

Jefferson County Public Schools

Common Core State Standards Implementation Review

October 2012

GE Foundation Review Team

Jefferson County Public Schools

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During the week of October 1-5, 2012 an eight-person consultant team visited Jefferson County Public Schools to conduct a review of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) implementation. Kentucky moved to full implementation of both the Math and English Language Arts/Literacy CCSS in the 2011-12 school year.

The focus of the GE Foundation reviews this year is to monitor the implementation of the Common Core State Standards in the seven districts. The intent of the review is listening, observing, and learning from principals, teachers, coaches, central office personnel, and other stakeholders so we can provide feedback on JCPS's progress with Common Core implementation and to share the learning with other GE Foundation districts. In this report we describe strengths and early successes, challenges, and recommendations. The report is organized around five major components: English Language Arts/Literacy, Math, professional learning communities, coaching, and parent and community awareness and engagement.

Over the course of the week 197 educators participated in individual interviews and focus groups. Team members conducted observations in 203 elementary and middle school classrooms. In addition, 13 community representatives, business leaders, and elected board members were interviewed.

JCPS Common Core Implementation Strategy

There are several components to the JCPS Common Core Implementation Strategy including professional learning communities, school-based coaches, six-week pacing guides, curriculum documents and web resources, diagnostic and proficiency assessments, formative assessments, and a refocused RTI program.

English Language Arts/Literacy

Strengths

Louisville educators have clearly made the curriculum shift from textbooks and programs to standards-based planning, teaching, and assessing. Teachers are planning and delivering lessons aligned to Common Core (CC) literacy standards. Teachers are following district pacing guides to focus on specific standards in six-week cycles and using common district diagnostic and proficiency assessments. We observed consistency of curriculum across classrooms and across schools. Teachers described pulling resources from a variety of places. They acknowledged that they enjoy the creativity of being able to make decisions about what content to use rather than having to stick to one textbook. Learning targets and “I Can” statements were posted in virtually every classroom. Informational and literacy texts were evident in all schools. ELA, social studies, and science classes used informational texts to integrate across the curriculum, expose students to primary sources, and supplement textbooks.

Every teacher and principal interviewed spoke about utilizing more informational texts, but acknowledge that there is still work to be done with respect to focusing on evidence grounded in texts and practice with complex texts and academic language. Teachers confirmed that they were giving different amounts of time for each instructional shift with (a) as priority one, (b) as priority two, and (c) as priority three:

- a. Building knowledge through content-rich non-fiction text
- b. Reading, writing, and speaking grounded in evidence from text, both literary and informational
- c. Regular practice with complex text and its academic language

Students are engaging in more conversations about text with each other and as a whole class, using conversation prompts, participating in book talks and oral presentations, writing about their thinking, and referring to the text to support their claims.

Many teachers mentioned intentional and focused vocabulary study in their classrooms taken from texts. One school uses a “vocabulary vault” in science and social studies by grade level. Another school had word banks for use in writing prompts. Teachers are aware of the importance of academic vocabulary and about a quarter of the classrooms had academic word walls.

K-2 teachers are excited to have a set of Common Core standards that articulate grade level outcomes and responsibilities (instead of what should be accomplished by third grade and guessing at what to aim for in grades K through 2). They report that the new standards have provided clarity, consistency, coherence, and common agreements and actions among teachers. There is evidence of ongoing assessments of foundational and other literacy skills based on flexible grouping for interventions, leveled books, data rooms, and in observations of team meetings. There is ongoing review of student data and work and teachers are making instructional adjustments. In some of the classrooms observed students were given extensive opportunities to investigate the text. Read Alouds are used to integrate science and social studies and teach literacy skills. Generic word walls were used in most classrooms. Teachers are also using many questioning techniques to help students think about what they have read or heard.

There are pockets of teachers at the 3rd-5th grade levels beginning to make the instructional shifts related to quality texts, questions, and tasks. Some 3rd-5th grade teachers are using short informational articles, a textbook, or a good piece of fictional writing as the centerpiece of the lesson. In the majority of observations, the main text appeared to be at or above grade level. A few teachers are probing for evidence and precision, as well as, carefully sequencing questions to delve deeper into the text in order to make higher order inferences.

At the middle level, teachers have a sound knowledge of the CCSS shifts and have learning targets and “I can” statements posted. Informational and literary texts were available in all classrooms. In some schools students were reading grade level texts, being exposed to primary

sources, focusing on academic vocabulary, and teachers were asking text-based questions and requiring evidence. As well, in some classrooms students were working collaboratively to build on each other's observations or insights using textual evidence. Some schools have rubrics for formal speaking and are using writing guidelines for students.

