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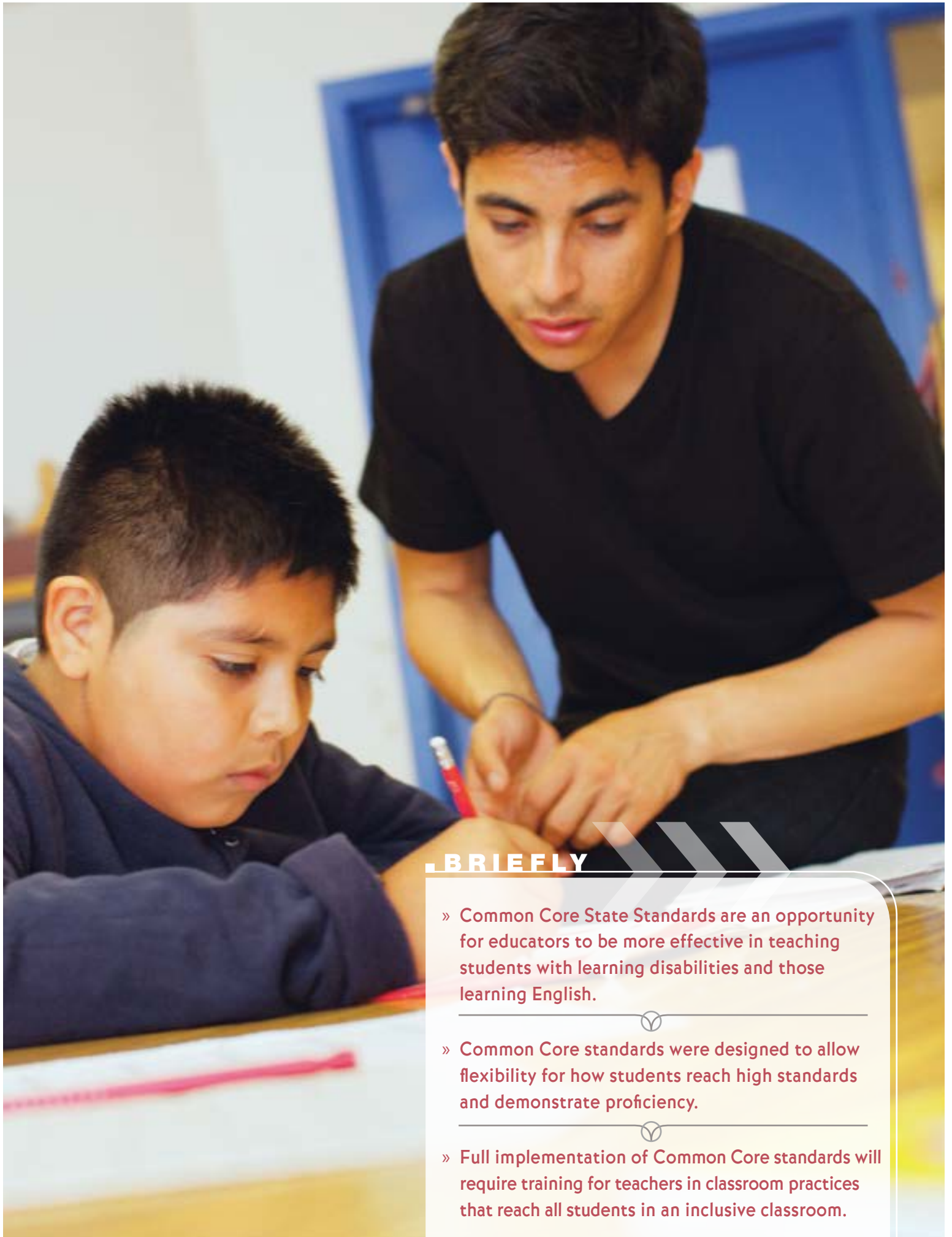
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*timely knowledge for education and human development*





## BRIEFLY

- » Common Core State Standards are an opportunity for educators to be more effective in teaching students with learning disabilities and those learning English.
- » Common Core standards were designed to allow flexibility for how students reach high standards and demonstrate proficiency.
- » Full implementation of Common Core standards will require training for teachers in classroom practices that reach all students in an inclusive classroom.

# Common Core: An Uncommon Opportunity for Low-Performing Students

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS), adopted by 45 states so far, provide an opportunity to change education practices so as to turn around the performance of student groups most in need of improvement.

And such turn-around is more important today than it's ever been. Throughout the nation, almost every subgroup of students performs poorly on measures such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress, and students with disabilities are typically the lowest-scoring subgroup. English learners don't fare much better. The gaps between these groups and higher-performing peers are huge.

"CCSS offer an opportunity to help all students be more engaged and successful in school—and have more opportunities when they graduate," says Sharen Bertrando, Special Education Development Program Specialist at WestEd.

Building on more than 20 years of experience as a teacher and program coordinator focused primarily on special education, Bertrando has coauthored, with WestEd's John Carr, *Teaching English Learners and Students with Learning Difficulties in an Inclusive Classroom: A Guidebook for Teachers*. Their book describes teaching practices that support students for the kind of learning that the Common Core emphasizes.

The developers of the Common Core intended these new standards to work well with all students, explicitly including English learners and students with disabilities. Bertrando contends that several characteristics of the

CCSS are favorable for implementing teaching practices that research has shown to be effective with all students, particularly students with learning disabilities and those who are English learners.

"The Common Core gives us an opportunity to encourage widespread implementation of more effective practices," she says, "because the standards are so flexible, so broadly written, and they take an integrated, interdisciplinary approach to learning that is aligned to real-life application."

## INTEGRATING AND ALIGNING STANDARDS

Traditional state standards tend to consist of isolated expectations, chunking learning goals by grade and subject matter. They often include a laundry list of discrete pieces of knowledge or skills students are expected to acquire. The Common Core State Standards do include similar expectations—for example, an English Language Arts standard for grade 1 is to "identify basic similarities in and differences between two texts on the same topic (for example, in illustrations, descriptions, or procedures)."

