

Common Challenges to Implementing College- and Career-Readiness Standards

“If policymakers wish to realize the goal of standards-based reform—a K-12 where all students regardless of subgroup status receive standards-emphasized, grade-level instruction—we all must deepen our understanding of how we can shape policy in a manner that facilitates popular teacher support.”¹

Standards-focused instruction is a vital component to the success of college- and career-readiness standards. With the passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2015, federal funds were mobilized for state and local use to help improve educational opportunities for all students, including disadvantaged and high-need learners. Yet with this effort to decentralize federal authority came a notable amount of variation in how teachers experience standards-based policy firsthand.

While many in the field grapple with the revisions that come with a growing decentralization of standards-based reform, **teacher learning and understanding of college- and career-readiness (CCR) standards and revisions is critical to successful implementation**. Even when fully supported and focused on implementing standards in the classroom, teachers often face challenging work conditions that stymie their best efforts to implement standards-based reform. If the goal is for teachers to own the standards and align their instruction in support of them, we must turn our attention to addressing the critical challenges teachers face in the classroom.

Common Challenges

Based on select questions from a spring 2016 survey administered to a representative sample consisting of district administrators, principals, and teachers in Kentucky, Ohio, and Texas, we uncovered some common challenges facing teachers, principals, and districts. To measure these challenges, we provided a list of 10 school, classroom, and student challenges and asked respondents to rate them as either not a challenge, a minor challenge, a moderate challenge, or a major challenge. By understanding salient roadblocks, we can move to seek resources and solutions that support teachers’ standards implementation.

The following are the top five reported challenges among teachers.

¹ Teacher Implementation of College- and Career-Readiness Standards: Links Among Policy, Instruction, Challenges, and Resources
<https://www.c-sail.org/publications/teacher-implementation-college-and-career-readiness-standards-links-among-policy>

#1: Wide range of student abilities

U.S. classrooms are becoming increasingly varied in terms of learning assets and needs, leaving teachers scrambling to provide standards-aligned grade-level instruction to students of varying backgrounds and abilities. In 2015–16, 6.7 million students ages 3–21 were receiving special education services in the nation’s schools.² That same year, 4.8 million students in 2015 were English language learners, and 14.7% of those learners were also classified as students with disabilities.³ Across all three partner states studied, 71% of teachers reported the range of student abilities as the largest challenge they face in implementing standards in the classroom.

Opportunities for support and guidance

To address the myriad demands of a mixed-ability study body, leaders should discuss and support strategies for instruction in their classrooms. As many of the hurdles to addressing this challenge likely center around issues of cost, logistics, and guidance, professional development (PD) for both principals and teachers can focus more on shaping an inclusive classroom and include access to effective online educational resources (OERs). OER curricula, for example the Bookworms reading and writing curriculum, have proven effective across subgroups of students⁴. Additionally, exploring alternative classroom arrangements and structures can be an important step toward more effective inclusion.

#2: Inadequate student preparation in prior grades

Speaking to this variation in student needs and abilities in today’s classrooms, 62% of respondents indicated that inadequate student preparation in prior grades is a roadblock to aligned instruction. In environments where preparation for grade-level work is low, teachers are charged with both adequately aligning their instruction to standards and remediating students with significant learning gaps. The importance of academic achievement has been illustrated by such findings as those in Chicago, which showed freshman-year academic achievement to be a bigger predictor of high school graduation than any other factor⁵, including test scores, ethnicity, and family income. Thus, in the face of an unprepared student body, teachers are juggling both remediation and standards to ensure long-term student success.

Opportunities for support and guidance

Incorporating assessment data to create personalized learning plans can help those teachers seeking to close learning gaps for unprepared students. Informal, day-to-day assessments can help teachers shape instruction for both remediation and standards alignment, and periodic formal assessments can help monitor student progress.⁶ Additionally, schools and districts can explore new opportunities for teacher collaboration across grades and schools.

#3: Lack of support from parents

Along with issues related to the variety of student needs and abilities, 59% of teachers identified the lack of parental support as a major challenge. Indeed, public opinion of standards-based reform is not without controversy, and many parents struggle to either understand or support the approach. This tide of opposition and lack of awareness places additional pressure on teachers, schools, and districts.

2 https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_cgg.asp

3 <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=96>

4 <https://www.cresp.udel.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/RB19-001.2-Bookworms-Case-Study-Brief.pdf>

5 <https://consortium.uchicago.edu/sites/default/files/publications/07%20What%20Matters%20Final.pdf>

6 <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1130896.pdf>

Opportunities for support and guidance

To address an unsupportive parental and community environment, schools and districts can focus on developing new parental involvement programs, parent support, and additional outreach on standards. Clear communication around the standards students are expected to meet in each grade can reduce ambiguity in the minds of parents, as can thorough explanations of test results and what they mean for students. In addition to direct communication with parents, teachers and schools can equally inform students themselves to enhance a holistic community understanding of the impact and practice of standards-based reform.

#4: Time

While the preceding challenges directly relate to students and parents, time challenges were the most significant logistical factors in implementing new, challenging standards. Insufficient class time was a notable challenge for 53% of teachers, and both teachers and principals reported a struggle to incorporate teacher planning time for standards-related activities into the school day.

Opportunities for support and guidance

Additional supports for teachers, such as personalized coaching and highly valued resources, have potential for mitigating classroom time issues. In this same survey, teachers reported valuing resources such as CCR-aligned textbooks and curriculum, formative or diagnostic standards, and digital tools such as online textbooks, webinars, videos, and online communities.

#5: Student absenteeism and tardiness

Student absenteeism negatively impacts student performance in the classroom and additionally provides a challenge for teachers engaged in standards-aligned instruction. Fifty-one percent of survey respondents cited lost instructional time and difficult-to-replicate experiences as challenges to implementation.

Opportunities for support and guidance

While many factors leading to student absenteeism and tardiness are often beyond the control of teachers and schools, administrators can explore supports and interventions for schools and districts with greater rates of absence and truancy. The U.S. Departments of Justice, Health and Human Services, Housing and Urban Development, and Education jointly provide a toolkit for addressing chronic absenteeism⁷, and researchers across the country are implementing interventions such as using text messaging⁸ and sending postcards reminding parents of the importance of attendance⁹.

For further discussion of opportunities for support, see our forthcoming research brief on teacher support and guidance.

7 https://www2.ed.gov/about/inits/ed/chronicabsenteeism/toolkit.pdf?utm_source=youth.g

8 <https://www.future-ed.org/work/connect-text-leveraging-text-message-communication-to-mitigate-chronic-absenteeism-and-improve-parental-engagement-in-the-earliest-years-of-schooling/>

9 https://www.attendanceworks.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Todd-Rogers-Avi-F.-influential_third_parties.pdf