

Supporting High School Teachers' College and Career Readiness Efforts: Bridging California's Vision with Local Implementation Needs

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California's high school teachers and its state policy leaders are generally optimistic about the potential of the Common Core State Standards (Common Core) to prepare a greater proportion of students for college and careers, according to exploratory research by the Education Insights Center (EdInsights) on the implementation of the Common Core in high schools.¹ Policy leaders said the Common Core represents a shift in content in math and English, along with a greater focus on independent and critical thinking, collaboration, communication, and a host of other skills that would serve students well after high school. The educators supported these general concepts, but said they need greater clarity and more support in order to develop, use, and refine instructional strategies that will foster skills valued by colleges and employers.

About this Brief

This brief shares the perspectives and concerns of high school teachers in two districts regarding implementing the Common Core State Standards, specifically as the Common Core pertains to preparing more students for college and well-paying careers. The brief also makes state policy recommendations for ways to support teachers in their efforts to increase students' college and career readiness, including through fostering alignment between K–12 and postsecondary and workforce partners.

The state provided new funding, some limited teaching resources, and greater flexibility to support local school districts in their implementation of the Common Core (see “State Resources” on page 3). At the same time, the state moved toward a local or regional approach for educational decision-making, and this appears to be the case for college and career readiness as well.² For example, other states have proposed statewide definitions of college and career readiness, but California's leaders have stopped short of doing so. In this new landscape of local control, schools, districts, and county offices of education (COEs) are now responsible for interpreting and implementing California's vision for college and career readiness.

Defining College and Career Readiness

With the adoption and implementation of the Common Core and the Smarter Balanced assessments aligned with it, California's policy leaders signaled the importance of preparing a larger share of students for college and careers. As of 2014, 36 states and the District of Columbia had adopted statewide definitions of college and career readiness—that is, statements that articulate what students should know and be able to do by the end of high school.³ However, California has not done so. An overly broad and vague definition of readiness would likely serve little purpose, but having no definition creates challenges for schools and districts to understand the state's vision.

States' definitions of college and career readiness vary in several ways, including in their level of specificity and their focus on both college and career readiness.⁴ Early conceptions focused primarily on readiness

in English and math,⁵ but most definitions of college and career readiness now include both academic and non-academic (non-discipline specific) knowledge and skills. In reflecting this expanded approach, Gaertner, Conley, and Stoltz broadened appraisals of readiness to include multiple dimensions of readiness, adding “student success skills such as perseverance, resilience, and ownership of learning.”⁶ Currently, states’ definitions include conceptions of academic readiness (19 states); critical thinking (14); social and emotional learning (14); grit, resilience, or perseverance (8); citizenship (8); and other skills, such as technological competence and environmental stewardship (6).⁷

The American Institutes for Research reported that definitions of college and career readiness can help build a shared understanding of “the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of learners who are prepared for postsecondary success. In addition, these definitions can guide educators’ efforts to identify which students are on track.”⁸ In Oregon, the state’s Workforce Investment Board suggested that local and regional education entities leverage Oregon’s definition of college and career readiness for communications planning; student, family, and community engagement; educational alignment across sectors; high school reform and 12th grade redesign; pathway programs that extend from high school to the first two years of college; postsecondary placement and reform of developmental education; assessment; and data collection and analysis.⁹ A college and career readiness definition and related professional learning opportunities can be part of a comprehensive approach to support increased levels of learning for all students.

Findings

Clarity About What College and Career Readiness Means

Interviewed teachers consistently reported that they need clarity about what it means to ensure that all students graduate from high school ready to succeed in college and careers. The teachers understood that there are many different certificate and degree programs in two- and four-year postsecondary institutions,

Research Methodology

Since 2014, EdInsights, with support from The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, has been exploring implementation of the Common Core through the lens of high school-to-college connections. These findings are based on research that included interviews with district administrators, school administrators and staff, and teachers in two districts (50 in total); interviews with 17 administrators from 10 COEs; interviews with 20 state policy leaders and three education policy researchers; a literature review of Common Core research; and a website review related to professional learning for high school teachers. The research sought to analyze policymakers’ expectations for the Common Core and to understand how local educators were implementing the Common Core—with a focus on the end of high school and beginning of college. Researchers analyzed a host of issues, including: challenges in implementing the Common Core; type and frequency of professional development for high school teachers; changes to curriculum and instruction; use of technology in instruction and for assessments; use of the Smarter Balanced Digital Library, the Early Assessment Program (EAP), and other ways to gauge college readiness; collaboration among teachers at each individual school and at all schools; collaboration with postsecondary institutions; and communication with parents. Researchers analyzed the interviews by theme and reported the findings in [Leveraging the Common Core for College and Career Readiness in California](#).



and that expectations for college-level coursework can vary greatly across programs and institutions. In particular, teachers said the lack of clear information about what college and career readiness means in Common Core implementation creates uncertainty for them.

