
A Path Forward

Recommendations from the classroom for
effectively implementing the Common Core

Teacher Action Team on the Common Core State Standards
March 2014

Contents

Introduction	3
Recommendations	4
Communication, Support, and Resources	5
Teacher Evaluation	7
Testing and Assessment	9
Conclusion	11
Teacher Action Team Members	12
References	13

Introduction

“Any kind of change needs time and money – there’s a learning curve.”

Courtney Summer, English Teacher, M.S. 223

As teachers, we know that our education system is not serving all students. We don’t need to cite the usual numbers (graduation¹, college readiness², and international competitiveness rates³) to make this point; instead, we see it every day in our schools and our classrooms.

That’s why we support the Common Core. These standards⁴ create clear, aspirational goals that all students – with the help of their parents and teachers – should strive for. Of course, higher standards will not in and of themselves raise student performance, but they are a necessary step towards the goal of ensuring that all students can attain a higher education and career worthy of them. A finish line will not ensure that we’ll get there, but it will help us know where we’re going and give students, parents, and teachers accurate information about where each child is on his or her path towards this goal.

We’ve watched with sadness and frustration as the Common Core – which was initiated and adopted⁵ by states (with federal support) and written⁶ and revised⁷ with teacher input – has morphed from a pedagogical tool into a political football. The New York State Assembly recently passed a bill⁸ that would halt Common Core’s full-scale implementation, by prohibiting student growth on Common Core-aligned assessments from being one part of teachers’ evaluations.

Of course, good policy is only as good as its implementation. In New York, as in many other states across the country, there have been some strengths to the Common Core rollout, but there have certainly been many missteps. Regardless, it’s unfortunate that a rocky implementation has led to ideological attacks on the standards themselves. The roll-out of the new standards in New York City has been difficult for many reasons, not least of which is the fact that our City is the largest school district in the country, so making such a monumental shift in teaching and learning will naturally be a challenge for the over one million students and 78,000 teachers in the City.

Of course it isn’t easy; we know that first hand. At the same time, if this transition were to be accomplished without challenges that

would tell us something: specifically, that such a change would not be particularly meaningful. In other words, we support these standards not despite, but because, the difficulty entailed is so necessary.

That being said, there are many ways in which the Common Core’s implementation can be improved in New York City and State. Several months into the school year, some educators don’t have aligned curriculum; others haven’t received enough professional development and support; and all of us feel that we haven’t had enough time to collaborate with our colleagues. Nevertheless, classroom teachers have been working to implement the standards as best we can with the tools we have at our disposal. Yet the need for practical solutions to the implementation challenges has been overshadowed by the politics—perhaps because it’s easier to argue than to fix.

But for our students it is critical that we do not let the politics drive the discussion, and instead engage in a productive conversation about how best to adjust course, improve implementation of the standards, and ensure all of our students receive a high-quality education.

That’s why we’ve made our own set of solutions-oriented recommendations to address many concerns related to the Common Core in order to achieve the universally shared goal of giving students the education they deserve. We are glad that some – including the Board of Regents⁹ and Governor Cuomo’s Common Core Implementation Panel¹⁰ – are focusing on solutions, and we believe that the most actionable and useful ones should be pulled and implemented in order to better serve students.

After analyzing the current challenges with implementation – drawing from our own experiences and from what we’ve heard from others – we developed three categories of concerns and proposed solutions within each. Although this is not an exhaustive list, and it is crucial that problems are responded to as they develop, we believe that these solutions will go a long way towards addressing the concerns of parents, educators, and students.

“Delay could create chaos and probably would be the end of the Common Core.”

