



# Three Keys to Achieving Common Core Success

## A Challenge ... and an Opportunity

With many large-scale assessments for the Common Core set to begin in 2015, the vast majority of K-12 districts still face significant challenges in implementing the Standards, according to a recent survey from the Center on Education Policy at George Washington University. These challenges include finding high-quality instructional resources to support the Standards, providing effective professional development for teachers, and overcoming resistance to the Common Core.

But there are early successes to learn from. As debate over the new standards continues, school systems in Kentucky—one of the first adopters of the Common Core—are quietly logging success after success, proving that higher achievement with these new standards is possible.

We've interviewed state and local education leaders from Kentucky, as well as national education experts like best-selling author Jay McTighe, to learn their keys to Common Core success. These interviews—along with webinars and other instructional videos—are available as part of Edivate™, School Improvement Network's on-demand, highly personalized professional learning platform for educators and administrators.

In this white paper, we've compiled some of the best advice from the Edivate archives to help you implement the Common Core successfully in your schools. This advice is organized around three key requirements for Common Core success:

### 1. Communication

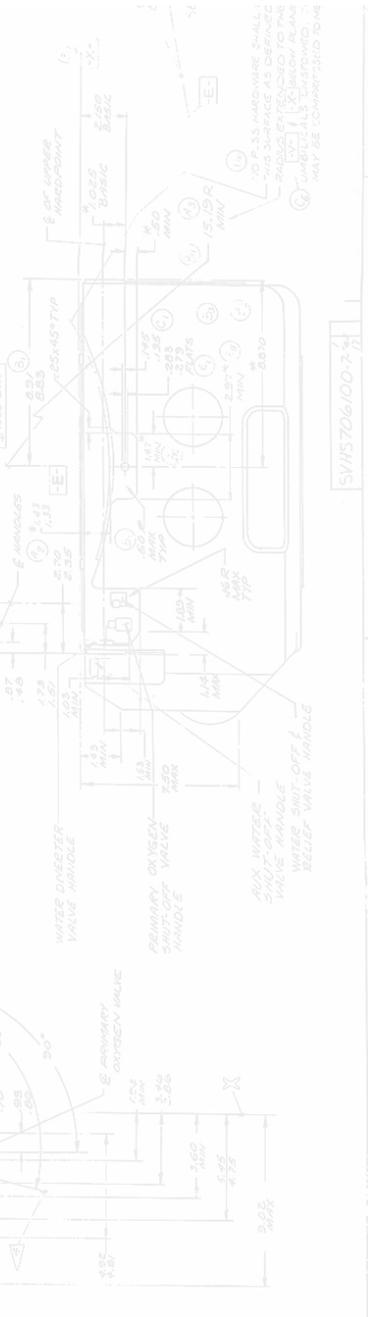
- How to talk to your community about the new standards
- How to ensure teacher buy-in and support
- How to dispel common myths about the Common Core

### 2. Alignment

- How to align your district's learning goals with the Common Core
- How to design better learning tasks for Common Core success
- Where to find high-quality Common Core teaching materials

### 3. Support

- What teachers need in order to be successful
- How to support teachers in their Common Core planning
- Where teachers can find additional support



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## 1. Communication

Getting the many different stakeholder groups—including parents, teachers, and school and district leaders—to support the Common Core Standards isn't easy, yet it's critical to the success of any Common Core implementation initiative.

In Kentucky, state leaders made a concerted effort to earn the support of various stakeholder groups as they rolled out the Common Core Standards. As a result of their efforts, Kentucky's implementation of the standards thus far has been marked by nearly universal buy-in, something that few other states have enjoyed.

Here are some key lessons gleaned from the various methods used in Kentucky to earn stakeholder support of the Common Core.

### **Involve all stakeholders in planning.**

As Kentucky officials started planning for the Common Core, "We began to identify Kentucky teachers to participate ... in small group work sessions," said Felicia Cumings Smith, who was Associate Commissioner of the Office of Next Generation Learners at the time of adoption and helped oversee much of Kentucky's implementation. "We had business and community leaders at the table as well."

"Including all stakeholder groups in the planning process helped secure their Common Core support," Cumings Smith added.

