

Leading Change for the Implementation of Common Core State Standards in Rural School Districts

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Paul Lopez
Donald Wise, Dissertation Chair
California State University Fresno
NCPEA Editorial Advisor, Dr. John R. Slate

Rural school districts across the nation, with their limited resources, face daunting challenges posed by the implementation of the Common Core State Standards. This article presents a recent study of 13 rural school districts in the Central Valley of California and how these districts are responding to those challenges. A total of 352 teachers and 36 administrators responded to the Stages of Concern Questionnaire (SoCQ), which measured the concerns of respondents associated with CCSS implementation. Qualitative responses by administrators to questions relating to concerns and leadership approaches associated with CCSS implementation were also analyzed.

Major findings were that teachers were mostly concerned about their own personal efforts of CCSS implementation while administrators were more concerned about collaborative processes involved with implementation. Also teachers in their first years of service generally had greater perceived levels of concern at all levels. Recommendations included continuous data collection and assessment of the implementation with greater efforts at communicating findings and next steps for all stakeholders utilizing a blend of instructional and distributed leadership.

Introduction

It is a privilege and a human right for children to attend school. Among the central reasons students attend school is to gain knowledge, build life and career skills, and to become productive members of society. Curriculum is at the core of a student's education. When districts are faced with the need to redesign curriculum, such as to transition to the Common Core State Standards, it is imperative leaders clearly define the rationale and redesign process to

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all stakeholders and work to make clear that the end result is to increase student achievement. Moreover, the curriculum redesign process should be viewed a “win-win” situation for all stakeholders. The organization of the process is just as important as designing the curriculum (Ainsworth, 2010).

This article presents the results of a study that was conceived with this idea in mind. Therefore, the study investigated the concerns of teachers and administrators and the perceived levels of use as they relate to the California Common Core State Standards. An additional intent of the study was to investigate the leadership approaches to lead the necessary change processes to take place for the California Common Core State Standards.

Leadership

Being an effective school leader in this day and age can be a formidable task. Leading schools in times of change, however, is even more demanding (Portin, Schneider, DeArmond, & Gundlach, 2003). The expectations placed upon school leaders continue to increase in a dynamic and changing environment (Bossi, 2007; Fullan, 2002). In order to address concerns associated with change, school and district leaders will need to utilize appropriate leadership skills. Using appropriate leadership skills requires school leaders to have an understanding of the different types of leadership approaches and when each of these leadership approaches is most effective. For that reason, it is imperative that school leaders have an understanding of major leadership approaches including transactional, transformational, instructional, and distributed approaches. Having a good understanding of these leadership approaches and using them appropriately will enable the creation of ideal situations for teachers to bring about the changes necessary for successful implementation of the CCSS.

Without effective leadership skills, change cannot happen in a meaningful manner. Certain leadership approaches are more conducive to the change process than others. For instance, leaders that follow a transactional leadership model tend to follow established protocols and as a result may find it difficult to adapt to change and to meet unexpected demands (Smith & Bell, 2011). On the other hand, transformational leadership has been shown to strongly influence teachers’ practices by motivating them to evaluate their current practices as well as to evaluate the need for change or action (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006). Furthermore, the components of transformational leadership including charisma, individualized consideration, and intellectual stimulation are critical for leaders, especially in organizations that are faced with demands for change (Bass, 1990).

Other leadership approaches have been demonstrated to be effective in promoting change. Instructional leadership, for example, has been demonstrated to be positively correlated to organizational change (Kursunoglu & Tanriogen, 2009). The more teachers viewed their principal as an instructional leader, the more positive their attitude was towards change. Some of the elements contributing to this phenomenon include the ability of the school leader to successfully create inclusionary environments that give subordinates a voice. Other aspects of instructional leadership that impact change include the ability of the school principal to participate in professional development and to model for staff (Kursunoglu & Tanriogen, 2009). Additionally, the practice of distributed leadership, that of sharing leadership with others at the school, alone has also been demonstrated to be a positive force in the change and development of schools (Harris, 2008).

