Teachers back in school to master Common Core standards

Jul 15, 2015 | By Katherine Ellison | Sarah Tully, EdSource

School’s out for summer – although maybe not, if your job is to teach the Common Core State Standards.

Interviews with officials in six large California school districts and a major charter school system have found that several hundred of their teachers have signed up for – and in many cases by now already completed – summertime professional development programs provided at their schools to help them transition to the new standards.

EdSource Today is tracking how the six districts – Fresno Unified, San Jose Unified, Elk Grove Unified, Garden Grove Unified, Visalia Unified and Santa Ana Unified – and the Aspire Public Schools charter system are implementing the Common Core State Standards in California.

The summer learning opportunities are meant to address a major challenge facing districts throughout California: making sure their teachers are adequately prepared to help students adapt to the new, more rigorous standards in mathematics, literacy and English language arts.

The district-provided classes add to Common Core-focused educational programs that have been recruiting thousands of teachers from all over the state. These include a one-day, multi-site teachers’ summit, co-sponsored by organizations including the national nonprofit New Teacher Center and the California Department of Education, that is expected to attract up to 20,000 educators, and a two-day K-12 “summer institute” in Indian Wells, California, on July 19-20. Additionally, from August 4-6 at the Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles, the California County Superintendents Educational Services Association Arts Initiative will offer a three-day program called “Creativity at the Core,” featuring newly developed professional learning projects that link the visual and performing arts with the Common Core standards.

Kristen Soares, president of the Association of Independent California Colleges and Universities, said she was encouraged by both what she said was an unusual number of teacher education programs and the eagerness with which teachers are signing up for them. “We’re seeing a combination of resources, need and desire,” she said.

The districts’ summer programs range from two-hour workshops to intensive five-day workshops focused mainly on helping students learn to meet the standards’ new requirement that they be able to explain their reasoning in mathematics classes. In four of the districts surveyed, programs have been funded by philanthropies that support the Common Core.
Uncommon math in Santa Ana

Among the six districts and Aspire, the 56,000-student Santa Ana Unified School District, California’s sixth-largest school district, is offering some of the most extensive summer programs focused on the Common Core. These include two five-day workshops focused on the new math standards for 3rd- and 6th-grade teachers. The classes are taught by instructors from the Silicon Valley Mathematics Initiative, based in Morgan Hill, Calif., which provides professional development in mathematics instruction throughout the state.

The math workshops have been sponsored in part by a $6 million, five-year grant from the S.D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation, which through its Math in Common initiative has given similar grants for Common Core professional development in K-8 math to nine other school districts. These include two districts being tracked by EdSource Today: Elk Grove Unified, near Sacramento, and Garden Grove Unified, in Orange County.

In Santa Ana, math teachers have been paid on average $897 to attend the summer workshops. The district’s assistant superintendent, Michelle Rodriguez, said 280 teachers were quick to register for the two summer sessions, after which they will be given follow-up training and demonstration lessons during the school year through another professional development organization, the Irvine Math Project.

During a class at the first of the workshops, held in late June at Santa Ana’s Spurgeon Intermediate School, elementary school mathematics teachers learned strategies to coax students to explain how they arrive at answers to math problems. A key goal in Common Core math is to get students to figure out solutions to problems in multiple ways and then explain their thinking, rather than simply memorizing formulas.

Trainers suggested that teachers use phrases such as “Tell me more,” and “Good effort,” even if the initial answer is incorrect.

“It’s a big shift,” said 3rd-grade teacher Tricia Cummings, one of the participants. “Students are not used to orally explaining their answers.”

The classroom walls were covered with posters that teachers had produced over the previous three days, illustrating various ways to answer math problems, such as with words, pictures, and graphs. One of the posters, for instance, showed different ways to calculate the amount of ingredients required in a recipe according to how many people it would serve.

“What I’ve gotten out of this is how to talk about math with my kids,” Cummings said. “It’s made me more excited.”

In another classroom, 6th-grade math teachers talked about ways to help the district’s many English-language learners.

After the training, one of the teachers, Nikolina Petrova, said she had learned that using unfamiliar words such as “factor” or “quotient” could get in the way of English learners’ ability to grasp math concepts, whereas using simpler language, like “break into smaller numbers” might help them understand. Learning the formal terms for the concepts could come after that.