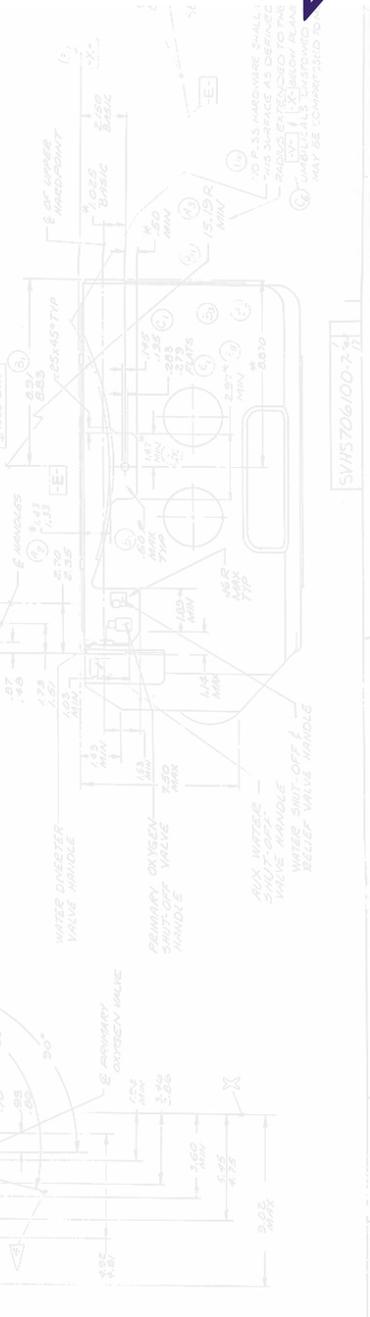
### **Create a separate communication plan for each stakeholder group.**

Each stakeholder group will have its own set of questions about the Common Core Standards and its role in the implementation process. To meet these different needs, Kentucky defined a separate messaging plan for each group.

Kentucky used the leadership networks already established for superintendents, principals, math teachers, and ELA teachers to disseminate information, and state leaders produced a series of webcasts aimed at these various groups. This was "instrumental in our messaging," Cumings Smith said.

### **Emphasize the 'why.'**

Change is never easy, but when people understand why they're being asked to do something, they are more inclined to agree.



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“The more information you can give [people] as to why the Standards are so very important, the more success I think you will have,” said Karen Lyon, former principal of Mary A. Goetz Elementary School in Ludlow, Kentucky

Just as students are more willing to do the work when they see it means something to them, the same is true for teachers and other stakeholders, Lyon said.

### **Offer the support the stakeholders require.**

Kentucky’s chief message to principals, superintendents, and other district leaders was: 1) enable your teachers to take risks, and 2) embrace a positive culture. What’s more, the state’s leadership networks provided Common Core support for teachers and administrators as they worked to implement the standards in their schools.

To expand on this idea, school district leaders should offer support for parents as well. Hold community nights where you explain the Standards to parents and give them the support they need to help their children with homework. If you support their efforts, they’re more likely to support yours in turn.

### **Address questions and controversy directly and honestly, always offering accurate information to dispel misunderstandings.**

A key step in successfully implementing the Common Core Standards is making sure your teachers, parents, and other stakeholders understand what the Standards are and getting their full support. But more than four years after the Standards have been released, a number of persistent Common Core myths still exist.

In a recent survey, 73% of K-12 leaders in the US said overcoming resistance to the Common Core from parents and others outside their district was a challenge and 34% said it was a “major” challenge. Many parents, and even some educators, continue to misunderstand important aspects of the Standards.

Here are five prevalent Common Core myths and how to counter them.

**Myth No. 1:** The Common Core Standards are a federal mandate, written and funded by the federal government (“Obamacore”).

**The Truth:** The federal government played no part in writing the standards and has played only a minor role in funding them.



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– Karen Lyon



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The Standards originated at the state level and were developed by governors and state school officials. Discussions began in 2007—before Barack Obama was even a candidate for president—at the annual meeting of the Council of Chief State School Officers. The National Governors Association joined the conversation as well.

Both groups were concerned that states had different expectations for exactly what high school students should know in order to graduate. To address this concern, the governors and state education officials developed a set of common standards with help from business leaders and higher-education officials; the federal government was not involved.

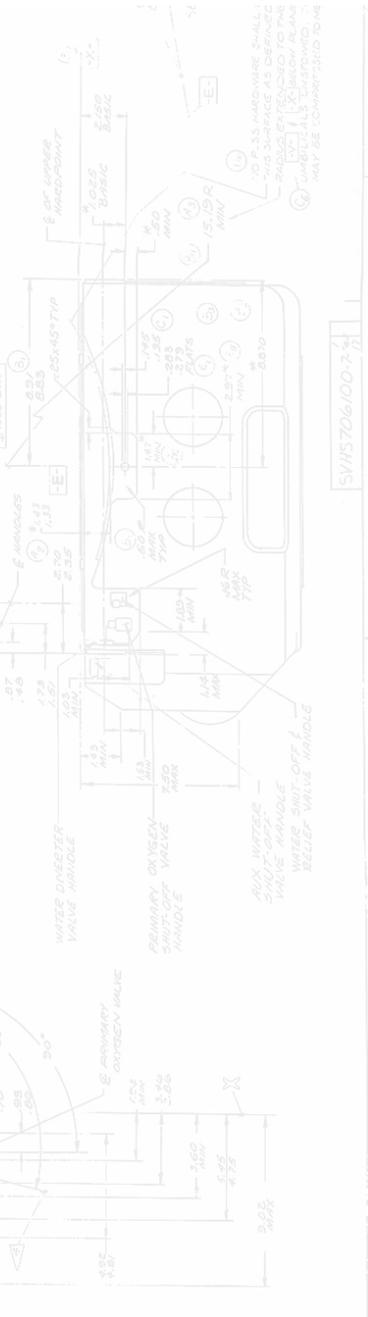
Adoption of the Standards has always been voluntary and the states that have adopted them are free to change their standards at any time. Development of the Standards was funded primarily by the governors and state schools chiefs, with additional support from a handful of private foundations. What little federal funding was applied to the Common Core came after the Standards were developed in the form of Race to the Top grants awarded to states that adopted “internationally benchmarked” standards and shared them with other states.