Having a thorough understanding of these leadership approaches will assist educational leaders who constantly deal with change processes. Change is an inevitable and constant phenomenon in P-12 education. Because of the inevitability of change and the need to understand and manage change, school systems must learn to adapt to change in order to be effective and to keep up with increasingly rapid innovations. It is even more important to understand change when institutions enter into uncharted territory, such as the implementation of the Common Core.

Change

In an environment of increased accountability, educational organizations have had to learn much about change. Finding a common definition of change, however, is difficult. Various definitions of change exist and most definitions of change include multiple aspects. Lewin (1947), for example, defined change as the “difference between a preceding situation and a following situation which has emerged out of the first as a result of some inner or outer influences” (p. 151). Quattrone and Hopper (2001) argued that organizations change when their structures and operations are transformed. Such transformation occurs as the object of change passes from one state to another and as a result gains or loses identifiable features. Kotter (1995), on the other hand, stated that change by definition requires creating new systems, which in turn demands leadership. Without effective leadership, Kotter (1995) stated, the initial change process is compromised.

Tsoukas and Chia (2002) argued that change “is the reweaving of actors' webs of beliefs and habits of action to accommodate new experiences obtained through interactions” (p. 570). Change has also been noted as having quantifiable attributes. For instance, the essence of organizational change is found in the small, but frequent adaptation and adjustment of repetitive actions and routines (Weick & Quinn, 1999). Although adjustments in some cases may be small, the continuous and frequent adjustments produce alterations in structure and practice, which is the fundamental nature of change (Orlikowski, 1996). Change has also been defined as the establishment of new understandings, new practices, and new relationships (Thomas & Hardy, 2011). Such an encompassing definition leads to the concept that everything could be construed as change including people, organizations, ideas, and even identifiable resting points (Sturdy & Grey, 2003). In other words, simply “being” is change. To complicate matters, the research and writing of organizational change is undergoing a metamorphous (Pettigrew, Woodman, & Cameron's 2001). This is to say that the conceptualization of change in the academic literature itself is changing.

Oftentimes leaders fail to effectively implement promising reforms due to a lack of understanding of the type of change required. The specific type of change is especially critical for school leaders to understand, especially as they lead their schools in the transition to the Common Core State Standards, a radical change in K-12 education.

Common Core State Standards

When California became one of 45 states to adopt the same standards for English and math (California Department of Education [CDE]) in 2010, it set the stage for a complete overhaul of its approach to instruction and assessment (Reed, Scull, Slicker, & Winkler, 2012). The adoption of the Common Core State Standards initiative also represents what is perhaps the most

sweeping educational change in the K-12 system since the passage of the No Child Left behind Act of 2001 (Vecellio, 2013). Additionally, while much has been written about the instructional shifts and other elements entrenched in the Common Core State Standards; little has been written about the mental shifts that need to occur to successfully implement these standards. Still, in order for educational changes of this magnitude to be implemented effectively, stakeholders need to have a good understanding of the major instructional changes required by the Common Core State Standards, as well as the shifts in thinking.

The process to create the same K-12 standards for the multistate consortium was led by the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and the Council of Chief State School Officers (Porter et al., 2011). This process marked the most impactful shift in the Common Core State Standards by moving away from dissimilar content standards in English language arts and mathematics across individual states. Another significant shift in the standards is the focus on digging deeper, which means fewer standards compared to previously adopted standards, in order to develop a greater understanding of the content (Maloch & Bomer, 2013; Phillips & Wong, 2010).

Focusing on informational text is another key feature of the Common Core State Standards for English language arts/Literacy (Santos, Darling-Hammond, & Cheuk, 2012). The idea is that by focusing on informational text, students will be able to build on their knowledge by using the complexity and academic language found in the text to provide evidence and justify their point of view. In short, this new type of learning will allow students to engage in an improved form of written and oral communication that would allow them to form eloquent argumentation from the text.

