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Implementation of Massachusetts Curriculum Framework in English Language Arts and Math: Insights, Innovations, and Challenges in Six Districts

Abstract

This brief presents findings from C-SAIL's Implementation Study, which uses interview and survey data to explore how district administrators, principals, and teachers are understanding, experiencing, and implementing Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks in English language arts (ELA) and math. We examine how and what kinds of supports are provided to teachers of all students, including students with disabilities (SWDs) and English learners (ELs) who take the general state assessment.

Keywords

college and career-ready standards, implementation, curriculum, professional development, assessment, students with disabilities, english learners

Disciplines

Education | Educational Assessment, Evaluation, and Research

Comments

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Implementation of Massachusetts Curriculum Framework in English Language Arts and Math: Insights, Innovations, and Challenges in Six Districts

The Center on Standards, Alignment, Instruction, and Learning (**C-SAIL**), funded by the Institute of Education Sciences, examines how college- and career-readiness (CCR) standards are implemented, if they improve student learning, and what instructional tools measure and support their implementation. This brief presents findings from C-SAIL's **Implementation Study**, which uses interview and survey data to explore how district administrators, principals, and teachers are understanding, experiencing, and implementing Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks in English language arts (ELA) and math. We examine how and what kinds of supports are provided to teachers of all students, including students with disabilities (SWDs) and English learners (ELs) who take the general state assessment.

Since our research began in 2015, C-SAIL researchers have interviewed 10 state officials, and 12 district officials in six Massachusetts districts. We also conducted 12 interviews and focus groups with teachers, principals, and instructional coaches in one of these districts. We selected the six case study districts by identifying two urban, two suburban, and two rural districts with relatively high percentages of SWDs and ELs. We also examined other district characteristics—percentage of students receiving free or reduced-price lunch, student achievement or growth rates, and geographic location within the state—to ensure that our districts represented a range of contextual factors.

Below we highlight key insights from the six case study districts, emphasizing Massachusetts innovative practices and notable challenges.

Curriculum

Teachers' curricular autonomy is high in our case study districts, with elementary teachers encouraged to supplement designated curricula and high school teachers often choosing their own materials entirely.

- Insights** Teacher autonomy in making curricular decisions is valued across the six case study districts, though they are taking different approaches at varying levels of the system.
- » In two districts, district officials encouraged teachers to consider the standards to be their central curriculum and to design their own materials around them. One of these districts utilized “curriculum committees” to assist in this task.
 - » Three districts purchased external curricula after realizing that the prior curriculum was either not aligned to the standards, disjointed across schools and teachers, or both. However, two of these districts then paid teachers to design supplementary materials, such as curriculum maps, rubrics, and writing protocols; one of these districts included more than 40 teachers in the vetting and implementation process, viewing it as an opportunity for professional development.
 - » Two districts said that while they recommend that their teachers use the district-wide curriculum, it is not necessarily used with fidelity and teachers are welcome and encouraged to supplement outside of it.
- Innovations** One district collaborates with four other districts in the region to create and use a common scope and sequence for elementary and middle schools, allowing them to lessen the burden of creating materials on each district and to avoid gaps in student knowledge for their highly transient populations.
- Challenges**
- » One district noted that its purchased math curriculum does not lend itself well to differentiation, so district officials are working on building teachers' capacity to do this on their own.
 - » Two districts, one of which created district-wide curriculum and one of which purchased it, only used the common materials at the elementary school level, citing high schools' varying schedules and structures and strong teacher preference as a result of subject-matter specificity for preventing common high school curricula.

Professional Development (PD)

Massachusetts districts are moving away from the one-day workshop model of PD and toward embedded and sustained practices, such as PD in the form of evaluation feedback or long-term coaching and professional learning communities (PLCs).

Insights

While district administrators in one of the six case study districts noted that their district failed to offer thorough PD aligned to the standards when they were released in 2010, many districts used the revision of the standards in 2017 as an opportunity to refocus their PD. Much of this was organized around the creation or vetting of standards-aligned curricula and supplementary materials, which offered a chance for deepening teachers' understanding.

- » Three districts emphasize choice and thus boost teacher buy-in to PD, and three utilize the train-the-trainer model, in which selected teachers attend region- or district-wide PD and then share the content with teachers at their schools.
- » Only two districts referenced instructional coaches as a form of PD. One district wished they had coaches but did not have room in their PD budget to hire them; this district relied on PLCs and the associated peer-to-peer learning model instead.