But the CCSS are more than a list of discrete items. The essence of the Common Core is in its overall structure and organization. They include individual grade-level



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standards within an integrated set of learning progressions that build toward college and career readiness.

The CCSS consist of what Bertrando calls “staircased” learning progressions, building students’ knowledge and skills with increasing sophistication year by year until they achieve college and career readiness. For example, the Common Core item mentioned above is one step in students’ progression toward a college/career “anchor standard” for English language arts: “Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.”

Students are not expected to do this at a college level right away. Rather, the Common Core specifies a standard for each grade that ties to this “anchor.” By the end of grade 8, for example, students are expected to be at a more sophisticated level, able to “analyze a case in which two or more texts provide conflicting information on the same topic and identify where the texts disagree on matters of fact or interpretation.”

Another way the standards are integrated is that they have more of a real-world emphasis than previous standards. “The approach is more about integrating ideas, so you’re not going to teach just math, just English, or just social studies. It’s all integrated,” says Bertrando. “That’s the approach of the 21st century. You teach things in a context that makes them more related to real life.”

Such an approach is particularly helpful for students with learning disabilities, especially for those with autism spectrum disorder, because it is often very difficult for

them to understand things that are not real or concrete, says Bertrando. The more integrated, “real-life” approach engendered by the CCSS tends to be more motivating for many of these students.

#### COMBINING FLEXIBILITY WITH HIGH EXPECTATIONS FOR ALL

With standards for all grades, even as early as kindergarten, “anchored” by college and career readiness expectations, the Common Core establishes particular steps for students to achieve by the end of each grade. These steps, in turn, are broken into the more detailed learning progressions used to organize shorter units of study. Recent developments in cognitive science, educational psychology, and assessment make it possible for teams of diverse professionals to take a new approach to defining these learning progressions.

Rather than sequencing instruction principally by specific chunks of content that must be “covered,” steps toward mastery of core knowledge and skills can be defined more by *how most students progress toward learning them*. With their greater emphasis on students’ cognitive processes, these kinds of learning progressions could serve as an important tool for developing Common Core-based instruction and assessment.

The Common Core has been designed to allow flexibility for how students reach high standards and demonstrate proficiency. For example, “the English Language Arts standards are fewer in number, and a broader range of skills can be used to attain them,” in comparison with most previous state standards,” says WestEd’s Carr. “So the Common



Core standards support teachers in focusing on what is most important in greater depth or perhaps a slower pace so that all students eventually can reach proficiency.”

He notes that this approach is especially helpful for English learners “who need ample time to learn a great deal of academic language and build background knowledge and experience that support reading comprehension.”

One of the 21st-century skills emphasized in the Common Core is collaboration. The introduction to the standards for English Language Arts and Literacy lists “speaking and listening: flexible communication and collaboration” as one of the key features of the standards. According to Carr, collaborative learning can be particularly important for students with learning disabilities and English learners because it promotes a rich environment for the use of academic language.

By working together with other students, English learners and students with learning disabilities hear their peers discuss ideas and rephrase what the teacher has said, which can help build their vocabulary and fluency. Small-group or pair work also can lower students’ anxiety by giving them opportunities to speak to just one or a few peers before sharing their thinking with the teacher or the whole class.

### EMBEDDING LITERACY LEARNING IN ALL SUBJECTS

One of the most significant ways the Common Core State Standards are integrated, or cross-disciplinary, is the way they address literacy. Rather than viewing literacy as an isolated set of skills to be taught only in English language arts classes, the Common Core suggests that

literacy is the responsibility of all teachers. The Common Core includes reading standards for literacy in history/social studies, for example, and writing standards for literacy in science.

English learners and many students with learning disabilities tend to struggle with literacy, which affects their performance in all subjects. Increasing the focus on literacy instruction across subjects has the potential to boost the achievement of these and other students. The Common Core also places more emphasis than previous standards on learning through informational texts rather than narrative texts. Many students with particular kinds of learning disabilities tend to do better working with informational texts because of their focus on “real life.”

### PUTTING THE IDEAS INTO PRACTICE

“We need to be smart about how we implement the standards, translating them into a curriculum that is innovative and creative,” says Bertrando.

Teaching approaches should take into account the fact that there are many different kinds of students in every classroom, so teaching should not be limited to a one-size-fits-all approach. To implement the CCSS, educators will need extensive professional development on teaching practices that can reach all students in inclusive settings—general education classrooms that include students with disabilities as well as English learners.

Educators also need to be able to work together, especially given the Common Core’s integrated approach, spreading responsibility for literacy across all subject



## BRIEFLY

- » High school students who excel at pencil-and-paper exercises in chemistry earn high grades in the subject yet often don't understand basic chemistry concepts.
- » An interactive virtual chemistry lab, ChemVLab+, shows promise for improving high school students' understanding of basic chemistry concepts through inquiry learning.
- » Embedded tutoring in ChemVLab+ supports students to complete lab experiments independently, allowing them to make mistakes and try again.

# INTERACTIVE LAB

## Brings Chemistry to (Virtual) Life

Studies show that high school students who excel at solving pencil-and-paper chemistry problems from a textbook—and who, therefore, get good grades—often can't make connections between the long string of chemical notations they create and the actual chemical reaction it represents.

For some leading science educators, this situation is analogous to giving students A's in Spanish because they can conjugate a dozen verbs. While they've mastered an important tool of the trade, they may never have actually applied it to speaking or reading the language.