The Common Core Standards are never mentioned in Race to the Top literature, but opponents argue that because federal officials awarded points for developing common standards of any kind, the government was essentially forcing states to adopt the Common Core if they wanted Race to the Top funding.

**Myth No. 2:** The Common Core Standards tell teachers what to teach and how to teach it, overriding states’ rights by institutionalizing a national curriculum.

**The Truth:** The Standards are not a “curriculum”; they describe the skills students need to learn at each grade level and can be taught using a school’s local curriculum. The Common Core Standards do not determine which books must be read or what learning methods will be used. They don’t tell the teachers what to teach, how to design their lesson plans, or how children should learn the material.

**Myth No. 3:** The Common Core Standards include required reading and will eliminate the study of classic literature.



*“There are no data requirements in the Common Core.”*  
– Kate Dando

**The Truth:** Appendix B of the English Language Arts standards gives examples of stories, books, poems, plays, and nonfiction materials the Standards’ authors found to be of high quality and the appropriate level of complexity for each grade level. But these examples aren’t requirements or even a suggested reading list; teachers are free to choose their own books.

While it is true that the Standards place more emphasis on reading “informational texts” than many schools have taught in the past, that isn’t intended to replace classic literature—and the classics, such as Shakespearean plays and sonnets, are actually cited in the Standards.

**Myth No. 4:** The Common Core Standards promote data mining.

**The Truth:** The Standards not only do not add new data requirements for states, they have no data mining requirements at all. States maintain their current data collection requirements. “There are no data requirements in the Common Core,” Kate Dando, a spokeswoman for the Council of Chief State School Officers, told the Associated Press.

**Myth No. 5:** Existing state standards are more rigorous than the Common Core Standards.

**The Truth:** The Common Core Standards are more rigorous than the vast majority of state standards in the U.S. The Thomas B. Fordham Institute conducted a study comparing the rigor of previous state standards to the Common Core and found that the Common Core Standards were superior to the standards of 39 states for math and 37 states for English. In 33 states, the standards were superior in both categories, and states with more rigorous standards are free to drop the Common Core. The Common Core Standards are similar to the Massachusetts standards, a state that has led national achievement over a 10-year period.



## 2. Alignment

Aligning your district’s learning goals with the Common Core, and involving educators in this process, is another key to Common Core success. In Kentucky, state leaders organized cross-district networks to work on the alignment of standards and curriculum.

To build the capacity for integrating the Standards within each district, Kentucky created “leadership networks” consisting of 20 to 25 district teams, with each district team made up of three to four professionals from each the following groups: teacher leaders in ELA, teacher leaders in math, school-level leaders, and district-level leaders.



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Leadership network meetings were organized by content area, with separate meetings held for ELA and math. To make sure the Standards were implemented with fidelity in every school, these meetings were facilitated by university professors and other content specialists with expertise in math and ELA who then asked the teams to translate, pace, and sequence the Common Core Standards for their districts—all under their expert guidance.

### How to Design Better Learning Tasks for Common Core Success

The Common Core Standards call for a deeper, more complex understanding of material than many schools have required before—and to prepare students for Common Core success, “the assignments and assessments that educators give their students will need to change as well,” says best-selling author and education expert Jay McTighe.

