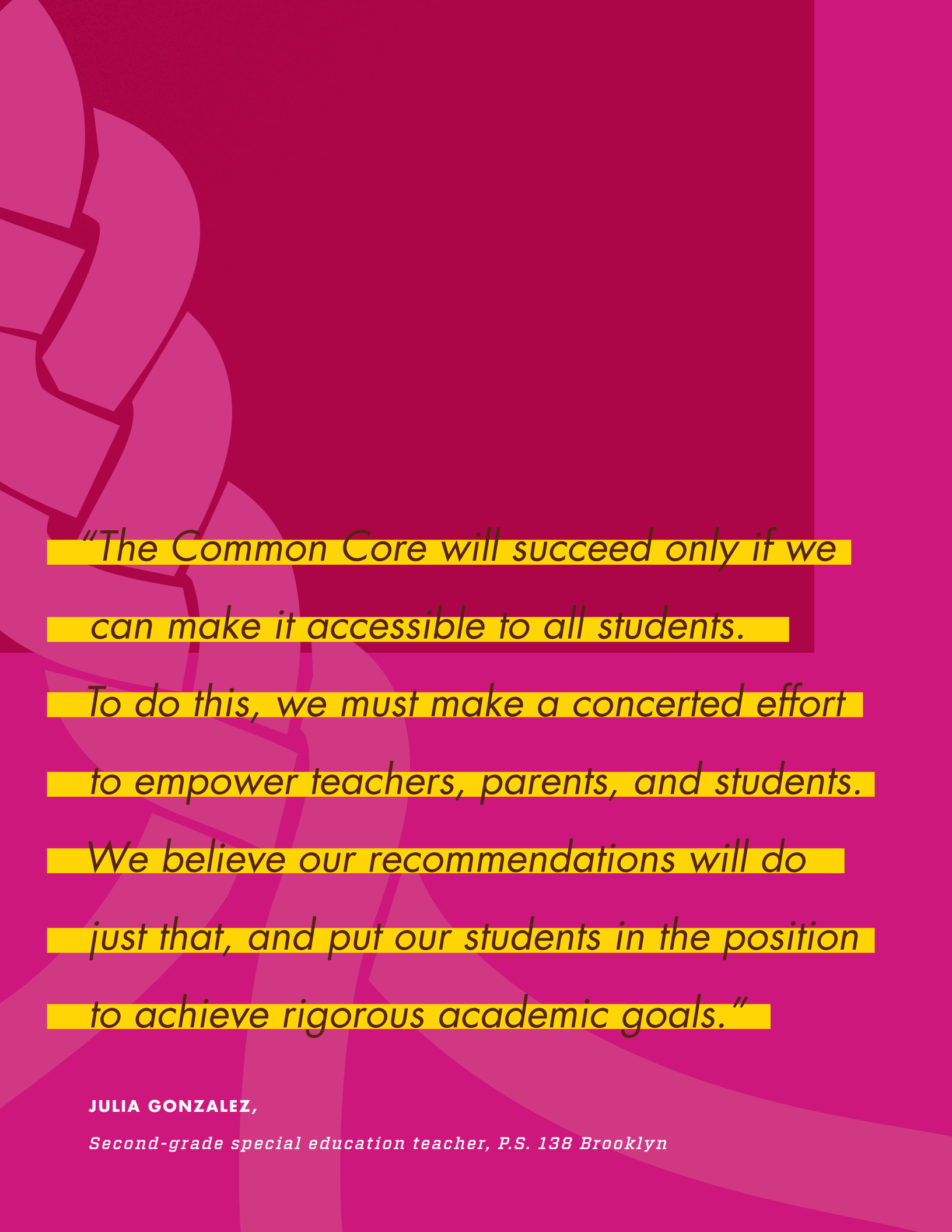




# PATHS FOR ALL

*IMPLEMENTING THE COMMON CORE FOR  
UNIQUE STUDENT POPULATIONS*

March 2015



*"The Common Core will succeed only if we can make it accessible to all students.*

*To do this, we must make a concerted effort to empower teachers, parents, and students.*