The demands of the new math standards will require students to focus on understanding and making sense of mathematical concepts. This shift moves away from focusing on finding the correct answer to a problem by using procedural knowledge. The CCSS math standards will also require students to understand various representations of mathematical concepts, which will be presented in text, numbers, tables, diagrams, and symbols. Understanding the step-by-step actions that lead to reliable results, while having a firm understanding of the relevant ideas are key for developing a firm understanding of the CCSS (Santos et al., 2012).

To assess students' understanding of the CCSS, new assessments were created (Herman, Linn, & Moss, 2013). The assessments will be performed by two consortia, the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (Smarter Balanced) and the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC). The assessments are based on the new standards, as well as on the capabilities of new technologies.

The implementation of the CCSS and the assessments that gauge understanding of the new standards pose various challenges for teachers and site leaders. Sawchuk (2012), for example, stated that in order to ensure that students master the new standards; teachers will have to change the methods they employ to deliver instruction. Additionally, the challenge of preparing teachers to teach the common core state standards is the enormous. Part of the problem is that curriculum that is aligned to the common core standards is in the developmental stages. Furthermore, the cognitive demands of the CCSS require teachers to function at a higher cognitive level. This is going to require time for teachers to familiarize themselves with the rigor associated with the standards, as well as the strategies needed to deliver instruction. Moreover, teachers will need training in utilizing technology in creative ways, so that they could deliver the CCSS, while ensuring that students become digitally fluent (Cosmah & Saine, 2013).

Research Design

The research design utilized in this study was a mixed method approach that incorporated quantitative and qualitative research. Quantitative research consisted of the 35-item Stages of Concern Questionnaire (SoCQ) administered to teachers and their administrators, which rated their concerns relating to the CCSS. The qualitative component consisted of open-ended questions, which were posed to administrators regarding concerns or challenges associated with leadership and change relating to the implementation of the Common Core State Standards.

The SoCQ is a major component of the Concerns Based Adoption Model. The Concerns Based Adoption Model (CBAM) is a widely applied theory and methodology, which is often used for studying the process of implementing educational change by teachers and school leaders (Anderson, 1997). The CBAM involves measuring, describing, and explaining the process of change experienced by teachers or others who are involved in the implementation of new practices or innovations. The CBAM is based on the assumption that change is on-going and that it involves personal experiences. Additionally, the effectiveness of the implementation or change is partially dependent on the extent that training was matched to the needs and concerns expressed by the individual. In other words, the CBAM considers implementation of initiatives or innovations in educational institutions as a developmental process that involves users of the innovation by examining the process people go through when they engage in the implementation of a new innovation or initiative.

Results

Requests to participate in the study were sent via email to superintendents from 19 school rural school districts. Thirteen district superintendents agreed to participate in the study. Superintendents from participating districts forwarded an email from the researcher, which included a letter and survey link to school site principals, who then forwarded the email to their respective staffs. To ensure a higher participation rate, follow up emails were sent to district and site administrators by the lead researcher.

Of the 1,074 individuals invited to participate in the study, a total of 388 actual participants completed the SoC questionnaire. Participants in the study included 352 teachers of various grade levels from Pre-school to 12th grade. Thirty-six administrators also completed the SoC questionnaire.

The researchers analyzed results of the Stages of Concerns Questionnaire of administrators and teachers from 13 rural school districts, which provides figures illustrating peak scores of stages, as well as statistical analysis. Determining peak scores was important because peaks represent the greatest relative intensity of users' concerns. Hall et al. (1977), for example, argued that as users of innovations move from unconcerned and non-use into beginning use and more established use, their concerns developed from being most intense at Stages 0, 1, and 2, to most intense at Stage 3, and ultimately to most intense at Stages 4, 5, and 6. The opposite was also hypothesized. This was important because non-users' concerns were normally highest on Stages 0, 1, and 2, and lowest on Stages 4, 5, and 6. Qualitative data were analyzed to investigate and determine themes relating to concerns that administrators had regarding CaCCSS implementation. Patterns relating to implemented tasks associated with the CaCCSS were also examined.