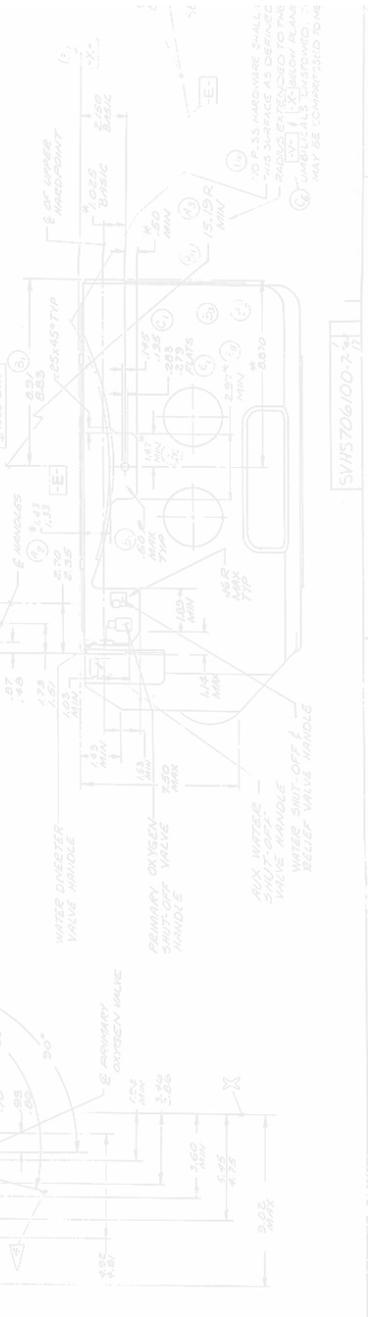
McTighe, whose education experience includes both teaching and state-level leadership in Maryland, has written a book with ideas for how to design more rigorous, authentic learning tasks and assessments to better prepare students for Common Core success.

As large-scale accountability tests become more demanding, this “underscores the value of building and using rich, conceptually and cognitively demanding tasks with kids,” he says, “so they become increasingly able to think and apply their learning to new and more challenging scenarios.”

McTighe refers to the Depth of Knowledge (DOK) framework developed by Norman Webb to illustrate what he means by rich performance tasks. In Webb’s DOK framework, there are four levels for defining the complexity of a task:

- Level 1: Recall and Reproduction (requires only basic recall of information)
- Level 2: Skills and Concepts (includes some mental processing beyond recalling; usually involves more than one step)
- Level 3: Short-Term Strategic Thinking (requires planning, reasoning, using evidence, analysis)
- Level 4: Extended Thinking (complex tasks undertaken over time; requires sophisticated thinking and creativity)

Before the Common Core, state assessments used mostly Level 1 items with some Level 2 items mixed in. Now students will be expected to complete mostly Level 2 and Level 3 items—and the tasks and assessments that teachers give their students should reflect this level of complexity as well, McTighe says.



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High-quality performance tasks should be set in a context, “and as much as possible, we should make this [context] authentic” to the experiences and interests of students, he adds.

McTighe outlines his own framework for designing rich, authentic performance tasks that will better prepare students for Common Core success. His framework is called GRASPS, which is an acronym for:

- *Goal:* What is the student’s goal in the scenario you’ve designed?
- *Role:* What is the student’s role in the task or project?
- *Audience:* Who is the intended audience for the task or performance?
- *Situation:* What is the situation you’ve designed?
- *Products (or Performances):* What are students expected to produce?
- *Standards:* What standards are you assessing with the task?

Here’s an example that might be used as the culmination of a unit in which students have learned about a geographic region:

“The Department of Tourism has asked for your help in planning a four-day tour of [region] for a group of foreign visitors. Plan the tour to help the visitors understand the history, geography, and key economic assets of the region. You should prepare a written itinerary, including an explanation of why each site was included on the tour.”

And here’s a template that can be adapted to a variety of scenarios, called “What’s Your Position?”

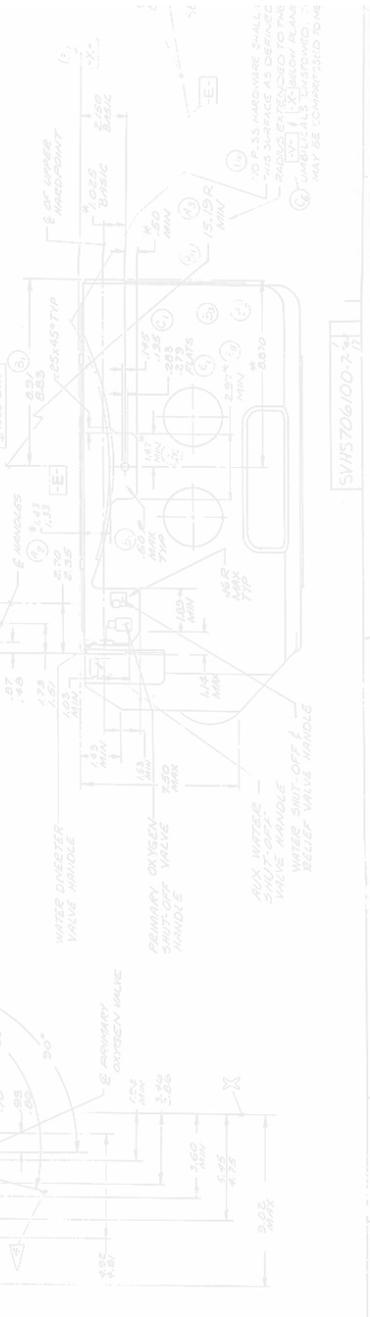
“After reading \_\_\_\_\_, write a \_\_\_\_\_ that compares \_\_\_\_\_ and argues \_\_\_\_\_. Be sure to support your position with evidence from the texts.”