*We believe our recommendations will do just that, and put our students in the position to achieve rigorous academic goals."*

**JULIA GONZALEZ,**

*Second-grade special education teacher, P.S. 138 Brooklyn*

# CONTENTS

Introduction	<b>5</b>
The Importance of High Expectations for Unique Student Populations	<b>7</b>
Implementation Challenges and Solutions	<b>9</b>
Conclusion	<b>15</b>
Methodology	<b>16</b>
Notes	<b>17</b>
Teacher Action Team and Acknowledgements	<b>18</b>

## WHO ARE UNIQUE STUDENT POPULATIONS (USPs)?

When we use the term USPs, we are referring to three specific groups of students. In doing so, we are not attempting to exclude any other individuals or groups of students who have unique needs. However, we find this term useful in identifying subsets of students who face many of the same challenges in the transition to the Common Core.

**ENGLISH-LANGUAGE LEARNERS (ELLs)** are defined by the New York City Department of Education as “students who speak a language other than English at home and score below proficient on English assessments when they enter our school system.”<sup>1</sup> ELLs often face language challenges with both English and math standards; parents of ELLs sometimes have similar barriers to access that make it more difficult for them to support their children.

**DISTRICT 75 (D75)** refers to schools across all five boroughs in New York City that serve students “who are on the autism spectrum, have significant cognitive delays, are severely emotionally challenged, sensory impaired, and/or multiply disabled.”<sup>2</sup> D75 students often struggle to access the higher standards and may have instructional needs that extend beyond academic content.

**SPECIAL EDUCATION** students are those who have an identified disability and an individualized education plan (IEP). There is vast diversity in these students’ needs and in their levels of success in accessing the Common Core. We have tried to identify trends in implementation that apply to many special education students, across a spectrum of disabilities.

# INTRODUCTION

The implementation of the Common Core State Standards in New York City has come with an array of challenges. This is to be expected in a school system as large and complex as New York City's. Yet too little attention has been paid to how Common Core affects three unique groups of students: English-language learners (ELLs), special education students in community schools, and District 75 (D75) students. A past E4E–New York Teacher Action Team paper, “A Path Forward,”<sup>3</sup> addressed how to improve implementation of Common Core for general education students; here, as teachers of students from varying backgrounds, we make recommendations for improving implementation specifically for these “unique student populations” (USPs).

# OVERVIEW: CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS

	CHALLENGES	SOLUTIONS
1	Lack of parental resources, particularly regarding USPs	<p>Encourage schools to host Common Core training for parents</p> <p>Create a Common Core guide that is specifically designed for parents of USPs with separate sections for ELL, D75, and special education students</p> <p>Create an opt-in parent newsletter in multiple languages with updates, mini lessons, and resources on Common Core</p>
2	Lack of quality training and opportunities to collaborate for USP teachers	<p>Give teachers a full week before the school year begins to receive professional development and time to collaborate in order to implement the Common Core successfully</p> <p>Allow USP teachers to opt out of some school-level professional development in order to work in specialized teams to collaborate on curricular and pedagogical issues related to the Common Core and their students</p>
3	Lack of easily accessible and differentiated curricular resources	<p>Prioritize attaching differentiated and scaffolded materials to all lessons on EngageNY</p> <p>Break down standards into essential components ranging in complexity in order to help teachers scaffold their instruction</p>
4	Lack of consideration of functional and vocation components of education	<p>Give D75 teachers training on writing IEP goals that combine academic and functional goals</p>
5	Common Core-aligned assessments have made it challenging for USPs to show their academic achievement	<p>Allow for math problems to be read aloud to all students</p> <p>Eliminate or significantly adjust time limitations for USPs</p> <p>Expand use of computer-adaptive assessments</p> <p>Create resource banks of performance tasks for the New York State Alternate Assessment</p>

# THE IMPORTANCE OF HIGH EXPECTATIONS FOR USPS

One of the best components of the Common Core is that it sets aspirational goals for all students, challenging every pupil to think critically and gain a deep conceptual understanding of English and math. Too often our students are underestimated by some adults in their lives, including their teachers. That includes each of us, who have seen many instances when our students surprise us with what they can do.

