



UNBRIDLED LEARNING – COMMUNICATIONS AND COLLABORATION

On November 2, 2012, the Kentucky Department of Education (KDE) released the first round of data from the Unbridled Learning assessment and accountability model. This release was the culmination of work that began in March 2009, with the passage of the wide-sweeping education reform legislation known as Senate Bill 1 (SB 1), in the state legislature.

Since then, KDE has released two more rounds of data with increasingly positive results.

Each data release went smoothly; there are a number of factors that contributed to their success:

- Legislative Authority
- Partnerships
 - Educator Support and Involvement
 - Business Community Support
- Communications

Legislative Authority

Kentucky has a long history of legislatively mandated public school assessment and accountability. The 1990 Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA) included requirements for state-level assessments in a variety of subjects and an accountability model using scores from those tests and other measures to provide information about student, school and district performance.

The assessment and accountability model underwent many changes from its inception, but the concept remained the same: test all students over a broad spectrum of subjects with the goal of all students reaching proficiency or better, assign labels to schools and districts based on performance and publicly report the data produced by the system.

With the passage of the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act in 2001, Kentucky implemented a two-tier accountability system that used test score and other data from the state model to provide information for NCLB requirements, along with continuing to provide accountability labels as mandated for the state model.

In 2009, the Kentucky General Assembly passed Senate Bill 1 (SB 1), which impacted many aspects of the state's public education system. The focus shifted from student proficiency to readiness in order to ensure student success at the next level.

Senate Bill 1 mandated new, more rigorous standards aligned with college-readiness expectations, new assessments based on those standards and a new balanced accountability system – all to be developed and implemented for the 2011-12 school year. This legislation, which passed without

opposition, was the result of months of collaboration between legislators, educators, state officials, partners and constituents.

In a historic 2010 joint meeting, the Kentucky Board of Education, Council on Postsecondary Education (higher education) and the Education Professional Standards Board (teacher certification) unanimously agreed to adopt the Common Core State Standards in English/language arts and mathematics – known as the Kentucky Core Academic Standards. KDE provided news releases, presentation material and other communications items to inform and gather support for this action.

The new standards were implemented in Kentucky classrooms in the 2011-12 school year. Because of the tight timetable set forth by Senate Bill 1, the state contracted with Pearson for aligned tests for grades 3-8 and on-demand writing in high school, and with ACT for End-of-Course assessments in English II, Algebra II, Biology and U.S. History at the high school level. The new assessments were given in spring 2012 with first results reported as part of the new accountability system in Nov. 2012.

In 2013, Kentucky adopted the Next-Generation Science Standards and implemented them in Kentucky classrooms in the 2014-15 school year. A new assessment model and tests to evaluate student learning of the new science standards are currently under development.

The state is in the process of adopting new social studies and arts and humanities standards.

In accordance with SB1, the Kentucky Board of Education developed an accountability model that includes multiple measures of student learning (achievement, gap reduction, student growth, college/career readiness and graduation rate); educator effectiveness (based on results of the teacher and principal evaluation system which is based on multiple measures of effectiveness); and support systems (Program Reviews in areas such as writing, arts and humanities and practical living and career studies).

Two federal initiatives, the Race to the Top grant competition and Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)/No Child Left Behind (NCLB) flexibility waivers, also played a part in the development of Unbridled Learning. Both helped Kentucky further define some of the elements of its accountability model.

In Feb. 2012, the United States Department of Education granted Kentucky's waiver request for ESEA flexibility, which allowed the state to use one system of accountability for both state and federal reporting. Since then, the state has received a one-year extension and a four-year extension which extends the flexibility through the 2018-19 school year.

Partners

One of the major efforts that arose after the passage of KERA in 1990 was the work by KDE to connect with education partners. These included state agencies such as the Council on Postsecondary Education and the Education Professional Standards Board; state organizations such as the Kentucky Education Association, Kentucky School Boards Association, Kentucky Association of School Administrators, the Prichard Committee (a grassroots citizen advocacy group focused on education); and many more. This collaboration was critical to the success and implementation of SB1.

