



GETTING DOWN — TO FACTS II —

RESEARCH BRIEF | SEPTEMBER 2018

Implementing the Common Core State Standards in California Schools: A Work in Progress

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About: The Getting Down to Facts project seeks to create a common evidence base for understanding the current state of California school systems and lay the foundation for substantive conversations about what education policies should be sustained and what might be improved to ensure increased opportunity and success for all students in California in the decades ahead. *Getting Down to Facts II* follows approximately a decade after the first Getting Down to Facts effort in 2007. This research brief is one of 19 that summarize 36 research studies that cover four main areas related to state education policy: student success, governance, personnel, and funding.

This brief summarizes two *Getting Down to Facts II* technical reports on standards implementation in California:

Insights on Standards Implementation in California’s Schools

Neal Finkelstein, Reino Makkonen, Rebecca Perry, Francesca Delgado, Clay Willis, Pam Spycher, and Kim Austin, September 2018.

Frontline Perspectives on Instructional Support in the Common Core Era

Susan Moffitt, Matthew J. Lyddon, Michaela Krug O’Neill, Kelly B. Smith, Marie Schenk, Cadence Willse, and David K. Cohen, September 2018.

These and all GDTFII studies can be found at www.gettingdowntofacts.com.

Introduction

California state leaders are asking new things of school leaders, teachers, and students.

The past decade has been a time of significant education reform. The transition began with the adoption of new academic standards for English language arts and mathematics based on the Common Core State Standards, and then later for science based on the Next Generation Science Standards. The state also passed the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF), which dramatically changed how school districts are funded and held accountable for their performance. With California’s newest academic standards, curriculum frameworks, and assessment system, the state is seeking to change what is happening in California’s schools and classrooms.

In the words of one California superintendent, achieving the shifts envisioned in the new standards “...requires teachers to change the way that they think about teaching and think about instruction and think about learning...”

The process of standards implementation has challenged local education leaders who must curate a vast array of instructional materials for quality and alignment with the new standards, provide strong professional development, and ultimately strengthen the abilities of their teaching staffs. All of this is taking place across an uneven terrain with respect to districts’ conditions and capacity. Even mapping the landscape of where and how changes have occurred is a daunting task. But understanding what progress has been made on the frontlines is essential for policymakers as they examine the impact of current policies and think about what might come next.

This brief summarizes two studies that describe the challenges local educators face as they implement the state’s new academic standards. The researchers report on educators’ opinions regarding actions taken to implement the new standards, and their insights into what is needed to continue making progress. The information comes from interviews and surveys that give voice to state and regional education leaders as well as those on the front lines of these changes.

KEY FINDINGS

- Positive perceptions of the standards are accompanied by pleas to “stay the course” so the complex process of putting the standards into practice can take root.
- Ambitious content and pedagogy shifts in the Common Core era underscore the importance of professional learning.
- Teachers express both perceptions of improved instructional support and concerns about the suitability of their instructional materials.
- Teachers are generally positive about their opportunities to learn the new standards, and professional learning systems for teachers increasingly focus on collaboration.
- School principals play a pivotal role in standards implementation and depend on district support.

DATA SOURCES FOR THESE REPORTS

Both sets of researchers drew on a set of California-specific standards implementation questions that are part of RAND’s ongoing American Teacher Panel (ATP) and American School Leader Panel (ASLP) surveys. The two projects are designed to survey the same educators at regular intervals over time.

- The ATP surveys conducted in October 2016, May 2017, and January 2018 included responses from 281, 482, and 444 California teachers, respectively.
- The May 2017 ASLP surveys included responses from 386 California school principals.

Susan Moffit and her research team also drew on:

- A March 2018 ATP survey of 169 California teachers.
- Interviews of 44 state- and regional-level actors.
- Interviews of 91 California district superintendents, selected from a stratified random sample.

Unless otherwise noted, the direct quotations in this brief come from the interviews conducted and cited by Moffit and her research team in their full report.

Neal Finkelstein and his team have also collected data through case studies such as Math in Common®, focus groups, and document collections. More information about the Math in Common® project, including resources related to standards implementation in math in California during the past five years, is available at: <https://www.wested.org/project/math-in-common-evaluation/>

Summary of Key Findings

Positive perceptions of the standards are accompanied by pleas to “stay the course” so the complex process of putting the standards into practice can take root

Prior studies in California portray support for the Common Core. In more recent surveys and interviews with California educational leaders, the researchers who conducted both studies summarized in this brief find:

- a deep commitment among leaders for the ideas embodied in the Common Core;
- a pervasive plea among state education leaders and superintendents to “stay the course” so putting the standards into practice can take root; and
- a variety of governmental and nongovernmental efforts aimed at supporting instructional improvement, along with a concern that teachers and school leaders face challenges in identifying high-quality materials and information.

