Leading Change

Sonoma County administrators and teacher-leaders join in teams to lead Common Core implementation

Strong leadership has long been acknowledged as a significant contributing factor to school excellence. In the complex world of Common Core State Standards implementation, successful transition to this new vision for K-12 education demands strong leadership at both the school and district level.

But **one strong leader is not enough** to bring the Common Core to life in every classroom within a school or district. This work requires leadership teams: teachers and administrators who come together to guide the process and support the people who must make needed changes.

At the start of this school year, SCOE's Educational Support Services department set a goal of providing clear, forward-thinking support for school and district leadership teams engaged in Common Core implementation. The department developed several professional development opportunities centered on curriculum and instructional practices as seen through the lens of shared leadership. New courses were designed for leadership teams comprised of administrators and teacher-leaders who were shepherding the transition to Common Core at the school site and district level.

"There is plenty of work to be done at all levels," says Dr. Judith Martin, director of leadership initiatives at SCOE. "By developing a structure for *shared* leadership, districts create opportunities for many individuals to contribute and help build the necessary knowledge, skills, and capacity for change. The shared-team approach pulls people together to study and understand concerns about change and to work on integrating 21st century learning practices at their sites."

This year's *Building High-Performing Leadership Teams* course was especially impactful for Sonoma County teams. In this issue of the SCOE Bulletin, Dr. Martin explains how this training was structured and how it helped prepare teams to lead Common Core implementation.

Shared leadership

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The Twin Hills team creates a map to help clarify goals and challenges as they move toward full Common Core implementation.

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Teams used this planning tool to focus their priorities as they discussed the **culture-building drivers** that impact their sites, including:

- Trust
- Collaboration
- Capacity building
- Shared leadership

SETTING THE STAGE

Ninety-two participants came together in nine teams for the *Building High-Performing Leadership Teams* course. They met three times during the 2013-14 school year—in October, January, and March. Mornings were devoted to presentations on Common Core and leadership building, interspersed with exercises designed to help teams analyze school culture and assess faculty strengths and needs in light of the changes required by Common Core. Afternoons were organized so that each team could meet separately to plan the next steps for their sites.

Instructors Karen McGahey and Judith Martin, both part of SCOE's Educational Support Services department, worked with independent leadership consultant Anne Richards to develop and lead the morning presentations. In the afternoon, they visited the individual team meetings to answer questions and offer suggestions specific to the needs of each team.

The starting point in designing the sessions was to clearly identify the purpose: Why are we doing what we are doing? What do we expect as an outcome? The instructors focused on this essential question: How does a high-performing leadership team guide successful implementation of the Common Core State Standards?
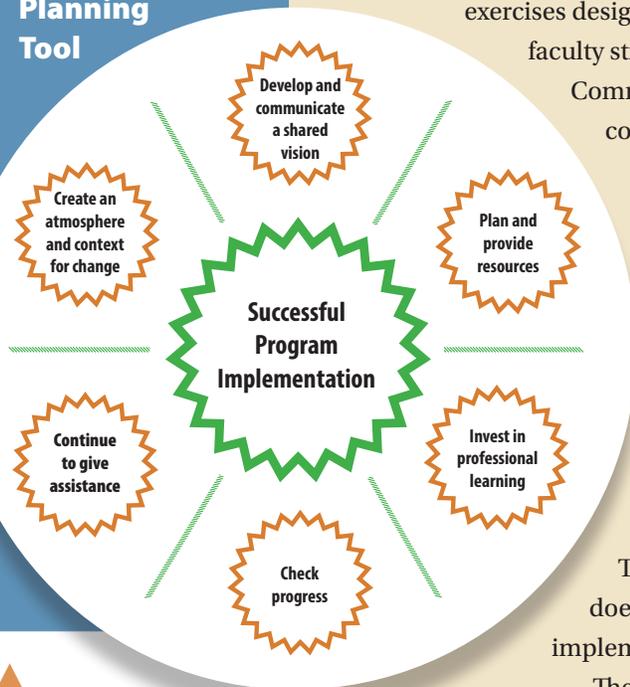
The October session began with a look at school culture, a topic of such significance that the teams returned to it throughout the subsequent meetings. Action Briefs on Common Core implementation from Achieve, Inc. were reviewed and raised a provocative question regarding school culture and the move to Common Core: **Are you driving your school's culture, or is it driving you?** This was a topic of intense discussion.