The findings (Figure 1) revealed different overall concerns between administrators and teachers. Results of the Stages of Concern Questionnaire revealed that teachers were mostly concerned about their own personal efforts (Stage 2, Personal) at successfully implementing the CaCCSS. Administrators, on the other hand, were mostly concerned about the collaborative processes (Stage 5, Collaboration) involved with implementing the CaCCSS. These differences were statistically significant for both stages and would seem to indicate that teachers and administrators have very different perceptions of the implementation of the CCSS.

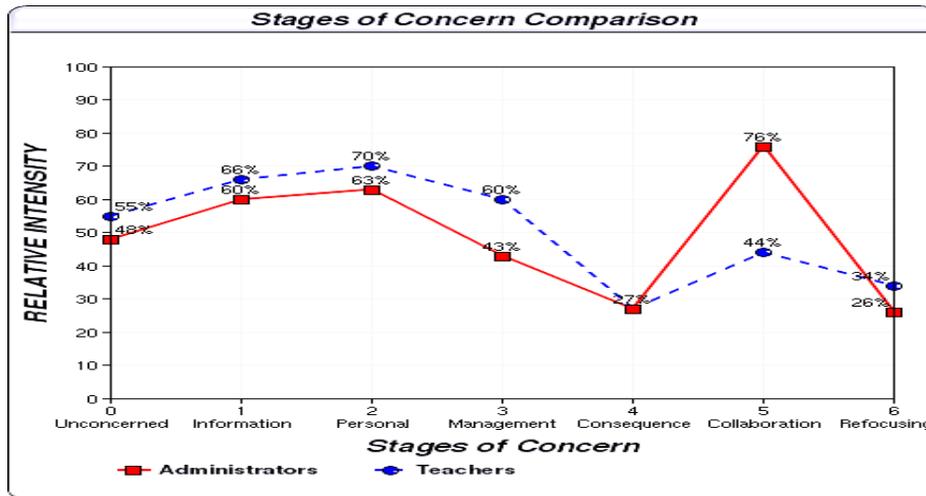


Figure 1. Stages of concerns of administrators (n=36) compared to teachers (n=352).

Results of the Stages of Concern Questionnaire also revealed that there were statistically significant differences in the means of respondents when classified by years of experience (Figure 2). Data indicated that respondents with 1-2 years of experience had a higher intensity level of concern at Stage 4, the Consequence Stage, and Stage 5, the Collaboration Stage, than the other groups. These differences were also statistically significant.

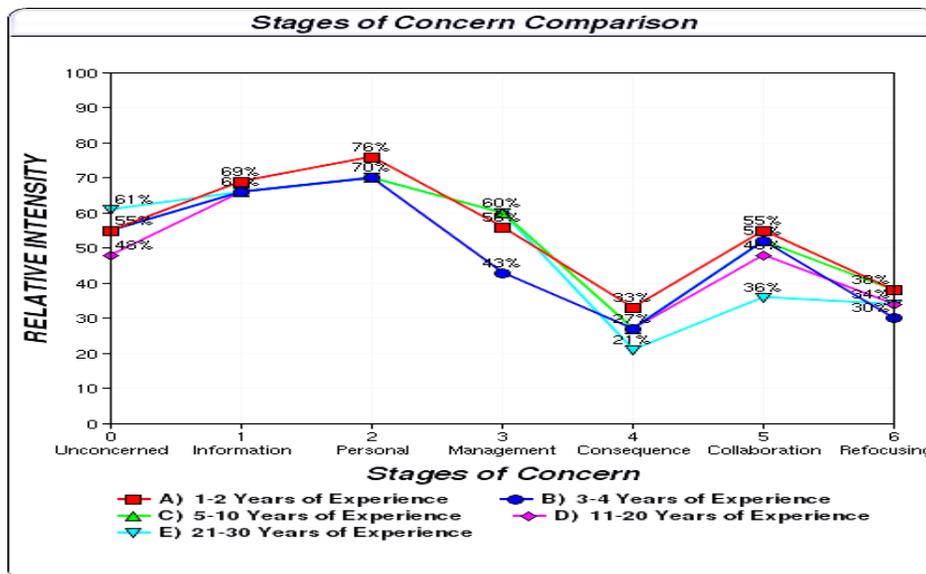


Figure 2. Stages of concerns of respondents (n = 388) by years of experience.

