BY MADELEINE WEBSTER

Academic achievement in the United States is stagnant. Remediation levels are high, fewer students are graduating from college and, when compared to students around the world, the U.S. consistently ranks in the middle of the pack. In response, states are tackling myriad policy issues to identify what it means to be college- and career-ready, what it means to be globally competitive, and to construct education systems that bring students up to that standard.

Whether a state is implementing the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), an iteration of them, or an entirely unique set of college- and career-readiness standards education leaders are working to raise standards and increase academic achievement. This work is difficult, requiring system-wide changes, alignment across policy sectors and communication between key stakeholders.

Kentucky was among the first states to tackle this difficult work by realigning its state education system to new college- and career-readiness standards. Most strikingly, and perhaps one reason why it became a national example of successful implementation, Kentucky embarked upon realigning the system to new standards by passing comprehensive legislation.

This case study of Kentucky’s experience serves as a guide to other state policymakers as they take on the work of implementing college- and career-readiness standards. This case study drew upon interviews with Kentucky educators, the Kentucky legislative staff and the Kentucky Department of Education (KDE) to examine standards implementation from a legislative angle, and to provide actionable insight to state policymakers and education leaders as they work to
make students ready for college and careers.

**Kentucky Senate Bill 1**

In the years leading up to adoption of college- and career-readiness standards, Kentucky students, parents, educators, legislators, higher education officials and the business community expressed deep concern about the effectiveness of the state education system. Teachers reported that the standards were too broad and too shallow. Legislators shared concern that they weren’t able to compare Kentucky student achievement to students in other states. Most concerning were the levels of remediation. Commissioner of Education Terry Holliday recalls:

> As much as 80 percent of graduating students required remediation. We were hearing about instances in which even the valedictorians of our high schools needed remedial coursework.

In response, KDE officials worked closely with Senate President David Williams and Senator Ken Winters to draft Senate Bill 1, legislation that passed in 2009 requiring a number of significant changes in the state education system. To begin, Senate Bill 1 directed KDE to work with the Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education (CPE) to develop and adopt college- and career-readiness standards. This mandated collaboration would ensure that the standards aligned with state universities’ definition of college- and career-readiness to help reduce remediation levels. Ken Warlick of the Kentucky Legislative Services emphasized this key piece of the bill, explaining:

> The General Assembly required the involvement of higher education up front, so that those stakeholders would be able to say with confidence that yes, if a student meets these standards, he or she will be prepared to succeed in one of our colleges and perform in our entry-level ELA [English language arts] and mathematics courses.

Senate Bill 1 required KDE to adopt new standards by December 2010, leaving officials little time and limited resources for development. As Kentucky was beginning to undertake the development and ultimate passage of Senate Bill 1, the concept of common standards that would prepare students for college and career was percolating across the United States. The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) Initiative was formally launched in June 2009—with the support of the governors and commissioners of education from 48 states, two territories and the District of Columbia—by the National Governors Association (NGA) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO). The involvement of former Kentucky Commissioner of Education Gene Wilhoit, who was serving as the executive director of CCSSO at the time, put Kentucky in a unique position to contribute to, and benefit from, the drafting and discussion of the CCSS very early on in the project.

As a member of the CCSS Initiative, Kentucky was able to share the costs of developing college- and career-ready standards with other states, while contributing heavily to the drafting and discussion of the standards themselves. KDE formally created a committee comprising 100 educators and experts in mathematics and ELA, to weigh in on drafts of the standards at least monthly. In March 2010, KDE posted the draft of its new standards with a survey for statewide review and feedback from educators and the public. Ken Warlick

**Box A: Kentucky Senate Bill 1**

Senate Bill 1 required that the new college- and career-ready standards: Focus on critical knowledge, skills and capacities needed for success in the global economy; result in fewer, but more in-depth standards to facilitate mastery learning; communicate expectations more clearly and concisely to teachers, parents, students and citizens; be based on evidence-based research; consider international benchmarks; and ensure that the standards are aligned from elementary to high school to postsecondary education so that students can be successful at each education level.
notes that, due to this early collaboration:

Kentucky was able to take early versions of the standards to teachers and universities, and we were able to decide, collectively, that we liked what was being developed. The Kentucky Board of Education, the Council on Postsecondary Education and the Education Professional Standards Board went on record before the release of the final draft of the standards saying that the Professional Standards Board, the CPE and the KDE thought that these standards met the intent of Senate Bill 1.