We firmly believe that all students deserve to be exposed to rigorous content—both academic and functional—that at once challenges them and builds their confidence in their own abilities. Similarly, we believe that all students can learn at high levels specific to their needs. In turn, high expectations for students push teachers to improve our practices in order to unleash our students’ potential. Indeed, research suggests that teachers who hold high standards also show higher achievement gains among their students.<sup>4</sup>

All that said, high expectations do not mean the same thing for all students, and such expectations must be both rigorous and realistic. A teacher cannot simply, through high expectations, enable an eighth grader reading at a

second-grade level to fully reach all the eighth-grade Common Core standards.<sup>5</sup> Nor should high standards imply one-size-fits-all teaching, but instead they should serve as an aspirational destination. To be clear, however, we support the Common Core’s high expectations because we believe in setting a high bar for all our students.

In sum, the Common Core standards challenge both students and teachers. We, as teachers of remarkable students, are ready for that challenge, but look to improved implementation of the Common Core to help us raise the bar for all students across New York.

*“With the Common Core, teachers of unique student populations have the chance to **challenge their students and expose them to content** they otherwise wouldn't get. Teachers are excited about this, but need the resources to make it successful.”*

*Samuel Copeland*, Special education teacher, The Vida Bogart School for

All Children, District 75

# OVERVIEW OF THE COMMON CORE

## WHAT ARE THE COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS?

The Common Core State Standards are a response to nationwide data showing that students are not graduating from high school with the skills necessary for college or career. Designed with collaboration from teachers, researchers, and leading experts from across the country, the new standards provide a scaffolded framework of the skills and knowledge most demanded by employers and universities.

## HOW ARE THE COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS DIFFERENT FROM OTHER ATTEMPTS AT STANDARDS-BASED REFORM?

Previous attempts at standards reform yielded inconsistent results. Each state had its own long list of vague standards. Even with these standards in place, instruction was often not standards-driven, culminating in inconsistent and nontransparent state assessments.

The Common Core was designed to ensure that educators are teaching fewer standards more deeply. The Common Core is clear about what students need to know most. They are aligned to college and career readiness and push students to think critically.

## WHAT ARE THE SHIFTS TEACHERS ARE MAKING BASED ON THE COMMON CORE?

The literacy and math standards can be summarized by three major shifts each. These shifts place emphasis on critical thinking skills and holistic understanding of content, and ask teachers to focus their daily work in the following ways:

### LITERACY SHIFTS

Students build knowledge through content-rich nonfiction, balanced with literary texts.

Students read both informational and literary texts, grounding written and verbal analysis and commentary in evidence.

Students regularly practice with complex, grade-level text and academic language.

### MATH SHIFTS

Teachers focus deeply on less, and only on the concepts outlined in the standards.

Students receive coherent instruction within and across all grades.

Teachers focus on conceptual understanding of math concepts, fluency of math facts, and application of math skills in real-world situations.



# IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS

Despite the potential of the Common Core, its implementation—particularly for USPs and us, as their teachers—has proven difficult. Below we lay out the main challenges that we have seen and offer potential solutions for each of these hurdles.

## 1 CHALLENGE

Many parents do not yet understand aspects of the Common Core, and resources and outreach are not often available or accessible, particularly for parents of USPs.

Too often parents of all students report that they are perplexed by the Common Core and the instructional shifts that go along with it.<sup>6</sup> This is especially true for parents of USPs, who often struggle to access resources. Exacerbating the problem is a lack of targeted resources about how Common Core affects USPs. Schools—as parents’ main point of contact with the education system—should actively work to inform parents on how Common Core affects their children.

## SOLUTIONS

We therefore encourage schools, with support and resources from the New York City Department of Education (DOE), to host Common Core training for parents during the time<sup>7</sup> set aside in the new contract for parental engagement. We also suggest that schools use per-session dollars to offer trainings on nights and weekends to fit parents’ schedules. To hold schools accountable, we recommend adding a question to the DOE-administered parent surveys<sup>8</sup> regarding how well schools have communicated the Common Core and the instructional and curricular shifts it entails.