Rob O’Leary, English Teacher, High School for Law and Public Service



Recommendations

1. Teachers should be offered the opportunity to return to school a week early to receive high-quality professional development – as well as time to collaborate – that continues throughout the school year.
2. Teachers need to be offered quickly digestible resources on where we can find support and high-quality Common Core-aligned lessons.
3. The state needs to ensure that curricula are independently audited for alignment, with a particular focus on curricular differentiation for students with special needs.
4. The New York State Education Department (NYSED), NYCDOE, and individual schools need to work to clearly communicate the value of the Common Core to parents, as well as how parents can help their children complete Common Core-aligned work.
5. Districts must clearly communicate to teachers how they'll be evaluated.
6. By next school year, districts - with the support of NYSED - should ensure that all teachers' student growth scores are based on subjects and students that they actually teach.
7. Principals must continue to receive training on how to fairly evaluate teachers; the training should include a section devoted to ensuring that lessons are Common Core-aligned, and evaluators should continue to have their evaluations normed annually.
8. NYSED should independently audit Common Core-aligned state tests to ensure quality.
9. Schools and districts should use multiple measures for high-stakes decisions for students.
10. The state should release state exams and detailed data in a timely manner so that teachers can use this information to improve our instruction.
11. NYSED should expedite review of districts' APPR (evaluation) plans for the purpose of eliminating unnecessary tests.
12. Districts and schools should communicate to principals and teachers that excessive teaching to the test will not increase student test scores – and may even harm them.

Communication, Support, and Resources

To implement the Common Core effectively, teachers need clear communication, stronger support systems, and high-quality resources. Here's how to get there.

1 **Problem:** Teachers are overwhelmed and not fully prepared to implement the Common Core.

Solution: Teachers should be offered the opportunity to return to school a week early to receive high-quality professional development – as well as time to collaborate – that continues throughout the school year.

Teachers need professional development (PD) on how best to teach to the Common Core Standards. Too often, however, the PD offered at schools is of middling to low quality. We believe that to make it genuinely useful to educators, such PD must be sustained throughout the year, rather than a one-shot lecture, as is too often the case. We also believe that some of the best PD comes from the ground up, within schools. To that end, schools should have the choice to design their own PD or to select from a menu of options offered by the district or state. We also believe that educators should be given additional time to collaborate specifically on implementing the Common Core. The best way to put in place both of these proposals is to compensate teachers to return from summer a week early in order to participate in a week's worth of PD and collaboration that continues in significant increments throughout the school year. Time and money should be allocated to this end,

and schools should be given the flexibility to apply this in a way that works for their staffs, and that targets PD to meet specific needs.

2 **Problem:** There are too many Common Core resources and teachers don't always know where to turn for support.

Solution: Teachers need to be offered quickly digestible resources on where we can find support and high-quality Common Core-aligned lessons.

We are convinced that, although there are many resources out there for teachers, they have not been cultivated in a manner that allows time-crunched educators to quickly and easily find them. This could be done in many ways, but we envision an online clearinghouse – incorporated into the already useful Engage NY – that links each standard to a set of high-quality lesson plans (from different external sources, such as Share My Lesson and The Teaching Channel), as well as exemplar videos of actual teachers conducting aligned lessons. This will help teachers and administrations build a common understanding of effective Common Core instruction.

3 Problem: New curricula may not be aligned to the Common Core.

Solution: The state needs to ensure that curricula are independently audited for alignment, with a particular focus on curricular differentiation for students with special needs.

We share the concern of many of our colleagues that some of the Common Core–aligned curricula is no different than past curricula – except of course the ubiquitous “Common Core–aligned” stickers that have been slapped onto every textbook. To achieve these standards, students must be offered a high-quality curriculum, and in order to ensure that we’re doing so, current curricula should be independently audited. In particular, the audit should ensure that curricula are differentiating for students with disabilities as well as English-language learners. If we are raising the bar for students who, traditionally, have not met the old, lower bar, we have to help educators identify what instructional steps to best prepare these students. Curricula should include this so that teachers are not guessing how to best adapt their lessons.

Problem: Parents are confused about what the Common Core means and how they can support their children.

Solution: NYSED, NYCDOE, and individual schools need to work to clearly communicate the value of the Common Core to parents, as well as how parents can help their children complete Common Core–aligned work.

Parents have been understandably anxious about how the Common Core will affect their children, so it’s crucial that they are provided clear and accurate information. Specifically the state, districts, and schools each need to do their parts, by, for example, hosting seminars, distributing informational flyers, discussing the Common Core during “back to school” nights, etc. E4E-NY has already been working with the NYSED to write parent-friendly “curriculum” on the Common Core. We plan to host parent seminars, in which teachers can educate parents about the new standards, and how they can support their children. We believe this would be a beneficial practice to conduct statewide, particularly in collaboration with local community groups.