Through a joint resolution in February 2010, the Kentucky Board of Education, CPE and the Education Professional Standards Board adopted the CCSS as the Kentucky Core Standards.

Implementation of the Kentucky Core Standards

The first challenge KDE faced in implementing the Kentucky Core Standards was to ensure that there was system-wide understanding of exactly how the new standards differed from previous standards, and how classroom instruction needed to change to meet them. KDE began by establishing and mobilizing regional networks to support all the districts in the state. KDE tasked these regional networks with forming district leadership teams of about 12 to 15 people consisting of teacher leaders, school leaders and district leaders. District leadership teams focused on deep professional learning in four areas: assessment literacy, the new standards themselves, highly effective teaching and learning practices, and leadership. KDE Standards Division Director Karen Kidwell recalls:

We knew that these new standards required serious shifts in thinking at the district, school and classroom levels, and that we needed to do deep professional learning that train-the-trainer or overviews wouldn’t accomplish. Instead, we set up a structure in which districts and teachers could really take the lead on making those big instructional shifts.

The task of building an understanding of the new standards and the instructional shift they required, while simultaneously developing resources teachers could actually use to teach the standards, was a challenge for KDE. Kentucky’s solution included giving teachers time to work with the standards and develop their own understanding and curriculum collaboratively. Leveraging the professional learning communities KDE had established previously, it was able to hand teachers what they now call “the spiral,” or hard copies of the standards. Educators had meaningful conversations about what these new standards really meant for their instructional practices. Kentucky educator Ali Wright says:

I had never had the opportunity to sit down with the other math teachers in my school and say, “Okay, let’s read the
standard. What does this mean? What are we currently doing that matches this? What are we doing that doesn’t? What are some activities we can do to get at this?” This shift has really changed and improved my practice. The old standards were things like ‘students can graph a line.’ The CCSS call for students to understand what graphing a line really means. We had to figure out how to help our students grapple with the mathematical understanding that’s beyond just following directions or memorizing steps or solving an equation.

As educators were having these conversations, they were able to amass instructional materials and resources, including curricular tools, selected textbooks, worksheets and activities. According to one educator, teachers had about a year, beginning in summer 2010, to have these conversations and develop the materials they could use and share to begin to teach the standards.

KDE’s next challenge was to educate the public about what the new standards meant and to prepare them for the drop in assessment scores. More rigorous standards mean a more rigorous assessment, and that fewer students would perform well in the first few years of implementation. Without widespread understanding of this shift toward rigor, the public could easily conclude that the standards had only worsened the performance of students. With the help of the Prichard Committee, a partner organization in this work, KDE and CPE organized forums across the state in libraries, civic centers and at community events in which they presented the new mathematics and ELA standards. The forums gave members of the public the chance to decide for themselves if they believed in the standards and to become comfortable with the inevitable score drop. Commissioner Holliday adds:

We also developed a very comprehensive, statewide communication plan that involved parents. The Kentucky Parent Teacher Association was heavily involved in creating parent-friendly messaging, and we also worked to create business-friendly communication. Then we provided every teacher and every principal, superintendent and school board member with key talking points about the standards, all put in the context of Senate Bill 1.

Finally, Senate Bill 1 required KDE to select an assessment aligned to the new standards and implement it by the beginning of the 2011-2012 school year. In April 2011, KDE contracted with ACT to provide end-of-course examinations in mathematics and ELA for high school students. Due to the comprehensive communications plan that Kentucky had in place, when the state released the first scores from the assessment in November 2012, reactions were calm. Ken Warlick recalls:

When we rolled out the first assessment, average state scores had dropped by about 30 percent. The reaction from the public was, “We knew that was coming.” This gives us incentive to ensure that we understand these standards. Now we know that, when students start to meet these standards, we’ll know we are moving forward.