An interactive virtual chemistry laboratory for high school students, developed by The ChemCollective group at Carnegie Mellon University (CMU) and WestEd's Science, Technology, Engineering, & Mathematics (STEM) program, is drawing students into the inquiry process at the heart of chemistry and presenting them with interesting, real-life problems to solve. The ChemVLab+ project, based on a virtual lab developed by CMU, shows promise for improving high school students' understanding of basic chemistry concepts and their appreciation for how chemistry is used to explain puzzling phenomena, develop new materials, and solve problems.

"The ChemVLab+ activities with embedded individualized tutoring give all students access to the benefits of open-ended inquiry in chemistry lab assignments," says Principal Investigator Jodi Davenport, "regardless of their beginning level of proficiency. The technology is also providing teachers detailed performance data they can use to fine-tune instruction. Our preliminary classroom studies suggest students are learning content and inquiry skills and teachers find the reports valuable."

### SUPPORTING INQUIRY-BASED LEARNING WITH DETAILED FEEDBACK

The original virtual chemistry lab was developed in 2000 by CMU to replace the paper-and-pencil problems that are typically assigned in chemistry class. Its flexible, multimedia learning environment was designed to promote authentic chemistry learning by allowing students to design and carry out experiments. Activities using the virtual lab aimed to help students connect the "math" of chemistry (calculations in traditional problems) with the "science" of chemistry (making predictions, gathering data, drawing conclusions, and generating explanations).

But when CMU pilot tested the modules, student responses indicated that the open-ended environment wasn't working for everyone. Users fell into two distinct groups – those who thrived on the free exploration, and others who were paralyzed with confusion about what to do next.

The new modules developed by CMU and STEM—complete with virtual chemicals, equipment, and tools—use interactive and engaging scenarios to help students make connections between symbolic representations of chemical reactions, molecular models of those reactions, and observable changes in, for example, the color, temperature, or final concentration of chemical compounds.



Teachers commented that “students were really involved” and that they “liked using the real settings and tying the chemistry to new contexts.”

The activities also contain an intelligent tutoring system that offers hints when a student gets stuck. By responding to user behavior, the system allows students to progress at their own pace, offering them just enough scaffolding to reach the next step in the problem on their own. The goal is to calibrate instruction so that students are working within what psychologist Lev Vygotsky called their “zone of proximal development,” that sweet spot of perfectly pitched challenge where students learn best.

The virtual tutor gives graduated feedback, ranging from simple prompting to detailed explanations of how to apply a rule or concept. A log file maintains data on each student’s performance, including how many tries were needed to succeed in a learning task and how much help was needed along the way. Teachers can access reports detailing what knowledge or skills were covered, what was retained, and what may need further teaching.

Researchers are in the process of creating eight online laboratory activities. The lab activities address core concepts in high school chemistry, such as conservation of matter, equilibrium, heat flow, and acid-base chemistry. Each activity presents an authentic problem-solving context to motivate the problem solving. For example, in one scenario, students learn about concentration and dilution in the context of preparing drinks of differing concentrations. Using a virtual spectrometer, they determine the concentration of various drinks and prepare a drink of a specified concentration. Other modules focus on using chemical equations and specialized measurement to identify unknown components in a solution; and figuring out whether samples of drinking water meet EPA guidelines.

In each activity, students engage with multiple representations of chemistry from the macroscopic (e.g., concentration of solutions in beakers) to microscopic (e.g., atoms and molecules) and notational (e.g., chemical equations). Students, as an example, analyze chemical reactions by observing changes in solutions, looking at molecular changes as represented by two-dimensional molecular models, and working with chemical equations.

In a pilot study, WestEd’s STEM program tested these three virtual lab activities in three California high school classrooms with a total of 69 students. Classroom observations revealed high student engagement and active involvement. What’s more, students were able to progress through the exercises with the virtual tutor, either independently or in pairs.

Observers noted that the novelty of the virtual lab tasks allowed some students to break out of their habitual classroom roles. In one instance, a pair of low-performing students was observed engaging in an animated discussion about chemistry. Teachers commented that “students were really involved” and that they “liked using the real settings and tying the chemistry to new contexts.”

Performance on post-tests showed significant gains in conceptual understanding of chemistry concepts. An analysis of the log file data revealed that students required less help on subsequent iterations of the same task, and that their patterns of seeking hints showed increasing understanding of the material.

#### ENGAGING IN AUTHENTIC PRACTICE

Although the virtual lab is effective in helping students understand chemistry, its developers did not intend it to



replace the chemistry lab experience. Rather, they hoped to enhance the practice piece of the curriculum—the part that would ordinarily consist only of paper-and-pencil calculations—so students could better see the connection between their classroom exercises and the work that chemists do: conducting experiments to explain phenomena, analyzing substances to reveal their chemical makeup, and creating new materials. In short, they want students to recognize that the notations, calculations, and procedures that they learn in chemistry class are simply part of a toolbox that allows chemists to carry out this work.

By taking away some of the vagaries of the lab, where imprecise measurement or uncontrollable variables can prevent results from turning out as planned, the virtual lab allows students to focus on the concepts as they observe the results of their actions. As Davenport explains, “In a real lab, setups are complicated, safety measures must be taken, and errors are often difficult to correct. The virtual lab gives students the ability to quickly design experiments, make mistakes, and try again.”

### REFRAMING THE TEACHER'S ROLE

One of the guiding questions of the project is: can the assessment information gleaned from work in a simulation-based environment allow teachers to make better instructional decisions without increasing their workload? Embedding formative assessments in the virtual lab is one small example of the tremendous potential for technology to enhance instruction by freeing teachers of some of their most time-consuming burdens. The computer provides a detailed analysis of error patterns, allowing teachers to spend less time on grading and

more time tailoring instruction according to their own students' needs.

Teachers in the pilot study commented that, because their students were being supported by the virtual tutor, they were able to circulate in the classroom and have valuable interactions with individual students. Log file data on students' use of hints provided a rich trove of information about what they understood and what skills were still missing.

