

## Introduction .....

As teachers in Shelby County and across Tennessee begin their deep dive into Common Core implementation, the Shelby County Unified District has an incredible opportunity to increase student access to a rigorous curriculum and change the classroom teacher-student instructional dynamic. Successful implementation of the Common Core can be a key lever for improving outcomes for students. To enable teachers to transition effectively to the new standards, high quality professional development support is much needed for teachers, in conjunction with the great conversations around effective teaching practices that began with our county's evaluation reform process. Through our roles as current classroom teachers and Common Core coaches, we have had the chance to lead peers through this transition. While Shelby County Schools' current Common Core implementation plans are more thorough than many other counties' across Tennessee, there is still more that we believe the district can do to support teachers and high quality instruction.

## Recommendations .....

### I. The district should provide “transformative” professional development experiences to as many teachers as possible before training teachers in the individual practices that make Common Core classrooms successful.

As Common Core Coaches trained directly by the Institute for Learning (IfL), we experienced firsthand the idea of transformative professional development—the kind that immerses teachers in the practice and challenges their previous assumptions and beliefs about teaching and learning. Professional development is considered transformative when there is also accountability for a change in instruction. Like many current classroom teachers, the Common Core Coaches entered this work with much anxiety, and questioned if the standards were right for our students. However, because our IfL trainers were committed to giving teachers the space and opportunity to critically self-reflect, self-examine, get frustrated, and develop from that frustration, we were able to facilitate a new way of thinking. The structure of the summer trainings allowed a productive struggle to build towards a resolution. Because we were allowed to struggle for the first half of the sessions and then experience the effectiveness of active learning through intentional structured talk, the Common Core Coaches gained a greater sense of why such methods were necessary and effective. In transformative trainings, teachers are taught

through the same method being presented, and after a productive struggle, realize the effectiveness of the new methods.

This is perhaps the most important component of a successful transition—helping teachers achieve a “Common Core mindset” that allows them to embrace the standards and practices being implemented statewide. While we may try to purchase the “right” curriculum materials or provide more case-by-case, in-classroom support for teachers, none of it will be as effective as setting teachers up for thoughtful experimentation, guided by the principles of the Common Core. States such as New York are providing outright, ready-to-use curricula for their teachers, but the usefulness of such investment will be limited as teachers continue to fight the idea of the new standards themselves. Through the Institute for Learning, Tennessee was able to invest in an experience for a group of teachers to truly immerse themselves into the Common Core, and we should make sure as many teachers as possible experience this same structure of training. The three-day training allowed for a holistic approach and immediate feedback that is critical in effective learning. Every Tennessee teacher needs the same opportunity.

**2. Create opportunities for teacher experts to lead Common Core implementation through professional learning communities (PLCs), district learning days, and other professional development outlets that work in cohort-like structures over the course of the year.**

Given the competing priorities of merging two very different school districts, Shelby County Schools was not able to adequately enforce the “train the trainer” summer model of work as it had hoped. The PLC-based learning modules that the district is recommending for teachers may address this problem in a limited way, but will only increase the need for accountability to practice. One setback of the summer training was the absence of opportunities for the participants to try out the new ideas with students and return in the same cohort to debrief and strategize methods going forward. Thus the most effective process is to present the training in its entirety then offer departmental collaboration, continual practice, and group reflection through the PLCs. This reflective practice is instrumental in allowing teachers to teach in ways they have never taught before. For us, the most important part of advancing the Common Core in our own classrooms was to consistently reflect and refine our practice based on what we learned from our students’ work. Students learned with us as we developed our skills in implementing a math task or facilitating evidence-based discussions and writing. Teachers need this on-going professional development opportunities that allow cohorts of teachers to collaborate throughout the year. Until teachers have some significant time and space during work hours to dive into the standards, this refinement of practice cannot take place and our transition time may be wasted.

To create teacher accountability to the transition to the Common Core State Standards, the district must be very clear in its expectations for District Learning Days. The most recent Learning Day in October was a missed opportunity. While some school leaders offered Common Core learning module practice, other school leaders chose to offer non-Common Core-related professional development. Going forward, PLC time should be sacred time for the exclusive use of Common Core learning modules followed by bridge-to-practice assignments (i.e. teachers implement a Common Core task, discuss their implementation in class, and identify areas of improvement). Until this knowledge base is set, teachers will not believe that they have had sufficient space to productively utilize the Common Core standards.

### **3. Invest students, parents, and other stakeholders in the raised standards and inform them about the likely decline in proficiency scores ahead of PARCC implementation.**

As teachers press forward with innovating with the new standards and instructional practices, we must also be ready for the inevitable drop in proficiency scores once the more rigorous PARCC replaces current assessments in 2015. Based on our own experiences, we've seen our students struggle to adapt to the new learning methods. While we continue to support our students' learning, we want to be clear to all stakeholders that this is a moment of transition toward higher expectations, layered with some harsh truths about what our students are able to do right now. States such as Kentucky that have implemented the Common Core for several years now have prioritized active communication with parents and other stakeholders to prevent a wave of backlash to the Common Core as a result of lower proficiency results. Teachers have already been challenged to raise their game in implementing the Common Core even in the final year of TCAP, and to heap on negative reactions to lower 2015 test scores would only encourage Common Core naysayers and strengthen those who argue that the Common Core is "too hard" or "not relevant to our students." To decrease score-shock, the district should initiate PARCC simulation days throughout the school year. Simulation days would mimic the PARCC testing days. A thorough analysis of the assessment and the results would be communicated to students, parents and other stakeholders in a generic fashion where they could monitor student growth over the course of the year. If stakeholders are communicated realistic results on the informal PARCC assessments, they will be prepared for similar results on the authentic PARCC.

Outside of the parent/child relationship, the most influential person in a student's life is the teacher. For all students to have access to quality teachers, teachers also need equitable access to quality professional development and resources to enhance their instruction and improve student achievement. The success or failure of the Common Core rests in the hands of teachers and the instruction that they provide. Professional growth and training need to be for teachers, by teachers, because teachers best understand what our students need. We encourage the unified school district to utilize the Common Core Coaches as much as possible to provide consistent and quality professional development, and encourage teacher accountability through quality collaborative PLCs after in-depth training similar to the IfL summer training. Tennessee is going to be the fastest improving state in the nation, but we must show teachers that we believe in their ability to lead us there.

#### **Memphis Teaching Policy Fellows, 2012-2013:**

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