Implementing Common Core

INTRODUCTION: HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Just the mere mention of the words Common Core State Standards (CCSS) invokes a strong emotional response from students, teachers, librarians, principals, central office administrators and parents. As states and school districts move to full implementation, the fervor around the Common Core has intensified. The homepage of the Common Core State Standards Initiative includes a section on “Myth vs. Facts,” which illustrates how contentious the discourse has become.¹ Like many controversial issues, the truth lies somewhere in the middle.

The West Warwick Public Schools (WWPS) has been able to work with the entire community to cut through the noise to discuss the positive impact the Core has on teaching and learning. The focus of this paper is on our district’s successful struggle to implement the CCSS into classroom instruction, and how we used Aspen Instructional Management System (IMS) from Follett to support our work.

The Common Core State Standards were developed in 2009 in cooperation between state commissioners of education, governors, state leaders and educators across the country.² School districts are in various stages of implementation, and their efforts have accelerated with the PARCC and Smarter Balance assessment field tests in the spring of 2014. As the assessment dates of the 2015 school year creep closer, districts are evaluating their progress and planning for the future.

West Warwick Public Schools: First Steps to Common Core Implementation

Local English Language Arts and mathematics curriculum coaches participated in the national discourse on the standards development. They immediately began conversations with teachers and district leaders regarding an implementation timeline for educators and students in the WWPS. As early as 2009, teachers and administrators in the WWPS were getting a preview of the draft documents of the Core. The initial conversations with teachers and administrators laid the foundation for the district’s massive curriculum development work en route to the full implementation of the CCSS in the 2013-2014 school year. Illustration 1 depicts the district’s transition timeline to the Common Core in mathematics.

### Illustration 1: WWPS CCSS Implementation Timeline

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<th>School Year</th>
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- **PD needed for Common Core**: In 2010-2011 teachers in K, 1 and grade 8 will need PD to support their full implementation of the Common Core standards at their grade level in 2011-2012.
- **Teaching GLEs/GSEs**: Teachers in grades 2-7 and grades 9-12 will continue to teach GLEs/GSEs in other grades on 2011-2012, even though the focus of their PD will be Common Core. This will give them opportunities to study the standards, to develop the necessary domain knowledge and to experience some of the research-based instructional strategies that will support the learning in their classroom.
- **Teaching Common Core**: In 2011-2012 teachers in K, 1, and grade 8 will be fully implementing the Common Core because those cohorts of students will not be responsible to take the NECAP. This will allow us to mitigate some of the gaps in conceptual understanding for those students when they take the PARCC.
- **Assessment will be NECAP**: Where there is a green A with a blue star, this is where we anticipate some possible changes to NECAP to reflect the Common Core.
- **Assessment will be Common Core**: Full implementation in 2014-2015.

Amongst great fanfare on August 24, 2010, Arne Duncan, the Secretary of Education, announced Rhode Island as one of the Phase II recipients of the Race to the Top grant. The WWPS reviewed our internal capacity to achieve the goals outlined in our state’s application. A central component of Rhode Island’s grant was to implement the Common Core State Standards, and have districts make the necessary changes to their curricula aligned to the CCSS. As noted in illustration 1 the district was prepared to engage in the work with a thoughtful and reflective response.
COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS: THE EARLY YEARS

The WWPS supports a distributed leadership model as outlined by Alma Harris. Harris’s central theme of distributed leadership speaks about the structures put in place to apportion the difficult work of educating students to many leaders across the organization. The district’s structure, the collaborative tools in Aspen IMS and the commitment to distributed leadership supported our Common Core implementation.

High School department chairs, middle and elementary grade-level leaders, principals, and central office support staff were some of the first individuals to be introduced to the Common Core by professional development facilitators. This group of approximately 45 educational leaders representing nearly 15% of our certified staff received a preview of the standards. Over several professional development (PD) opportunities teachers and administrators were charged with introducing themselves to the draft form of the standards, and understanding how these standards were different than the previous iteration of state standards. Two additional initiatives (Aspen IMS and Educator Evaluation) helped fuel our Common Core implementation.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT EFFORTS: INTRODUCING THE CCSS TO TEACHERS & PARENTS

Sustained and continuous PD efforts began immediately with all of our teachers during the 2010-2011 school year. Teachers and administrators were provided the following opportunities to gain a deeper understanding of the CCSS:

- Model lesson
- Proficiency based summer school
- Ramp-up programs
- Unit design and curriculum work
- WWTA education committee sessions
- Embedded professional development
- Common planning time
- Building level meetings
- Departmental meetings
- Lab classrooms

Each of these activities helped teachers unpack the standards and gain a deeper understanding of the Core. Teachers and administrators dug deeper into the CCSS, and started to align their daily instruction to the Core. Teachers focused on:

- understanding each grade level standard relative to the CCSS anchor standard
- looking across the standards vertically and horizontally
- describing what a student should know, understand and be able to perform at each grade level, for each standard

Our “aha” moment arrived and the staff realized we needed to completely rewrite our curricula PreK-12, and revise our report. District staff suffered from fatigue and the burden of the work ahead. We needed a tool to support the work ahead. Aspen IMS was the life preserver we all clung to as we navigated the turbulent waters ahead.

Using Aspen IMS to Support Our District’s Work through Communication

The instructional shifts in the district were immense and required significant changes to our curricula across all grade levels and disciplines. Our district turned to Aspen IMS as a solution and it served as a lifeline to the district. WWPS employees, parents and students could access a variety of resources concerning the implementation of the Common Core via district pages powered by Aspen. We were able to group individuals with shared interests, and provide access to shared resources and discussion forums to provide a “one-stop shopping” experience. Illustration 2 depicts an example of a shared district page used by K-12 science teachers to develop a new PreK-12 science curriculum.

