

The CCSS and Schoolwide Instructional Changes

Implementing the Common Core State Standards and ensuring that students have the skills for success in college and career will require schools to make significant changes.

By Mel Riddile

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For school leaders, implementing the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) requires thinking in different ways. The CCSS change the focus of K–12 education from completion of high school to readiness for college and career—which is such a fundamental shift from current practices that educators will require new knowledge and skills for successful implementation.

Teachers and school leaders will need to develop different ways of thinking about education. Learning new ways of teaching and leading—and unlearning old habits that do not relate to college and career readiness—will take months and years of deliberate practice to master. But that learning is vital to making the lasting schoolwide changes that successful implementation of the CCSS will require.

Significant Shifts SCHOOLWIDE LITERACY

The new standards envision a literate 21st century student who possesses the reading, writing, thinking, and speaking skills necessary for success in college and career. Cross-content literacy instruction has moved from an option to a necessity. The success of the new standards will depend heavily on school leaders' ability to implement schoolwide literacy initiatives so that teachers of *all* subjects integrate literacy throughout their instruction.

Through its work with a number of national organizations over the past eight years, NASSP has vigorously encouraged adolescent literacy as an essential ingredient to improving student performance. As a result, school leaders today are much more favorably disposed toward explicit literacy instruction. Even so, only a handful of high schools across the country

currently have in place or are attempting to implement comprehensive schoolwide literacy initiatives. At the secondary level, literacy instruction is like a transplanted organ. Because it has never been a part of the culture in secondary schools, the body rejects the transplant. Few, if any, teachers attended a literacy-rich high school and few have worked in schools with a comprehensive literacy initiative in place.

From a practical standpoint, secondary schools simply lack the capacity to integrate literacy instruction in the content areas. Even if teachers were receptive to the idea of incorporating literacy into their daily instruction, they lack the training and resources to deliver that instruction. If cross-content literacy were the only change that would result from CCSS implementation, educators' task would be formidable. A comprehensive schoolwide literacy initiative is, however, only the beginning of the changes.

INCREASED RIGOR

The CCSS were developed through backward design: the developers began with college and career readiness standards and worked down through the grades. That resulted in a significant increase in rigor at each grade level. For example, the CCSS math standards are designed to prepare all students to be ready for algebra by grade 8 instead of grade 9, and some course content in English language arts has been shifted down as much as two grades.

Stuart Singer, who has 40 years of experience teaching high school math, recently wrote on the *Principal Difference* blog, "If fully implemented, the Common Core Standards will fundamentally change the way math is

taught” (Singer, 2012). Students must not only demonstrate fluency in solving math problems but also provide evidence of their thinking or habits of mind.

The new standards emphasize higher-order thinking and applying what students learned to real-world situations. This means that school leaders will need to enhance teachers’ questioning strategies and skills.

READING COMPLEX TEXT

Tied closely to the increase in rigor is the increase in text complexity and the inclusion of much more informational or nonfiction text. Teachers will be challenged to find appropriate higher-level texts for their students, and they will need additional training to evaluate the appropriateness of such material for their students on the basis of quantitative and qualitative measures and the motivation of each student.

To truly differentiate instruction, teachers must have a current quantitative measure of students’ reading comprehension skills. That will be a big change, particularly for many secondary schools. My informal surveys of school leaders over the past seven years indicate that few secondary schools conduct annual diagnostic reading assessments of all of their students.

Under the CCSS, students must engage in “close reading” to analyze the text instead of simply reading it and answering questions. Students will be required to explain their analysis of a text by interpreting and citing specific evidence that supports their assertions and interpretations. Building close reading skills in students, a skill that will probably be assessed through writing, is the ultimate goal of the CCSS in English language arts.

WRITING ACROSS CONTENT AREAS

In most classrooms, there is little reading and almost no writing. But the CCSS seek to create a literacy-rich environment in which reading and writing become a shared responsibility of all teachers and a normal part of every lesson.

Reading gets students to college. Writing keeps them there. Some researchers report that only 20% of college freshmen have the requisite writing skills (Graham & Hebert, 2010). Research demonstrates that writing improves reading skills and that reading improves writing. Further, writing about what they read improves students’ reading comprehension. Students will be required not only to write more but also to move away from narrative to argumentative writing styles.

STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

Students cannot learn habits of mind, close reading, or argumentative writing by listening to a teacher talk: students must actively interact with the teacher and other students.

From direct observations of hundreds of classrooms, I know that teachers who call on only students who raise their hands actively engage very few students—maybe a fifth of the class. In addition, much of the questioning in such classrooms currently relates to lower-level thinking, such as remembering and understanding. Less teacher talk and more student work is a big change for many classrooms.

INSTRUCTIONAL TIME

As a poster from Education Northwest (formerly NWREL) succinctly states, “Maximizing learning time is one of the most effective means for increasing student achievement.” Teachers cannot teach more-rigorous,



higher-level content in more depth and integrate literacy skills into their lessons without more instructional time. But tight budgets have rendered longer school days, a longer school year, after-school tutoring, and multi-tiered interventions cost prohibitive. Therefore, school leaders must help teachers make maximum use of the time they already have.

INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICES

Instead of teachers giving students the answers, students must now demonstrate understanding by applying their knowledge to real-world situations: they must be able to find an answer, make claims, and produce evidence from text to support their claims. This requires a different type of instruction than “sit and get.” In most cases, teachers will have to completely reverse the ratio of student work to teacher talk.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

School leaders are faced with the challenge of increasing the capacity of all instructional staff members within a brief period of time. Studies show

that teachers are weakest in the areas that are deemed essential to the CCSS. They are strong in organization and classroom management and weak in higher-order questioning and engaging students (Sawchuk, 2012). Implementation of these standards will require retraining and deepening the knowledge of the entire teaching corps.

Traditionally, school leaders have attempted to improve teaching one teacher at a time, and they must continue to do that. The changes that accompany the new standards, however, are of such magnitude that educators must also build the collective capacity of their entire staffs by developing a defined set of instructional practices to be employed by every teacher. In much the same way that a coach or an

orchestra conductor must get everyone on the same page, the primary task of school leaders will be to get everyone working together every day in every classroom.

Conclusion

The CCSS mean doing for all students what educators have been doing for some students. The standards make schoolwide close reading, writing, higher-order thinking, application to real-world situations, and student engagement minimum expectations. Success depends on students' receiving consistent, high-quality instruction in every classroom, every day. Successful implementation of the CCSS will test the will and the skills of every school leader. PL

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