allow data to be easily analyzed for a variety of measurement purposes, do we really understand student capabilities when learning is indexed in this fashion? It is not that traditional tests do not provide data; rather they fail to accurately measure student achievement in relation to the Common Core (Rackowitz, 2012). Next-generation assessments models must replace traditional tests so educators can deeply probe student abilities and reveal compelling data about achievement levels in order to determine whether students are truly becoming career and college ready (U.S. Department of Education, 2010).

### **Limitations**

While the survey results are statistically reliable and reveal some strong trends, it cannot be assumed that teachers in other districts or states will have the same responses and needs. Educational leaders should consider surveying their own teachers to uncover their specific needs. Decision-making needs to be based on data to help teachers implement the Common Core and create next-generation assessments in a meaningful and timely manner.

For many questions, the survey results revealed low levels of understanding and implementation. At the time of the survey, many teachers were just beginning to work with the Common Core and next-generation assessments in earnest. Since then, teachers have been presented increasing opportunities for professional development and time to work with the new standards and next-generation assessments. Therefore, the survey is more an indicator of the starting point; improvement will occur as teachers are provided professional development opportunities and time to make changes in their instructional practices. This is important because of pressures on teachers to begin the transition immediately. For example, the Common Core has become a requirement for all schools in my state state. State-wide field trials of the Smarter Balanced Assessment will begin in the spring of 2014. Many other states are operating under similar mandates and time frames.

### **Implementation Recommendations**

As the survey results have suggested, implementing the Common Core and transitioning teachers to the use of Core-compatible next-generation classroom assessments will involve challenges. Teachers need time to make changes to instructional contexts and assessments, samples to guide their thinking, and meaningful professional development opportunities. What will it take for effective implementation to occur? How can highly-structured outcome-based Common Core implementation plans be executed? What components should be included in implementation plans?

With time limitations and resource shortages faced by many schools and districts across the nation, effective implementation will require creative approaches. The following implementation recommendations are based in part on a building-level Common Core action

plan that began in my school during the 2012-2013 school year. There are four important shifts that school should consider: 1.) Providing time for teacher peer collaboration, 2.) Identifying and training teacher leaders, 3.) Utilizing staff meetings and professional development days for Common Core implementation, and 4.) Promoting paradigm-shift through teacher evaluation and portfolio processes. These shifts have addressed the needs of educators as reported in the survey.

### **Providing Opportunities for Teacher Peer Collaboration**

As teachers work toward implementing the Common Core and creating next-generation assessments, collaboration will be an essential consideration. Jean Piaget (1977) and Lev Vygotsky (1987) have long since established the benefits of collaboration and social learning. This is especially true in school settings. When students and teachers work collectively through social interactions, learning is enhanced. Vygotsky proclaimed, "We become ourselves through others" (1966, p. 43). As schools navigate the Common Core implementation process, how can teacher peer collaboration be used to support teachers as they create learning contexts, common assessments, and other instructional components?

In my school district, collaboration is a formalized process. As mentioned previously, the district's collaboration philosophy is based on DuFour and Eaker's (1998) PLC model. This model asks teachers to consider four essential questions: What do we want students to learn, how will we know when they have learned, what will we do if they haven't learned, and what will we do if they have already learned it? (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). Teachers work together to address these questions as a community of professionals who have a defined mission, values, vision, and goals (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). PLC groups in my school are expected to establish group norms and work toward specific deliverables. DuFour and Eaker promote the use of SMART (strategic,

measurable, attainable, results-oriented, and time-bound) goals to direct the outcomes of this type of collaborative teacher work (1998).

A recent focus of PLC efforts in my school has been the development of Core-compatible common assessments. For example, my PLC group uses the Common Core anchor standards for reading and writing in science to guide the creation of summative next-generation assessments that require students to apply science content to real world situations. We then apply the philosophy of backward design to create tightly-aligned instructional contexts to prepare students for the assessments (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). One recent performance task assessment we developed tasked our middle school life science students with researching a set of documents and establishing a point of view about who deserved credit for the 1962 Nobel Prize in Medicine and Physiology awarded for the discovery of DNA's double helix structure. They used their research and text evidence to compose letters to the Nobel Prize committee about how the credit should be distributed.