As the Kentucky Board of Education worked to revise state regulations related to standards, assessment and accountability, it gathered input from teachers, administrators, parents, lawmakers and the general public through public hearings, face-to-face communications, e-mail and other methods.

Updates were provided to the agency's advisory groups, which are comprised of specific audience members such as teachers, superintendents, parents and others. KDE also established an advisory committee of partner organizations, the Guiding Coalition, to provide ongoing chances for information sharing, collaboration and communication

The Prichard Committee, through its ReadyKentucky initiative, was a major partner in disseminating information about the new standards, testing and accountability system, and expected results. Staff with the ReadyKentucky initiative made presentations throughout the state, providing a layman's view of what to expect with the first data release and why Kentucky had implemented a new system.

Governor Steve Beshear also became a valuable partner in this work, supporting the agency and the Kentucky Board of Education. Gov. Beshear's Transforming Education in Kentucky Task Force, which issued its final report in February 2011, made several recommendations related to college/career readiness, assessment and academic rigor.

Educator Support and Involvement

Standards

In the fall of 2009 and winter of 2009-10, KDE convened workgroups of teachers across the state to review the draft English/language arts and mathematics standards, provide feedback and suggest improvements. The groups also compared the state's current academic standards to the new Common Core State Standards to help in the development of "crosswalks" between the two sets of standards. Kentucky's adoption of the new standards in February 2010 began a process in which teachers were heavily involved in the design and implementation of training materials and local curriculum. Teachers' input was crucial in this work.

The state's regional Leadership Networks also played and continue to play a key role in the work around standards, assessment and accountability. These networks are intended to build the capacity of each school district as they implement Kentucky's new standards, develop assessment literacy among all teachers and work toward ensuring that every student is college- and career- ready.

When pushback on the standards started developing in other states, several years into Kentucky implementation, KDE surveyed all the state's teachers. An overwhelming majority of teachers were enthusiastic about teaching the new standards and indicated the new standards were having a positive impact on learning in their classrooms.

In August 2014, Kentucky launched the Kentucky Core Academic Standards Challenge as part of its normal review of the standards taught in Kentucky classrooms. This online tool gave Kentucky parents and others unfamiliar with the content of the English/language arts and mathematics standards, the opportunity to learn what the standards actually say and provide standard-specific feedback on how they might be improved. It also gave educators who had been working with the standards for more than three years, the opportunity to provide feedback based on their experience on how to perfect the standards. The challenge ran through April 2015.

Educator Evaluation

In November 2009, the U.S. Department of Education announced guidelines for the federal Race to the Top competition. Kentucky immediately began work on its application for those funds, using the work related to SB 1 and the proposed accountability model as the core.

KDE's Race to the Top application process included securing signatures from local school board chairs, superintendents and teacher organizations to support the state's application. Signatures were received from all 174 school districts and included representatives of the Kentucky Education

Association and local teachers' unions. Also, KDE initiated a survey of teachers and administrators in October 2009 to get their input on the state's vision and plans for public education specific to the Race to the Top application. In Dec. 2011, Kentucky was granted a third round, \$17 million Race to the Top award which was used primarily to support teacher implementation of the new standards.

Kentucky Education Commissioner Terry Holliday appointed teacher and principal effectiveness steering committees to follow up from the state's Race to the Top application. The Teacher and Principal Effectiveness Steering Committees, whose members included teachers, college and university representatives, parents, principals and superintendents from volunteer districts and also represent the Kentucky Association of School Administrators (KASA), Kentucky School Boards Association (KSBA), Kentucky Education Association (KEA), Jefferson County Teachers Association (JCTA), Council on Postsecondary Education (CPE) and Education Professional Standards Board (EPSB), were convened and met from 2011-14 to design the teacher/principal evaluation systems. These groups identified the characteristics of good teaching and leadership practice; the committees' efforts led directly to the Teacher and Principal Effectiveness Frameworks that would form the basis for Kentucky's Professional Growth and Effectiveness System (implemented statewide in the 2014-15 school year). A separate committee went on to develop standards for superintendent effectiveness and a statewide evaluation system for superintendents.