Teams also dug into the article, "Making the Leap: Leadership, Learning, and Successful Program Implementation," by Edward Tobia and Shirley Hord. This article identified six essential strategies for program implementation:

- Create an atmosphere and context for change
- Develop and communicate a shared vision
- Plan and provide resources
- Invest in professional learning
- Check progress
- Continue to give assistance

With these strategies in mind and referencing excerpts from *School Systems That Learn* by Paul Ash and John D'Auria, a planning tool was developed for this session. Using this tool, the teams discussed the elements they needed to focus on and the "culture-building drivers" that had the most impact at their sites. Teams had homework to do on this topic and would report back at the next session.

PROCESSING THE LEARNING

When the teams met again in January, the room was abuzz with updates on site-based conversations, use of the planning template, self-assessments, reflections on school culture, and what it was going to take to deeply implement the Common Core Standards. The leadership teams had begun to grow in cohesiveness and clarity about their purpose in leading change at their sites.

The January meeting was devoted to **advancing team capacity** in working with colleagues and planning site implementation of Common Core. Following a review of the first session's planning tool, teams took a closer look at the four stages of team development as articulated by psychologist Bruce Tuckman: forming, storming, norming, and performing.

To increase participants' understanding and empathy, the teams also read Phillip Schlecty's seminal 1993 article, "On the Frontier of School Reform with Trailblazers, Pioneers, and Settlers." Almost immediately, team members were identifying themselves as one of the "types" described in this article.

Most team members saw themselves as trailblazers—the individuals who take the first step toward change and innovation. Pioneers stand close behind the trailblazers. They can help develop teams, but need reassurance that the change is for the better. Settlers want detailed maps and need to know the purpose of the change. Two additional types are outlined in the article: stay-at-homes, who wait until the change is built, and saboteurs, who can cause trouble in times of change.

The ongoing context for the session remained focused on implementation of the Common Core State Standards. Time spent learning about the personality types that populate schools served the useful purpose of encouraging teams to **plan a differentiated approach** to supporting Common Core implementation.

Karen McGahey, director of Common Core at SCOE, was the constant and reassuring voice in support of "going slow" and "finding a logical entry point" for Common Core implementation. She referenced several guides with helpful checklists for implementation planning that would help teams move forward.

Of special note was the Leadership Planning Guide from the California County Superintendents Educational Services Association (CCSESA). The guide's Ten Key Components across the Four Phases of Implementation chart provided a way for teams to track their implementation progress over time.

FINDING DIRECTION, ARTICULATING COMMITMENT

By the third session of *Building High-Performing Leadership Teams* in March, school and district teams had begun to see the through-line of their work, from where they started in the fall to the future at their sites. The challenge of crafting inclusive group processes, inviting involvement from everyone affected by the changes, and staying the course toward Common Core implementation remained, but the spirit of goodwill and commitment to the work had taken hold.

At the March session, teams reviewed their journey using a visual dialogue template. This helped them clarify critical events and key learnings; identify useful tools and strategies; articulate their challenges, opportunities, and accomplishments; and consider the messages they needed to craft for others at their sites. The teams presented their findings in colorful visual representations, which were shared in a gallery walk activity. Everyone came away from the session with a sense of accomplishment and the understanding that this was just the beginning, but it was a start they could grow on.

This session, like the two earlier ones, was designed to **help build capacity for change** rather than focus on the specifics of what the change entailed. It acknowledged the "messiness" of re-envisioning instruction in every single classroom, yet gave the teams a sense of resiliency and commitment to support the Common Core shift. The active participation of teacher-leaders on each team validated their role and recognized that the impact of the work that lies ahead will be seen in the classroom—and in the future success of our county's students. ◆

About this publication: Content for this issue of the SCOE Bulletin was provided by Judith Martin, Ph.D., (707) 522-3069 or jmartin@scoe.org.

Visual Dialogue

Template	Past	Present	Future
Critical events			
Key learning | "ah-ha" moments			
Useful tools | strategies | take-aways			
Challenges | opportunities			
Successes | accomplishments			
Messages to others			

One Team's Representation

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Teams used the template above, then presented their findings in visual representations.

The 'Building High-Performing Leadership Teams' class will be offered again in 2014-15, along with ongoing support for this year's teams.

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