Common Core By Design:
A Whole Systems Approach to CCSS Implementation
Working Paper, Fall 2013

I. CONTEXT REVISITED: INCREASING RESOURCES (AND EXPENSES!) AND MORE AUTONOMY

With the adoption of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and the new English Language Development (ELD) standards, California has embarked on its third wave of major curriculum reform, continuing a process that began with the initial round of curriculum frameworks in the 1980s and that continued with the adoption of the California State Standards, the Public School Accountability Act, and No Child Left Behind. Much about California’s context has changed since the State adopted the Common Core in 2010. Each of these changes present new challenges and opportunities for districts as they design and implement a plan for implementing CCSS.

With Proposition 30, the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) and the new categorical grant for CCSS implementation, districts are finally emerging from the one of the worst financial crises in our state’s history with resources to dedicate to Common Core. This is cause for celebration, but not exuberance. For many districts, especially those with high-need students, the revenue side of the ledger is improving, but many districts still face structural deficits because their long-term health care and pensions costs are outpacing revenue increases. Furthermore, to survive the funding cuts, most districts have had to make major cuts to both central office and site level staff. These cuts pose several challenges to CCSS implementation, including:

1) During the recession most districts deferred raises for their teachers: Now that resources are finally flowing back into the system, districts will likely have to spend some portion of these resources to increase salaries for teachers and other staff.

2) Most C&I Departments are no longer equipped to apply the “Managed Instruction Model” to the Common Core: This model, which was adopted by most districts during the transition to the current standards, requires a well-resourced C&I department who can provide implementation monitoring, instructional coaching and professional development support to sites. Due to deep cuts in staffing, this approach is not viable for most districts today, and it is not likely that districts will have the political will to invest limited CCSS resources in central office staffing in the future. Furthermore, a “one-size-fits all” curriculum can limit the ability of districts to compete with charter schools, and urban districts in particular have already begun
adopting alternative C&I approaches that allow for more site autonomy and curriculum differentiation and school choice for parents and students.

The other major change in the context has been an increase in local control over how to design and implement change initiatives like Common Core. Exemplified by LCFF and the new $1.25 billion CCSS categorical grant, this shift in state policy poses significant advantages for district and site leaders, but it also poses major implementation challenges. It is a well-known fact that over the past decade California teachers, especially in low-performing schools, were expected to teach a scripted curriculum. Though we don’t always think of it this way, under NCLB leaders, too, followed their version of a scripted curriculum. Superintendents, school board members, principals and district leaders, especially if they were in Program Improvement, were not empowered to design their own change efforts any more than teachers were empowered to design their own lessons. State and federal improvement targets established goals and timelines, and State Board-adopted frameworks like the Nine Essential Program Components laid out the change strategy. Districts were expected to adopt a standards-aligned set of instructional materials, train teachers and principals on these materials, adopt pacing guides to “get everybody on the same page,” do walkthroughs to check for high-fidelity implementation of identified instructional strategies, adopt benchmark assessments, organize teachers into PLCs to study the assessment data. As a result No Child Left Behind helped create a generation of leaders who haven’t ever really had the chance to practice change design.

II. THE NEED FOR A WHOLE SYSTEMS APPROACH TO CCSS IMPLEMENTATION

Since the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and the ELD Standards were created and adopted, academics, think tanks and education reform providers have framed the transition as a series of “shifts”. With good reason much of the emphasis has been on the instructional shifts. But focusing on instruction ignores a whole set of other shifts that must occur for the new standards to reach their promise. At Pivot, we believe districts must design and implement change across three dimensions: systems, leadership and teacher practice. If the Common Core is to be a dramatic change for students that its advocates intend, if more students are to be supported to go deeper and reach higher, then school systems must be led in new ways. As leaders define goals, decide on core strategies, tactics and messages, they would do well to consider these shifts. As the graphic below demonstrates, shifts in teacher practices require a related set of shifts for leaders and for how the system is organized. In California especially, the CCSS require that schools and districts rethink how they lead, manage and support teachers and curriculum-focused change.

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1 There are a number of think tanks who have written about the instructional shifts of the Common Core for students. Both EngageNY and Achieve the Core’s Instructional Shifts for the Common Core are good sources.
III. “DESIGN THINKING” + CHANGE MANAGEMENT = CHANGE DESIGN FOR NEXT PRACTICES

Districts that are ahead of the curve on CCSS understand that successful implementation demands fundamentally redesigning the system in which learning takes place. To meet the design challenges posed by the Common Core, leaders at all levels are going to have to innovate, which represents a significant change in current practice for many in the system who have been relying on cherry picking from a set “best” or “evidenced-based” practices. The ability to design and create is an essential 21st Century Skill and one of the 4Cs, and it is an essential skill for teachers and district and site administrators in the Common Core environment. For more experienced leaders and teachers this may feel familiar and reenergizing, but for newer teachers and leaders this may feel brand new, and they will need significant support before they can effectively take on this new role.