As one leader said in an interview: “I hope we stay the course in California for a while. ... Is it a perfect system? No, but I think there’s enough places where improvements have begun to happen, staying with them helps. We need the same assessments. We need the standards, we need the funding system and Dashboard to take hold in the best way so that we continue to improve.”

Susan Moffit and her research team’s interviews of 91 California district superintendents also underscored the impact the standards have had in the professional development choices districts make. In the words of one respondent: “The standards play a key role—they have refocused us—they have been a game changer.”

Majorities of teachers surveyed as part of the January 2018 RAND ATP also agreed that:

- they understand what California’s standards expect of them as teachers;
- the standards are appropriate for the children that they teach;
- the curriculum frameworks help them teach; and
- their instructional materials meet the needs of their students, though teachers in schools with high proportions of English learners were less likely to express this.

Ambitious content and pedagogy shifts in the Common Core era underscore the importance of professional learning

Standards implementation is a multifaceted process for aligning curriculum, instructional materials, assessments, and professional development with the goal of improving teachers’ practice. Despite a widespread commitment to the state’s academic standards, considerable energy expended, and some exemplary models of expertise, it is going to take many more years for the changes to fully take root, given the enormity of the task and the scope of change in California.

California is not new to standards-based reform, but this latest installment of Common Core State Standards is more ambitious in terms of what the standards expect of teachers. Those expectations include extraordinary learning about academic subjects from teachers and other educators, and equally extraordinary

learning about how to teach those academic subjects. The standards also aim much more plainly to redress problems of inequity in public education than earlier standards did.

The coupling of more ambitious content with more ambitious pedagogy has underscored the importance of professional learning. As one interviewee noted, “The thing is, those [prior] standards did not call for huge shifts in instructional practice in the way that the Common Core standards are calling for, yet we haven’t made that same kind of investment in professional development that we did back in the early 2000s.”

As the state’s Quality School Framework describes (see box), California’s goal is to put the state’s ambitious grade-level content standards into practice deeply and equitably. That requires aligning all parts of the system—curriculum, frameworks, instructional materials, professional development, and assessments—to support extraordinary changes in instructional practice. Moffitt and her team say that the challenges of constructing coherent structures of instructional support include coordinating many independent private sector curriculum providers along with the private and public sector agencies that support teachers’ professional learning.

Additional challenges emerge regarding efforts to monitor instructional quality and use the results to improve instruction, particularly given the limitations of the state’s educational data system.¹ Further, in California all of these support activities are taking place in school systems that differ in their size and capacity and reside in varied racial, ethnic, linguistic, and socioeconomic contexts.

The state has invested in instructional resources to support standards implementation. Moffitt’s team analyzed the March 2018 RAND ATP teacher survey and found that 86% of English language arts respondents and 87% of math respondents used the state’s standards documents in deciding about what curriculum or objectives to teach. However, getting state resources into the hands of local educators has been something of a challenge. School principals who participated in focus groups conducted by Neal Finkelstein and his team said they were initially unaware of where to find, and how to use, the wealth of state resources that support standards implementation. After the state’s instructional resources were located (or provided to them) and professional development was delivered on how to use them, principals saw the resources as helpful examples of standards-aligned instruction and pedagogy.

The principals most often mentioned the California Curriculum Frameworks as both the most helpful resource and the most dense. As a result, they at times described the frameworks as challenging for teachers to use. Following the frameworks, principals mentioned the California School Dashboard, the digital library, and test preparation resources as the most used California Department of Education (CDE) resources. (The Dashboard shows how districts and schools are performing on test scores, graduation rates, and other measures of student success.)

A common thread throughout multiple principal focus groups was the difficulty of finding state resources on the CDE website, stumbling across state resources, and reliance on county office staffs to provide the resources. The general consensus was that there is a need for more user-friendly navigation tools within the CDE website, supporting resources that are more easily accessible, and professional development for how to use them.

¹ See the *Getting Down to Facts II* report *Making California Data More Useful for Educational Improvement* for more on this topic.

