

Case Study: The Kentucky Campaign



Summer 2014

Building Employer Support for Rigorous Standards

Understanding the importance of business engagement is one thing. Making it happen is another. This is a case study of a campaign led by the Kentucky Chamber of Commerce Foundation that is credited with helping build critical employer support for the Common Core State Standards (known in Kentucky as the Kentucky Core Academic Standards). A key aspect of the campaign was the “inoculation effect” it created. Even when the tougher standards lowered test scores initially, Kentucky stayed the course with the new standards.

Ready Kentucky: Building Employer Support for Student Success

The Kentucky Chamber of Commerce Foundation developed a campaign to build support for the Kentucky Core Academic Standards, prepare for the likelihood of lower test scores on assessments under the new standards, and emphasize the importance of sticking with the standards.

Key Components



Partnerships. The importance of partnerships cannot be overstated. Kentucky advocates and education officials have consistently encouraged and welcomed business involvement in school improvement efforts. The Kentucky Chamber’s Common Core partnerships were a natural outgrowth of prior work with the Kentucky Department of Education and the Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence, a citizens’ advocacy group.



Common Messaging. The Kentucky Chamber worked with advocacy groups, professional organizations, and education leaders to craft common messages—a key element of the overall state effort. The Prichard Committee conducted outreach to parents and educators in support of the Common Core. The two organizations co-branded their initiatives as Ready Kentucky.



Actively Involved Chamber CEO and Staff Support. The Kentucky Chamber’s CEO emphasized support for the standards in his public appearances, ensured the Chamber’s legislative agenda reflected that support, and made staff available to assist in the campaign.

Kentucky Chamber of Commerce:

- State’s largest business organization
- Represents the interests of more than 90,000 employers

Kentucky Chamber Foundation:

- 501(c)(3) organization

Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence:

- Statewide citizens organization
- In its third decade of advocacy for better schools

Specific Tactics

Ready Kentucky: Building Employer Support for Student Success included the following elements:



The Kentucky Chamber’s CEO and Kentucky’s education commissioner **made joint appearances** before local and regional business groups around the state, generating media coverage and editorial support.



The **education commissioner made appearances** at state meetings of business leaders.





The **Business Leader Champions for Education** was established in partnership with the Prichard Committee. This CEO-led group of more than five dozen business executives provided a unified employer voice in support of the significant education developments, including the Kentucky Core Academic Standards. Peer-to-peer communication was key to recruiting the champions, with the CEO chair initiating contacts and staff following up with details.



Immediately after Kentucky adopted the standards in February 2010, the Kentucky Chamber's CEO wrote a **statewide op-ed** emphasizing the standards' focus on preparing students for both college and the workplace, an important point for the business community.



A **video featuring Kentucky employers** expressing support for the standards and their full implementation in Kentucky's schools was hosted on the Kentucky Chamber's website and distributed to local chambers and other organizations.



Audio news releases were distributed statewide.



An **employer toolkit** was created and distributed for use in workplace communications and included electronic and hard-copy examples of:

- Newsletter article for use in-house or in a publication of the employer's affiliated association
- "Facts & FAQs" document explaining the standards, the need for them, and why employers should support them
- Letter to the editor for submission to a local newspaper
- Email message to share information with employees
- Talking points for use as a paycheck stuffer or staff meeting material
- Examples of the new standards and test questions



A **brochure** was created to provide a jargon-free overview of the new standards, explaining their background and impact, comparing them with the state's old standards, and providing sample questions from the new tests.



Regular **op-eds and columns** were published in business publications. Some were co-authored by state education leaders to present a united front and a consistent message.



Direct **communications with state legislators** and Kentucky's congressional delegation were conducted.

Working in partnership with the Prichard Committee, the Kentucky Chamber also developed a quick-response strategy to counter pushback that could arise in conjunction with legislative proceedings or other events, including personal contacts and messages delivered via op-eds and letters.

Lessons Learned

- Employers have influence with the public, policymakers, and elected officials—possibly more than they realize.
- Consistent messages are critical, regardless of who is delivering them.
- Partnerships are key to ensure the development and delivery of consistent messages. Partnerships among employers, educators, and advocates present a united front to the public, policymakers, and elected officials. This can be particularly helpful to counter pushback against tougher standards.
- The active interest and involvement of business association leaders and key CEOs helps build meaningful employer engagement. It is unrealistic to expect employers to add education advocacy to their schedules without the enthusiastic encouragement of their peers.

