INCREASING RIGOR IN STATE STANDARDS

EXAMINING PRIORITIES, PITFALLS AND IMPACT ON PERFORMANCE

Justine González, M.Ed.
Indiana State University

Abstract

Nearly one decade after the majority of the United States adopted the Common Core State

Standards (CCSS), educators are watching to see the impact. This paper explores the

perspectives of students on CCSS, the observed priorities for implementation of one large district

in the United States and questions to identify potential infrastructure improvements necessary to

develop sustainable models with newer, more rigorous standards. Findings indicate that if

districts do not provide the proper infrastructure aligned to the measured outcomes for students

and adults, large-scale initiatives such as adoption of new standards can pose a dilemma instead

of the intended reformation.

　　　　Keywords: common core state standards, rigor, school reform

Increasing Rigor in State Standards:

Examining Priorities, Pitfalls and Impact on Performance

The Common Core State Standards, adopted across nearly the entire United States, have proven to be a hot topic amidst educators. Creating another polarizing conversation amidst politicians and educational decision-makers, like most large-scale initiatives, the question to be examined is if the dawn of new, more rigorous standards have developed higher-levels of performance (mastery and growth) for *all* students?

Famously coined as going "an inch wide and mile deep" when describing the depth and breadth required of new standards, the CCSS for ELA and Math are nearing a decade of full implementation across the majority of the United States. And everyone wants to know if this approach is working.

This paper examines the implementation of the Common Core State Standards in Illinois, implications for success with adoption of standards with increased rigor and potential areas of future study relating to overall performance with newly adopted standards.

Illinois' Adoption of the Common Core State Standards

In 2010, Illinois began adoption of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). Districts built their own guidelines for implementation, with schools administering the PARCC tests (aligned to CCSS) in spring of 2015. In the third largest public system within the United States, Chicago Public Schools (CPS) built numerous resources as teachers and principals alike learned

the ins and outs of what exactly the new era of CCSS meant for student learning outcomes, as well as how the PARCC scores may be factored into teacher evaluation growth points.

Following the rollout of CCSS ELA and Math standards, Illinois adopted the Next Generation Science Standards in spring of 2014 (Loewus, 2014).

Though many resources have been provided through the online platform for Chicago Public Schools (the Knowledge Center), individual schools are responsible for ensuring that curriculum, resources and planning efforts are appropriately aligned to CCSS, satisfying the rigor levels of the new standards. Though CPS makes recommended choices to schools, it becomes the responsibility of the principal and their administrative team to identify supports for implementation. Such resources are companies like Thinking Core, whose goal is, "To decode and breakdown the standards so they can be taught in the clearest, most effective way possible." (www.thinkingcore.com)

Founder of Thinking Core, Dr. Diana Dumetz-Carry believes, "Improvement is not a random act and that student achievement must not be left to chance."

Though subject matter experts are certainly helpful and it would appear that a multitude of districts underwent curriculum mapping, deep dive planning to unpack both ELA and Math CCSS (including the Standards for Mathematical Practice), it remains unclear how each district and the state (as a whole) are tracking mastery and growth after initial rollout efforts.

Discussion

In observation of Chicago Public Schools in particular, the priority focus areas from 2011 into the first five years seemed to be on the following:

1. Equipping teachers and leaders to implement the CCSS;

2. Providing information to parents and community stakeholders;

3. Developing and aligning curricular resources and supports to satisfy the rigor levels of the CCSS.

In a recent 2018 study, college-bound seniors in urban high schools indicated that their schools struggled to meet the priority goals of the CCSS, especially in pertinence to college readiness (Kolluri, 2018).

Considered a reform movement in education to standardize *and* set the bar higher for all learners, the adoption of new standards over the past decade has proven a dilemma for many districts. Cohen, Spillane and Peurach highlight a core dilemma in a recent article: "Systems manage environmental pressures to become more coherent enterprises that focus on tested outcomes while managing the inherited differentiated organizations and environmental pressures which support these enterprises," (2018).

One of the pitfalls that many districts have succumbed to is being able to clearly align a strategic plan for implementation, while breaking apart rollout into small chunks. For many, everything was seemingly overhauled and adopted in a short period of time. Though this urgency may be argued by many as very necessary for progress in educational systems, others feel it was, ultimately, taxing to school leaders and teachers, resulting in burnout. Though educators have

been provided a multitude of supports (like CPS), many districts have now wondered what's next, a potential pitfall of solely focusing on the shift for adults.

This begs a question: Can the majority of districts maintain infrastructure that can strategically connect outcomes to the delivery of instruction? The adoption of new standards, CCSS or otherwise set a new expectation; however, were districts truly prepared to operationalize the standards towards the outcomes?

Finally, an additional exploration tied to school performance is recruitment and retention of highly skilled teachers. Many states are faced with severe teacher shortages. Leaving yet another question: Have pre-service teacher programs been equipped to train and develop educators over the past decade and beyond for the requirements associated with delivering instruction aligned to new standards? Or could this be considered another pitfall? Examining post-secondary teacher training programs adds a layer of questions, specifically regarding infrastructure support that ultimately dictates the future outcomes of success with the adoption of new standards boasting increased rigor.

For both students and adults, Marzano's thoughts on performance relating to standards seems to support any aspect of adoption: "Students who can identify what they are learning significantly outscore those who cannot," (2005).

Conclusions and Future Study

To obtain a comprehensive understanding of the priorities, pitfalls and performance related to the adoption of increasingly rigorous, new state standards, it is vital to consider the

infrastructure support factors associated with implementation beyond the initial layer of training and professional development for adults. This may include but is not limited to: examination of pre-service teacher programs (pedagogy relating to deep understanding of CCSS), multi-tiered systems of data collection to track standards mastery and growth on district, state and national levels, and ongoing accountability for teachers and school leaders to ensure day-to-day delivery of instruction satisfies the requirements of the measured outcomes.

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