Although the ChemVLab+ activities currently comprise only eight classes out of a year-long high school chemistry course, Davenport and her colleagues foresee the impact extending beyond the virtual lab experience. “Our activities focus on specific topics, but our broader goal is for students to see chemistry as the practice of finding solutions to problems that matter in the world, not just problems in the back of the book. Our activities aim to help teachers and students gain experience with inquiry practices, and actively make connections between mathematical calculations and scientific principles.”

“Not only do the activities reinforce important chemistry concepts,” she says, “but they provide both teachers and students a new approach to learning chemistry.”



**For further information about the embedded assessments for The ChemVLab+ project, please visit [chemvlab.org](http://chemvlab.org) or contact Jodi Davenport at 510-402-3274 or [jdavenp@WestEd.org](mailto:jdavenp@WestEd.org).**



## BRIEFLY

- » The California Healthy Kids Survey (CHKS) is a nationally recognized tool for measuring youth resilience and the developmental supports linked to positive outcomes in school and life.
- » CHKS has played a powerful role in bringing communities together to address youth needs related to health and well-being.
- » CHKS reflects the input of a wide range of community stakeholders and can be customized to fit the needs of a particular school or district.



# Surveys

## Rally Communities to Protect and Support Kids

On February 5, 2005, the community of Pacifica, CA, was rocked with tragedy when two teenagers died in a drunk driving accident near the city's golf course. That same night, school administrators and community agency staff were on the phone to one another, coming to an agreement: "This cannot happen again." The question was how to prevent another such incident.

The answer has involved using results from the California Healthy Kids Survey (CHKS)—a youth needs assessment and school climate data collection service created by WestEd for the California Department of Education and available to education agencies in California and beyond—to address students' vulnerabilities to behaviors and environments that jeopardize their academic performance, health, safety, and positive development.

Uniting under a coalition called the Partnership for a Safe and Healthy Pacifica, teenagers, parents, local health and human services and law enforcement agencies, and school administrators scrutinized CHKS data to more clearly understand the substance abuse problems in the Jefferson Union High School District (JUHSD). They then drew upon that data to garner \$500,000 in grants from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services over the past five years to fund the Drug Free Communities Support Program.

Those efforts have paid off. JUHSD teenagers are now promoting alcohol awareness and designated driver programs at proms and parties. Local police are diligently working to make sure merchants don't sell alcohol to minors. And, thanks to a new ordinance, parents are now held accountable to prevent underage kids from drinking at parties at their homes—or risk paying a stiff fine. The 2011 CHKS data on binge drinking indicated a significant

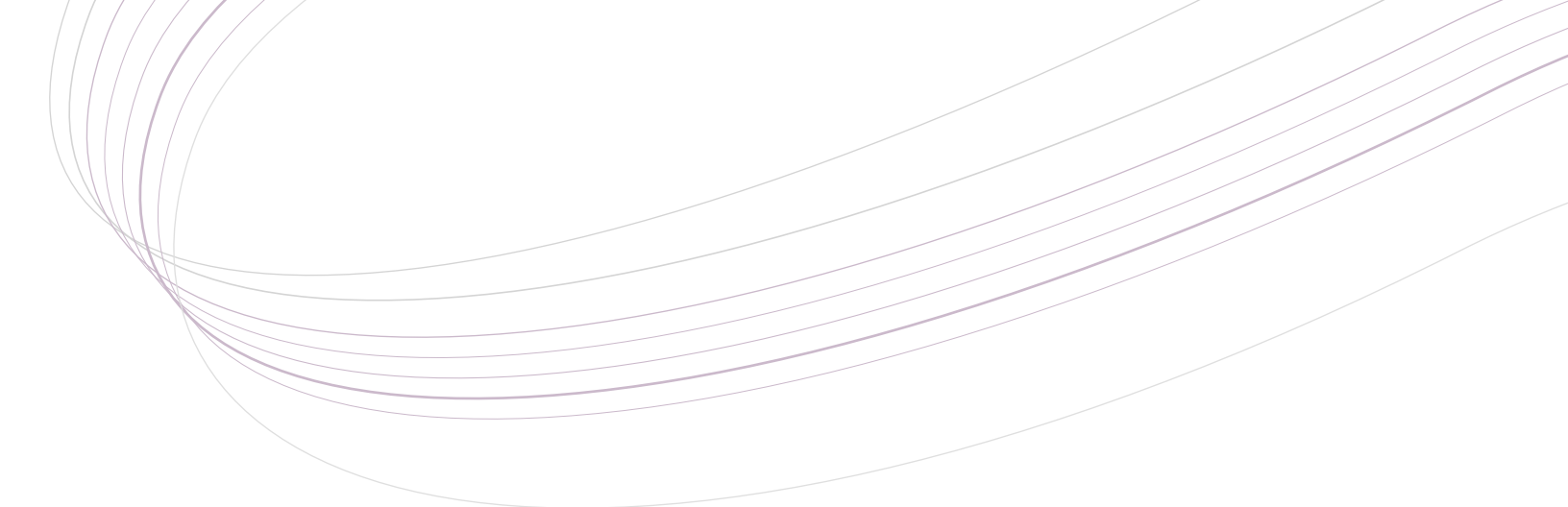
downward trend, compared to data from 2005, for both 9th and 11th grades in one Pacifica high school, but data for the other high school showed an upward trend in binge drinking. The new data helped the coalition build a case for new funding in its 2012 application because the data shows much more work needs to be done in Pacifica to reduce alcohol abuse among middle and high school students.

### WHAT'S (REALLY) GOING ON

JUHSD's experience is just one of many success stories demonstrating how schools may turn troubling statistics into projects and programs that serve students' emotional, social, health, and safety needs and improve school climate. Indeed, that's the motivation behind the CHKS and its partner surveys, the California School Climate Survey for school staff and the California School Parent Survey. The CHKS is nationally recognized as a leading tool for the assessment of youth resilience and the developmental supports and strengths that have been linked to positive educational, social, emotional, and health outcomes.