There has been a lot of buzz about “Design Thinking” in education reform circles recently. Proponents argue that in order to innovate education leaders will have to adopt the same mindset and processes product designers use to design products. We think “Design Thinking” and the strategic use of formal design cycles offer education leaders a powerful new tool to solve the design challenges posed by the Common Core. By taking a human-centered and collaborative approach to change design, districts will be able to develop more innovative solutions, while securing greater buy-in from a wide range of stakeholders.

However, applying “Design Thinking” strategies and processes will be insufficient. Districts will also need to have an intentional plan for managing the transition to the CCSS. Pivot can provide technical and leadership support for leaders at all levels about how to effectively manage the human side of the change process.

“Design Thinking” is a mindset. It is about believing we can make a difference and having an intentional process in order to get to new relevant solutions that create positive impact. Design thinking is: human centered, collaborative, optimistic and experimental.

Adapted from IDEO's Design Thinking for Educators.
IV. COMMON CORE BY DESIGN: AN OVERVIEW OF PIVOT’S APPROACH

To assist districts in meeting the challenges posed by Common Core we provide comprehensive support for CCSS design and implementation, including but not limited to training and coaching. When possible we play an active role co-designing the CCSS change initiatives in which we play a supporting role. A number of factors make our approach unique including:

- A focus on addressing leadership, systems and instructional shifts
- An emphasis on building the structures, processes, roles, tools and agreements necessary to manage and support the change process and to hardwire the change after our project is complete
- Build capacity at all levels of a school system from the boardroom to the classroom and into the community
- Designing professional development to model student-centered 21st century teaching and learning
- Customizing support to meet the individualized needs of districts
- Stretching resources by leveraging low cost technology to support collaboration and knowledge management

While each Pivot CCSS project is unique, our training, coaching and technical support generally focuses on the following broad service areas:

1. **Designing an Effective CCSS Change Initiative**
2. **Building and Redesigning CCSS Systems**
3. **Capacity Building and Implementation Support for District and Site Leaders**
4. **Capacity Building and Implementation Support for Teachers**

1. **Designing an Effective CCSS Change Initiative:** In the design phase of a project, we start by helping the district to analyze and leverage their existing context, build the basic awareness of the shifts of the Common Core necessary to design a change plan, and work with a District Implementation team to design an implementation plan for the district. Essential questions to consider include: (a) what are the opportunities in our existing context that can be leveraged for CCSS?; (b) how will the district define autonomy and which parts of the CCSS implementation will be standardized and which will be open for innovation?; (c) what systems, processes and roles will need to be created or repurposed to design, implement and hardwire the change?

To support districts in this area we offer the following services:

- **Readiness Inventory:** The first step in developing a district strategy for the CCSS is to assess the context. What foundation is in place to build on? What problems or gaps exist that need to be solved or filled? What resources (money, time, tools, talent and enthusiasm) are available? What other initiatives are underway and how does CCSS fit in? What can be offloaded, wrapped up, or downsized to make room for a major new initiative?
• **CCSS Implementation Plan Assessment Tool and Implementation Inventory:** Most districts have already developed an implementation plan and have started some implementation activities. However, no plan is perfect and many of the plans were developed in advance of the $1.25 billion categorical grant. Pivot has created two tools to assess how current implementation efforts are going, and to help districts identify what areas of their existing plan might need refinement.

• **Awareness Training:** Because our approach involves addressing a cadre of leaders at each level of the system, we believe that before a district can develop and operationalize a CCSS implementation plan, they must first develop a shared understanding of the CCSS. Pivot Learning has developed a set of basic CCSS training modules aimed at building the awareness of district and site level (teachers and principals) staff and other community members (e.g. school board).

• **Common Core Implementation Plan:** Once district leaders have begun to understand the scope of the challenge and opportunity represented by the Common Core, Pivot will work with the central office to charter a District Implementation Team that consists of key central office staff, several site administrators and teacher leaders. Pivot then introduces its Leadership Cycle model and leads the Team through the development of a core strategy and associated tactics and messages related to a multi-year reform effort to implement the CCSS that is explicitly treated as a second order change. Services and deliverables include:
  o Chartering of the District CCSS Implementation Team
  o An in-depth analysis of the district’s context
  o A vision for CCSS, SMARTe goals and several core strategies
  o A communications plan with differentiated messages for all key stakeholders
  o Detailed action plans for each of the core strategies
  o A process for how the plan will be monitored and refined

2. **Building and Redesigning CCSS Systems:** To transition to CCSS, most districts will have to design or redesign essential systems, such as assessments, assessment data management, professional development, technology, knowledge management, etc. Pivot’s team of systems design experts can assist districts through this transition. Examples of support include:

  • **Redesigning the C&I department:** Districts who have relied on a managed instruction model may decide that transitioning to the CCSS will require redesigning how their C&I departments function. Pivot’s Central Office Service Quality (COSQ) Team can help these departments reimagine their roles and structures and begin to redesign the processes and systems that are in place to better support site implementation of CCSS.