Assessment and Accountability

Professional learning communities (PLCs), groups of educators that meet and continuously connect regarding specific areas of education practice, were and continue to be a key component in Kentucky's standards, assessment and accountability work. The PLCs provide a means by which teachers, administrators and other professionals come together to learn, share, critique and process new information within a supportive, district/school-created community.

From its inception in December 2010, the proposed accountability model was revised based on feedback from teachers individually and as members of groups such as the School Curriculum, Assessment and Accountability Council and the Leadership Networks. Specific changes occurred to Program Reviews and teacher/leader effectiveness portions of the model.

When it implemented the Unbridled Learning accountability model in the 2011-12 school year, KDE promised to review the system after three years. In 2014, the state surveyed superintendents and other key stakeholders about unintended consequences that multiple years of data may have revealed and what might need to change to make the system more fair, reliable and effective. Those suggested changes have been circulated among key stakeholder groups and advisory councils for input and the Kentucky Board of Education has approved several of the suggested changes.

Business Community Support

Since the passage of SB 1, Commissioner Holliday and the Kentucky Board of Education have focused on bringing the business community into the conversation about new academic standards and college/career readiness.

The Kentucky Chamber of Commerce has been a strong partner. The chamber dedicated staff time and resources to developing materials, sharing information with local chamber affiliates and other activities to support Unbridled Learning.

In the summer of 2012, Commissioner Holliday and Kentucky Chamber President Dave Adkisson embarked on a statewide tour of local chambers and other civic organizations. During their visits, they made presentations to chamber members about Unbridled Learning and college/career readiness, connecting the work of public education to business and industry success.

The Kentucky Chamber of Commerce developed the Business Leader Champions for Education, a joint initiative with the Prichard Committee. The group is made up of corporate executives and other business leaders in the state who support public education. Their voices have been especially important on the need for higher standards to produce a workforce that is ready to work, can compete globally and can help attract new business to the state.

The Business Leader Champions for Education group released a statement prior to the unveiling of data from the new system that emphasized the system's focus on college and career readiness. The chamber also produced a brochure, *New Standards, New Tests and New Scores*, that provided parents an overview of the new Common Core State Standards. An additional video resource featuring Kentucky business leaders talking about the importance of a ready workforce and how the state's reform efforts supported that was also distributed.

Communications

KDE began communicating about Senate Bill 1 and what it would mean for students, teachers and Kentucky's future almost immediately after it became law.

Many vehicles were used for these communications:

- a webpage (<http://education.ky.gov/comm/UL/Pages/default.aspx>) dedicated to SB 1 initiatives along with supporting documentation
- presentations at: meetings of Kentucky's eight regional educational cooperatives, each composed of local school district superintendents; the commissioner's advisory councils including the Guiding Coalition
- articles and informational items in KDE's online publication *Kentucky Teacher* – the department's primary communication with teachers
- webcasts for teachers and administrators that provided opportunities for real-time input
- frequent e-mail messages to educators, partners, legislators, media representatives and others focused on building the new system
- blog posts related to standards, assessment, accountability and other related items
- news articles and editorials about the new standards, assessment and accountability system
- discussion in Kentucky Board of Education meetings, which were webcast live and accessible to the public
- social media postings on Twitter and Facebook

The core message in all of these communications was that Kentucky was moving toward preparing all public school students for college/careers and success after high school and that this effort would start as soon as a child entered the public school system. A secondary message was that the new assessment and accountability system would be more useful and provide educators, parents, elected officials and communities with reliable data that could be used to move students and schools forward.