Moreover, we strongly recommend the creation of a Common Core guide that is specifically designed for parents of USPs with separate sections for ELL, D75, and special education students. Among the resources offered on both the DOE<sup>9</sup> and New York

**“Parental engagement is not just a responsibility—it’s a right. The same way we, as educators, refuse to let language barriers, learning disabilities, or interrupted formal education get in the way of letting our students learn, we cannot let those challenges get in the way of helping parents be informed, active, and engaged participants in their children’s education.”**

*Mara Dajevskis*, Social studies teacher, P.S. 89 Elmhurst



State Education Department (NYSED)<sup>10</sup> websites, there are no resources that specifically refer to USPs and the Common Core. These websites and resources should make clear that the standards themselves are not different for different students, but certain populations will face unique challenges—and will therefore need special support—in achieving the standards.

**Finally, we encourage the DOE to consider creating a parent newsletter in multiple languages with updates, mini lessons, and resources on the Common Core that parents can opt into during parent-teacher conferences.** Another option, in this same vein, would be for the DOE—specifically the Division of Family and Community Engagement—to create content on the Common Core that schools can use for their own parent newsletters.

## 2 CHALLENGE

**There is a lack of quality training and opportunities to collaborate for teachers, particularly those of USPs.**

Since the Common Core creates new instructional standards, but does not dictate to teachers how to reach them, it is crucial that we receive the time and support to teach to these high standards. This is particularly important for those of us who teach USPs, as we sometimes receive professional development that is not tailored to either our students' learning needs or our own professional needs. We appreciate efforts by New York City and State to align professional development to the Common Core, but more work needs to be done in this area.

*“Like all professionals, **teachers need opportunities to develop our crafts.** Finding meaningful time to do so is crucial, and using that time to support teachers of unique student populations is necessary if we want Common Core to be accessible to all students.”*

**Joan Moon**, Sixth-grade inclusion teacher, P.S. 86 Kingsbridge Heights

## “Collaboration is key to a successful school.

*When educators collaborate to share best practices and resources, students experience a more consistent learning environment. Why not take that effective practice and bring it to the state level? Teachers sharing best practices and resources across the state and beyond could lead to more effective teaching that would benefit all children.”*

*Lexie Fichera*, Fourth-grade special education teacher, P.S./I.S. 49 Dorothy Bonawit Kole

### SOLUTIONS

Our colleagues recommended in “A Path Forward” that to implement the Common Core successfully, teachers need a full week before the school year begins to receive professional development and time to collaborate.<sup>11</sup> We wholeheartedly endorse this recommendation.

During this “week back,” special attention must be paid to teachers of USPs by requiring schools to provide professional development options and collaboration time for USP educators. It may also be appropriate to provide such training for general education teachers, as most—if not all—serve some USPs. This, of course, would require careful planning and active solicitation of teachers’ input and support. For example, USP teachers could be surveyed to solicit information regarding what type of professional development would be most useful, and the results could then be used to create professional development sessions for this time.

**We recommend that USP teachers be allowed to opt out of some school-specific professional development targeted at general population teachers in order to permit us to work in specialized teams to collaborate on curricular and pedagogical issues unique to the Common Core and our students.** The teachers’ contract passed in 2014 took an important step forward by carving out time for additional professional development.<sup>12</sup> However, in our experience this time has not always been effectively utilized to support USP teachers in implementing the Common Core. In order to get the most out of this time, flexibility and differentiation for USP educators need to be built in.

### 3 CHALLENGE

**There is a lack of easily accessible curricular resources that are differentiated for a variety of students’ needs.**

Unfortunately, many of us consistently feel like we are reinventing the wheel in our classrooms. We are not given enough curricular support, and what we are given is rarely scaffolded or differentiated to help us meet our students’ specific needs.

