

Implementation of Kentucky's Learning Standards in English Language Arts and Math: Insights, Innovations, and Challenges in Six Districts

The Center on Standards, Alignment, Instruction, and Learning (**C-SAIL**), funded by the Institute of Education Sciences, examines how college- and career-readiness (CCR) standards are implemented, whether they improve student learning, and what instructional tools measure and support their implementation. This brief presents findings from C-SAIL's **Implementation Study**, which uses interview and survey data to explore how district administrators, principals, and teachers are understanding, experiencing, and implementing the Kentucky Academic Standards (KAS) in English language arts (ELA) and math. We examine how and what kinds of supports are provided to teachers of all students, including students with disabilities (SWDs) and English learners (ELs) who take the general state assessment.

Since our research began in 2015, C-SAIL researchers have conducted a state-representative survey of 390 teachers and 163 principals. In addition, we have interviewed 12 state officials, and 20 district officials in six Kentucky districts. We selected the six Kentucky case study districts by identifying two urban, two suburban, and two rural districts with relatively high percentages of SWDs and ELs. We also examined other district characteristics—percentage of students receiving free or reduced-price lunch, student achievement or growth rates, and geographic location within the state—to ensure that our districts represented a range of contextual factors.

Below we highlight our key survey findings on teacher perceptions on curriculum, professional development, assessments, SWDs, ELs, and outreach/communication. We share detailed insights from district officials in the six case study districts, emphasizing Kentucky's innovative practices and notable challenges.

Curriculum

A majority of teachers (80%) felt that their curriculum was aligned to the standards.

- Insights** Districts range in their use of state curriculum resources and invest a considerable amount of time and resources vetting or creating ELA and math curriculum to support teachers in implementing the KAS.
- Innovations** Curriculum is being used as a strategic tool for ensuring alignment and focus, though districts take different approaches.
- » Two districts worked with teachers on revising or supplementing their math curriculum to address student learning gaps demonstrated by state and local assessments. One district asked teachers to use their PLC time to create curricular materials targeting these gaps. Another district reviewed how its math curriculum was being used with teachers to reorient its focus and ensure all dimensions (conceptual, application, fluency/skill) of the math standards are covered.
 - » One district enriched its curriculum by embedding major city events (e.g. visit by the Dalai Lama) into its program of study. This district also restructured the district curriculum director position to facilitate consistent instructional supports across schools.
- Challenges** Districts continue to struggle in incentivizing teachers to move away from traditional ways of teaching (i.e., skill-building) in favor of standards-based instruction that facilitates teaching to the depth required in the KAS. Several district officials expressed concern that their teachers were not prepared to teach at the level of rigor demanded in the KAS.
- » According to administrators, the KAS often require a deeper level of content knowledge than that covered in teacher preparation programs. They reported that teachers struggle to teach the standards comprehensively.
 - » Negative public perception of the standards has contributed to teacher resistance.

Professional Development (PD)

A majority (62%) of teachers across both subjects reported receiving PD on the content of the standards. However, fewer than half of teachers received PD on instructional strategies for SWDs (44%) and ELs (46%).

Insights

Some districts are shifting away from relying on site-based PDs and towards more district guidance and oversight, though districts are in different stages in this process.

- » Most districts offer opportunities for teachers to participate in PLCs, and three districts require that PLC time be allotted to all teachers. The degree of school and district oversight during PLCs varies but is shifting towards teacher ownership across all schools.
- » Instructional coaches support district initiatives by collaborating with district offices and providing PD across schools. Coaches receive regular opportunities for their own PD so they can offer targeted and cohesive supports to teachers.
- » Differentiation strategies for SWDs and ELs are frequently cited as areas of high PD need.

Innovations

District and school leaders are taking an active role in PD initiatives.

- » In one district, principals and assistant principals participate in a summer leadership institute where they receive PD on instructional rounds and high-yield instructional strategies. One goal of this institute is to increase their understanding of the PD initiatives the district leads with teachers.
- » Two districts run PD programs to support co-teaching. One program has started to train program participants as coaches for consequent years.
- » Two districts provided PD focused on literacy and asked teachers to consider student perspectives on standards, including students that are below grade level.

Challenges

The shift towards more centralized PD has created tension between school and district leaders. District PD initiatives have attempted to work with school leaders to ease these tensions. Still, larger districts struggle to scale PD programs while schools attempt to balance existing resources to implement district initiatives.

- » Districts are active in providing specialized PD training such as that provided by the World Class Instructional Design Assessment (WIDA) consortium. School leaders find this PD helpful but cannot always disseminate this PD widely.
- » School-level PD often only reflects the priorities of principals due to limited time and resources, which may mean, for example, that sometimes PD for EL teachers is not offered if it is not prioritized by the principal.
- » Teacher turnover has made it difficult to sustain rigorous co-teaching practices and “train the trainer” models.

Assessments

A majority (79%) of teachers believed that district summative assessments, formative assessments, and school-based assessments were aligned to the standards.