Challenges

The current balance of fiction and non-fiction has not reached the prescribed targets (50/50 elementary and 55/45 middle) yet. In many cases, the text selections could be more robust and of higher quality. Many tasks still require students to make text-to-self-connections rather than providing text-based evidence. Question sequencing could also use improvement. Most teachers ask a succession of random questions rather than a sequence of questions that build on each other with high student participation. Many questions are at the comprehension level rather than the analyzing, evaluating, and creating levels.

We also observed students and teachers using leveled readers with graphic organizers and ditto sheets that did not reflect text complexity required by the CCSS in a majority of classrooms. Finding appropriate informational texts and planning how to use them at all grade levels is very time consuming. Teachers reported in interviews that they are spending hours trying to find appropriate complex, challenging, and interesting material.

While many teachers who were interviewed identified increased attention to vocabulary work in their classrooms, we found inconsistencies in our classroom observations. More specific attention to academic vocabulary and specific vocabulary instruction could be increased in many schools. In the majority of schools, there was limited student work posted and there was a lack of teacher feedback on the work. This was particularly true at the middle school level.

Many students have learning gaps due to the prior lack of clarity at the K-2 level and with the increased challenge of the new standards. This is feeding into teachers beginning to think that the work is too hard and expectations are too high. The diversity and range of student needs

within a classroom is also very challenging with appropriately 30% of them struggling with curriculum. Many teachers feel the “pacing guides are way off.” This is leading to the dilemma of trying to stay with the pacing guidelines and still ensure deep understanding and mastery. Many teachers are feeling stressed and overwhelmed with the constant pressure of this balancing act and with the curriculum development workload.

Recommendations

There needs to be a systemic district plan and strategy for reaching teachers in all content areas. All teachers and school leaders need to be explicitly taught the ELA/literacy instructional shifts, with time to observe demonstration lessons or view videos, followed by opportunities for practice with feedback. Provide classroom observation protocols with a specific focus to ensure challenging, meaningful, and purposeful lessons are being delivered in every classroom. These will provide guidelines for teachers, coaches, and school leaders.

JCPS needs to figure out how to continue using the best strategies from the Readers and Writers Workshop while shifting to the Common Core literacy instructional strategies. Identify which current practices are philosophically different and provide direction about how to transition to close reading of rich non-fiction texts with a deliberate focus on complexity, evidence, and academic vocabulary. In addition, signage around the Common Core needs to be posted in all classrooms and schools.

Focus on less teacher talk and more on small group student engagement with rich text. Implement strategies for structuring student work on complex tasks and texts. Provide rubrics for student self-evaluation and teacher formative feedback. In addition, begin the development of integrated units aligned to the Common Core that engage students in project-based and problem-based learning.

Ensure more high quality text resources are available for teachers. Review and revise the website so it is more user friendly. Teachers are having trouble navigating the JCPS website to

find the resources they need. As well, continue to inform teachers about other websites where they can find model lessons, curriculum units, learning tasks, performance assessments, and instructional videos.

Math

Strengths

Overall, Jefferson County Public Schools are clearly making observable progress toward implementing the CCSSM in grades K-8 and instituting structures to support this work. In fact, the use of the new curriculum guides, the common assessments, the emerging professional learning communities (PLCs), and the reliance on coaching were all reported as “new” or “important changes” or “better than in the past.”

The majority of K-8 mathematics instruction is guided by new district level curriculum maps that are aligned with the CCSSM. Teachers are clearly taking their cues from these maps or guides and using the Investigations and CMP2 instructional materials in artful ways to address the standards that are outlined in the guides. Math standards are written in lesson plans and posted in classrooms in student language keeping teachers and students focused on the standards.

Teachers are routinely asking students to identify multiple strategies for solving problems. Some teachers are purposefully using mathematical academic vocabulary. Teachers reported that there is more writing taking place in math classes now. In interviews, teachers reported that they are spending most of their time on procedural skill and conceptual understanding.

Classroom visits made clear that the majority of classes observed were well organized, students were engaged, and teachers made effective use of questioning. In many classes we observed teachers working with SmartBoards and using them effectively, at a minimum, to organize and pace the lesson, and in several cases, to significantly enhance the quality of instruction. In

those classrooms with document cameras, teachers made very effective use of this technology to display and discuss student work.

Teachers are pleased with and they are consistently administering district developed common unit assessments. Teachers are discussing the results of these assessments during their PLC meetings and making decisions about instructional adjustments, interventions, and student grouping. These unit assessments are appropriately aligned, for the most part, with the curriculum guides and therefore the CCSSM.