Qualitative data from the open-ended responses collected from site administrators revealed three major concerns: time, the Common Core assessments, and implementing effective trainings. Themes that emerged from responses from district level administrators included: a lack of knowledge of the CaCCSS, curriculum concerns, and fear of losing effective practices. Most administrators also felt that teachers were concerned about: (a) the lack of time to study the CaCCSS and to plan new lessons around the CaCCSS, (b) lack of CaCCSS materials, and (c) change itself. The analysis of respondents' Stages of Concerns and qualitative responses also revealed that the 13 districts in the study are in the early stages of implementing the CaCCSS.

Conclusion

As is the case with all major change, the process of implementing the CaCCSS resulted in various concerns for administrators and teachers. The current level of CaCCSS, implementation revealed through results from the Stages of Concern Questionnaire, demonstrated that teachers are mostly concerned about their own personal efforts at successfully implementing the CaCCSS. On the other hand, results revealed that administrators were mostly concerned about the collaborative processes involved with implementing the CaCCSS. Administrators also revealed concerns relating to: (a) collaboration and planning time, (b) knowledge of the CaCCSS, (c) accessing appropriate curriculum, (d) best instructional practices, and (e) moving away from current instructional practices. Our review of the findings suggests that teachers at the Pre-K to upper elementary level are a little further along than Jr. High/High School in understanding and implementing the CaCCSS.

Recommendations

We examined the concerns of teachers and administrators and the perceived levels of use as they related to the California Common Core State Standards. To address concerns regarding the level of implementation, specific needs, and specific concerns of staff(s), site and district level administrators should consider conducting a CaCCSS needs assessment. Schmoker and Wilson (1993) recommend that continuous improvement includes continuous data collection and assessments. This would be a good starting point, which would allow for a more precise and common understanding of where schools are in their level of CaCCSS implementation. Once a needs assessment is conducted, the sharing of results through effective systems of communication is critical. Hallinger and Murphy (1987) exhorted instructional leaders to promote a positive learning climate by directly and indirectly crafting systems and processes that communicate priorities. Communication is a key component throughout the entire change process (Marzano et al., 2005). Transformational leaders communicate high expectations, motivate, and inspire those around them (Bass, 1996, 1997).

Lack of time was also mentioned as a concern by teachers, specifically, lack of time to plan and to collaborate. To determine approximate amounts needed to make progress, district and site level administrators should participate to some degree in teachers' PLCs. This could serve two purposes. First, it could provide administrators information needed for forward CaCCSS planning and it could improve communication and collaboration with teachers. Harris (2004), for instance, found that distributed forms of leadership that emphasize collaboration help build capacity within schools, which in turn contribute to school improvement. Ainsworth (2010) stated that shifting long set beliefs is not easy and that an effective way of helping people change

their way of thinking includes allowing them to act or experience their way into new beliefs through collaboration.

In order to address curricular concerns, administrators should form a committee of lead teachers and administrators to research and recommend the purchase of CaCCSS materials. Fullan (2010) described how successful change is implemented by leaders who are empathetic to their employees' concerns and who listen to their colleagues and other stakeholders. Schmoker & Wilson (1993) emphasize that teamwork between and within units is an essential component of successful change.

To address concerns regarding fear of or resistance to change, all administrators should start or continue to be transparent in all of their forms of communication with teachers. Schmoker and Wilson stated that communication and trust between management and employees contributes to efficiency and helps maintain a focus of the important long term vision. Fullan (2010) stated that when dealing with fear of change, successful leaders, collaborate and take responsibility for change, thereby generating more buy-in from those who are concerned with failure. Ainsworth (2010) described the importance of connecting new knowledge or change to the big picture. This process would assist in securing support from subordinates and colleagues in implementing the CaCCSS.

The arrival of the Common Core in our schools represents a major change in the way we do business and how we lead our schools. This study provided some insights into just how different teachers and administrators of rural schools perceive where they are in the continuum of adjusting to the CCSS. Communication and support are paramount in bringing about successful change.

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