Innovations

- » One district works an entire professional development cycle into one day by providing a structure in which math teachers collaborate on a lesson plan that one teacher then immediately enacts in his or her own classroom while the other teachers observe. The observing teachers provide in-the-moment feedback and at times pause the class and jump in. This attempts to provide teachers with real opportunities to apply what they've learned in PD in their own classrooms and to hold them accountable for implementation.
- » One district recently revised the form school leaders fill out after conducting a classroom walkthrough in order to focus on "bite-size feedback" after finding that the old form's excessive length was preventing teachers from receiving feedback in a timely manner.
- » One district organizes their yearly PD into two semesters: the first semester focuses on choice, with teachers entirely in charge of determining the topic they will learn about with no restrictions from the district, while the second semester asks them to apply what they've learned to a district-wide goal (last year, the creation of performance assessments).

Challenges

- » One district noted a sharp divide in the authority of district-wide rigor-oriented PD between elementary and high school teachers, obtaining buy-in from secondary teachers proving much more difficult.
- » The same district described conflict between teachers and district leaders in setting the agenda for weekly collaboration time.

Assessments

District administrators believe the state test and common district assessments to be appropriate mechanisms for shaping instruction and measuring student performance.

Insights

- » All six of the case study districts use at least one form of common assessment, though they range from purchased online platforms to teacher-created tests to common writing rubrics.
- » District administrators in three districts labeled the MCAS 2.0 an appropriate and aligned measure of student performance, and two mentioned appreciating that it is created and vetted by teachers. One district said it was too early to evaluate the appropriateness of the new test. No district called the test inappropriate.
- » Three districts use data from common assessments to better target PD and inform instruction.

Innovations

- » One district uses common performance assessments at the high-school level to create a more authentic measure of student ability and a broader data source.
- » One district uses an online platform that allows teachers to generate assessments based on which standards they are teaching, thus ensuring alignment and saving the valuable time of educators.

**Challenges**

While the MCAS 2.0 was viewed by districts as generally appropriate, three districts noted specific challenges related to it.

- » One district leader noted wanting more student-generated response questions over multiple choice.
- » One district thought that students were mandated to take the test too frequently, and suggested students take it every other year between third and eighth grade instead of every year.
- » One district expressed frustration about the instability of the state test, noting that the three different state tests in recent years have made it difficult for districts to evaluate growth or move from one level to another within the state's accountability system.

Students with Disabilities (SWDs)

The case study districts are divided on standards-based policies for SWDs.

Insights

While some case study districts are moving toward an inclusion and co-teaching model, including working on establishing a district-wide definition of inclusion and its accompanying policies, other districts' SWDs and general education populations continue to exist in separate worlds. A similar divide exists in the use of standards-based IEPs, with some districts using them to varying extents and some using the traditional IEP-writing process.

Innovations

- » One district leveraged technology to create a Google Drive full of supports for teachers of SWDs, such as a one-pager on how to write a measurable IEP goal.
- » The same district has increased the amount of professional development available for paraprofessionals who support SWDs in an effort to increase the quality of student supports for this population.

Challenges

- » District leaders generally find the state standards and assessments appropriate for students with high-incidence disabilities in that they act as safeguards against reduced rigor in the classroom and instead push the district to implement additional supports to help SWDs meet high standards. Including SWDs in the accountability system encourages general education teachers and special education teachers to collaborate and take responsibility together. However, some district leaders worry that this isn't trickling down to the school level and that rigor is being reduced regardless.
- » One district noted a tenuous relationship between general-education and special-education teachers at the high-school level, and is working to make general-education teachers feel more comfortable voicing their opinions in the special-education setting and creating a more cohesive learning environment for all students.

English Learners (ELs)

While the six districts agree that ELs should be held to the same high standards as their peers are, they see problems with the way in which they are tested by the state.

- Insights** District leaders in the case study districts agreed that standards should remain high for ELs. Rather than changing standards, they approach instruction through increased supports and modification of how progress is assessed.
- Innovations** One urban district has created two unique programs for its ELs outside of the traditional academic scope.
- » In the district’s intergenerational language program, parents can come with their children to school to take English classes.
 - » At the high-school level, students host Spanish-language classes for teachers after school, which has been both valuable for teachers and empowering for students.
- Challenges**
- » District leaders struggle with how frequently and the way in which ELs are assessed. Because after one year in the district ELs have to take the state MCAS, the resulting data for ELs is often not informative as many of the students taking it still struggle to read English. One district leader said a “beginner version” of the MCAS would be more appropriate for EL students after their first exempt year to give educators a better understanding of their growth.
 - » District leaders agree that ELs, particularly those in middle school, are tested far too often.
 - » One urban district wants more EL support from the state in the form of clearer language development standards to help general education teachers and more staff in the state’s Office of Language Acquisition. They also would like to be able to provide more EL support to the classroom through updated curriculum with built-in differentiation tools.