GE trained coaches are valued and respected by the teachers. Again and again, teachers said that these coaches were indispensable resources. It was clear in these schools that the coaches were incredibly effective at helping teachers and with supporting the implementation of the letter and spirit of the Common Core.

Challenges

Attention to the instructional shifts and eight mathematical practices have not received the same emphasis as the math Common Core standards. There is also a need to strengthen the provision and organization of intervention programs for struggling students. Teachers talked about the many gaps in students' knowledge and this has been accentuated with the shift of standards to different grade levels. Application of math concepts is not as strong as the other components of rigor, possibly because teachers are still focused on procedural skills and fluency at this time of year. Finally, there seems to be an overall weakness in students' construction of viable arguments to critique the arguments of others.

As the Investigations and CMP2 materials are used less, it is clear that teachers need better access to a district level resource bank with lesson plans, rich problems, and activities that are aligned with the CCSSM. Among the resources that every school coach needs access to are the LearnZillion video lessons (www.learnzillion.com) and the Common Core progression

documents for use as part of the PLC work. Rearranging, adding, and deleting lessons from previous curriculum is a challenge especially in schools where there is no coach on staff.

While the district's progress in the domain of summative assessment is impressive, there was far less attention to daily formative assessment practices. Despite the district proclaimed emphasis on incorporating formative assessments into daily instruction, we observed inconsistent evidence of these practices. Teachers need to concentrate on consistently using formative assessment practices in every lesson every day.

Unfortunately, many Jefferson County schools now have "goal clarity coaches" who appear ill-equipped to support CCSSM implementation. A key imperative to continue and expand this CCSSM implementation is intensive training of the goal clarity coaches and an expansion of the pool and deployment of math-trained coaches.

Recommendations

The greatest need faced by the system is finding ways to take instruction to the next level. More specifically this means charging all principals and coaches with ensuring that all teachers of mathematics:

- respond to most student answers with "Why?", "How do you know that?", or "Can you explain your thinking?"
- elicit, value, and celebrate alternative approaches to solving mathematics problems so that, in conformance with the spirit of the CCSSM, students are taught that mathematics is a sense-making process for understanding why and not memorizing the right procedure to get the one right answer.
- provide multiple representations – for example, models, diagrams, number lines, tables and graphs, as well as symbols – of all mathematical work to support the visualization of skills and concepts.
- embed the mathematical content they are teaching, whenever possible, in contexts to connect the mathematics to the real world.

- devote the last five minutes of every lesson to some form of formative assessment, for example, an exit slip, to assess the degree to which the lesson's objective was accomplished.

Revisit the district professional development plans for developing the math content knowledge of primary and elementary teachers. Consider organizing summer institutes or other learning opportunities led by JCPS personnel, university partners or experienced consultants.

The district needs to significantly strengthen the provision and organization of intervention programs for struggling students to support the broad implementation of the CCSSM. Intervention programs and strategies need to be led by a knowledgeable and trained teacher of mathematics and need to be closely coordinated with the mainstream mathematics program.

Professional Learning Communities

Strengths

The concerted district-wide effort to implement PLCs in every school to support teachers in raising the quality of teaching through much greater sharing and collaboration is a powerful change strategy. Recognizing that the implementation of a culture of effective PLCs is a long-term process, the team was very impressed with the initial efforts. The majority of people interviewed spoke very positively about their experience with PLCs. The simultaneous implementation of the Common Core has also created the urgency and motivation for teachers to work together in PLCs.

Regular weekly time is scheduled for teachers to meet and collaborate in grade level teams. Principals and coaches are routinely attending PLC meetings to monitor and provide support. PLCs are providing the time and the structure for teachers to plan for the six-week cycles, to focus on standards and targets, to create common understandings and agree on common instructional strategies. Teachers are also using this time to develop formative assessments, to review student data and work, and to make decisions about the pyramid of support and

intervention strategies. Teachers reported that they are using more formative assessments, they are discussing and developing these assessments in their PLCs, and modifying their teaching practices based on these results.

Teachers constantly reported that PLCs are building relationships, consistency, and cohesion within teams. While most PLCs are organized by grade level (horizontal), some schools are beginning to move to vertical alignment that is the next natural phase of the work. Teachers talked about becoming more aware of what's "above" and what's "below" in the curriculum standards. They reported that they are getting clearer about where to begin and end, and what students should know and be able to do by year's end.

There is a clear distinction between PLCs in the DuFour schools and other district schools. The support is superb for the 13 schools in the DuFour network. Teachers and principals are receiving more training, more structure, more coaching, and more direction. The professional development in the summer and the school-based follow-up sessions are very much appreciated. Math is the focus of the PLC work this school year; ELA/literacy will be the focus next year.