### SOLUTIONS

**We recommend that NYSED prioritize attaching differentiation and scaffolding materials to all lessons on EngageNY, a hub for Common Core-aligned resources.** To do this, we suggest that NYSED convene groups of USP teachers over the summer to put together differentiated and scaffolded resources that can be included on EngageNY. EngageNY has many terrific lessons, but very few provide thorough resources for differentiation for those of us teaching a variety of student levels. Similarly, few provide clear scaffolding for students far below grade level. Engaging teachers directly to improve curricular resources will leverage the expertise that many educators have developed as we have worked to implement Common Core in our classrooms, while also eliminating the need for teachers to reinvent the wheel in our classrooms.

**We recommend that the standards be broken down into essential components, ranging in complexity, in order to help teachers scaffold their instruction.** The rigorous standards in Common Core are often difficult to access for students with severe disabilities, so not only must curriculum be scaffolded, but in some cases the standards themselves must be scaffolded as well.

## EXAMPLES OF BREAKING DOWN STANDARDS

The eighth-grade reading standard “Determine an author’s point of view or purpose in a text and analyze how the author acknowledges and responds to conflicting evidence or viewpoints” can be scaffolded with “Recognize the author’s purpose in informational text” (*less complex*) and “Identify the author’s point of view and recognize any conflicting evidence in informational text” (*more complex*).<sup>14</sup>

The fifth-grade math cluster standard “Write and interpret numerical expressions” can be scaffolded with “Identify a numerical expression” (*less complex*) and “Evaluate an expression that represents a situation” (*more complex*).

Fortunately, resources are already available that do just that, so to a large extent the problem is a lack of dissemination. The New York State Alternate Assessments (NYSAA)—an assessment for students with severe disabilities<sup>13</sup>—breaks down the Common Core in grades 3–12.<sup>15</sup> These sorts of resources must be distributed widely—and created where they are not available, specifically grades K–2—to USP teachers.

### 4 CHALLENGE

**There has often been a lack of consideration of functional and vocational components of education for D75 and special education students.**

A large body of research suggests that students with severe disabilities benefit from learning a combination of academic and practical skills.<sup>16</sup> Common Core has focused all teachers on high academic standards—which is very important—but it is similarly necessary that students receive access to functional and vocational instruction that will prepare them for life beyond school.

### SOLUTIONS

**To address this concern, we recommend that D75 teachers receive training—potentially during the “week back”—on writing IEP goals for students that combine academic and functional goals.**

We recommend creating goals in consultation with parents, the IEP team, and the student (when appropriate). This approach will allow for a dual focus on how academic content can inform and further real-world skills.

For example, some of the life skills that many of us take for granted (e.g., self-care, money management, time management, and even basic social skills), need to be explicitly broken down and taught for some USPs. During IEP meetings, parents frequently express concerns over their students’ futures (e.g., living arrangements and employment possibilities). It is important for us to find a way to merge the importance of life skills with the importance of academic, standards-based skills. Based on the research of Hunt, McDonnell and Crockett, we agree with the suggestion of using goal areas associated with quality of life outcomes to drive the IEP development.<sup>17</sup>

We also agree with the sentiment of using this framework to develop standards-based academic goals that are specifically tailored to each student, and have a greater potential for application into real-life scenarios. It is important for academic goals to be practiced in a variety of real-world situations to enhance comprehension and application to the variety of settings our students will be exposed to upon graduating from school. Training should be centered around how to unpack the Common Core Standards into relatable, easily digestible pieces for students with lower cognitive abilities, as well how to explicitly connect standards to quality-of-life outcomes.