"The resulting information allows districts to monitor whether they're providing the critical developmental supports and opportunities that promote healthy growth and learning," says Greg Austin, program director of





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WestEd's Health & Human Development Program. The majority of questions examine student experiences at and attitudes toward school, to provide data to guide school improvement efforts. The middle and high school surveys capture information on serious and growing issues that are barriers to learning and positive development, such as drug use, harassment and violence, nutrition and physical health, sexual behavior, suicide, gang involvement, and truancy.

"Because CHKS data has enabled us to demonstrate need, our family advocates have been able to bring service providers into the schools to work with parents and students," reports Melissa Cadena, formerly the Safe Schools/Healthy Students Coordinator for Soledad Unified School District in California. As a result, the district now offers evening and Saturday parenting classes, and in-school interventions such as anger management, grief groups, and substance abuse classes for students who face suspension. Schools have also been able to implement the Safe School Ambassadors program to address bullying concerns.

WestEd rolled out CHKS in California for the first time in 1998. "We developed it to meet multiple needs and help schools avoid becoming overwhelmed, as they often were, by numerous survey requests, frequently for data required by the federal and state government—but still provide them with the basic data they need to guide the fostering of positive school climates and the supports that all students need to thrive in school and life," says WestEd's Austin.

The flexible data collection tool offers schools the ability to customize a survey to meet their needs by adding supplementary modules of their own choosing

that expand on topics covered in the core module and that address in more detail issues of sexual behavior and education, gang involvement, staff cultural responsiveness, and other factors related to the achievement gap, school climate, physical and mental health, and the community environment. It also allows schools to assess other special topics by creating new items.

With feedback from school districts, WestEd has continued to refine the surveys over the years and has created additional tools to capture the experiences and knowledge of school staff and parents. The surveys are now available in a web-based online version and in a paper form with optical-scan answer sheets. Louisiana and West Virginia are using the CHKS, along with the staff and parent surveys, to assess school climate as part of their Safe and Supportive Schools projects.

#### THE RHODE ISLAND EXPERIENCE

Cited as a model program by the U.S. Department of Education, CHKS has inspired the development and administration by WestEd of similar surveys in states including Louisiana, West Virginia, and Rhode Island. In the "tiniest state," SurveyWorks! is the name given to a suite of surveys collaboratively designed by WestEd and the University of Rhode Island for Rhode Island students, parents, teachers, and administrators. It enables school teams and the community to get a 360-degree view of climate in local schools, student learning, teaching supports, family involvement, and funding and other resources.

In 2010, SurveyWorks! replaced an older survey in Rhode Island, which mandates a yearly questionnaire process of



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its 300 elementary, middle, and high schools. “While this data tool looks at school climate issues, it also focuses on teachers’ classroom practices, professional development, school decision making, and other education-related matters,” says Natalie Lacireno-Paquet, senior research associate with WestEd.

One key lesson that Rhode Island districts have learned is the importance of including a variety of stakeholders in developing survey questions. “This is critical for getting buy-in from all of those being asked to respond,” says Lacireno-Paquet. At the same time, SurveyWorks! developers have had to guard against questionnaires becoming too long and laborious as a result. “This year we shortened the surveys and we’re thinking of alternating various topics each year,” she notes.

### OPTIMIZING SURVEY PARTICIPATION

For California alone, which includes more than 1,000 school districts, 7,000 schools, and one million students, collecting such data every two years has been a huge, multi faceted effort. WestEd has taken care to provide workshops, guidebooks, webinars, helplines, and instructions to assist with survey administration, data processing, and the creation of action plans in response to results.

“One key challenge everywhere is getting sufficient numbers of students, staff, and parents to take the survey to have representative, useful data,” says WestEd’s Austin. To encourage the highest response rate possible, WestEd guides schools to conduct all three surveys at the same time, offer paper and online options, thoroughly inform all parties about the surveys’ value and procedures, and frequently remind them of survey dates.