“If the standards don’t stay high, how will we close the opportunity gap?”

Tamera Musiowsky-Borneman, Third Grade ICT Teacher, P.S. 208

Teacher Evaluation

Even-handed teacher evaluations that lead to actionable feedback go hand-in-hand with the implementation of the Common Core. Here's how to get it right.

“The experts are no longer text book or testing companies - it's us, teachers.”

Cole Farnum, Sixth Grade Mathematics Teacher, Williamsburg Collegiate Charter School

5 Problem: Higher standards combined with new teacher evaluation systems are creating fear and anxiety in many schools. In particular, some teachers worry that if they're not able to get their students to achieve at grade level with the new standards by the end of the school year, they will receive a poor evaluation.

Solution: Districts must clearly communicate to teachers how they'll be evaluated.

Many of our colleagues are understandably concerned about raising the bar for students already in the middle of their school careers, and wonder how doing so will affect teacher evaluation. This is largely a communications issue. Measures of student learning, which account for 40% of a teacher's evaluation in New York State, are based on student growth or student learning objectives rather than absolute proficiency¹¹. In other words, teachers won't receive a poor evaluation if their students aren't able to achieve Common Core proficiency in a single year; rather, ratings will be based on student growth. Many teachers may not realize this, and that is a failure of communication.

It also must be conveyed to teachers that under the new evaluation system, very few teachers will likely receive a poor rating, as last year across New York State (other than New York City) just 1% of educators were rated ineffective¹². The widespread anxiety over the implementation of the Common Core and teacher evaluation is understandable, but the vast majority of teachers should not fear a low performance rating. Evaluations are meant to be a tool for professional growth, and it's important that school leaders begin to change the narrative around these reviews.

This anxiety is an inevitable consequence of the fact teachers don't fully understand how test-based evaluations actually work. Although we support using student growth data as one part of teacher evaluation, such scores need to be explained to educators in a digestible way so they're not just, to quote Randi Weingarten, “test scores and black box algorithms.”¹³ For example, the state's current formula for calculating Student Growth Percentile accounts for ELL, disability, and poverty statuses¹⁴ – but how many teachers realize this?

6 Problem: Teachers are being evaluated based on scores in subjects or on students they don't teach.

Solution: By next school year, districts - with the support of NYSED - should ensure that all teachers' student growth scores are based on subjects and students that they actually teach.

Although this is not directly a Common Core issue, teacher evaluation and the Common Core are frequently linked, so this concern often comes up and is worth addressing. There are two problems here. First, due to the complexity of the new evaluation system, we've heard from many fellow teachers who are confused¹⁵ about how exactly their Measures of Student Learning (MOSL) component will be assessed. Second, many are dismayed¹⁶ by the fact that they will be held accountable for their colleagues' performance.

On the first point, evaluation criteria must be clearly communicated to all teachers, so they know precisely how they'll be assessed, as well as what is, and isn't, in their control. On the second point, by the next school year, there must be meaningful measures to evaluate students and teachers who are not in grades and subjects that are assessed by the state. What that looks like will vary by subject – and it doesn't always require a standardized test, which is why we're heartened by increased use of authentic performance assessments¹⁷, which we believe should continue to be developed with the input of teachers.

7 Problem: Some principals may not be fully prepared to fairly evaluate their teachers' Common Core-aligned lessons.

Solution: Principals must continue to receive training on how to fairly evaluate teachers; the training should include a section devoted to ensuring that lessons are Common Core-aligned, and evaluators should continue to have their evaluations normed annually.

It is crucial to the success of teacher evaluation that principals are excellent evaluators. If they're not, evaluations will be meaningless, and teachers will rightly lose confidence in the system. To that end, principals need to continue to receive high-quality training specifically on how to evaluate Common Core-aligned lessons. After all, a good lesson post-Common Core will and should look different than pre-Common Core. Furthermore, we should have confidence in knowing that our evaluators are annually normed on their evaluations of Common Core-aligned lessons. Evidence of this norming should be available to teachers upon request.