McTighe offers a few examples showing how this template can be adapted:

“After researching school policies and student/staff opinions on internet filters in schools, write a (blog post, letter to the school board, editorial for the school paper) that argues for your position. Support your position with evidence from your research. Be sure to acknowledge competing views.”

“What makes something funny? After reading selections from Mark Twain and (contemporary humorist), write a review that compares their humor and argues which type of humor works for a contemporary audience and why. Be sure to support your position with evidence from the texts.”

McTighe’s book, *Core Learning: Assessing What Matters Most*, was published using School Improvement Network’s LumiBook™ platform, a robust eBook platform that includes web links, video clips, and opportunities for discussion with the author and with other readers.



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In McTighe's LumiBook™, you will find dozens of other templates and examples of rich performance tasks that will help you better prepare your students for Common Core success.

### Seven Free Sources for Common Core-Aligned Content

Both teachers and administrators agree that finding high-quality instructional materials that are Common Core-aligned is the biggest challenge to implementing the Standards. Here are seven free sources that can help.

#### 1. Activate Instruction

This open database of learning materials helps to personalize instruction. Educators can browse, search, rate, add, share, and organize their favorite Common Core-aligned resources, and put them together in personalized playlists for students. The content, which covers nearly all subjects for grades 6-12, has been collected with the help of Summit Public Schools in San Francisco and High Tech High in San Diego. As of July 2014, there were more than 27,000 resources available, organized into more than 3,000 playlists.

#### 2. Graphite

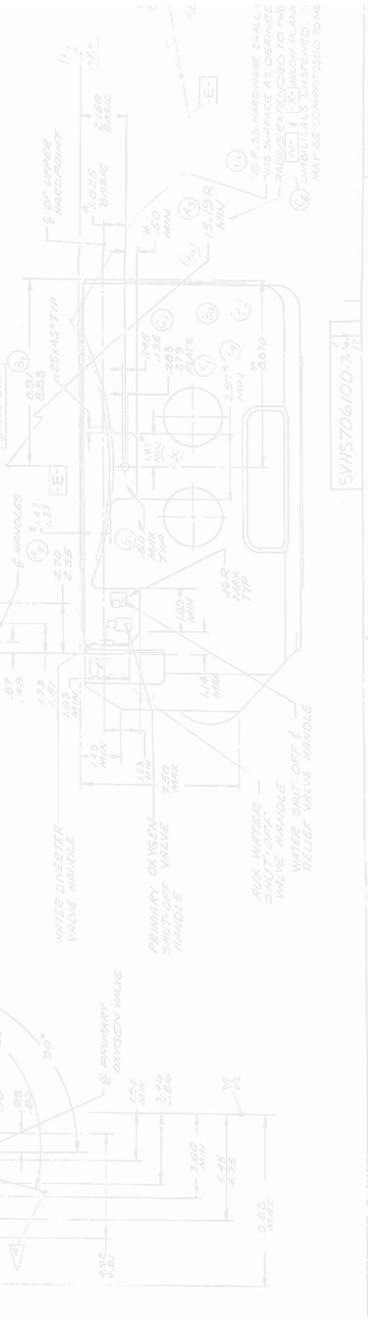
This free resource from Common Sense Media helps educators find high-quality apps, games, and websites to use in their classrooms by offering in-depth ratings and reviews. A new search tool within Graphite, called the Common Core Explorer, helps educators find the best digital resources that are aligned with the Common Core Standards in math and ELA.

#### 3. Khan Academy

This popular online resource now includes thousands of interactive math problems fully aligned to every Common Core math standard in grades K-12. Created and reviewed by some 40 math educators, the exercises focus on conceptual understanding, procedural fluency, and real-world applications of math.

#### 4. OpenEd

This website gives educators a searchable catalog of more than 250,000 teacher-curated, standards-aligned resources to enhance their lesson plans or help students either in class or at home. While the resources can be used with any learning management system (LMS), OpenEd also offers its own free LMS, allowing teachers who sign up for a free account to create playlists of materials that can be shared with students, parents, or colleagues. What's more, the site offers a free tool for teachers to create assessments with the question types required by the Common Core Standards.



### 5. SAS Curriculum Pathways

SAS, a major business analytics company, has updated its free Curriculum Pathways resource for middle and high schools. The new version of SAS Curriculum Pathways includes enhanced search capabilities that can help educators find materials for teaching specific state or Common Core Standards.