Insights Districts focused on common formative and other benchmark assessments as a means of collecting more data throughout the school year, moving beyond a heavy emphasis on end-of-year tests.

Innovations Districts are focusing on organizational coherence by creating more uniform assessment policies.

- » One district developed a balanced assessment system, including common unit assessments, that includes teachers' providing feedback on whether test questions are appropriately aligned to the standards during PLCs.
- » One district increased the use of various formative assessments.
- » In another district, leaders provided more PLC time to allow teachers to have alignment conversations.
- » One district created a system to share common assessment scores within their district to encourage collaboration across schools.

Challenges The statewide focus on teacher accountability, through assessment scores, encouraged districts to reallocate instructional PD time to assessment discussions, which was described as "suffocating." One district remained concerned about the changing nature of EL assessments and the state's timeliness in delivering assessment materials that inhibited analysis.

Students with Disabilities (SWDs)

Teachers reported that they spent similar amounts of time on standards-emphasized instruction across grades and subjects for students with disabilities as with students without disabilities.

- Insights** Districts focus on providing teachers with co-teaching training and supports, either by funding additional PD through grants from their regional service center or by including teachers of SWDs in PLC conversations.
- Innovations** Together with instructional coaches, curriculum specialists, and teacher PLC groups, districts and schools are revising their approaches to instructing SWDs in general education environments by strengthening co-teaching, RTI, or teacher collaboration models.
- » One district is working with principals to improve school schedules that can better accommodate and sustain co-teaching relationships. Rather than having SWD teachers work with multiple general education co-teachers, they are attempting to pair co-teachers who have the time to work well with one another.
 - » One district is working with principals to re-evaluate their RTI model so IEPs can be better served in the general education classroom.
 - » One district described having content experts and intervention specialists facilitate PD for general education teachers.
 - » District officials believed that integrated PLCs have decreased the sense of separation experienced by general education and SWD teachers.
- Challenges** Districts expressed concern over the number of essential standards and the challenge in maintaining rigorous levels of differentiation for all students.
- » One district expressed difficulty in balancing individual IEP goals with grade-level standards especially in the elementary grades where teachers have less collaborative time.
 - » One district struggled with the overidentification of Black students in their district leading them to create an RTI director position.

English Learners (ELs)

A majority of ELA teachers (67%) reported providing somewhat different instruction to ELs than to other students, but only 49% of math teachers did.

Insights

Districts emphasized providing Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) training to assist teachers in serving their EL student populations. Specific program models vary considerably between districts depending on their EL student enrollment.

- » One district created Newcomer Academies to serve the needs of their EL student population that represents speakers of 136 languages. This district has also invested in multiple curricular resources specifically for ELs.
- » In another district, EL support was provided through an online program in addition to 15-minute intervals of support from in-school teachers.
- » One district provided PD focused on the needs of ELs, but it is not required.

Innovations

Districts have hired bilingual staff to support schools and teachers and some have also created networking opportunities for teachers and principals to discuss the needs of ELs.

- » One district used their principal learning network to encourage school leaders to discuss their EL needs and provide strategies that support standards-based instruction.
- » One district led an academy for EL teachers that provided PD emphasizing the language dimensions to the KAS and project-based instruction that supports both language and content.
- » One district houses a language services department that provides translation services across schools. Bilingual associate instructors in this district provide language supports directly to students.
- » Another district hired a district-level EL coordinator to train all teachers and coaches in SIOP and other standards-based EL strategies.

Challenges

New ESSA accountability metrics, large influxes of refugees, and limited resources dedicated to ELs have created challenges for districts to meet the needs of their EL students.

- » Districts expressed concern over new ESSA accountability measures focusing on ELs as their limited resources make it difficult to meet certain requirements (e.g., assessment within 100 days).
- » Districts struggle to find bilingual teachers to support the many linguistic communities they serve. One district has an EL-to-EL-teacher ratio of 1-to-90 and relies heavily on part-time EL teachers, when they are available.
- » Adjustments to the WIDA ACCESS assessment has created some “turmoil” regarding the move to an online assessment and changing entrance/exit criteria, especially in high-poverty districts serving long-term ELs.
- » Districts with few ELs continue to struggle to provide comprehensive EL programing and supports.

Outreach and Communication

A majority (67%) of Kentucky teachers felt that a lack of support from parents was a moderate or major challenge.

- Insights** Several district officials discussed parent and community outreach efforts to distill concerns related to standards shifts and associated formative and summative assessments.
- Innovations** Districts discussed the important role of their school boards in advocating and securing funding for initiatives. Community members and school leaders were appreciative of the school boards' active involvement with their communities, particularly in settings outside the school board building.
- Challenges** Two districts actively coordinated community outreach to decrease pushback and resistance to the KAS math and college- and career-readiness standards.
- » Officials in one district, in which approximately 18% of adults hold bachelor's degrees, found that parents were confused about the interrelated nature of the KAS and college- and career-readiness standards, with some parents placing little value on college readiness).