Testing & Assessment

Teachers and students need high-quality Common Core-aligned assessments that can be used as tools to improve teaching and learning. Here's what needs to change.

“People think Common Core means more ‘drill and kill’ - in fact, it’s just the opposite.”

Michael Loeb, Seventh Grade Special Education Teacher, Urban Institute of Mathematics

8 Problem: There is a lack of trust in the quality of Common Core-aligned assessments, and a general concern that state tests are inadequate and not measuring meaningful learning.

Solution: NYSED should independently audit Common Core-aligned state tests to ensure quality.

As teachers, there's nothing more frustrating than effectively teaching a certain skill, but seeing an assessment that fails to adequately measure a student's understanding of that skill. Tests can and must improve in quality; teachers, parents, and students know this, and that's why some have lost confidence in the state's ability to give fair assessments. We understand this, but we have not lost hope. We believe that, as Senator John Flanagan proposed¹⁸, state assessments should undergo an independent audit to ensure they're truly high-quality and aligned to the Common Core.

Problem: For students, there is often too much stigma and consequence based on a single test score.

Solution: Schools and districts should use multiple measures for high-stakes decisions for students.

Students, like teachers, should be evaluated based on multiple measures. Common Core-aligned exams should be one factor in making promotion and selective-enrollment decisions for students, but it should not be the only factor. Insofar as some students are held back because of one bad test score, that practice should immediately stop, as the Board of Regents panel on the Common Core recommended¹⁹.

Moreover, teachers and parents should be given the tools to communicate with their students about what the test scores mean and what they don't mean. The creation of a simple, practical document offering tips for parents in talking to their children would be extremely valuable in this regard.

10 Problem: State exams are not transparent enough and cannot be used to improve instruction.

Solution: The state should release state exams and detailed data in a timely manner so that teachers can use this information to improve our instruction.

Assessments should largely be used as a tool for instruction, not punishment. So it's concerning that questions and fully disaggregated data are not always released to teachers in a timely manner or at all. Ideally, teachers should be given detailed information on which questions his or her students struggled with, and then refer to the actual test to understand where students' comprehension broke down. The point isn't for teachers to increase teaching to the test; instead, this would allow educators to fill in gaps in our students' understanding. Common Core-aligned tests should be publicly released after they're given, and teachers should be furnished, in a timely fashion, with detailed data to help improve instruction. We realize that this might cost²⁰ additional money. So long as we're paying for quality tests that can help educators, we believe it's a worthwhile investment. Moreover, releasing such information will help parents, teachers, and students better understand what the Common Core actually is.

11 Problem: Students, teachers, and parents feel overwhelmed by the quantity of testing in schools.

Solution: NYSED should expedite review of districts' APPR (evaluation) plans for the purpose of eliminating unnecessary tests.

We agree with many educators, parents, and students that districts are piling more and more tests on students with limited consideration of their necessity or value. That's why we support the notion, proposed by Senator John Flanagan²¹,

of expediting the review of district evaluation plans in order to ensure unnecessary testing is not taking place.

Problem: Some schools may be "teaching to the test" in a way that is replacing meaningful learning.

Solution: Districts and schools should communicate to principals and teachers that excessive teaching to the test will not increase student test scores – and may even harm them.

As New York City Chancellor Carmen Fariña put it, "if we do good teaching, that's the best test prep."²² In other words, high test scores can be achieved by quality educators teaching to high standards. However, many teachers report that too much time is spent teaching to a test. Sometimes such a practice is driven by an educator's own fear of a low evaluation; other times it's dictated by a principal hoping for improved test scores.

This practice should be discouraged, first and foremost because it fails to promote the deep understanding the Common Core aspires to. Moreover, teaching to the test doesn't actually work to improve tests scores. At best, the research suggests that teaching to a test has little correlation with increased test scores; at worst, it may actually lead to lower test scores²³. This needs to be conveyed clearly and simply to teachers and principals: tests cannot and should not be "gamed" by excessive preparation, and those who try to do so will only hurt themselves and their students. The push to end excessive "drill and kill" should be embraced by all, so we were encouraged that the Governor's Common Core Implementation Panel proposed²⁴ limiting the amount of time spent on test prep.