For example, teachers were concerned about whether newly integrated math and science courses would align with postsecondary expectations—and whether postsecondary faculty have an understanding of new K-12 reforms and their implications for college readiness. It is well documented that math expectations, for example, are not aligned between the 12th grade and the first year of college, and the teachers interviewed were aware of that disconnect.¹⁰ In addition, teachers across the board said they need better ways to understand what it means for students to be ready for careers. While there are some indicators of college eligibility, there are few such examples for the range of career readiness indicators that teachers could use; those working in schools without projects associated with Career Pathways Trust or Linked Learning faced the largest challenges in this area.¹¹ Both Career Pathways Trust and Linked Learning offer ways for schools to develop industry-themed educational pathways spanning high school and college. Schools with those programs had at least some experience with work-based learning opportunities or partnerships with local business entities and postsecondary institutions.

In addition, the Common Core emphasizes skills such as critical thinking, collaboration, communication, and other non-academic skills that colleges and employers value in students.¹² In EdInsights' research, many teachers said the Common Core's focus on skills and on how students learn is a bigger change than the shift in content that is based on the new standards. They added that they need clarity on which non-academic skills they should be teaching, in order to understand what the changes mean for their classrooms. Finally, teachers understood that curricular alignment should not just mean that higher education shares its expectations with K-12; they stated that those conversations should “go both ways,” and that there need to be mechanisms for high school teachers and college faculty to work together.

State Resources to Support Common Core Implementation by School Districts

Funding. Some of the state's most substantial allocations to support Common Core implementation include: \$1.25 billion to districts in 2013–14, to be used for professional development, instructional materials, and technology; \$490 million as a one-time block grant to districts in 2015–16, to be used for teacher induction programs and to “promote teacher quality and effectiveness;”¹³ and \$3.2 billion in one-time funds for unpaid mandate claims for local education agencies (LEAs), with discretion to use the funds to support critical investments such as Common Core implementation.

Teaching Resources. The State Board of Education (SBE) adopted a new framework and materials in math and in English language arts (ELA)/English language development (ELD)/literacy. In addition, the California Department of Education (CDE) provides educators access to some professional development resources, but it does not endorse those resources.¹⁴

Flexibility and Time. State leaders suspended the Academic Performance Index (the state's accountability system), provided a field-test year for the new Smarter Balanced summative assessments associated with the Common Core, and gave school districts greater flexibility in finance and programmatic decisions.¹⁵



Professional Development on How to Support College and Career Readiness

Many teachers said they were not trained in the kinds of instructional strategies that will support the development of critical thinking and other non-academic skills. They said they face difficulties in finding examples of instructional strategies to use in the classroom to foster these skills, and that they do not know how to judge whether the strategies they find are of high quality. Similarly, teachers in the studied schools were working to support the development of communication skills and successful group projects, but were uncertain about which instructional strategies to use.

Interviewed teachers also said they were uncertain about their role in aligning curricular expectations between high school and college. They reported having many opportunities for professional development in the first five years of Common Core implementation, but said most of these were based on changes to math and ELA standards. They were uncertain whether—and, if so, how—those changes connected with college and career readiness. Teachers expressed concerns that not all of the changes in math and ELA would be aligned with entrance and credit-bearing course expectations in California’s three public systems of higher education.

“I ask myself, ‘What will my classroom look like when it’s fully Common Core-implemented?’ And then, ‘What do I still need to do?’...I don’t even know what it would look like when we’re there.”

—English teacher

In addition, many educators reported feeling overwhelmed by the number of colleges in their region and confused about whose job it should be to reach out to each of them to learn about entrance and placement expectations, and to share information about their own curricular and instructional adaptations. Many teachers said they would like to have more communication with their postsecondary peers, but that they have few opportunities to do so. They also cited challenges such as finding the time, wondering whether it was their role or responsibility, and not knowing whom to contact. They were aware of some indicators of college readiness, including the University of California’s (UC) and California State University’s (CSU) a-g requirements,¹⁶ the Early Assessment Program,¹⁷ and community college placement tests. But they were uncertain how to access specific information about those indicators and how to adjust curricula and instruction to help support the full range of postsecondary options. For example, one interviewed teacher said that it is impossible for him to keep track of the expectations in different certificate and degree programs at the five community colleges, two CSU campuses, and one UC campus in his area. He does not receive such information and is uncertain whether it is his responsibility to seek it out and determine how to use it to inform his instruction. He also said he does not have ways to inform postsecondary faculty about curricular changes.