### 6. TenMarks

A website for independent math practice, instruction, and assessment, TenMarks was acquired by Amazon in fall 2013. Its library of 20,000-plus math problems is Common Core-aligned and includes questions that vary in answer type and difficulty. To guide students through math practice, TenMarks provides hints and video lessons that offer scaffolded explanations.

### 7. Wolfram Education Portal

Wolfram Alpha's Wolfram Education Portal is a free website that offers teaching tools such as lesson plans and interactive demonstrations that are aligned with the Common Core math standards. Created by noted scientist Stephen Wolfram, Wolfram Alpha is a research site powered by a computational knowledge engine that generates answers to questions in real time by doing calculations on its own vast internal knowledge base.

## 3. Support

How can you support your teachers most effectively as they work to integrate the Common Core Standards into instruction?

Obviously, the needs of your teachers differ from those in other districts, but a recent survey conducted by Scholastic and the Gates Foundation offers some interesting insights into what teachers across the nation say they need for Common Core success.

The deeper teachers get into weaving the Standards into their instruction and assessment, the more they seem to be recognizing the challenges involved in this work. Last year, 73% of teachers agreed that Common Core implementation is challenging; this year, 81% of teachers agreed.

The survey asked teachers what kinds of support they need most to ensure Common Core success; here are their top five responses:



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- 1. Common Core-aligned instructional materials (86%)
- 2. High-quality professional development (84%)
- 3. Additional planning time to find materials and prepare lessons (78%)
- 4. Opportunities to collaborate with other teachers on best practices for implementing the Common Core (78%)
- 5. Ideas on how to teach in an inquiry-based way that promotes deep thinking among students (69%)

*“If we’re going to fulfill the promise of the Common Core, ... it’s critical that we build our teachers’ proficiency.”*

– Lisa Leith

What can K-12 leaders learn from these survey results? A key step you can take to ensure the success of your Common Core initiatives is to build more time for planning and collaboration into your school calendar.

### Three Ways to Support Your Teachers in Common Core Planning

As teachers have indicated, more time to plan and more opportunities to work with their colleagues are two of their top Common Core needs. But finding ways to allow for this extra Common Core planning and collaboration can be hard, especially with so many priorities competing for educators’ attention.

Here are three strategies for creating more time and opportunities for Common Core planning and collaboration.

1. Create school-wide “communities of support” for teachers.

“If we’re going to fulfill the promise of the Common Core, ... it’s critical that we build our teachers’ proficiency,” says Lisa Leith, the former Director of Accountability and Accreditation for Colorado’s Thompson School District and current Vice President of Education for School Improvement Network.

Leith notes that Appendix A of the Common Core math standards recommends a number of strategies for supporting students who need extra help in math. These include creating a school-wide community of support for students; giving students a “math support class” during the school day; offering after-school tutoring; and providing additional instruction during the summer.

Leith asks: Why not apply these same strategies to give math teachers extra support as well?

“What if we created a school-wide community of support for teachers around math?” she says. “What if we gave teachers a math support class during the school day?”



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For instance, schools could have fifth-grade teachers working with fourth-grade teachers to discuss what the standards require, how to teach those skills, and how to build those learning progressions properly so when fourth graders advance, they're ready for fifth-grade math.

What's more, this strategy could be applied to teachers of all subject areas to make sure they're getting the opportunities they need for Common Core planning and support.

### 2. Build networks with colleagues in other districts.

In Kentucky, state leaders organized regional leadership networks for math teachers, ELA teachers, principals, and superintendents. These networks brought together colleagues from neighboring school districts to discuss common challenges to Common Core implementation and collaborate on solutions.

Amy Nolan, a special education and reading instructor in Dayton, Kentucky, describes feeling “overwhelmed” at the beginning of her school’s Common Core implementation process. But after taking part in these leadership networks, Nolan says the process is “...much better, because we ... get to talk with [colleagues at] other schools to see what’s going on and how they’re doing things.”

