

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS COMMUNICATIONS & OUTREACH

Implementation of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) presents a unique opportunity to revolutionize student achievement with next-generation approaches to curriculum, professional development and assessment. Yet, in order for this to occur, it is critical that the CCSS do not just sit on a shelf, but are fully utilized and inform classroom instruction. This requires strong collaboration between states, districts, schools and key stakeholders; open lines of communications; and public engagement to ensure everyone is fully informed and on the same page. All too often, implementation stalls and well-intentioned reforms fail to achieve their intended impact because of a lack of collaboration, shared understanding, and open, ongoing communication between policymakers and stakeholders.

That is why it is critical that in addition to having an implementation plan, states also have a complimentary communications and outreach plan in support of the CCSS. To that end, below are some key issues states should consider as they craft their communications and outreach strategies and engage important stakeholders in informed conversations about the Common Core State Standards, common assessments and the broader college- and career-ready agenda.¹

INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS & COORDINATION

Perhaps an obvious first step, but an important one, is to assemble the core communications team of people you will need to promote and gain support for the common standards. While having a compact team makes sense early on as states develop their initial communications and outreach planning, over time you want to make sure your core communications team includes, at a minimum, policy and communications specialists from the:

- Governor's office;
- State education agency;
- Higher education system/community;
- Business community; and
- Other public and third-party advocacy organizations.

Because this team is intentionally cross-sector, it is important to have an individual or agency identified as the lead coordinator, ultimately responsible – and accountable – for the development and execution of a communications plan. Given every entity is likely going to do something around the CCSS, it is critical that there is one individual or agency who is aware of the multiple efforts and can play a role in coordinating them to ensure the best use of resources and time.

Before any efforts are taken to formally engage key stakeholders and local actors, it is critical that states recognize that communicating internally – among yourselves and your team members – is where all efforts must begin. No strategy can be successful unless its own members and supporters are focused, energized and activated to help communicate the campaign's key themes and messages. The key to the "internal then external" communications strategy is to prevent any surprises. You never want one of

¹ Achieve has developed a suite of tools to help states in their communications and outreach planning, found at www.achieve.org/communicationstools

your internal team to read about something you have done in the morning paper or hear about it first from a supervisor in their office.

There are a number of strategies states can take to coordinate their internal communications efforts:

- Host regular in-person meetings with your core communications team;
- Schedule conference calls when you cannot meet in person to allow for information-sharing and brainstorming as a team;
- Send a regular update to your core team, which can be as simple as an email news alert or electronic newsletter;
- Establish an email distribution list of those principal internal people who must be reached out to frequently to ensure they are informed and on board with your efforts. Send them relevant news coverage, new studies and reports, and other related materials. Using an email listserv is a no-cost way to keep other team members in the loop on current events and engaged; and
- Encourage team members to communicate within their organizations more broadly (e.g., the department of education's communications director can send information to department staff on the CCSS, including information collected by the state's higher education communications point person).

CONSISTENT MESSAGING: KEY-THREE MESSAGES

You should be able to boil down what you want to communicate to three central messages – the “key three.” Typically, the first message will define the issue, the second will outline the problem, and the third will explain the solution. The key three should be distributed to all internal team members and communicated consistently, without variation, at all times.

The discipline of repetition should be carried across all communication channels, and by all public messengers. And while you may develop sub-messages for each target audience, those sub-messages should fit under the key three, and the overarching messages should be communicated at all times by all leaders/members to all media.

SAMPLE KEY-THREE MESSAGES:

- Currently, each state is responsible for setting its own standards. This leads to a nation with 50 different standards despite the fact that the expectations of colleges and employers in math and English are nearly universal and are not bound state lines.
- In addition, far too many students drop out or graduate from high school without the knowledge and skills required for success, closing doors and limiting their post-high school options. In our state XX percent of students are dropping out before earning a high school diploma and XX of first-year college students are enrolled in remedial (non-credit bearing) courses.
- Implementing the Common Core State Standards offers an opportunity to anchor our system in college and career readiness for all students, providing a common foundation for students across the country that will prepare them for college, careers and life.

Generally, research suggests that there is broad, but not necessarily deep (or intense), support for common standards across the country, among registered voters. This support provides an excellent starting point for driving messages about the need for consistent expectations across and within states,

and high standards – and therefore equal opportunity – for all students. The lack of intense support also suggests, however, that the public may be swayed by opposition messages. The best way to ensure this does not occur is to play offense – make sure your messages and goals reach key audiences first and are regularly reinforced by credible messengers.

STAKEHOLDER OUTREACH

Through Adoption: The What and the Why

Once the state has identified its lead individual/entity for coordinating communications and outreach, its core, cross-agency team of communications leads, and its key three messages, it is time to begin to reach out to the target audiences most critical to the success of the common standards, such as those responsible for adopting the CCSS (e.g., the state legislature or state board of education) and those ultimately responsible for implementing the CCSS (e.g., state policymakers, district and school administrators, local boards, teachers and teachers unions, school counselors) who should remain informed about the CCSS throughout the implementation process.