  • **Professional Development:** Pivot will work with the appropriate C&I staff to identify how the district’s PD system should be redesigned in order to meet the demands of CCSS. Special attention is given to how to ensure that the new system reaches every teacher and builds a common set of CCSS skills in all teachers, while offering differentiation for
teachers based on their individualized needs.

- **Curriculum and Instructional Materials**: Pivot’s curriculum experts can assist the district in conducting an audit of existing materials and make recommendations about how the district can address short- and long-term gaps.

- **Assessment and Technology**: Pivot’s Data SWAT (Strategic Work on Assessment and Technology) process provides technical support to districts to help them to review the capabilities of their hardware and software infrastructure in light of the substantially new challenges of the Common Core. After conducting an audit, the Data SWAT Team makes recommendations for how the district can improve its systems and if appropriate our team can provide implementation support. Work may include: (a) establishing an online curriculum repository; (b) ensuring district data managements are interoperable; (c) implementing a cycle of continuous improvement for data quality and integrity; (d) building protocols and procedures around collecting, storing and delivering data; etc.

### 3. Capacity Building and Implementation Support for District and Site Leaders

Common Core By Design provides a way for districts to scale CCSS implementation to reach every teacher in a cost-effective way by building the capacity of teacher leaders to lead their grade-level/subject PLCs in doing the actual work of changing teaching and learning, while also building the capacity of principals to support and monitor implementation and coaching leaders in the central office about how to build the systems and structures to support site level implementation.

- **District CCSS Implementation Team**: Pivot coaches will work with the Team ensure that the necessary structures, roles, agreements, processes and tools are in place to support implementation. In most projects, this involves coaching of key C&I staff who will need new change design and change management skills to effectively design and lead the initiative.

- **Site Administrators**: Pivot convenes a collaborative or PLC of principals to build their capacity to design, lead and implement CCSS, and to create a space for them to share strategies and resources. Pivot training and coaching will focus on:
  - Developing a clear and agreed upon definition for 21st Century teaching and learning
  - Effectively utilizing change management strategies
  - Developing site level CCSS action plans and messaging strategies
  - Supporting teacher PLCs in driving implementation at the site level
  - Monitoring CCSS implementation through Instructional Rounds or other non-judgmental monitoring tools
  - Ensuring that their schools have a plan for how to build 21st century skills while addressing the CCSS.
**Teacher Leaders:** Much of the focus of our implementation approach happens through teacher leaders. In order to perform this role, teacher leaders need to develop leadership skills to effectively lead the transition through grade and subject level PLCs/teams. Regardless of the focus of the content-specific instructional training and coaching teacher leaders receive from Pivot, the district and/or another provider, they will also need leadership training to help them perform their essential role in CCSS implementation. In each of our projects, we partner with the district to determine the appropriate balance of leadership training and content-specific training for CCSS.

4. Capacity Building and Implementation Support for Teachers

Pivot’s Common Core Working Group has developed the following training and coaching modules for teachers and teacher leaders.

**21st Century Instruction-Increasing Rigor and Access:** Teachers, especially young teachers, have spent years focusing on a direct instruction approach. To implement the Common Core Standards, there is still a place for direct instruction, but it needs to be supplemented with a wider repertoire of strategies. Pivot has developed this training and coaching program to provide districts an entry point to the Common Core, which focuses on the necessary changes in instructional practice to meet the expectations for student learning. This training is focused on how to design student-centered instruction that:

- Engages students in tasks that address the CCSS standards, ELD standards and Smarter Balanced Assessments
- Increases the depth of knowledge that students are expected to demonstrate
- Provides differentiation and scaffolding for all students, especially English Learners and students with disabilities
- Leverages technology to engage students and promote deeper learning and college and career readiness

The activities offer options for how to progress through the work based on participants’ prior knowledge, the district’s CCSS transition plan and available resources. We also can customize this training for a focus on mathematics or ELA, depending on the need of the district.