In what Rodriguez said was the district’s single mandatory summer program, Santa Ana has contracted with the Buck Institute for Education, based in Novato, California, to train 100 new teachers in project-based learning, an increasingly popular, mostly hands-on method. Proponents say the approach is well-suited to meet Common Core standards that expect students to improve their collaboration, communication, and critical-thinking skills. Rodriguez said the teachers had agreed to attend the program when they were hired.
Most of Santa Ana Unified’s professional development for teachers has been offered over the summer, Rodriguez said, to reduce the time that teachers spend out of the classroom during the school year to attend such programs. The district is one of many in California that has reported recent difficulties in finding well-qualified substitute teachers, due to a dwindling supply of teachers in the state.

**A boost in summer training**

The two other district beneficiaries of Bechtel grants are also offering extensive summer programs for their teachers. Garden Grove Unified, which with 46,500 students is the 11th-largest district in California, has also been providing Common Core training in mathematics and English language arts during two two-week “summer institutes” for K-8 teachers. In these sessions, teachers have been collaborating to plan lessons aligned to the new state standards and then delivering them to students enrolled in summer school.

The Garden Grove district is also offering an optional “Super Week,” open to all of its teachers, in late August, just before the beginning of the school year. The classes, lasting two to seven hours each, include a refresher course in “foundational skills” geared to the standards, a course in “Dialogue, Debate and Discourse,” to help teachers improve students’ communication skills, and a workshop titled “Got iPad? Now What?” for teachers seeking to be more comfortable with new information technology.

Elk Grove Unified is the fifth-largest district in California, with 61,000 students. It is offering more than a dozen Common Core-focused professional development workshops throughout the summer, lasting a couple hours to two days each, and taught by district program specialists on Common Core math, English, and social sciences. Topics include new strategies for math instruction, guidance on how to integrate technology into the curriculum, and “21st Century Literacy” – a term that as defined by the National Council of Teachers of English includes the capacities to manage new information technologies, including multimedia texts, and to collaborate with others to pose and solve problems. The district’s teachers are contractually obligated to attend one professional development course per year, but are eligible for payment if they take more than one.

**Going Deeper**

The Fresno Unified School District is another major beneficiary of educational philanthropy, having received a $5.1 million grant in 2013 from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The grant was specifically intended to support professional development, and some of it will pay for five days of “curriculum camps” tied to the Common Core for English, math and social studies teachers teaching grades 7 to 9. Fresno is also providing 10 half-day sessions this summer to familiarize teachers with the district’s new Common Core math materials, and will additionally offer training in the standards at 30 of its elementary school sites, one to five days before the school year begins.

The Aspire Public Schools system, which operates 35 schools in California, is also offering summer Common Core-focused classes for teachers, with two-day mandatory “Common Core Institutes” in two of the system’s main regions: the San Francisco Bay Area and in the Central Valley. The programs are tailored to teachers of K-5 English, K-5 math, and 6-12 science, math, and humanities, and among other goals aim to familiarize teachers with new curriculum materials and assessments. As part of the training, science teachers will be offered a survey of the Next Generation Science Standards.

Two of the six districts surveyed by EdSource Today – San Jose Unified and Visalia Unified – completed their summer professional training in June. San Jose’s main offerings were week-long sessions for K-5
teachers focused on reading and math instruction tied to the Common Core. In Visalia, in the San Joaquin Valley, the school district provided two-day math workshops for K-6 teachers. It also offered a two-day workshop on writing, geared to the new standards, for K-6 teachers.

Uniting the school districts and other providers of summertime professional development is a keen interest in ensuring the success of the new Common Core standards, said Soares, at the Association of Independent California Colleges and Universities. “And that’s a really good thing,” she said, “given their importance to our students and our state.”

*EdSource reporter Sarah Tully contributed to this report.*

*EdSource Today’s coverage of the Common Core is supported by philanthropies including the Gates and Bechtel foundations, both of which are mentioned in this story. EdSource maintains sole editorial control over the content of its coverage.*

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[Katherine Ellison](mailto:katherine.ellison@edsource.org) covers the Common Core State Standards for EdSource. [Email](mailto:katherine.ellison@edsource.org) her or [Follow](https://twitter.com/katherinellison) her on Twitter. Sign up [here](https://www.edsource.org/subscribe) for a no-cost online subscription to EdSource Today for reports from the largest education reporting team in California.