Challenges

There appears to be no district PLC implementation plan to ensure all schools are provided the intensive support needed for all schools to be successful. While the 13 DuFour's schools are following a framework and specific strategies, the remainder of the schools appear to be following the motto "Just Do It." All schools need more direction, a framework, strategies, and training to guide the continuing work of their PLCs. There also needs to be a strategy for sharing knowledge, successes, and learning across grade levels within a school and across schools within the district.

Missing from the collaboration agenda in nearly every school are expectations for collegial classroom visits and the use of videotaped lessons to broaden awareness at every school of the impressive work of colleagues that is currently invisible.

Recommendations

Create a conceptual framework for PLCs that describes best or promising practices. The framework and an accompanying rubric will provide direction to PLC participants, provide guidance for coaches who are leading and facilitating PLCs, and serve as a way to track the growth and development of PLCs for school and district leaders. In addition, develop a systemic implementation plan that provides strategies and outlines how the district will support the growth and depth of the PLC work.

Establish networked learning communities to expand the learning across schools. Members of a network learning community learn with one another, from one another, and on behalf of each other. Assistant principals, principals, as well as math and literacy coaches are anxious to meet on some kind of regular basis for training, sharing, and problem solving. These leaders need to be continually exposed to both knowledge and strategies to enable them to lead the school-based professional development and job-embedded learning.

Identify individual teachers who are doing exemplary Common Core work and ask them to serve as model classrooms that other teachers can visit. In addition, identify a set of JCPS schools that are showing early success with Common Core implementation and invite them to join a network of demonstration schools.

Form a networked learning community at the system level to promote collaboration within the central office and with JCTA to ensure cohesion and coordination of all efforts related to the Common Core implementation. It is really important to have a place to harness the collective will and skill of system leaders and to have open dialogue, sharing, problem solving, and learning together.

School-Based Coaching Roles

Strengths

There is broad support among teachers and principals for the concept of coaches in every school. Educators at both the school and district levels believe shifting coaching support to the school level is a very promising strategy. Coaches model effective instruction, team-teach, do curriculum planning with teachers at all grade levels, and find curriculum resources. They also provide professional development, facilitate PLCs and grade level meetings, organize and utilize data to improve instruction, and are instrumental in coordinating the response to intervention programs.

The feedback on coaches who have been working full time in schools over the past few years is very positive. Relationships need to be strong, trusting, and collaborative in order for coaching and PLCs to be successful and effective. Coaches are playing a critical role in this relationship-building process.

Challenges

There are three primary issues related to the school-based coaches: role confusion, training, and the Common Core development work.

There seems to be confusion about the role of the goal clarity coaches. Given that this is a new position, it is normal for some role confusion at the initial stage. If they are playing a different role than SBSD or resource teachers then it is important to communicate this to teachers and principals. If the roles, expectations, and responsibilities are the same then this needs to be stated. It was reported in interviews that some of the new coaches are not clear about their roles and responsibilities. During some interviews and focus groups people wondered if JCPS has the right people in the positions. A few people also questioned the selection process and assignments of some coaches.

School-based coaching positions are a huge financial investment for the district and potentially the most powerful strategy for implementing the Common Core, for improving instruction, and for increasing student achievement. Many of these valuable teacher leaders who were specialists in literacy or math in their previous roles now are responsible for Common Core math and literacy implementation. As well, most of them are responsible for leading PLC meetings, grade level meetings, and school-wide professional development. It is important that this group of teacher leaders receive training and support to be effective. Coaches need to have the required expertise and high quality leadership capacity in order to have a profound impact on instruction.

There is validity to the argument that the coaches' weekly meetings were excessive. At the same time, there is a significant amount of district curriculum work that needs to be done to continue supporting the shift to the Common Core. The district consultants cannot do all the necessary work alone. And it is a waste of time and resources to be doing all the curriculum work one school at a time over and over again.

Recommendations

Provide in-depth professional development for educators serving in a coaching role at the school level. It is critical that the professional learning for coaches be differentiated given the range of experience and levels of expertise in the group. JCPS has already demonstrated their ability to design and implement a strong school-based coaching model. It is important that district leaders step back and reflect on the lessons learned from this coaching development experience.

There needs to be some solution that allows for maximum time for coaches to work in classrooms and schools as well as attend meetings at the district level for training, networking, and contributing to the district's curriculum work. Rethink the frequency of district-wide coaching meetings from once every six weeks to once every two-three weeks.

