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## Kentucky and the Common Core: Interview With Terry Holliday and Felicia Smith

By [Marc Tucker](#) on October 16, 2014 10:21 AM

*In this blog, we hear from Kentucky's Commissioner of Education, Terry Holliday, on the Common Core. Holliday, who is also the President of the Council of Chief State School Officers is joined by Felicia Smith, now CEO of the National Institute for School Leadership, who until recently was the associate commissioner of the Kentucky State Department of Education directly responsible for Common Core implementation.*

**Marc Tucker:** Kentucky was the first state to adopt the Common Core, before development was even finished. How did that happen?

**Terry Holliday:** We had legislation that said standards had to be adopted by December 2009. We had been providing iterative feedback on the development of the Common Core throughout the development process, and had already seen a draft of the standards we were comfortable with. So the State Board of Education, the Council on Postsecondary Education and the Professional Standards Board all passed a resolution adopting the standards. We were beginning to plan for implementation when the final version came out in June 2010.

**MT:** Who had you involved in the process of shaping the Common Core?

**Felicia Smith:** We brought together a Working Group for that task. We included, in addition to teachers, individuals from higher education, business and community members, administrators, and others. We broke the Working Group down into two groups of 20 to 30 people each, one for English and the other for mathematics. We continuously updated our legislators at the interim joint legislative meetings, and their representatives were also at every working group meeting.

**MT:** So everyone involved in this process was intimately involved and deeply knowledgeable as the standards were developed?

**FS:** They were giving feedback on every draft. We could point specifically to language that Kentucky had submitted that then showed up in the next iteration of the standards. When Kentucky formally adopted the standards, we had a lot of commitment to implementation.

**MT:** What were you worried about as you went into implementation and how did you address the things that worried you?

**TH:** I was worried about teacher buy-in. I wanted to be sure that, as we translated the standards into performance expectations using the Stiggins model, teachers all over the state would be involved, and would see the implementation process as something they were driving, not something that was being done to them.

**FS:** We realized early on that the state agency would have to penetrate a wide range of practices at the district and school levels and within classrooms. We met every month for at least one day over three years with each stakeholder group: teachers, principals and district leaders. We established a Leadership Network structure to assist districts with their local implementation. We had a detailed course of study for each meeting. We gave them reading materials to reflect on and then asked them to bring back work they were implementing along the way. Much of our work around translating standards was around increasing the content knowledge of teachers. But we also worked with the teachers to develop tools they could use to make the standards come alive in classrooms, to build curriculum, to reshape their teaching techniques and instructional methods, to help them with formative assessment strategies. These and other measures were also designed to strengthen teacher's own grasp of the content they were going to be responsible for teaching. We also wanted the principals to know what effective instruction should look like and to be knowledgeable about the pedagogical practices that would support the shifts that needed to occur to fully realize the standards in classrooms for students. And, finally we wanted district leaders to revamp their curriculum processes for the inclusion of the resources the schools would need to accelerate the implementation of the Common Core.

**MT:** What did you do to make sure that the standards would be used to create a strong curriculum?

**FS:** We developed a model curriculum framework based on the standards, but we did not want to mandate the curriculum itself, so we engaged the teacher, principal, and district leaders in a co-development or co-design process for curriculum materials to aide in the implementation of the new standards. Curriculum development, instructional system design and professional development were all intertwined in this model. Teachers would be asked to try out new techniques in their classroom and to bring the resulting student work back to their district and regional meetings. The student work would be compared to the standards. This would stimulate other teachers to try the techniques that the most successful teachers had developed. Teachers were jurying each other's work and then engaging in regional conversations to engage in a quality assurance process regionally. Student work was always the focus of these subsequent conversations. Our goal was to build a bank of quality resources that teachers could share across the state using our technology platform. No surprise, we found our greatest gains in student performance in those places in which these new teacher-developed tools and techniques into local curriculum was most advanced.

**TH:** We knew we had to go beyond just the ELA and math teachers. We worked with Learning Forward to set up guidelines for a more comprehensive professional development system statewide. We are struggling to find high-quality professional development resources that can support our conception of what needs to be done, but they are very scarce. I don't think we got a lot of middle school teachers' attention until assessment results came out, and they found out that their kids didn't have the background knowledge they thought they had. I think we are still a couple of years away from the point at which these initiatives will have a widespread effect on learning.

**MT:** Some states are trying to do this all overnight, with catastrophic results. When Dave Driscoll implemented the new MCAS system of standards and assessments in Massachusetts, he insisted that there be no consequences for anyone for years while the state helped teachers build the skills needed to teach the standards well.

**TH:** That's exactly what I wanted to do. In our request for a waiver extension, we asked the U.S. Department of Education if we could do that with Science. We wanted to give teachers at least two years with standards before high-stakes assessments. We would have been much happier with a three-year delay. The U.S. Department of Education has been pushing us hard to adopt their strategy to use teacher evaluation based on student scores on standardized tests. We kept asking the Department to give us waiver extensions that would enable us to avoid doing that and managed to put it off for five years. We said it was unfair to ask teachers to accept a teacher evaluation model based on student performance on standardized tests unless, one, those tests were based on the Common Core and, two, the teachers had had several years to develop the skills and create the curricula needed to implement the Common Core. But, even then, we think the Department's model is deeply flawed. Our model is very much a professional growth model. We don't believe in a model of teacher evaluation in which a percent of the evaluation is based on student test scores; that is why we submitted a matrix model of assessment, which cannot be used to associate student test scores with individual students. That model was ultimately approved by the Department.

**MT:** How would you judge your implementation so far? Where are you headed? Where do you see the country going?

**TH:** With respect to how we are doing so far, I'd say the following. In 2009, 30 percent of our high school graduates were college- and career-ready, according to students ACT scores, college placement tests and a readiness measure agreed to by Kentucky's two-year and four-year institutions. For the class of 2014, the proportion is now over 60 percent, a doubling in just five years. Our state proficiency results are up seven or eight percent too. We are proud of what we have accomplished but we know we have a long way to go to match the performance of the top-performing countries. Assessment for the Common Core is a big concern. PARCC will not survive, SBAC might. We need access to their performance items, but they are resisting, because they think that ownership of their items is the key to their business model. The states should be collaborating through CCSSO to refresh assessment items — but not contracting through PARCC or SBAC. Every state has a procurement process that they have to adhere to.

**MT:** Do you have advice for other states?

**TH:** Go slow in order to go fast. When the teachers see the Common Core being rushed into place, when they are told that their heads could roll if their students are not making progress against the Common Core, when they have not had the support they need to teach it well, they are at least frustrated and many will turn against the Common Core. It is critical that there is enough time between the time the Common Core is first introduced and the time that the professionals are held accountable for the results for teachers to get the support they need to teach it well. This is the approach that David Driscoll took when he introduced the MCAS system in Massachusetts and he was right. Implement—as much as possible—your own agenda, and not the federal government's agenda. Make sure you've got state legislation to do what you are doing. Don't rely on federal waivers and the Secretary of Education; he'll be gone in two years. The states need to figure out how to use standards to increase student—not teacher—accountability and they need to do much more to promote the use of assessment to support learning.

**MT:** What about advice for the federal government?

**TH:** We tried to tell them they should not get out in front in supporting the Common Core, but they did not listen. Ever since the President took credit for the Common Core in the 2011 State of the Union, it has all been downhill. Supporting the Common Core doesn't mean squat unless you are supporting teachers. The best thing the feds can do is get out of the way.

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