While there are varying levels of execution among PLC groups, consistent direction has been provided by the building administration and teachers are receiving support. There is a strong culture of collaboration in the building; PLC time is considered sacred and not used for purposes other than those directly related to student learning. Grade-level, discipline, and other meetings occur at different times. During weekly collaboration time, administrators check in on PLC groups to monitor progress and provide focus, guidance, and assistance as needed.

The most significant resource need revealed by the survey was time. By maximizing existing collaborative structures or creating a new system, educational leaders can provide teachers with time and space to work toward implementing the Core and creating assessments.

Districts that do not have the resources to create a collaboration model like the one presented must still consider that teachers need time. One creative approach could be to consider how prep periods and teacher schedules can be arranged so that teachers can collaborate during common times within the work day. Solution may not be convenient or easy, but teachers need time for acceptable levels of implementation to be achieved.

### **Identifying & Training Teacher Leaders**

Implementing the Common Core involves addressing a number of challenges, one of which involves leadership roles and coaching. Many educational leaders may not have not taught the Common Core Standards in a classroom setting with students. As a result, it may be difficult for some administrators and instructional coaches to speak from an informed position about how to implement the new standards. Furthermore, school-level administrators face challenging working conditions. They must deal with busy schedules, a wide range of job responsibilities, and daily interruptions; as a result principals are often pressed for time and have difficulty completing job-related tasks (Marshall, 2008; Robertson, 2006).

One way that principals can mitigate these challenges and help facilitate the Common Core is by identifying and supporting professional development opportunities for teacher leaders in their buildings. Teacher leaders fill an important leadership role in schools:

Teacher leaders assume a wide range of roles to support school and student success. Whether these roles are assigned formally or shared informally, they build the entire school's capacity to improve. Because teachers can lead in a variety of ways, many teachers can serve as leaders among their peers. (Harrison & Killion, 2007, p. 74)

Two specific ways that teacher leadership can be utilized in service of the Common Core are by empowering teachers to act as instructional/curriculum specialists. In this capacity, capable teachers can be tasked with researching effective instructional strategies and ways to link curriculum and the standards (Harrison & Killion, 2007). Giving this responsibility to capable staff members allows teacher leaders to act as agents of change. By demonstrating a desire to rise above the status quo and put in the effort to make continual improvements, they challenge peers to do the same (Harrison & Killion, 2007).

Teacher leaders are vital to implementing the Common Core because this form of leadership results in “the construction of significant new educational knowledge” which inspires “confidence in teachers, students, and parents, and [lays] the foundations for heightened aspirations and enhanced levels of student achievement” (Crowther, 2009, p. 10). When teachers are able to name their practices for students, peers, and parents/guardians, they can communicate their actions in a way that benefits others. It is imperative for school administrators to identify teacher leaders who can operate in this capacity.

Teacher leadership plays an important role in professional development in my school. The school’s leadership team is comprised of teachers from each grade level who represent all subject areas – language arts, mathematics, social studies, science, and electives. Under the guidance of building administrators, the leadership team establishes a professional development calendar for the school year and divides the work based on capabilities and professional interests. The school also has a pool of professional development days available for staff members. The leadership team approves requests for use of these days. Professional development days are typically approved for teachers requesting to participate in activities that build instructional capacities. Teachers are asked to share outcomes of their experiences. This can range from small

discussions with PLC partners or grade level teams to leading whole staff professional development.

During the 2012-2013 school year, members of the leadership team worked in pairs to research and present Common Core-compatible instructional strategies at monthly staff meetings. The benefits of using this style of professional development were numerous. On an end-of-year survey about professional development, 44.2 percent of teachers reported moving from *uniformed* or *somewhat informed* at the beginning of the year into *informed* or *highly informed* when asked to what extent they felt informed about the Common Core State Standards. When asked to what extent they had begun implementation of the Common Core, 48.2 percent of teachers moved from *rarely* or *occasionally* to *frequently* or *very frequently*. Survey respondents also overwhelmingly reported (>60% *agree* or *strongly agree*) that the topics presented during professional development increased their level of understanding and helped them implement the Common Core and create next-generation assessments. In total, 81.5 percent of respondents reported being *satisfied* or *highly satisfied* with the professional development opportunities presented. While the sample size (27 of 51 teachers responded) of this school-level survey did not result in statistical reliability, the results show strong trends and demonstrate the benefits of this type of teacher leadership.

