



FIVE REAL-WORLD LESSONS FROM COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS IMPLEMENTATION



It happens all the time. Teachers are told to implement not one, not two, but three or four new policies—all at once.

A new study dives deep into this multi-policy reality in two large (and un-named) school districts by examining the implementation of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). The study is co-authored by NEPC Fellow [Emily Hodge](#) of Montclair State University and Elizabeth Leisy Stosich of Fordham University, who interviewed 68 educators, observed instruction and professional development (PD), and reviewed documents related to policy, curriculum, and PD.

Officially launched in 2009, the standards for English/language arts and math have been adopted by [more than 40 states](#), with [the stated goal](#) of creating a rigorous and consistent learning experience for the nation's students. Study data were collected in 2013.

Like most new education policies, the CCSS were not implemented in a vacuum. Their adoption was also typically accompanied by changes to assessments, curriculum, and teacher evaluation.

The focal districts that Hodge and Stosich selected provided an illuminating contrast in that one (located in New York) represented a relatively high-alignment context. The district was able to implement three policy changes (a new curriculum, new tests, and a new teacher evaluation program) at the same general time as the new CCSS standards were adopted. In the other case study district, located in Florida (which dropped the CCSS in 2020), alignment was lower. Florida had adopted the new CCSS standards and a new approach to teacher evaluation while continuing to use its old curriculum and exams.

In their article, Hodge and Stosich present several “lessons learned” relevant to practitioners as well as policymakers. Here are five takeaways.

- 1. To change standards, you also need to change curricula:** “A challenge for both districts in this study was a lack of highly aligned curricular materials,” Hodge and Stosich write.
- 2. Changing curricula is not sufficient:** “They have developed [the curricula] in such a way that it is directed to what the students should know at their grade level . . . All you have to do is deliver it properly,” one teacher said of the district’s new standards-aligned curricula. However, Hodge and Stosich note that if real transformation is to occur, pedagogy too must change. For instance, if teachers continue their practice of watering down curricula for students assigned to low-track classes, the CCSS goal of rigor for all will not be met in those courses. “Explicit support and guidance on how to use or modify curriculum in ways that maintain rigor and meet standards should be a critical part of district implementation strategies,” Hodge and Stosich suggest.
- 3. Order of operations matters:** Teachers in both case study districts found reforms incoherent because certain pieces were introduced or emphasized well before others. For instance, New York adopted high-stakes tests aligned to the new standards before educators had a chance to adopt and receive support for teaching them. The reverse occurred in Florida, where teachers were asked to adopt standards while continuing to prepare students for older assessments that were not standards-aligned. Hodge and Stosich explain that teachers and students might have been better served by introducing assessments aligned to the new standards early on, but making them low-stakes until educators have had time to receive support for teaching new curricula.
- 4. Not so fast:** When multiple policy changes are introduced at once, districts and schools need time to help teachers implement the new approaches. “Our teachers are feeling a lot, and it seemed to come all at one time, just boom!” a middle school reading coach interviewed for the study remarked. “It’s definitely taken time for teachers to get comfortable with the shifts in the Common Core, the shifts in the curriculum, the shifts with the evaluation system, how you’re rated. It’s just a lot.”
- 5. Policy changes are not “one and done”:** Instead, they require ongoing attention to on-the-ground experiences with implementation, especially when multiple changes are introduced at the same time. “Coherence is not a characteristic of policies but rather a perception that is developed and renegotiated over time as educators are confronted with new information and experiences,” the study authors note.

In conclusion, Hodge and Stosich write:

A key lesson from this cross-case analysis is that while a lack of alignment among policies can impede reform, simultaneous implementation of multiple, seemingly coordinated policies is unlikely to result in educators perceiving these policies as coherent unless such reforms are carefully sequenced and supported.

NEPC Resources on Standards-Based Reform

This newsletter is made possible in part by support provided by the Great Lakes Center for Education Research and Practice: <http://www.greatlakescenter.org>

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