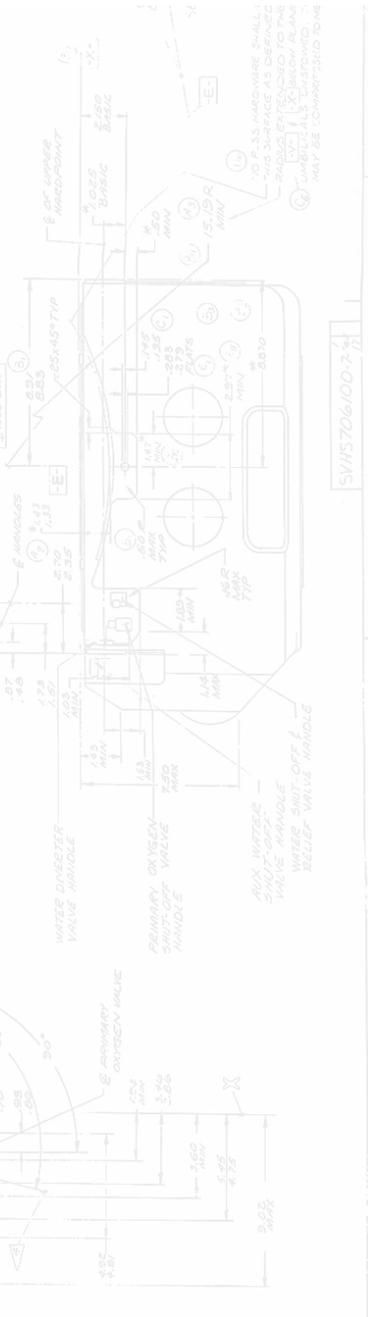
Kentucky’s leadership networks convened for a series of face-to-face meetings, but these networks don’t have to meet in person. Giving your teachers resources to expand their personal learning networks (PLNs) online or through social media also can help.

As elementary school teacher Suzanne Thompson noted, the opportunity to learn from each other was a key benefit of Kentucky’s leadership networks. Another benefit? “Knowing that we’re not alone.”

### 3. Be creative.

The lack of time for Common Core planning and collaboration has forced many K-12 leaders to adopt creative approaches to make this happen.

At Tichenor Middle School in Erlanger, Kentucky, teachers were getting together every Monday after school for 45 minutes to discuss the new standards. But “just like their students at three o’clock, teachers are tired as well, and their minds are spent,” said Karen Luehrman, the school’s instructional coach at the time. Together with Luehrman, the school’s teachers came up with a plan to meet for three hours during the school day for one day per month.



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Teachers “would cover each other’s classes, so that the students would still get a certified teacher for that day,” Luehrman said. “We would just work in our own buildings together.” The result was an extra 27 hours of time for planning and collaboration as Tichenor teachers rolled out the standards.

### Five Sources of Common Core Support for Teachers

Here are five online sources where your teachers can get the additional Common Core support they need—including instructional videos, webinars, and networks of professionals with whom they can share ideas and strategies.

1. ASCD’s EduCore and Common Core Resources Project on iTunes U  
ASCD, the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, has created a website with Common Core articles, videos, webinars, sample teaching modules, and more. Called EduCore, the site also links to a collection of 23 free iTunes U courses from ASCD designed to help teachers successfully implement the Common Core Standards for both math and ELA at each grade level.

2. ISTE’s Project ReimaginED

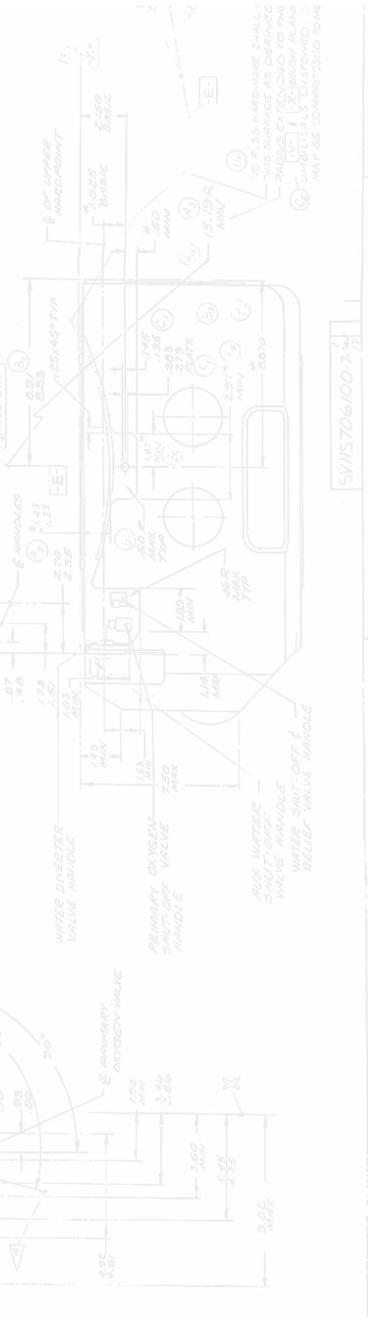
A new online community from the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE), called Project ReimaginED, helps educators implement the Common Core. Developed in conjunction with the National Council for Literacy Education, Project ReimaginED offers teachers the opportunity to collaborate with fellow educators to redesign classroom activities to meet the Common Core and ISTE Standards. Within this new social learning community, K-12 teachers and coaches work with standards experts and other community members in real time to develop real lessons they can freely share and implement anywhere.