While teacher leaders can serve an important role in the professional development process, the role of building administrators and their influence cannot be discounted. Although it has been acknowledged that principals face time constraints and can utilize teacher leadership to increase capacity, their leadership roles should not be minimized. Research shows that principals influence school quality to a great extent. In their 2009 project, *Principal Time-Use and School*

*Effectiveness*, researchers Eileen Horng, Daniel Klasik, and Susanna Loeb cite various categories in which principals “play critical roles in the development of high-quality schools” (p. 1).

Among these is the impact of principals on student performance. In the context of the Common Core, administrators need to be highly informed about the standards and next-generation assessments in order to effectively lead their teachers. This means that to some extent, principals should attend professional development opportunities with teacher-leaders so they can better inform the professional development process, guide/mentor individual teachers, and impact collaboration efforts. When this happens, student performance is enhanced.

### **Utilizing Staff Meetings and Professional Development In-service for Common Core Implementation**

A significant part of the professional development model implemented by my school was shifting the focus of staff meetings during the 2012-2013 school year. The first few minutes of each monthly meeting allow for important announcements, but if a subject could be covered in an email or the principal’s weekly newsletter, those forms of communication were generally utilized instead. Valuable face-to-face meeting time was spent considering how to facilitate the Common Core. Monthly meetings became professional development sessions of 20-25 minutes. As mentioned previously, pairs of teachers from the school’s leadership team presented a variety of Common Core-compatible instructional strategies. These were active participation sessions. Teachers were presented with strategies and accompanying resources, practiced using the strategies, and were tasked with trying the strategies with their students. Teachers used PLC collaboration time to develop opportunities for using the strategies and discuss the outcomes of their efforts.

In one of these short professional development sessions, a pair of colleagues used Martin Luther King Jr.'s famous "I have a dream" speech to teach a close reading strategy. Teachers listened to an audio recording of the speech and then worked in small groups to read segments of the speech and identify specific elements of language that were used. At the end of the working session, each member shared their findings to the group. In the same session, teachers also read and summarized several pieces of science text and used a jigsaw format to share information with others who had read different passages. Teachers were learning about and actively using strategies they could apply to any grade level or subject matter.

On full and half-day professional development days, teachers participated in more extensive professional development sessions. These sessions were often facilitated by teacher leaders who had attended professional development opportunities outside of the school. Sessions typically lasted between 45 and 90 minutes in length. Some of the sessions incorporated time for PLC groups to work collaboratively with the topic. For example, during one in-service session in April 2013, teachers were provided an introduction to performance tasks and the Smarter Balanced Assessment during a 40 minute thinking session. They reviewed examples and identified components. Next, teachers were given 60 minutes in their PLC groups to develop a framework for a performance task assessment. The culminating activity was a whole group share-out session and gallery walk. During the gallery walk, teachers used a praise/question/polish (PQP) strategy to provide feedback to their peers.

The use of professional development days for implementing the Common Core is a very productive endeavor. By incorporating collaborative opportunities, teachers are able to compound their efforts, grow professionally, feel supported, and accomplish more (Lassonde & Isreal, 2010). Through the professional development activities described, teachers were provided

valuable work time; examples of strategies, lessons, and assessments; and advice and recommendations from highly-informed colleagues, several significant needs indicated by surveyed teachers. The most important characteristic of the school's professional development model is active participation. Teachers do not just sit and listen. They engage, apply strategies, struggle productively, and create lessons, assessments, and other resources they need.

### **Promoting paradigm-shift through teacher evaluation and portfolio processes**

Because the Common Core represents a profound shift for teachers in terms of pedagogy, instructional contexts, and assessments, it makes sense to shift teacher evaluation and portfolio requirements to serve as a catalyst for change. This may be especially true during the first several years of the implementation process. As teachers work to enact such profound changes, it will be important for building administrators to ensure that implementation is occurring at appropriate levels so a timely transition can occur. One way to accomplish this is by increasing evaluation-related activity.

Some principals rely upon only one or two formal evaluations per year and infrequent checks of lessons and assessments. For example, in the state of Idaho, teachers are evaluated annually, but that evaluation can be determined by as few as two formal observations or "evaluative discussions" (Idaho State Department of Education, 2013). This minimum level of evaluation may not be enough to ensure that teachers are frequently or very frequently creating instructional contexts and assessments that meet the Common Core. Nor may it provide administrators ample opportunity to identify struggling teachers. While additional evaluation may stretch administrators who are already pressed for time, it is an important and cost-effective consideration.