CALIFORNIA'S QUALITY SCHOOLING FRAMEWORK DEFINES THE STATE'S GOALS FOR STUDENT LEARNING

The full framework is available at: <https://www.cde.ca.gov/qs/ab/>

We seek the day when all children in California—regardless of where they live, the color of their skin, or their economic circumstances—receive the start in life that comes with a world-class education. We seek the day when all students are prepared to pursue their dreams, participate in the rich cultural life of our state, and compete in our global economy.

An Expanded View of Student Success

Despite an emerging consensus that definitions of a quality education should support an expanded view of success for every student (the “whole child”), much variation still exists in what we want for our public schools. Nonetheless, most stakeholders agree that intellectual, social, and emotional development are worthy goals for public education. A number of education stakeholders also believe civic development should remain a central purpose for public schools.

- Intellectual development refers to the academic skills and knowledge we want all students to acquire as a result of their schooling. ... In California, desired intellectual skills and knowledge are clearly defined in the new Common Core State Standards.
- Social and emotional development refers to positive social behaviors such as respect for others, ethical concern, and the ability to work in teams. It also refers to individual characteristics and outcomes such as motivation, self-discipline, empathy, confidence, and independence. Research shows that social and emotional development plays an important role in improving students' academic performance and lifelong learning....
- Civic development has been a consistent topic in debates about the purpose of education in the United States. Civic development outcomes are associated with responsible citizenship at the local, state, national, and now often global levels.

Teachers express both perceptions of improved instructional support and concerns about the suitability of their instructional materials

Moffitt and her team note that early studies of Common Core implementation, including a 2014 study of California by Stanford University researcher Milbrey McLaughlin, revealed frontline frustrations with the quality and availability of Common Core materials and with insufficient opportunities for professional learning. The results from the January 2018 ATP survey of California suggest that teachers generally say things have “improved a little.” Although roughly a third of teachers reported that much has “stayed the same” during the past five years, a slightly larger proportion reported “a little” improvement in:

- the alignment between instructional materials and California’s grade-level standards;
- the alignment between district professional development and teachers’ needs;
- the quality of district professional development; and
- school-level professional learning communities.

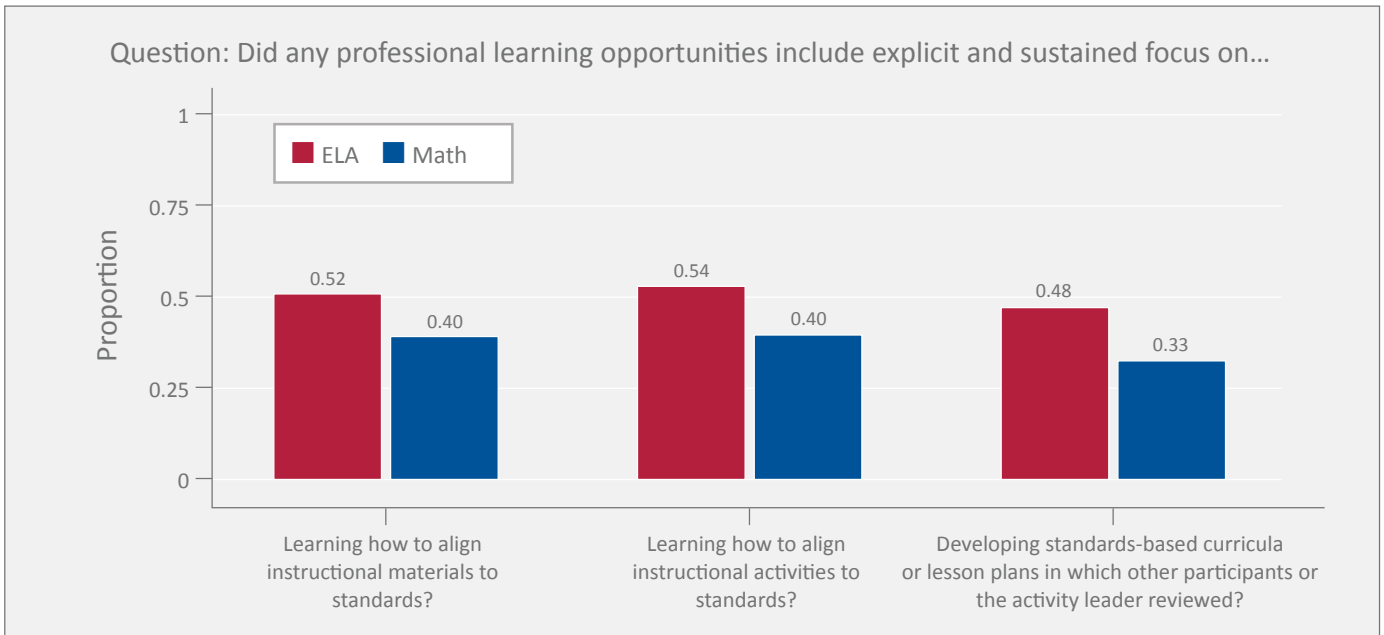
Few teachers report that the alignment or quality of these instructional components has worsened. Given the enormity of what alignment expects and entails, the perception that “a little improvement” has occurred lends credibility to and is consistent with the view that California is, indeed, making strides toward improvement.