Help Assessing Outcomes for College and Career Readiness

Teachers said that since college and career readiness expectations are “abstract” in the Common Core, they face difficulties in figuring out whether they have hit the mark. That is, it is difficult for them to know if they are reaching their goal when the goal is ill-defined.

This challenge is heightened because teachers must develop their own instructional strategies to help students think

“We want the universities’ thoughts, feedback, contact. Tell us what you want us to do. Tell us what you want us to tell our administration to do.”

—Science teacher



critically, collaborate more effectively, and develop other non-academic skills, and they want to know how effective those strategies are. Teachers could not cite any tools they could use to help them understand if they are succeeding in these areas. A review of the state’s online teaching resources revealed that the vast majority of teachers focused on ELA/ELD and math content and did not address goals for college and career readiness implicit in the Common Core.

“I’m curious what postsecondary expects from us. All of this stuff that we’re talking about with the Common Core goes from elementary school to the end of high school and then it just stops there.”

—*Science teacher*

According to interviews, state policy leaders expect that teachers will change their instructional strategies by using the new formative and interim assessments from Smarter Balanced that are aligned with the Common Core. However, interviewed teachers were unaware of this expectation. Most teachers did not know about, or had trouble accessing, the Smarter Balanced Digital Library, which offers a suite of resources associated with the assessments. It is not yet clear whether teachers will have the time and expertise to apply what they learn from interim and formative assessments to improve their instructional strategies. These challenges are even more complex when it comes to their work addressing college and career readiness expectations aligned with the Common Core.

Alignment Across K-12 and Postsecondary Systems

Developing and implementing a vision for college and career readiness requires the active participation of a wide variety of entities. This is a school, district, regional, and statewide responsibility that requires deep partnerships with postsecondary institutions and systems. Efforts can include developing transition curricula, refining instructional strategies, providing professional development opportunities, assessing progress, and developing pathways that help students graduate ready for postsecondary education and well-paying careers. Those efforts are relevant for all education systems—not just K–12. Regional and local partnerships between K–12 and postsecondary entities that focus on college and career readiness need to support faculty in structured engagement opportunities, including professional development.

For example, in *Co-Design, Co-Delivery, and Co-Validation*, Vargas and Venezia provide a framework to create ways for K-12 and postsecondary educators to work together to support successful student transitions between high school and postsecondary education.¹⁸ At the same time that the joint activities create better content alignment across systems, they also serve as cross-system professional development opportunities for instructors.

- **Co-Design.** Jointly deciding on and designing courses, curricular pathways, and support systems, as well as professional development opportunities and data platforms, that impact what and how students learn.
- **Co-Delivery.** Sharing and coordinating faculty and staff, facilities, and other resources to carry out co-designed learning experiences and supports.
- **Co-Validation.** Accepting agreed-upon assessments, successful completion of performance tasks and experiences, and other indicators of learning as evidence of proficiency, including for student placement in credit-bearing, college-level courses.



Teachers also emphasized the importance of knowing what happens to their students after graduation and said they do not have access to much information about student outcomes. For example, some teachers compared the end of high school to “falling off a cliff” or “a black hole.” Most of the interviewed K–12 educators do not receive information about how their students fare in college. They also have few, if any, opportunities to interact and communicate with college and university instructors—or employers—in their regions in order to understand their expectations. As a result, teachers face challenges in gathering even anecdotal evidence about how well their students are doing in college or careers. There are some regions in the state where data are shared better across systems, where K–12 teachers and postsecondary faculty work more in concert, or where educators are clear about college readiness expectations.¹⁹ Educators said they were aware of these kinds of partnerships, but added that they were not the norm in their districts.

Recommendations

This research found that teachers need more specific information about what constitutes college and career readiness, professional development to help students achieve college and career readiness, and ways to assess student outcomes pertaining to college and career readiness. The following recommendations for supporting the needs of regional and local leaders are directed primarily at the state.

Provide clarity to California schools about who should articulate a vision for college and career readiness, and how those concepts should be defined. This is the time for the state to determine if there is statewide coherence for its vision of college and career readiness, or if this is a regional responsibility. Either route is challenging, given the wide range of institutional and program types in California’s postsecondary systems and the decentralized governance in all public education systems. Schools have relied on some definitions of readiness, such as completion of “a–g” requirements, Advanced Placement testing, and the Early Assessment Program. These fall short, though, of measuring whether students are college and career ready, and not all schools offer preparatory options for the majority of students. The current lack of guidance leaves teachers, schools, and districts struggling to help students achieve an undefined goal of college and career readiness, often in relative isolation from their local postsecondary institutions. The state should articulate an actionable vision for college and career readiness and provide examples of how that vision could be defined and used in practice. Regional entities, including COEs, could play a more prominent role in this area; see [Roles for County Offices of Education to Support College and Career Readiness: Bridging California’s Vision with Local Implementation Needs](#).