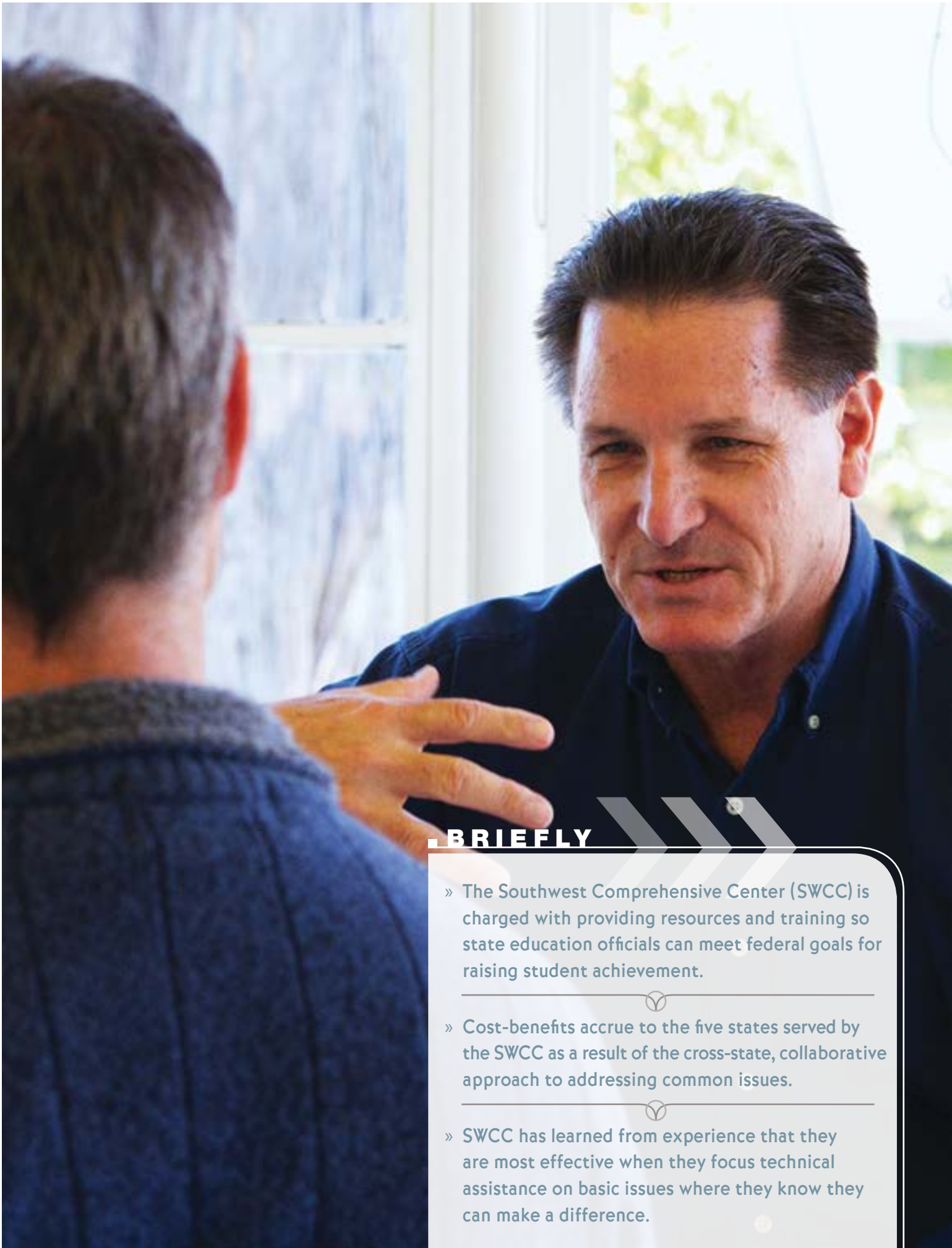
To help schools use the resulting information effectively, WestEd works with districts to discuss the survey results in depth, identify and prioritize their issues and needs, and determine what resources are available to create or improve intervention and school climate programs. “Bringing the student and parent voices into the process is also critical,” emphasizes Austin. “Holding student fishbowls and focus groups helps a school better understand why students have responded the way they have, what the issues are, and what can be done to support them. This also communicates caring and promotes a healthy environment and students’ sense of connectedness to school.”

Between 2003 and 2010, all California districts were required to complete the surveys every two years in order to receive federal Title IV funds to support risk prevention work in schools. The federal government stopped funding Title IV in 2010, meaning that CHKS and its companion surveys for staff and teachers were no longer required.

“The surveys have proven so useful,” says Austin, “that many communities are organizing resources at the county level to continue their administration. It seems that such data collection tools will continue to play a role in California and other states because they’re having a real impact on the quality of life and education for our students.”



**For more information about the Healthy Kids Survey, contact Greg Austin at 562.799.5155 or [gaustin@WestEd.org](mailto:gaustin@WestEd.org). And for more information about SurveyWorks!, contact Natalie Lacireno-Paquet at 781.481.1133 or [nlacire@WestEd.org](mailto:nlacire@WestEd.org).**



## BRIEFLY

» The Southwest Comprehensive Center (SWCC) is charged with providing resources and training so state education officials can meet federal goals for raising student achievement.



» Cost-benefits accrue to the five states served by the SWCC as a result of the cross-state, collaborative approach to addressing common issues.



» SWCC has learned from experience that they are most effective when they focus technical assistance on basic issues where they know they can make a difference.

## Center Gathers State Education Agencies to Tackle *Common Issues*

In the nearly five years that Robert Hammond has had a leadership role with the Colorado Department of Education, first as its deputy commissioner and now as commissioner, he says that he cannot recall “a single significant policy change that did not involve the Southwest Comprehensive Center” (SWCC) at WestEd. Whether helping to bring consistency to the department’s budgeting and hiring procedures or to align Colorado’s new assessment system to the Common Core standards, the SWCC has been a valued partner in transforming the state agency.

“It’s real simple: without [SWCC’s] support we would not be where we are today,” Hammond says. “I’ve dealt with other groups around the country, and it pains me sometimes because my expectations are so high now. But I realize that what [SWCC] does is unique; it’s a whole different level of support.”

Established in 2005 to help state education agencies implement the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the SWCC is one of 16 Comprehensive Centers around the country, each one serving either a single state or a cluster of states. The SWCC guides state agencies in Arizona, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico, and Utah with state and federal education policy and reform efforts. Because the federal government supports the center’s work, the state agencies are able to receive assistance and logistical support whenever they need it.

Those cost benefits are crucial. All five states in the SWCC region have among the lowest-funded education departments in the nation. They have very limited staff and large geographic areas to cover, making it especially difficult to both monitor and support school districts. In addition to having limited state education budgets, the five members of the SWCC share a history of local school control. Districts often resent and resist state interference, which challenges efforts to create uniform systems of teacher

evaluation and school accountability. As an outside partner with recognized expertise and credibility, the SWCC has helped repair these relationships as well as improve the overall quality of education.

“They serve almost as external staff members. They know our state context, they’re deep into the work with us so they know our needs, and they’re able to prioritize what we need to do,” explains Rorie Fitzpatrick, deputy commissioner of the Nevada Department of Education.

“Because of our long-standing relationship with individual staff members at the Southwest Comprehensive Center and knowledge of them across Nevada, it helps to immediately gain buy-in from the field. If it comes with WestEd and the Southwest Comprehensive Center, people in Nevada are trustful of it.”