Educators had access to resources essential in getting the curriculum revision work completed. Discussions were extended beyond the traditional workday due to the use of Aspen allowing the best ideas to percolate to the top. Aspen IMS allowed everyone access to the same materials and resources. We could also ask ourselves if the resources and materials collected helped our students become the type of scientists we articulated early in the curriculum development process. The collaboration and communication tools built into Aspen allowed even the quietest voice in our midst to be heard loud and clear.
Using Aspen IMS for Curriculum Mapping and Development

Districts across the country have been engaged in a mad scramble to revise their curricula and align with the Common Core. We needed to move quickly to reduce the burden on our teachers, and create multiple curricula in the most efficient and cost-effective manner. The tools offered through Follett coupled with Aspen IMS allowed our district to be thoughtful and effective in our response.

The curriculum mapping tools in Aspen IMS assisted teachers in getting past the initial stage of sheer panic, roll up their sleeves and get down to the business at hand. As district educational leaders rolled out how we were going to use the curriculum-mapping tools to help distribute the workload, there was almost a collective sigh of relief. Aspen IMS allowed us to chunk the work into reasonable stages versus every teacher “recreating the wheel” for all of their classes.

Illustration 3 depicts a curriculum map in the visual arts, and shows the connection between topics, concepts, strategies, assessments, resources and the standards in the high school visual arts classroom.

Allowing teachers an opportunity to build curriculum documents connected to each of those areas with the appropriate resources was a game changer for the district. Teachers across the district could work on a particular curriculum map, and all others had access to the work as it was completed. Using Aspen IMS also allowed district leaders to coordinate the efforts of individual teachers across grade level throughout the district. This systematic approach allowed district leaders to expend district resources in the most efficient manner.
ASPEN IMS: UNDER THE HOOD

Aspen IMS has several essential pieces to support building effective curriculum maps in your district. When you look under the hood you will notice the following additions to the Aspen IMS database:

- Destiny QuestTools
  - WebPath Express
  - One Search™
  - Digital resources
  - Destiny™ Library Manager
- Planner Integration
- Learning Standards
  - National content standards
  - State created standards
  - Locally created standards
- Document Structures
  - Header structures
  - Unit map structures
  - Lesson plan structures

National and state standards are automatically added to the database via Follett. School districts can add their own standards to the database, and this can be an important mechanism to align student work to high school graduation requirements or for accreditation purposes such as NEASC (New England Association of Schools and Colleges). Aspen IMS allows districts to align assignments in the teachers’ gradebook to lessons within a Unit of Study in a curriculum map. Each and every standard utilized in a curriculum map is connected to a course, and this alignment allows districts to perform a gap analysis of their courses against the standards. The ability to make the connection between what is being taught and how it’s being assessed is groundbreaking.

With Aspen IMS, districts have a lot of control as to the look and feel of their curriculum maps, and how the header, the unit map, and the lesson plan structures are determined. Each document structure is created in a similar fashion, and document structures can be standardized for all of the curriculum maps in a district, individualized for departments or individual courses. The document structure created at the district level translates into the curriculum map forms educators populate during the curriculum creation process. Illustration 4 depicts both the document structure and the form filled out during the mapping process.
Educators use the Destiny Quest tools embedded within Aspen IMS to help locate resources and materials aligned to the Common Core State Standards, or other national, state or local standards. Illustration 5 shows the extensive set of search tools embedded within Aspen IMS. Using the Quest tools in their resource/materials search, educators are quickly linked to resources used within the curriculum development processes. Aligned resources can easily be added to the shared resources within the Pages tool, or directly added to a specific curriculum map. These tools in concert with one another allow district educators the opportunity to develop curricula in a collaborative manner with a high degree of efficiency.

WebPath Express: This tool allows educators to search educator approved websites that have gone through a vetting process at Follett Software Solutions.
One Search: This tool pulls multiple databases (in house and subscription services) and web resources into a single search. End users can choose which results may be the most promising.
Digital Resources: This tool allows educators to search resources that are owned by the school district, or free resources identified by the district.
Destiny: This tool allows educators to search both print and e-print resources that are housed in the district’s online circulation database.

Another tool available to classroom teachers is the Planner tool. This tool allows teachers to view their curriculum maps across all of their courses. The Planner helps teachers see the daily connection in their classroom to district-wide curriculum maps. Teachers can view the overall scope and sequence of map topics, and review individual lesson plans in a curriculum map. The Planner provides access for teachers to print out lesson plans in a unit of study, or download resources associated with a lesson plan. Illustration 6 depicts how the curriculum maps are displayed within a teacher’s planner. Teachers can access all of the resources available directly from the planner, download them and revise them as needed.
The Planner tool built into Aspen IMS keeps the curriculum maps for a teacher’s courses front and center, and helps support the idea that curricula is living and needs to be revised according to the students in our classrooms.

**PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER USING ASPEN IMS**

Aspen IMS provided the vehicle for educators in the WWPS to create curriculum maps aligned to standards, and search for teacher-vetted resources that were aligned to the Common Core. The importance of the structure allowed WWPS educational leaders and staff to cut through the controversy and noise to create a viable and articulated PreK-12 curriculum aligned to the CCSS. Our purposeful connection beginning with curriculum and ending with the assessment of what was learned helped connect all of the dots for classroom teachers, administrators, parents and students. Aspen IMS allowed our district to stay above the fray, away from the controversy, and focus on teaching and learning.