3. TenMarks Math Teach

TenMarks Education, a math practice and assessment site owned by Amazon, has launched a free service called TenMarks Math Teach. It combines instructional resources and professional development to help educators teach Common Core math in grades 2-6. Teachers can get a bird’s eye view of how the math standards are interconnected across grade levels, recommendations for remediation and enrichment activities, and other Common Core support.

4. Triumph Learning’s CommonCore.com

Triumph Learning, a publisher of standards-aligned instructional materials and literacy programs, has created a website around Common Core support for teachers. Called, appropriately, CommonCore.com, it includes interactive clinics, videos, lesson plans, blogs, and white papers intended to give educators best practices in integrating the standards into their instruction.



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5. School Improvement Network's Edivate and Teaching Strategy of the Week Edivate is an on-demand professional learning platform that is highly personalized, driven by a recommendation engine that suggests videos and other resources based on teachers' needs and interests. It also contains hundreds of useful videos for helping educators implement the Common Core.

Each week, School Improvement Network releases one of the videos from Edivate for teachers and administrators to access free of charge. In the Teaching Strategy of the Week archives, you'll find dozens of free examples of Common Core-aligned lessons for teaching skills such as solving math story problems with hidden information, persuasive writing, and more.

### Conclusion

By focusing on communication, optimizing alignment, and providing robust support, schools in Kentucky and throughout the US are achieving remarkable success implementing the Common Core. For some, this success comes in the form of quick and dramatic increases in test scores, while for others it manifests itself as steady, reliable growth year after year. Regardless the form it takes, the lesson is clear: with the right implementation strategies, Common Core success isn't just a possibility, it's an inevitability.

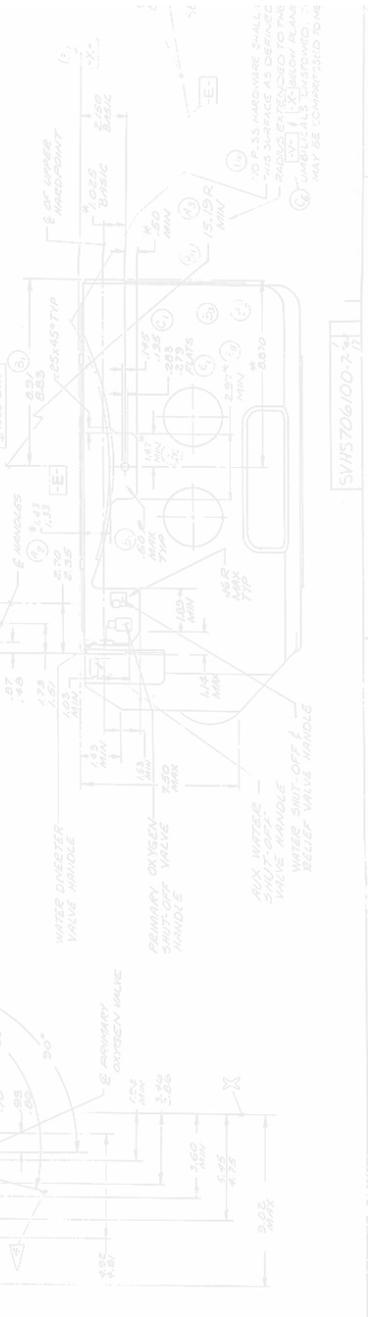
To learn even more about how your school or district can become the next Common Core success story, and to get access to information and resources to help you and your teachers in day-to-day implementation, we encourage you to visit the Common Core Blog, an online repository with thousands of the best standards implementation resources available.

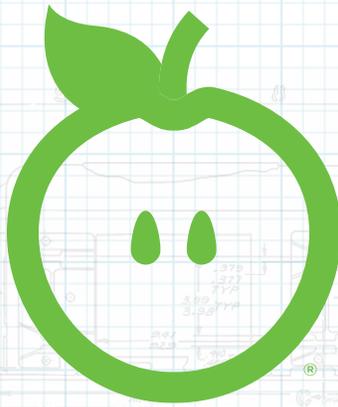
To visit the blog, go to:

[schoolimprovement.com/blogs/common-core-blog/](http://schoolimprovement.com/blogs/common-core-blog/).

### About the Author

Dennis Pierce has been writing about education and technology for more than 17 years. He was one of the founding editors of eSchool Media and served as editor in chief for many years before leaving to start his own writing and consulting business, Pierce Publishing, in 2014.





## ABOUT SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT NETWORK

Founded in 1991 by teachers, School Improvement Network has spent decades researching and documenting the best practices in education. From this research, School Improvement Network has developed Edivate, the new PD 360, a personalized professional learning solution for educators. School Improvement Network works with thousands of schools and districts in every state and around the world and has visited over 3,500 classrooms to document best practices in action.

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