A central idea embodied in the Common Core is its intent to use standards and aligned instructional components to redress educational disparities. The January 2018 ATP survey results suggest that teachers working in high-poverty schools and schools with high concentrations of English learners (ELs) perceive these alignment issues somewhat differently than their peers in low-poverty and low-EL schools.

The teachers in schools with higher concentrations of high-needs students were more likely to report perceived improvement in the alignment between instructional materials and the state standards during the past three years, but less likely to say that their instructional materials are well suited to the needs of their students.

Studies of instructional improvement highlight the importance of teachers having sustained learning opportunities connected explicitly with instructional materials and teaching activities. The March 2018 RAND national survey suggests wide variation in California teachers’ experiences. As Figure 1 shows, 52% of English language arts teachers and 40% of math teachers report having professional learning opportunities that included a focus on aligning their instructional *materials* to the standards. The responses were similar regarding the alignment of instructional *activities*.

Figure 1: Teacher Surveys Suggest Differences in the Professional Learning Opportunities Afforded to English Language Arts (ELA) and Math Teachers



Data: March 2018 ATP; sample is weighted. ELA N=137; Math N=135.

The approach that California is taking to helping teachers align instruction to the standards appears to rest on the assumption that the school district is the chief unit of action, and that coherence can best and most durably be built at that level. Some districts have made significant progress consistent with this assumption, often through extraordinary efforts. Among other things, districts must grapple with curating a vast and diverse terrain of new instructional materials, a task that can be overwhelming and often falls on the shoulders of teachers, teacher leaders, and school leaders.

Responses from large majorities of California teachers on the January ATP survey suggest that they depend on their districts and other teachers as major sources for these instructional resources. At the same time, about two-thirds of teachers are also using online teaching networks to inform their decisions about instructional materials and teaching activities. Just a third reported the use of the California Department of Education’s website for the same decisions. The survey results also suggest that teachers with high-needs student populations are more likely to use many different kinds of available resources for guidance—including Smarter Balanced and county office of education resources.

As one education leader told Moffitt and her team of interviewers: “There are so many resources out there around any given topic. And they are not curated. They are not organized. They are not bundled and pulled together... put yourself in the place of a site principal. So where do you go to get your CliffsNotes and have it all pulled together? That doesn’t exist.”

Although California has an array of instructional improvement options related to standards implementation, conditions may be overwhelming teachers who make instructional resource decisions in a loosely curated terrain. Many sources of support exist in California, but the state’s schools and districts are far from equal in their ability to fruitfully access those supports. Thus, the distribution of instructional resources does not necessarily map onto need.²

Teachers are generally positive about their opportunities to learn the new standards, and professional learning systems for teachers increasingly focus on collaboration

Finkelstein and his team look at how teachers, working within their schools and districts, have aligned their instruction to the standards. They consider interviews and survey results in order to document the ways in which teachers have taken on the challenge of this alignment and how the professional learning systems and structures around them have been redesigned to support the daily work of teaching students.

The authors note that recent research suggests that on-the-job collaboration among teaching peers is vital to building teachers’ capacity to initiate standards-driven instructional shifts. In addition, those collaborations should include activities such as in-depth lesson study and analysis of student work. These kinds of collaborative work can open teachers’ eyes to the instructional shifts required by the new college- and career-ready standards. The Finkelstein study finds that teachers are more likely to revise their practices when their collaborative work is “focused on designing, adapting, and improving specific instructional plans and students’ work, rather than more superficial discussions of practice.”

² See the *Getting Down to Facts II* report *State Structures for Instructional Support in California* for more on this topic.

To understand whether the design and implementation of school districts' professional learning systems support teachers in these ways, Finkelstein and his team used ATP survey results from multiple years.

