

Communications for the Common Core

Change is coming to most states in the form of new standards. They represent a major leap forward for academic rigor as well as a public relations challenge for school districts

A quiet revolution is under way in American education, and it's about more than massive budget cuts, pay for performance, and alternatives to traditional public schools. The revolution even has a name—the Common Core State Standards Initiative.

More closely aligned with international norms, the standards were developed during a year-long process involving content experts, state officials, teachers, school administrators, and parents. A centerpiece of the Obama administration's education reform policies, they were announced in June 2010. So far, 45 states and the District of Columbia have adopted the new standards for English language arts and mathematics.

The standards outline what students should learn at every grade level, giving states a common platform for goals and measures, but do not dictate the curriculum districts must use or teachers' instructional methods.

For most states, the new standards represent a major leap forward in terms of academic rigor. A report issued recently by the Center for Education Policy (CEP) in Washington, D.C., shows that about three-fifths of participating states view the new standards as more rigorous than those currently in use.

Many districts and communities are accustomed to lower state standards and higher test scores, so getting educators,

students, parents, and others ready for what's coming represents a major communications challenge—and an educational imperative. As with other major change initiatives, doing so requires a systemic approach.

What does it mean?

Before signing teachers up for Common Core State Standards workshops, or rushing new policies through the board approval process, school officials need to step back and make sure they understand what the standards mean for their state, school system, schools, and the public.

For many, meeting the standards will give new meaning to the term “stretch goal.” Teachers, students, principals, and parents—and the school board members and central office staff that support them—must work even harder, and smarter, to achieve student success.

This won't be welcome news to the teachers and principals feeling the unrelenting strain of dwindling resources juxtaposed against increasing accountability. Not surprisingly, the CEP study also shows that state officials see lack of funding and a haphazard technological K-12 infrastructure as major obstacles.

Many state timelines for using the new standards vary, but it's not too early to start getting ready. Creating awareness, influencing perceptions, and changing teacher, student, principal, and parent behavior

takes time, resources, and careful planning.

The implications for change are profound, especially for schools and districts still organized along the industrial model of education, with entrenched, hierarchical structures organized separately by functions, tasks, and academic disciplines.

The new language arts standards for high school sophomores, for example, require a multidisciplinary approach that incorporates content traditionally found in social studies, technology, and communication classes. Students who once focused on reading, analyzing, and writing essays about American literature may now find themselves “delineating and evaluating the reasoning in seminal U.S. texts” and applying constitutional principles and the “use of legal reasoning” in public advocacy.

With states struggling for adequate resources, districts that wait for direction and tools to come down from on high may discover they are two to three years behind schedule. Others may lack the one-to-one technology access for students and staff that offers an ideal platform for multi-source, web-based content and project-based learning.

Crafting a proactive plan

Communications needs to be a vital part of any plan focused on helping key individuals and groups understand the Common Core, and the need to transform student expectations as well as teaching and learning.

The National School Public Relations Association (www.nspr.org) offers a useful four-step process for internal and external communications planning. Called RACE, the acronym stands for Research, Analysis and planning, Communications, and Evaluation.

Based on the diffusion process, excellence theory, and other literature regarding effective communications practice, the RACE model walks educators through a sophisticated set of tasks and tools to develop a more proactive, strategic, and measurable approach to internal and external school public relations.

For example, school officials may begin the research phase by having a cross-functional team review the standards and conduct a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) analysis to determine gaps in knowledge, experience, and understanding.

The team then may want to conduct an online employee or parent survey to determine their baseline awareness and perception levels, as well as any questions they may have, or their preferences in terms of communication channels.

Given the Common Core State Standards' complexity, and the significant change they represent for many districts, you also may want to identify and test key messages to see whether various audience groups receive and respond to the information the way you intend.

Once your team has a solid handle on where various audiences are in terms of awareness, perception (opinion), and behavior—the three major goals of any worthwhile communications plan—they can prepare an executive summary that succinctly captures what they've learned, along with the most salient research points.

Much as the spine supports the human body, this research then serves as the framework that aligns the communication issues or challenges that need solutions with the audiences, objectives, strategies, messages, mediums, timing, benchmarks, budgets, and measures outlined in the communications program.

The right marketing mix

Today, most overarching marketing and communications programs are integrated, blending a mix of employee communications, media relations, social media, community relations, and paid media

(advertising) tactics.

The key to success often isn't which tactical approach is used but whether the strategy behind it meets the audience and makes sense given the targeted objective. If, for example, the technology infrastructure required to meet Common Core Standards will require taxpayer approval for new bond funds, a year-long internal and external communications campaign that mobilizes employees, parents, and other likely yes voters may be needed.

If the objective is to secure \$1 million in private donations, you may want to target opinion leaders active in the philanthropic community, including corporate chieftains, foundation honchos, and their respective executive committees and boards.

Typically, the more complex an issue, the more face time is required and the simpler the messaging needs to be. With this in mind, a communications strategy for educators may include some one-on-one sessions with key teacher opinion leaders. This is followed by a series of small-group awareness sessions as well as broader communication tactics such as staff e-mails, electronic newsletter blurbs, and intranet postings.

If districts skip the awareness phase and move too quickly to professional development or school-based activities such as lesson plan writing, they may find that their efforts fall short. Teachers need more time than we often allow to absorb, test, and play with new ideas before being asked to make any decisions, such as changing content and instructional practices.

Effective communication allows key groups to dig deeply into the reasons and rationale behind the proposed change. When these groups get to ask questions and shape decisions regarding the Common Core implementation, they are more likely to embrace it.

Champions for change

Your district's lead champions and most vocal spokespersons, both internally and in the larger community, need to include

the school board chairperson, vice chairperson, and superintendent.

Systemic change can't—and won't—happen without strong leadership, starting at the top. Except for a few early adopters, most central office administrators, principals, and teachers won't follow even the most knowledgeable experts and enthusiastic cheerleaders. If employees don't believe top leadership is committed, knees will start shaking and fingers will start pointing when the inevitable bumps and bruises occur.

To implement the Common Core Standards well, districts may have to restructure their organizations and budgets at the school and district levels, or break up long-standing fiefdoms. At the very least, better teamwork across divisions, departments, academic areas, and grade levels is needed, along with seamless technology integration for human resource functions, content development, teaching, learning, and assessment.

With educators already feeling pressured, there's no room for infighting or unnecessary bureaucratic obstacles that make a tough job even harder. Embracing world-class standards in actions as well as words means everyone must change some aspect of how they work and how they support student learning, whether that learning occurs at school or at home.

Of all the mandates rolling toward educators these days, few make more sense, and few are more vital to making sure that all kids have the future opportunities they so richly deserve. Expecting educators to make this shift without the requisite resources, however, is foolhardy and dangerous.

As advocates for high-quality education for children and young people, school boards and superintendents need to embrace these changes while fighting for what's needed to ensure student success. ■

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