**21st Century Skills:** In 2013 California adopted the P21 Framework for 21st Century Skills. P21 dovetails nicely with the CCSS, especially the College and Career Readiness Standards. Pivot has designed a set of teacher training modules for districts that are interested in building the capacity of their secondary teachers to design instruction (curriculum and teaching strategies) to address CCSS standards while also building 21st Century Skills. We have designed the program in the following tiered fashion:

- **Mini Performance Assessment:** We start with building the capacity of teachers to design “mini” performance assessments to address the standards, while building 21st Century Skills. In this 2-3 day module we focus on the 4Cs (creativity, critical thinking, collaboration and communication) and we design a lesson backwards from a
• **Unit**: Once teachers understand how to design a lesson or “mini” performance assessment, we work with them on developing a larger unit of instruction within their own discipline. We also move beyond the 4Cs (Learning and Innovation Skills) into other 21st Century skills, such as information, media and technology and life and career skills. Teachers also learn how to best leverage technology to engage students, promote critical thinking and deeper learning and develop real-world skills.

• **Interdisciplinary Unit/Project Focused on a Real World Problem**: Some districts will be interested in building the capacity of their teachers to collaboratively develop interdisciplinary units or projects that address the CCSS and build 21st Century Skills. This module focuses on identifying a real-world problem for students to focus their learning, and then working backwards from an end of unit performance assessment to design an interdisciplinary project or unit. This might include teaching students how to follow a design cycle for their project.

**Promoting Literacy through Text-Based Writing**: With its focus on text-based writing that utilizes complex and informational text, the CCSS reestablish writing as an essential skill that should be a major focus for every classroom. Many schools have deemphasized writing in favor of other skills that are easier to assess on a standardized test. The result is that many teachers, especially secondary teachers that began their career post-NCLB, lack a strong writing pedagogy. Secondary schools will also need to develop a school-wide approach to how they support literacy development in all classes for all students, including using scaffolding strategies that promote rather than inhibit critical thinking. To address these challenges Pivot has developed a five day teacher workshop where teachers will learn how to:

  • Improve their writing pedagogy
  • Design a school-wide or grade-wide literacy performance assessment (speaking, listening, reading and writing)
  • Use the SBAC writing rubric to collaboratively score the assessment.
  • Refine the literacy performance assessment based on feedback, analysis of results and reflection.
  • Design a unit of instruction (interdisciplinary if possible) that culminates in a literacy performance assessment.

**21st Century Curriculum Units**: Designed around Pivot Learning’s unit template, the Pivot Coach trains teachers/teacher leaders on aspects of the template and then coaches them as they develop their own units. The training and coaching is aligned to the following main sections of the template:

  • Identifying the instructional objectives of unit and aligning them to the CCSS and the new ELD standards;
• Determining how instruction will be differentiated to make the unit accessible to all students, including English Learners and students with disabilities
• Ensuring that the unit is rigorous and builds 21st Century skills;
• Ensuring that the unit makes effective use of technology and other materials to achieve learning goals;
• Developing a plan for summative and formative assessments for the unit

In addition to training and coaching the teachers about these concepts, the Pivot team will work with the teacher/teacher leaders to refine the unit template created by Pivot to meet the customized needs of each district. The Pivot Team will also coach the teacher leaders about how to de-privatize practice by sharing their units with one another online.

V. CONCLUSION

The CCSS provide us an opportunity to renew our focus on teaching and learning, and they can and should be a tool to impact what Richard Elmore calls the Instructional Core of student, teacher and curriculum and, especially, the kinds of tasks that students are asked to do. In the process, CCSS also has great potential to re-energize teachers by reconnecting them with the creativity and challenge of teaching.

However, the CCSS also pose a number of design and implementation challenges for school districts, including how to:

• Invest limited CCSS resources to reach every teacher and every child
• Design or redesign the district’s curriculum and instruction systems to ensure that every teacher has the information, support and on-going professional development and peer-to-peer collaboration necessary to effectively teach to the new standards
• Build the leadership capacity of at every level of the system to successfully manage the change
• Design and deliver professional development in ways that model 21st Century teaching and learning and that addresses key changes in instructional practice implied by the Common Core, including: a) increasing rigor; b) integrating ELD with core content; c) effectively using technology; d) focusing on text-based writing; and e) promoting 21st Century Skills and college and career readiness

To help districts rise to challenge and promise of Common Core, Pivot has developed a Common Core By Design, a comprehensive Common Core approach to help districts promote innovation and collaboration, and design and manage a complex and politically charged change process. While each Pivot CCSS project is unique, we focus our training, professional development and technical support on building the leadership and systems capacity of schools and districts to design and manage the change, while expanding the instructional capacity of teachers to reach every student.