In regard to their **satisfaction with the implementation supports they are receiving**, the researchers' analysis of May 2017 ATP surveys found that the majority of California teachers agreed that:

- their training and professional development on the revised California academic standards has been of high quality (67%);
- their school or district provides adequate professional learning opportunities to support their school's implementation of state standards (66%);
- their school or district leaders provide them with "adequate resources" (73%); and
- they are provided "adequate time" to support implementation of the California standards (58%), an increase from 51% in the prior-year survey.

California teachers also report engaging in **more site-based professional learning with their fellow teachers**, with increasing proportions meeting with or working with peers and observing another teacher's classroom. For example, Finkelstein's team found that 54% of California teachers reported that they observed another teacher's classroom to get ideas for their own instruction or to offer feedback in 2016-17, up from 45% in 2015-16.

Teacher leaders are also providing important support for collaboration and influencing instructional practice. On the two ATP surveys, about two-thirds of surveyed teachers agreed:

- their school "cultivates a cadre of teacher leaders" to make progress in implementing state standards (65%);
- teacher leaders provided adequate expertise and effective guidance during peer collaborations (68%); and
- teacher leaders provided materials, tools, or equipment that helped them work together more effectively (64%).

California teachers' professional learning is often delivered via peer collaboration, according to the May 2017 ATP survey results. Among the California respondents, 82% agreed that their school convenes grade-level teams, professional learning communities (PLCs), or other teacher teams to support the implementation of state standards.

That said, teachers want time and space to work together to practice improving instruction, and they routinely seek examples of what excellent teaching of the standards looks like. Survey data also confirm that teachers are in fact collaborating to review and plan instruction, and that their opportunities to do so are increasing.

School principals play a pivotal role in standards implementation and depend on district support

School principals play an important role in setting the direction for standards implementation and providing opportunities for teacher collaboration. Therefore, it makes sense to provide training and support for principals so they can effectively lead the work of teacher teams and give them opportunities to learn from the efforts of their administrator peers.

Most principals say they are receiving training and support from their districts

In the ASLP surveys of California principals in May 2017, the most common types of professional development activities reported in the past 12 months were:

- conferences/workshops (78%);
- visits to other schools (67%);
- participation in a principal network (61%); and
- formal mentoring or peer coaching (58%).

Regardless of their recent professional development activities, more than **90% of principals reported that their school is either somewhat or very prepared to put the revised California academic standards into practice**. California's elementary principals were slightly more confident of their preparedness than secondary principals. The notable exception: the principals who indicated that "higher quality textbooks, curricula, and/or instructional materials that align with the new California academic standards" was one of their top five implementation needs more often rated their school as "not at all prepared" to put the standards into practice.

A substantial majority of California principals surveyed said that their district provides adequate professional learning opportunities to support their school's implementation of the revised California academic standards (76%) and that the experiences had been of high quality (73%). Finkelstein and his team note, however, that it is possible that when principals visit schools in other districts, they may become less satisfied with their own district's professional development. Among principals who made such visits, a slightly lower proportion agreed that their local education agency provides adequate professional development to support their school's standards implementation.

When asked to identify how they apportion their time as principals, **California principals reported spending a higher proportion of their time on administrative tasks (32%)** than on curriculum- and teaching-related tasks (24%), on average. Interestingly, for the latter activity, the amount of time did not vary based on recent professional development activities. The time apportioned to supporting instruction was, however, associated with principals' perceptions of their schools' preparedness to implement standards. For example, principals who reported spending 15% or less of their time on curriculum- and teaching-related tasks tended to view their schools as less prepared to put the revised California academic standards into practice.

Principals do appear to feel the need to spend more time supporting instruction. Results from both the ASLP and Math in Common® surveys show that **principals want more time to observe teachers teaching in their classroom and more opportunities for their teachers to collaborate**. Principals who took the Math in Common® survey also said it was a high priority to get more information on how to use Smarter Balanced assessment results to support teaching and learning. Furthermore, a higher percentage of California

principals who indicated that they participated in mentoring or peer observation and coaching in the past 12 months rated “more time to observe teachers” as a top implementation need, and a lower percentage of those principals rated standards-aligned materials as a top need.

Deeper discussion illuminates successful strategies and ongoing challenges

In the fall of 2017, Finkelstein and his team conducted focus groups with California principals to further investigate the role they played in providing support to teachers during these years of standards implementation. They were particularly interested in hearing about examples of successful changes to professional learning systems and structures that these school principals had identified for their teachers.