*“I want to expose my students to rigorous academic content. I want to hold them to high standards. And **I want them to be important members of their communities** with confidence in their skills and abilities.”*

**Rachael Goeler**, Special education teacher, P233Q @ Metropolitan High School, District 75

*"We need computer adaptive testing in order to track the growth of the kids who need the most help. Not only does computer adaptive testing **build struggling students' confidence in their ability to improve**, but it also provides essential information to teachers."*

*Mara Dajevskis, Social studies teacher, P.S. 89 Elmhurst*



**“We need additional accommodations for students who utilize every second of their time when taking standardized tests, but still don't finish. I feel strongly about this because sometimes when students are working through specific strategies we taught them for breaking down complex questions, it takes them a long time.”**

*Nina Rosemarie Uy*, Fifth-grade special education teacher, P.S./I.S. 49

Dorothy Bonawit Kole

## 5 CHALLENGE

**New Common Core-aligned assessments have, in some cases, made it more challenging for USPs to show their academic achievement.**

Standardized tests are important in order to know how our students are progressing.<sup>18</sup> However, there have long been challenges in fairly assessing USPs, an issue that has been exacerbated in some case by new Common Core-aligned exams.

## SOLUTIONS

**Since reading decoding and comprehension are not part of the math standards being assessed, we recommend that the option for math problems to be read aloud be made available to all students.** In many cases, Common Core math assessments have a high number of word problems. This makes sense, and is one way to test a student's depth of mathematical knowledge. However, this presents a problem for students—particularly ELLs, among others—who struggle with reading. Our proposal ensures that reading difficulties will not inhibit performance on math exams. This is precisely the policy that PARCC—one of the two Common Core testing consortia—is adhering to, and New York should follow suit for all of its standardized tests.<sup>19</sup>

**We recommend eliminating or significantly adjusting time limitations for USPs on standardized tests.** Some USPs struggle to complete the complex and rigorous Common Core assessments in the allotted time, even those students who receive an extended time accommodation. This unfairly penalizes USPs, since we

should be assessing students' knowledge of the standards, not how fast they can finish a test. Here again, PARCC serves as an excellent example, allowing both special education students and ELLs who have been identified as needing extended time to have an entire day to complete a given assessment.<sup>20</sup>

**We support the expanded use of computer-adaptive assessments, which adjust question difficulty in real time and thus allow struggling students to show growth even from a very low starting point.**<sup>21</sup>

The rigor of the new tests is to be applauded, but in some cases such assessments do not let extremely low-performing students show growth over time, since the tests are often too far above their current academic levels.

**We recommend creating resource banks of performance tasks for the New York State Alternate Assessment, which will help teachers complete our roles in a more efficient and effective manner.**

Compiling and creating individual performance tasks based on student needs has always been challenging for teachers who administer the Alternate Assessment, which is given to students with severe cognitive disabilities to assess their growth in core academic subjects.<sup>22</sup> Under the Common Core, the test assesses more standards than ever before, resulting in more test items and creating an overwhelming burden for both students who take the tests and teachers who create them. To solve this problem, NYSED should create resource banks that are available for teachers to access.

# CONCLUSION

This is an incredibly unique moment in time to change the way teachers teach and students learn, but in order for the potential of this moment to be fully realized, we need to improve implementation of the Common Core, particularly for USP students and their teachers. The solutions we identify in this paper will move implementation forward, particularly for USPs. We must continue to push all students to reach the high standards set by the Common Core. If schools, teachers, students, and parents are given the necessary support, we will succeed together.

## METHODOLOGY

The discussion on Common Core has not included nearly enough focus on USPs. After several teachers independently identified this concern, in the summer of 2014, Educators 4 Excellence-New York conducted three listening sessions, during which USP teachers brainstormed solutions to Common Core implementation problems, specifically related to USPs.

Out of these listening sessions, E4E-New York convened a Teacher Action Team of ten educators who met regularly to discuss ways to improve implementation of the Common Core for USPs. We spoke with experts in the field, and discussed differing perspectives in order to create a set of actionable, New York-specific recommendations.

We weighed each policy against our ultimate goals of elevating the teaching profession and improving student outcomes. These goals anchored our discussion and drove us to select the recommendations we believe will best accomplish these lofty aims.



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# THE 2015 EDUCATORS 4 EXCELLENCE-NEW YORK TEACHER ACTION TEAM ON UNIQUE STUDENT POPULATIONS AND THE COMMON CORE

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*This report, graphics, and figures were designed by Kristin Girvin Redman and Tracy Harris at Cricket Design Works in Madison, Wisconsin.*

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