While some teachers will be naturally attracted to the possibilities of the new standards, there will also be resistance. As previously discussed, organizational change comes with challenges (Evans, 1996). Research shows that accountability raises compliance. High-stakes testing provides a powerful example of how accountability can change teacher behavior. When high-stakes testing is tied to accountability, teachers may go as far as abandoning best practices and focus their efforts on test preparation (Stecher et al., 2010; Volante, 2004). While not a desirable outcome, it illustrates the impact of setting expectations for which people are held accountable.

Accountability is important but caution should be exercised. These measures should not be punitive, rather realistic and useful deliverables that benefit teachers and their students. Buy-in from teachers is important. Otherwise resistance may derail accountability measures (Stecher et al., 2010). Administrators should consider embedding accountability measures into portfolio and evaluation tools that encourage collaborative approaches. When collaboration is used, there is less pressure on individual teachers and potential for higher-quality work. For example, teachers in my school were tasked with creating Core-compatible summative assessments as a portfolio requirement last year. My team worked to produce a year-end cross-curricular performance task assessment. Students were tasked with taking the concept of energy and relating it to subject matter in science, mathematics, English, and world civilizations. They composed graphs, illustrations, and text and incorporated everything into a two-page magazine. Because we all contributed, the work load was lessened and a variety of ideas and perspectives were considered. The final outcome was a high-quality assessment along with a plan that allowed students time to complete the task in each of their core classes.

Just like teachers should provide authentic learning opportunities for their students, principals should seek similar opportunities when it comes to portfolio and evaluation requirements. For example, a portfolio requirement adopted by my school for the 2013-2014 academic year required teachers to name a signature instructional practice they use in support of the Common Core (Picone-Zocchia, 2013). Teachers were asked to complete a template that named and described the practice, cite supporting research, and provide examples of student work.

The signature practices concept was further expanded to include a collaborative professional development component. Each grade level team of core subject teachers (language, history/social studies, math, and science), as well as a team comprised of elective teachers, were asked to choose a signature practice to implement across content areas and present the outcomes at a monthly staff meeting professional development sessions. In October 2013, my team presented our signature practice of using essential questions to guide student learning and provide thematic front-loading for subject matter (Wiggins & McTighe, 2013). In the presentation, we demonstrated how a thematic essential question (*How do parts shape the whole?*) guided learning across subject areas during the first quarter of the school year. Teachers participating in the session were given heuristic strategies for creating essential questions, insight on how we chose our essential question and content-specific guiding questions, and used literacy strategies to closely read an article on essential questions and complete a Frayer model. In a follow-up session during a professional development day in November, the topic was revisited more in-depth. After we reviewed the basics and showed examples of student work, each teacher team was provided time to write an essential question and content-specific guiding questions for upcoming units of instruction.

### **Moving Forward with the Common Core**

The Common Core State Standards and next-generation assessments represent profound change. Implementation will take time and may not always produce palatable outcomes. When Kentucky's traditional state-level assessment was replaced with a Common Core-compatible assessment during the 2011-2012 school year, proficiency rates dropped as much as 45 percent (Ujifusa, 2012). Students in Kentucky did not become less competent; the assessment targets changed. We must be ready for these types of challenges and initial outcomes. The end result will be worth the efforts.

Consider a final anecdote highlighting the challenges of transitioning to the Common Core:

*“Not long ago, while working with a group of school principals, I explained the big changes that were coming because of the Common Core State Standards. Everyone burst out laughing. Why the raucous response? The principals explained to me that officials from their state's education department had assured them that they were already meeting most of the Common Core requirements and that no big changes were necessary” (Shanahan, 2013).*

Shanahan argues that the Common Core is not “old wine in new bottles,” rather a profound educational reform initiative requiring great shifts in thinking and practices. This shift affects everyone involved in education – students, parents, teachers, principals, district-level administrators, state departments of education, and countless others. In order for change to occur

in the classroom, educational leaders must understand teacher preparation and resource needs. Decision-makers must then consider how to implement the standards while navigating the realities of stretched budgets, time constraints, and public pressure. It is not a simple proposition, but one which is attainable for every school, district, and state. This change is important for developing students who are critical thinkers and problem solvers ready for college, careers, citizenry, and life beyond the classroom.

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