12



Conclusion

We believe that the solutions we've laid out create a meaningful, sustainable path to continue the implementation of the Common Core. By improving communication, equipping parents, teachers and students with the resources they need, and improving assessment and evaluation, we will go a long way to addressing concerns around these new standards. Even with these recommendations we know we are not done. We must continue to learn, working with and listening to all stakeholders to constantly improve the implementation of the Common Core, while remaining open to the long-term investment necessary to complete this work. Our students deserve the Common Core. Let's roll our sleeves up, and let's get it right.

Teacher Action Team Members

Nina Barraclough

Second Grade
P.S. 396

Cole Farnum

Mathematics
Williamsburg Collegiate Charter School

Michael Loeb

Special Education
Urban Institute of Mathematics

Tamera Musiowsky-Borneman

Third Grade ICT
P.S. 208

Rob O'Leary

English
High School for Law and Public Service

Keith Scalia

English
John Adams High School

Courtney Summer

English
M.S. 223

Ruth Thomas

Fourth Grade
P.S. 102

References

1. <http://www.wnyc.org/story/302463-nyc-graduation-rates-stable-at-60-percent-achievement-gap-remains-wide/>
2. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/15/nyregion/37-of-new-york-graduates-meet-college-readiness-standard.html>
3. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/01/23/pisa-wealth_n_4641669.html
4. <http://www.corestandards.org/read-the-standards/>
5. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/01/10/common-core_n_4537284.html?utm_hp_ref=tw
6. <http://www.nga.org/files/live/sites/NGA/files/pdf/2010COMMONCOREK12TEAM.PDF>
7. <http://www.politifact.com/florida/statements/2013/oct/21/public-comments-common-core-hearing/teachers-were-not-involved-developing-common-core/>
8. <http://www.capitalnewyork.com/article/albany/2014/03/8541376/assembly-approves-common-core-delay>
9. <http://www.regents.nysed.gov/meetings/2014/February2014/214p12hea3.pdf>
10. <http://www.governor.ny.gov/press/03102014-common-core-implementation-panel-recommendations>
11. http://www.learndoe.org/dhr/files/2013/06/MOSL-Webinar_06202013_FINAL-v2.pdf
12. <http://www.buffalonews.com/city-region/schools/nearly-half-of-new-york-8217s-public-school-teachers-rated-highly-effective-20131022>
13. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/randi-weingarten/teaching-and-learning-ove_b_4575705.html
14. <http://www.engageny.org/sites/default/files/resource/attachments/grs-users-guide.pdf>
15. <http://www.wnyc.org/story/teachers-befuddled-evaluation-plans/>
16. ny.chalkbeat.org/2013/09/16/instead-of-telling-teachers-apart-new-evals-lump-some-together/
17. http://schools.nyc.gov/Teachers/ITeachNYC/NYC_Performance_Assessments_ITNYC_Dec_2013.htm
18. <http://ny.chalkbeat.org/2013/12/12/ny-senate-report-calls-for-testing-ban-and-data-collection-delay/>
19. ny.chalkbeat.org/2014/02/10/regents-recommend-slower-rollout-for-high-school-common-core-exams/
20. <http://www.brookings.edu/research/reports/2013/10/30-standardized-testing-and-the-common-core-chings>
21. <http://ny.chalkbeat.org/2013/12/12/ny-senate-report-calls-for-testing-ban-and-data-collection-delay/>
22. <http://www.dnainfo.com/new-york/20131230/park-slope/de-blasio-name-carmen-farina-schools-leader>
23. <http://ccsr.uchicago.edu/publications/authentic-intellectual-work-and-standardized-tests-conflict-or-coexistence>; <http://news.uchicago.edu/article/2008/05/27/intensive-act-test-prep-during-class-leads-lower-scores-students-dont-connect-gr>
24. <https://www.governor.ny.gov/press/03102014-common-core-implementation-panel-recommendations>