Since the new standards and assessments have been fully implemented, Kentucky has seen an improvement in statewide assessment scores and remediation rates. Ken Warlick says:

We have a K-16 data system with which we were able to track the performance of students longitudinally. One of the things we are seeing is that each year, the number of students we have who are scoring at career and college readiness is going up.

Key Lessons

1. LEGISLATIVE LEADERSHIP

The role the legislature played in standards reform and the passage of Senate Bill 1 was critical to Kentucky’s successful implementation of the Kentucky Core Standards. The legislation mandated the up-front collaboration, buy-in and cross-sector communication that unified various state education agencies for college- and career-readiness. It gave state and local agencies specific tasks to be completed on a specific timeline, and required the engagement of all the key stakeholders, from KDE, to parents, educators and students. The legislature and Senate Bill 1 provided the state of Kentucky the leadership and direction it needed to carry out this work. As Commissioner Holliday notes:

Having state legislation really made this work, and other states really seem to be struggling without it.

2. LEVERAGING EXISTING RESOURCES

Kentucky leveraged funding and infrastructure that was already in place to accomplish the tasks set by Senate Bill 1. Pre-existing committees and organizations, communication lines, and improvements in the professional development system led to success, without additional resources. Ken Warlick notes:

It’s quite remarkable that the executive
branch agencies managed this roll out so successfully, even though they have all had a reduction in funding and staff over the last few years. The fact that they were able to engage school districts and education collaboratives to get the message out and to get it out accurately is amazing. The fidelity that resulted among the public and the stakeholders is amazing. Our school districts made this work.

3. SUPPORTING EDUCATORS AS THEY LEAD THE WORK

Giving educators the time and space to understand the instructional shifts and develop their own curriculum secured educator buy-in and led to lasting changes in practice. Ultimately, the success of college- and career-readiness standards implementation hinges on their delivery in the classroom. As Kentucky illustrated, allowing teachers to make the major instructional shifts required by college- and career-readiness standards leads to deepened understanding, improved practice and gains in student achievement. Kentucky educator Ali Wright says:

Teachers are having conversations about pedagogy that we’ve never had before. I really do think my students are learning at higher levels. I think I’m challenged to be a better teacher, when it’s not enough to just check a standard off a list. I like that I’m expected to teach students to really understand mathematics. I like that we have standards that are on par with other states. I feel like the CCSS better prepare students for Advanced Placement. The collaboration that has to exist for this to work is a huge success.

Conclusion

Each state has its own complex education system, its own student goals and its own path toward college- and career-readiness. This study examines Kentucky’s use of comprehensive legislation to adopt and implement college- and career-readiness standards. The leadership and support provided by the legislature through Senate Bill 1 can serve an example for legislators as they seek to bring students in their state closer to college- and career-readiness.
Notes

1. The National Center on Education Statistics (NCES) estimates that 20 percent of first-year students enrolled in higher education institutions self-reported taking remedial coursework in the 2007-2008 school year, in 2013 publication *Statistics in Brief*. However, the Alliance for Excellence in Education analysis of the raw NCES data estimates that remediation rates are as high as 40 percent in *Saving Now and Saving Later: How High School Reform Can Reduce the Nation’s Wasted Remediation Dollars*. NCES’s most recent high school graduation rate estimate is 80 percent, detailed in *Public High School Four-Year On-Time Graduation Rates and Event Dropout Rates: School Years 2010–11 and 2011–12*. The NCES also reports that U.S. students scored below average in mathematics, average in science, and average in reading literacy in the 2012 PISA assessment, in *The Condition of Education 2014*.

2. Kentucky’s establishment of professional learning communities is only one piece of a large professional development reform effort that contributed significantly to the state’s implementation of the Kentucky Core Standards, a fuller discussion of which can be found in Learning Forwards’ *Transforming Professional Learning in Kentucky: Meeting the Demands of the Common Core State Standards*.

3. For more information about the Prichard Committee and its involvement in the Kentucky Core Standards, visit prichardcommittee.org.

References


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This is the third publication in a series focused on state policy options to improve college and career readiness and 21st Century learning and skills.

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