As earlier noted, Kentucky's work related to SB1 and the proposed accountability model aligned well with the guidelines for the federal Race to the Top competition and flexibility under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). The state started sharing information about the requirements of both of these federal programs, how they were aligned with the work we were already doing as part of Senate Bill 1 and how each could benefit Kentucky. The agency communicated its plans for Race to the Top and to apply for waivers primarily through the commissioner of education, who made presentations, sent e-mails and wrote blog entries on the subject.

When USED granted Kentucky's application for ESEA flexibility in February 2012, KDE began working on communications related to the fall release of data from the Unbridled Learning Assessment and Accountability Model.

Those included:

- talking points
- PowerPoint presentations
- blog entries
- parent-friendly brochures
- question and answer documents
- regular e-mail communications to educators and partners
- stories in *Kentucky Teacher*, the agency's flagship publication

Education Commissioner Terry Holliday began speaking about the upcoming data release and preparing educators, parents and communities for what the data would show. Main talking points included:

1. Kentucky's adoption of the Common Core State Standards in English/language arts and mathematics, coupled with the new Kentucky Performance Rating for Educational Progress (K-PREP) assessments tied to those standards, will lead to proficiency rates among students that are lower than what we've seen previously.
2. Scores may be lower than what you are used to -- as low as 40 points (reading) and 36 points (mathematics) at all grade levels. Students who may have been distinguished may now only score proficient. This isn't because they aren't making progress; it is because we are measuring them against higher standards. We've raised the bar.
3. These results cannot be compared to previous results, since we are assessing students on a different standard. The previous standard was basic proficiency on math and reading. The new standard is college and career readiness.
4. The college and career readiness standard is aligned with postsecondary expectations. This requires more than rote memorization for tests but requires students to demonstrate reasoning and critical thinking skills.
5. We made the change to college and career readiness due to the competitive global economy that was the basis of 2009's Senate Bill 1, which required KDE and the Kentucky Board of Education to provide new standards and assessments that are internationally comparative.
6. The results of the Kentucky assessments are more closely aligned to results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). Those results report proficiency at a much higher level than most state tests. Being proficient on NAEP is similar to our new college- and career-ready proficiency. One could say that proficiency on NAEP and the new K-PREP is similar to getting a B or B+ and being advanced/distinguished is similar to an A.
7. With the new tests and accountability system, parents should be able to tell as early as 3rd grade if their student is on track for college/career-readiness.
8. It will take time for teachers and students to get used to the more rigorous standards and the kind of teaching and learning they demand.
9. This is a first step on a path of continuous improvement.
10. Stay the course and don't get discouraged. This is the right thing for kids to ensure they are able ready for college/career and to compete in a global economy.
11. These data are crucial to planning and improvement – for our schools, districts and state.
12. Remember, our focus is on college/career-readiness for all students

The commissioner and other KDE staff also promoted the upcoming School Report Card, which was revamped extensively and designed as an online presence. KDE had published School and District Report Cards for many years, but only as electronic copies of paper documents. The new online School Report Card was designed to be more interactive, provide more information, and tagged to serve as the agency's primary delivery method for data from the Unbridled Learning system.

KDE staff in the Office of Assessment and Accountability and Division of Communications began working closely and meeting regularly to discuss how to present the Unbridled Learning data. The Division of Communications also was represented on the team responsible for designing and implementing the new School Report Card.

In October, the commissioner hosted a webcast targeted at the media, during which he answered questions and provided an overview of the system. The archived webcast was made accessible, as were the supporting materials, on the Unbridled Learning webpage.

Once a date was set for the public release of data, communications staff began preparing media representatives. Through phone conversations and e-mail messages, reporters and editors were kept aware of the timeline and of what would be released. Emphasis was placed on the newness of the system; how it could not be compared to prior years' data; the potential for lower percentages of proficient students in certain subjects; and how to prioritize coverage of the data.

The data were provided to media outlets under embargo three days prior to the public release. During those three days, KDE's media contact spent most of each day on the phone and e-mail, providing clarification and guidance to reporters and editors as they wrote their stories. The commissioner also made himself available for one-on-one interviews that were embargoed for later release.