Although the center’s services can filter down to schools and school districts if state agencies request such help, its primary role is providing resources and training so state education officials can meet federal goals for raising student achievement. The center has addressed a variety of needs within the five state agencies, including:

- » Guiding the design of statewide evaluation systems for teachers and principals, which include student achievement data as a measure of performance;



- » Adapting a WestEd software system to automate record-keeping so states can spend more time monitoring the impact of federal grants and less time inspecting voluminous compliance records;
- » Providing research about best practices—such as serving English language learners and raising achievement in persistently failing schools, and
- » Coaching state leaders as they seek to improve communications with legislators, board members, school districts, the public, and even their own staff members.

#### CROSS-STATE COLLABORATION TO GRAPPLE WITH COMMON ISSUES

“These states share many of the same challenges, so bringing them together to discuss these issues and share information has been an essential part of our center’s strategy,” explained Paul Koehler, director of the SWCC and the Policy Center at WestEd.

Building on these similarities, Koehler orchestrated a collaborative approach to working with the state education leaders, who, in turn, have formed professional learning networks with each other. The SWCC brings together commissioners and deputy commissioners from each state at least twice a year. Outside these facilitated sessions, the leaders regularly confer with each other and with the SWCC staff by phone and email.

Additionally, leadership teams from the five states gather together for quarterly meetings, which the SWCC organizes. The center brings in experts and research on key topics and acts as a sounding board for policy suggestions. After sharing questions and solutions across state agencies, the state teams get time to work as a unit,

figuring out how the recommended strategies could be adapted back home.

The cross-fertilization of ideas has hatched important discoveries and alliances. For example, Nevada Deputy Commissioner Fitzpatrick recalls attending a session where Colorado officials shared their success in obtaining a waiver from some of No Child Left Behind’s requirements. Ten states, including Colorado, are now free to evaluate student performance by their own methods instead of relying on standardized test scores in reading and math. Fitzpatrick says the information helped her understand how Nevada might classify schools differently to qualify for a similar exemption. When she learned the name of the technical specialist who had prepared Colorado’s application, she shared the contact with a counterpart in Nevada.

“Those two had a dialogue and it helped us resolve a challenge,” she says. “Not that we couldn’t find that out ourselves, but I’m not sure it would have occurred to me. Certainly this was much more efficient.”

#### INTERACTIVE APPROACH TO PROBLEM SOLVING

John Stollar, Chief of Programs and Policy for the Arizona Department of Education, says his state agency also has leveraged information from the SWCC strategy sessions, such as learning better methods of managing grants and how to write proposals with one voice while still reflecting contributions from multiple people within the department.

“You learn first of all that the trials and tribulations of your state are not much different than what others are going through,” Stollar says. “You then learn there are vast resources to answer the questions you have that



I think the tendency for technical assistance is to jump from thing to thing. One lesson learned from our work is that we need to stick with basic issues, where we know we can make a difference.

help you solve those problems. The Southwest Comprehensive Center provides you with a vehicle to brainstorm potential solutions, and then you get to evaluate whether those solutions would work within your context.”

Stollar says the SWCC’s guidance has been valuable at both theoretical and practical levels. For example, in helping Arizona leaders analyze why they initially failed to obtain a federal Race to the Top grant to pay for school reforms, the SWCC also inspired them to refine the scope and purpose of their application. The result: In the first competition cycle, Arizona had one of the lowest-scoring proposals in the nation. By the third cycle, the state had secured a \$25 million allotment from Washington.

“What I find really fascinating is that the staff of the Southwest Comprehensive Center don’t come in and say, ‘Here’s what you’re doing right and wrong and here are the solutions; just follow our prescriptions and you will be on the right path,’” Stollar says. “They engage us in an interactive process where probing questions are asked in terms of state goals and resources. Many times they have helped reshape our thinking, as a result of this kind of respectful dialogue.”

#### “STICK WITH BASIC WORK AND GO DEEP”

Koehler and state leaders believe that one of the strengths of their partnership has been continually aiming at a few targeted goals instead of frequently shifting focus. As they identify each state’s needs and forge distinctive plans to address the gaps, they keep refining their work by evaluating long-term progress.

“I think the tendency for technical assistance is to jump from thing to thing,” Koehler says. “I think one lesson learned from our work is that we need to stick with basic issues, where we know we can make a difference. We tend to stay with the work and to go deep.”

Another important lesson is the power of collaboration. The willingness of SWCC participants to share ideas, nurture professional relationships, and listen to feedback has helped them contribute to the region’s collective educational improvement. All five states now have educator evaluation policies in place. No state is still running afoul of the federal government for missing compliance checkpoints. All have systems in place to support their lowest-performing schools; implementing transition plans to the Common Core standards and developing aligned state assessments.

“Collaboration and collective ideas of a group are always superior to one person’s idea,” Stollar of Arizona says. “Our work with the Southwest Comprehensive Center has validated that issue over and over. It is so valuable to present ideas to an audience of colleagues who will be fair and understanding but who will also provide critique to help you hone your plans and point out possible pitfalls to implementation. As the saying goes, the devil is in the details. It really makes your chances for success much greater.”



For more information about the Southwest Comprehensive Center’s work, contact Paul Koehler at [pkoehle@wested.org](mailto:pkoehle@wested.org) or 602.322.7004.

# Featured Resources & Services



## Reading for Understanding

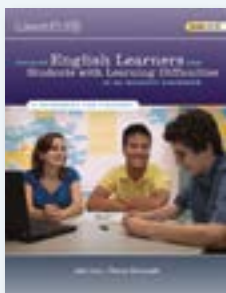
### How Reading Apprenticeship Improves Disciplinary Learning in Secondary and College Classrooms, 2nd Edition

By Ruth Schoenbach, Cynthia L. Greenleaf, and Lynn Murphy



This significantly updated edition of *Reading for Understanding* shows how teachers and students can work together to boost literacy, engagement, and achievement. Research has documented the effectiveness of Reading Apprenticeship® for increasing student engagement and achievement in subject-area classes and building reading independence. Endorsed by leading researchers and educators at every level, *Reading for Understanding* presents a coherent framework for improving reading and learning among all students—English learners, students with special needs, students in honors/AP courses, and those in technical and community colleges.