Encourage districts to include college and career readiness as part of their strategic plans and in their Local Control and Accountability Plans (LCAPs).

College and career readiness is not one of the eight state priorities that guide local education agencies in their strategic planning and implementation of the Common Core, and there are compelling arguments for not expanding the list of priorities.²⁰ The state should, however, collect information about college and career readiness efforts and signal the importance of the wide range of professional development needs outlined in this brief.

“I think that there’s a real need for much more coordinated and much more widely accessible efforts at professional development for teachers.”

— *Science teacher*

Provide school districts—and teachers, specifically—with more ways to work with postsecondary institutions and workforce entities to align curricula and instructional strategies across systems.

Examples include facilitating access to high-quality:

- Resources about instructional strategies that build academic and non-academic skills associated with improving college and career readiness.
- Models that exemplify promising regional cross-system collaboration. For specific examples, see [Organizing for Success: California’s Regional Education Partnerships](#).
- Educational goals, strategies, and structures that engage regional education systems in co-developing, co-delivering, and co-validating curricula and other experiences for students as they transition from high school to college. This could include jointly-developed capstone courses and dual enrollment opportunities.

Support the information needs of teachers.

Teachers emphasized that they need to be able to understand more about whether and how their efforts are supporting increased rates of college and career readiness, but they do not have the information they need to understand student learning and progression after high school.

“Honestly, it’s kind of a black hole [when students leave high school]. They leave here, and [it’s an] out-of-sight, out-of-mind kind of thing.”

—*Math teacher*

Conclusion

High school teachers face challenges in preparing students for college and careers, including needing clarity about expectations for college and careers, professional development focused on preparing students, and better ways to assess the effectiveness of their efforts. This brief recommends that the state provide clarity about who should define college and career readiness in California, encourage districts to report on college and career readiness efforts as part of their strategic plans, facilitate efforts to align curricula and instructional strategies across systems, and support the information needs of teachers.

Acknowledgments

EdInsights thanks the many teachers, district leaders, county office administrators, and state policy leaders who were generous with their time and reflections on Common Core implementation. We appreciate our external reviewers—Brock Grubb, Carla Hulce, Dan Humphrey, Tonja Jarrell, Julia Koppich—whose input greatly improved this publication. The authors take responsibility for all content.



Endnotes

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- 11 For more information on Career Pathways Trust, see <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/ct/pt/>. For information on Linked Learning, see <http://www.linkedlearning.org>.
- 12 See, for example, David Conley's research on non-cognitive factors to college/career readiness, such as <https://consortium.uchicago.edu/sites/default/files/publications/VJE%20Noncognitive%20Factors.pdf>.
- 13 For more information on the Educator Effectiveness grant, see <http://www.cde.ca.gov/fg/aa/ca/educatoreffectiveness.asp>.
- 14 For information on professional development resources from the CDE, see <http://www.cde.ca.gov/pd/>. For a list of state resources for professional development, see Bishop, J., Darling-Hammond, L., and Jaquith, A. (2015). *Maximizing the Use of New State Professional Learning Investments to Support Student, Educator, and School System Growth*. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education.
- 15 For more information on the Local Control Funding Formula, which provided LEAs with greater control over finance and programs, see <http://www.cde.ca.gov/fg/aa/lc/lcfoverview.asp>. Assembly Bill 484 (Chapter 489, Statutes of 2013) authorized the transition to Smarter Balanced assessments in English language arts and math. The SBE voted in 2014 to suspend the Academic Performance Index.
- 16 The "a-g" sequence is a set of required courses that qualify a high school student for admission to UC and CSU campuses. For more information, see <http://www.ucop.edu/aguide/a-g-requirements/>.
- 17 For information on the CSU Early Assessment Program, see <https://www.calstate.edu/eap/>.
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- 19 See, for example, the Long Beach College Promise, <http://www.longbeachcollegepromise.org>.
- 20 See Beltran, K. (25 February 2016). *Changes Coming to LCAP, Pressure for More Continues*. Cabinet Report. See <https://www.cabinetreport.com/politics-education/changes-coming-to-lcap-pressure-for-more-continues>. Also see: Koppich, Humphrey, and Marsh, 2015.