Community and Business Engagement and Support

Strengths

Thirteen individuals representing elected Board members, and a range of non-profit community organizations, the business community, city government, and the school district were interviewed. Everyone interviewed was affiliated with an organization that had an ongoing and substantive relationship with JCPS. The level of community support for the school system is impressive. In general, people feel that JCPS is moving forward. While acknowledging that much more work needs to be done, there is a sense that progress is being made in terms of increasing student achievement.

Everyone interviewed knew about the implementation of the Common Core State Standards and there was universal enthusiasm about the initiative. As well, they were unanimous in their willingness to do more to help JCPS in the effort. In addition, everyone referenced the recent events featuring Bob Corcoran, with Louisville's corporate community and state leaders regarding the CCSS. They thought the event was very helpful in educating the business leaders and the broader community about the CCSS. Many individuals said that the business community must play a "pivotal role" in communicating why the CCSS is important. The CCSS video was also described as very effective. Another positive communication strategy has been the Mayor's public service announcement about the CCSS.

Every person interviewed from the business/community meetings related positive comments about Superintendent Hargens. She is viewed as a welcomed change. Board members also expressed great confidence in Dr. Hargens and her leadership team. Her style is very open and transparent, and she is perceived as truly committed to engaging with the community and reaching out to parents and families. However, there were concerns about Dr. Hargens' recent central office/Gheens reorganization. Some felt it was too drastic; others were concerned that some individuals were in positions they are not qualified for. At the same time, a number acknowledged that something needed to be done but the jury is still out on whether this reorganization will work.

A number of individuals interviewed are directly involved with organizations that support students and families and all these organizations have programs to increase parental involvement in schools. Everyone in this group referenced that Dr. Hargens' personal actions demonstrate a genuine commitment to community outreach and greater communication and this was seen as a positive development. These relationships will no doubt be needed in meeting the challenges of the Common Core.

There are an impressive number of initiatives in the Louisville community to engage and support low-income families. Education and improving achievement are at the center of almost all of these programs. Many of these programs have had significant success with the communities and schools that they focus on.

Challenges

All of the business and community representatives expressed concerns about the ongoing challenges around achievement. Business representatives stated that they felt Louisville's economic future depended heavily on student achievement gains at JCPS. The public schools need to be perceived as a viable option for all socio-economic groups if Louisville is to experience sustained economic growth. While there has clearly been progress in student achievement, this is not the case across the district as there are pockets of schools that have not experienced any significant gains.

There is deep concern about how CCSS will impact African American and other minority students. "What does raising standards do to kids who were already behind?" The concern is essentially around the question of whether JCPS can be first with implementing CCSS and still close its achievement gaps.

Another general concern expressed was related to the current Student Assignment policy. Some people said that it was not sustainable. Many made reference to the upcoming School Board elections and the possibility that new members could get elected who want to

substantially change or eliminate the current policy in pursuit of “neighborhood schools.” There is widespread anxiety about the impact that any significant change in the Student Assignment policy will have on the district and the community. This could prove to be a powerful political issue that has the potential to distract time, attention, and resources away from the critical work necessary in shifting to the Common Core.

There is widespread concern about how CCSS information is being communicated to students and families. This is compounded by the lack of clarity around how much change is required to successfully implement CCSS. A number of community and business members expressed concern that the district has not done enough to prepare the community about the possibility of an “implementation dip” in test scores as the district introduces CCSS. There is considerable anxiety around the upcoming release of state test scores.

There are mixed reports on the different approaches to parental involvement at the school level. Some schools are effectively engaging parents while others have significant work to do to truly involve parents as true partners in learning. There needs to be “more accountability at the building level” around communication and family engagement.

Another significant area of concern was how the district deals with students and families in poverty. Often comments were made about the disparities in achievement rates and this relates directly to how the district communicates with and supports low-income families. In this area everyone acknowledges that the district is making an effort, but at the same time there is universal agreement that much work still needs to be done. This will become more important as rigor increases with the Common Core.

Recommendations

There needs to be a multifaceted communication plan about the Common Core – at the school and district levels – that reaches students, families, and community members across the socio-economic spectrum. The plan needs to identify what has changed, why it has changed, and the

implications this has for all stakeholders. District and school leaders also need to explain the premise behind the CCSS.

The district needs to investigate and learn from the policies and effective practices around successful programs that support low-income families and try to replicate them across schools in the district. There are several CBO's with effective programs and documented success that are anxious to collaborate with JCPS around this work.

Summary

JCPS appears to be off to a good start with implementing the Common Core and has selected several powerful and very promising strategies. Included in this report is a set of reliable observations about what we heard and observed during our site visit. The recommendations come from the consultant team and JCPS educators and other stakeholders. This is a collective set of ideas that people believe will help JCPS rise to the next level with the Common Core implementation.