Price: \$29.95 | Format: Trade Paper | Publisher: Jossey-Bass, 2012 | ISBN:978-0-470-60831-9 | Product #: READ-12-01RD



## Teaching English Learners and Students with Learning Difficulties in an Inclusive Classroom

### A Guidebook for Teachers

By John Carr and Sharen Bertrando

This guidebook offers powerful, concrete ways to engage all middle and high school students—especially English learners and students with other special needs—in successful learning. Teachers will benefit from the practical, evidence-based approaches for teaching standards-based content in any subject area. School and district leaders will benefit from the sustainable schoolwide and districtwide practices that respect diversity and support inclusion. Authors John Carr and Sharen Bertrando, both at WestEd, provide invaluable insight, tools, and strategies.

Price: \$24.95 | Format: Trade Paper | Publisher: WestEd, 2012 | ISBN: 978-0-914409-67-0 | Product #: CC-12-01RD

## FEATURED FREE RESOURCES FOR DOWNLOAD



### How Can Simulations Be Components of Balanced State Science Assessment Systems?

Edys Quellmalz, Matt Silbergliitt, and Michael Timms | WestEd, 2011

New science assessment frameworks and standards call for deeper understanding of dynamic science systems and uses of science inquiry practices. In this brief, leading scholars from a variety of disciplines present the latest research on how to best measure complex knowledge, skills, and abilities using technology-based assessments.

► [www.WestEd.org/cs/we/view/rs/1198](http://www.WestEd.org/cs/we/view/rs/1198)



### Workbook for Improving School Climate & Closing the Achievement Gap, 2nd Edition

California Department of Education and WestEd, 2012

WestEd's California Healthy Kids Survey (CHKS) and California School Climate Survey (CSCS) provide schools and districts with valuable data. The *Workbook for Improving School Climate & Closing the Achievement Gap* offers strategies for using this data to develop better schools and help students to succeed academically. This publication is part of a California Department of Education (CDE) initiative to address the persistent achievement gap that plagues so many schools.

► [www.WestEd.org/cs/we/view/rs/1234](http://www.WestEd.org/cs/we/view/rs/1234)



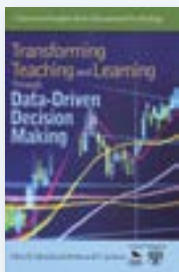
## Technology-Based Assessments for 21st Century Skills

### Theoretical and Practical Implications from Modern Research

Edited by Michael C. Mayrath, Jody Clarke-Midura, Daniel H. Robinson, and Gregory Schraw

Creative problem solving and collaboration have always been key workforce skills. Just as vital in the 21st-century job market is the ability to use technology with ease. Advances in assessment theory, education psychology, and technology make possible new methods of measuring students' 21st-century skills with validity, reliability, and scalability.

Price: \$45.99 | Format: Trade Paper | Publisher: Information Age Publishing, 2012  
ISBN: 978-1-61735-632-2 | Product #: AS-12-01RD



## Transforming Teaching and Learning through Data-Driven Decision Making

### Classroom Insights from Educational Psychology

By Ellen Mandinach and Sharnell S. Jackson

Many schools are required to gather student data and use data to inform instruction. But are educators formally trained in how to do this? Not necessarily. A must-have for teachers, school and district administrators, school psychologists, and other educators, this book presents an integrated model for establishing a data culture and transforming quantitative and qualitative data into actionable knowledge.

Price: \$36.95 | Format: Trade Paper | Publisher: Corwin, 2012 | ISBN: 978-1-4129-8204-7  
Product #: ER-12-01RD

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### Equal Access to Content Instruction for English Learners: An Example From Science

Zoe Ann Brown and Kathryn DiRanna  
WestEd, 2012

Gaps in successful outcomes for English learners start with the lack of opportunity to develop academic language: the words used in a classroom environment to discuss lessons and material. This paper makes the case that equal and meaningful access to science education is critical for English learners to help close the achievement gap.



### Willing But Not Yet Ready: A Glimpse of California Teachers' Preparedness for the Common Core State Standards

Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning at WestEd, 2012

With California on the precipice of implementing the CCSS, teachers are reporting that they are not ready for the transition. This issue of *CenterView* presents key findings from six focus groups and recommendations for districts, schools, institutions of higher education, and state leaders.

▶ [www.WestEd.org/cs/we/view/rs/1230](http://www.WestEd.org/cs/we/view/rs/1230)

▶ [www.WestEd.org/cs/we/view/rs/1207](http://www.WestEd.org/cs/we/view/rs/1207)



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Chief Policy & Communications Officer  
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*R&D Alert* Editor  
Linda Broatch

Contributors  
Holly Holland  
Carol E. Tate  
Noel White  
Johanna Wilson-White

Copy Editor  
Anna Hirsch

Proofreader  
Evan Hulka

Art Direction  
Christian Holden

Design  
Michael Medina

Photographs  
Christian Holden  
Ana Homonnay

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areas. "Districts and schools need to make sure all practitioners have opportunities to collaborate in a systematic way, including general education, special education, reading specialists, professionals who work with English language learners, and specialists in different subject areas," notes Bertrando.

In general, Bertrando recommends being "proactive not reactive." She encourages educators and education leaders to become familiar with the Common Core State Standards and begin making changes throughout the system to be sure the standards are implemented effectively and with a mind to how they impact students who have previously been least well served.

"I'm so excited about what's happening now," she says. "The Common Core State Standards are an opportunity for us to really change our practices and philosophy. If we do it with a true understanding of what the implications could be for students, I think this is a wonderful time to be in education."



**For more information about the Common Core State Standards and students with special needs, contact Sharen Bertrando at 916.492.4086 or [sbertra@WestEd.org](mailto:sbertra@WestEd.org).**

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