Principals frequently described how their **district engages in collaborative instructional planning processes around priority/essential standards** and “unpacking” and “drilling down” with teachers on the units, lesson plans, and pacing guides to teach those essential standards in classrooms. Several principals explained how they have revised their school’s master schedule to enable common planning time for teachers in the same department. As one principal said, “I think the best thing I can do is get teachers together...Give them the data and give them the time, and they can come up with some great things.”

Separate interviews with district leaders reinforced principals’ views that narrowing the focus and developing a deep understanding of essential standards has proven to be important. All districts who described “unpacking the standards” stated that, had the concentration on the standards occurred earlier, they believe the transitions in instruction would have been more effective. Conquering the instructional shifts was a key gap many identified as a major priority; but understanding the standards first, in retrospect, appears to be a more effective starting point (which some districts did do).

Principals also reported that **district-level curriculum and instruction specialists support them by modeling standards-driven instructional shifts in their schools**. Examples include leading professional learning communities, observing classrooms, and tracking the pacing of units focused on targeted standards. These district instructional leaders communicate with principals to note gaps and strategize next steps in teacher support. However, these specialists often have a large portfolio of schools to support and are in short supply.

Similarly, principals emphasized their **reliance on instructional coaches, teachers on special assignment, or other teacher leaders**—when they are available—to drive the work of teachers related to instructional improvements.

From the district point of view, several district leaders cited data as a driving force in developing their priorities, strategies, and professional development plans. However, how data and assessment are used was inconsistent across the districts interviewed.

MODELS OF STANDARDS IMPLEMENTATION

The *Insights on Standards Implementation in California's Schools* report by Finkelstein and his team summarizes three case studies that provide examples of standards implementation efforts in California. They include:

- An example from the Math in Common® project showcased Long Beach Unified's efforts to address math instruction under the Common Core State Standards, which started with developing administrators' knowledge of math instruction and then involving the principal with more regularity in math department activities.
- Fresno and Sacramento unified school districts worked together to improve academic experiences and outcomes for English learners by simultaneously leveraging all parts of the district system: teachers, coaches, principals, and district leadership.
- The California County Superintendents Educational Services Association (CCSESA) has been developing math and science networks composed of teams who are broadly representative of the state. The strategy has been practical: bring colleagues together from their respective regions and carve out the time to consider instructional practice and internal capacity to replicate and scale the delivery of high-quality, standards-aligned instruction.

Conclusion

The major instructional shift envisioned in the Common Core State Standards signals great ambition as well as a great need for state and district leaders to support the work involved in bringing those policies into practice. Based on their analysis of the state's progress, Moffitt and her team underscore the plea from the field to "stay the course." They also point out that "a little" improvement, given the enormity of the task, represents a major accomplishment.

The researchers also emphasize that implementation needs vary based on school condition and capacity. For example, they find that teachers in schools with high concentrations of poverty or of students who are English learners are less likely to perceive that their instructional materials are well suited to the needs of their students. They also raise concerns about the challenges local educators face curating the terrain of available instructional resources, identifying high-quality resources, and obtaining professional learning opportunities that offer an explicit and sustained focus on aligning both instructional materials and teaching activities to the standards.

Finkelstein and his team agree that the work of implementing aligned instruction takes years of practice and support. They, like Moffitt's team, are encouraged by the scale to which educators are reporting their commitment to, and deliberations on, standards implementation.

Their findings regarding these early years of standards implementation could be helpful in retooling and redirecting resources, and in the development of supportive policy strategies and priorities going forward. Research reviews, field observations, and recently collected survey data suggest key opportunities for professional learning for teachers and school leaders. For example:

- Districts with strong implementation programs rely, in a customized way, on complex internal support systems that often include district-level curriculum and instruction specialists who establish and support site-level professional learning models.
- The complexity of the standards, across grades and content, suggests that the principal should function as an instructional manager who connects resources within and across partnerships to secure adequate and stable support around classroom observation practices and site-level professional development.
- Though progress happens in small steps, the development of partnerships and professional affinity groups bodes well for organizing access to standards-implementation resources for increasing numbers of schools and teachers over time. These groups could be particularly critical for developing connections to smaller and more isolated schools in California.

Lead author biographies

Neal Finkelstein is a senior research scientist and co-director of the Innovation Studies Program at WestEd. His work focuses on connecting research, practice, and policy across K-12 and higher education systems. During the past five years, he has provided evaluation support to initiatives by district and county teams on standards implementation.

Susan Moffitt is the director of the Taubman Center for American Politics and Policy and an associate professor in the Department of Political Science and in the Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs at Brown University. Her scholarship focuses on the development of governmental and nongovernmental capacity to put policy into practice.