At this stage in the process, is it important to provide clear, transparent information on *what* the new standards encompass (e.g., K-12, anchored in college and career readiness, reflect lessons from high-performing countries and states, were developed by states, etc.) and *why* your state should adopt such common standards (e.g., they reflect an improvement over the current standards, allow for comparability across states, etc.). Any information or materials developed should be shared as widely as possible, from the State House down into the classroom, and should be as instructive and straightforward as possible.

The Indiana Department of Education, for example, has created a very simple yet informative [fact sheet](#) that provides general background on the Common Core State Standards Initiative, how it fits into Indiana's system, and what will come next for Indiana (including target adoption and implementation dates). In only two pages, Indiana lays out a clear and compelling case for adopting and implementing the common standards.

In addition to target audiences, you should also consider what other leaders and groups in your state (or nationally) are saying about the CCSS. Who is supportive and who is opposed? Where are opportunities for partnerships and coalitions, and from where (and from whom) is pushback most likely to come? While you may not be able to win all groups over, knowing the opposition – and their particular messages, audiences and level of influence – is extremely important when crafting your own communications and outreach strategy in support of common standards.

Post-Adoption: The How

After the state has successfully adopted the Common Core State Standards – ideally with support of local education leaders – leaders must immediately turn their attention to how they can best go about ensuring the standards are implemented consistently and with fidelity across their districts and schools. Communicating the *what* and the *why* of the common standards will only take a state so far; ensuring stakeholders that you have a clear plan for *how* the standards will be implemented moving forward will quickly become critical to the success of the standards. While the state should undoubtedly be communicating with district leadership, once the adoption phase is over, it is of the upmost importance that district and school leaders are fully engaged and fully aware of what the CCSS will mean for them and their students.

There are a number of ways in which the state can provide the actionable information and support districts need to successfully implement the common standards. For one, a state can conduct an analysis to compare its existing state standards to the new CCSS (see Achieve's Common Core Comparison Tool at <http://ccctool.achieve.org/>). Given many districts use their state standards and related curricular materials to guide their own instruction, demonstrating where the CCSS overlap, add new content, or eliminate content from the existing state standards could be extremely helpful in making local leaders understand what the true implications of the new standards will be on various classroom and instructional materials and practices. Results of such an analysis may also be useful in making the case for adoption, if policymakers are hesitant to adopt the CCSS without knowing how they compare to existing state standards.

In addition, state leaders in charge of developing a full implementation strategy for common standards (of which communications and outreach is a significant element) should definitely vet that strategy with district and school leadership at key times. For example, in any such implementation plan, the state will need to identify key phase-in dates for the new standards and related materials. Getting district buy in on these dates and the fuller timeline can go a long way; other district leaders may be more accepting of a rigorous phase-in timetable if they know it has been signed off on by their peers. Creating a mechanism for feedback is an important early action.

Thirdly, keeping lines of communications open and being upfront about the plan moving forward is another fairly simple strategy that can go a long way toward building good will for the Common Core State Standards. It should be easy for local and district educators and administrators to find information on the CCSS and your state's strategy for implementing and sustaining those new standards and related materials and practices. Creating a webpage with the facts and timeline clearly laid out, with an identified point person to contact with questions about the CCSS generally or your state's implementation strategy, is a relatively easy and straightforward way of ensuring transparency and mitigating confusion in the long run. Also, creating or using a listserv or engaging with math and English curriculum specialists at the district level, as a way to reach the teachers they may supervise, are other strategies for ensuring communications goes both ways.

BROADENING SUPPORT STATEWIDE AND AT THE LOCAL LEVEL

Beyond the critical stakeholders discussed above who need to be engaged throughout the implementation processes to ensure the common standards reach the classroom, there are many other individuals and organizations who need to be informed about what the CCSS will mean for their local school systems including, but not limited to local boards of education, parents, students, business leaders, higher education, civil rights groups and community-based organizations.

While there are sure to be efforts at the state level to build awareness of and support for the CCSS, district and school leaders are also likely going to need to answer questions about the new common standards from the groups described above and need to be prepared to respond. Ensuring any and all messengers are well armed with accurate and compelling information, offering opportunities for open dialog among interested stakeholders, and maintaining momentum throughout the implementation the CCSS are all critical to a state's broader engagement strategy.

For example, a few activities a state could engage in are:

- Provide educators and administrators with templates, materials and example assessment items to share with students and parents on the CCSS and what it will mean in the following years;
- Host regional meetings to ensure other stakeholders have the opportunity to ask questions and get information;
- Run web, radio and/or television PSAs on the new standards and the broader reforms the standards are designed to support; and
- Place op-eds from attention-getting leaders (e.g., current or former governors, major state-based CEOs, local administrators or educators, etc.) in support of the CCSS and a successful implementation of the new standards.

There are also a number of national efforts underway to build support for the CCSS including a five-state partnership being coordinated by the National Parent and Teachers Association (PTA). States should leverage these and other initiatives whenever possible.

TYING IT ALL TOGETHER

Communications and implementation must go hand in hand. Often the best communications strategy is simply having a clear and easily articulated implementation strategy that ensures an open dialog with critical stakeholders and transparency of intentions on the part of the state.