The data also were provided to school district personnel in the same format as provided to media outlets, so that they could see what their local reporters were seeing.

Starting on the day of the public release, news outlets began running stories about the data. Stories continued to appear in the next weeks, either announcing school and district standings or delving deeper into the data. Editorials and commentaries also appeared.

Lessons Learned

Unlike many other states, Kentucky had two decades of communicating about state-level assessment and accountability models to draw on as the state prepared for data from this new system to be released. Staff at the Kentucky Department of Education, members of the Kentucky Board of Education, school officials and partners could rely on their own experiences in this effort.

Organization is a key to success. KDE set an embargo period during which school officials reviewed their data and made any necessary corrections to student coding and other items. This provided a period where mistakes could be corrected and data corroborated, and also provided districts a familiarity with their data so they could be prepared to answer questions about it.

Then, the "clean" data were provided to media outlets three days before the public release. The data was packaged so that it could be reviewed and understood by the average person, and the embargoed materials included a statewide summary, explanations of the different data components and descriptions of the files provided. The agency's media contact was constantly available for clarifications and to provide answers to questions. A question and answer document was developed, and it featured questions that media representatives were most likely to ask. (This document or portions of it were reprinted by many media outlets.)

Initially, KDE released the data through multiple excel files sent out under embargo several days before the public release. With the 2013-14 data release, KDE made the data available to the media under embargo through a secure School Report Card website, which seemed to make it easier for them to understand, but also provided access to data sets which could be used for more in-depth analysis.

Preparation is also key for successful communications, and that was definitely the case for the initial and subsequent data releases. Staff knew that the media would be the primary vehicle for providing information to residents, so the agency's media contact begins "working" reporters and editors months before the release, dropping information about the release, new standards and other items into conversations.

After the initial data release in the fall of 2012, each year KDE has hosted two webcasts targeting the media and school communications personnel prior to the data release.

The first, hosted by the Division of Communications with a representative from the Office of Assessment and Accountability, focuses on a review of the Unbridled Learning system and what is new – (components are being phased in and some data, such as graduation rate, is calculated differently than before). With the turnover in media representatives regularly covering education, KDE found this to be a good way to get reporters up to speed, provide a refresher and update for those who had covered the release in the past and answer questions which could be submitted via e-mail. The webcast was recorded and made available for reference through the KDE website. In addition, the media liaison was made available by e-mail and phone afterward for those who might have additional questions.

In the second webcast, scheduled after the data is released to the media under embargo, but before public release, the commissioner discusses the data, under embargo, and provides comment on it for use in media stories. Again, reporters and school communication representatives are able to submit questions via e-mail. This allows KDE to better set the agenda on stories for coverage.

Since the media frequently cover local board of education meetings, school officials also work information about the data into their regular presentations and open discussion of the data is now a requirement of the superintendent effectiveness system. Also, the Kentucky Board of Education, commissioner's advisory groups (focused on teachers, parents, administrators and others) include regular updates on the data and other elements of SB1 on their agendas.

Education Commissioner Terry Holliday both supports and models open communications, even during "development" stages that many organizations are reluctant to share information about. He focuses on the good news, but also acknowledges and answers concerns about the news that is not so positive. This fosters trust and provides transparency about the state's educational goals.

One of most important components of the communications is consistency, which reached from the branding of the system with a formal name (Unbridled Learning) to the language used when sharing information with various audiences. Kentucky focused on one overriding goal and has stuck with it. Everything involved in the Unbridled Learning model leads to the goal of college/career readiness for all students – supported by continuous improvement.

Support from teachers, administrators, parents and partners is crucial. Bringing professional organizations and associations to the table early helped set a tone and foster cooperation.

The main lesson from Kentucky's initial and each subsequent data release is that communications does not start once the data are released to the public. You must be proactive. It takes much groundwork, collaboration, communication and focus to make the release go smoothly – even if the data do not show positive results for every school or district.