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Common Sense for the **Common Core**

Four ideas to help maximize your schools' chances for success in implementing the new standards.

By Regie Routman

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As a mentor teacher, leader, and coach who has been working in diverse classrooms and schools for more than four decades, I've learned that no matter what reforms, standards, or new programs come along, literacy achievement gains tend to be fleeting. Here's what I've observed over and over: Without administrators who have a solid knowledge of effective literacy instruction, schools wind up focusing on implementation of isolated skills and/or standards with the hope that all the parts will add up to something meaningful. At best, this yields short-term gains and superficial learning. A good example is No Child Left Behind. After many years of a national commitment that cost billions of dollars, most students got good at phonics but showed no measurable growth in reading comprehension. My concern is we may soon see a similar outcome with the Common Core standards, and educators, parents, and the public will once

again become disillusioned. So let's take a look at the historical and present realities to assess what is possible and advisable.

The Common Core State Standards—or some set of common standards and framework for what kindergarten through high school students need to know and be able to do to pursue college and career goals—became necessary when it was blatantly apparent that not all students in U.S. schools had equal opportunity to learn. In particular, factors including income inequality and school re-segregation doomed many poor and minority students, as well as English language learners, to an inferior education, with the result that many of these students routinely performed at least two years below grade level. In addition, many schools had not been challenging, engaging, or meeting the needs of large numbers of average-scoring and high-performing students for years. The need for common, high standards with content that spirals coherently from grade to grade was real.

Implementing the CCSS has become even more complex in the wake of the recent U.S. midterm elections, as more state governors have said they intend to replace the Common Core with homegrown standards. Also, some educators now view the CCSS as another fad that we need to “wait out.” The reality is that standards are necessary but insufficient; all standards are eventually replaced by “new” standards and expectations. Propelled by continuing pressure for quick results and high-stakes consequences for failure, schools understandably implement new reforms, mandates, and standards, but often without sufficient preparation or support for teachers. Predictably, we wind up with disappointing results.

So what's a conscientious administrator to do? The vision and goals of the CCSS are commendable. In the hands of a masterful teacher supported by a knowledgeable administrator, standards are a plus. However, despite worthy intentions, two huge obstacles may eventually cause the downfall of the Common Core, and both are common-sense factors.

1. First, the success of these new, higher standards depends on teachers and leaders knowing how to expertly implement them. Many teachers, principals, and administrators have not been properly prepared to teach reading and writing well, and they are relying on rapidly proliferating “Common Core-aligned” materials, most of which are severely wanting; even for experienced teachers, implementing the standards is daunting. The challenge for administrators is to provide professional learning that puts the highest priority on ensuring all teachers receive a deep foundational knowledge that transfers to expert instruction in the classroom. Without that theoretical and practical knowledge, teachers cannot effectively implement the CCSS or expertly teach and assess. Effective application of complex tasks and concepts requires a high level of expertise, and such expertise requires time and practice through well-planned, long-term schoolwide professional development. We are a “quick fix” society, and we often reject a commitment to long-term goals and outcomes.

2. Second, and attached to the first factor, is the high-stakes testing that accompanies the standards. History tells us that such stakes breed fear and distrust as pressure mounts for results. What's on the test is what gets taught, resulting in a narrow curriculum broken into bits and pieces to "match" the test. Rather than relying on putting our efforts into high-level professional learning for all teachers and leaders, we waste enormous sums of time developing, preparing for, and executing tests with major consequences for students, teachers, families, and society.

Administrators need to take the lead in providing the guidance, coaching, and expert professional development teachers need to successfully implement and sustain any set of literacy standards or learning outcomes. Here are some recommendations and actions for teachers—and administrators, too—for where put the literacy emphasis to increase student learning.

- *Become discerning readers and writers.* We cannot teach what we do not know or value. Apply what you do as a strategic reader and writer to teaching readers and writers. Let students know how and why you read and write for real-world audiences and purposes that go beyond the classroom—and this may include blogs, social media, opinion pieces, and more.
- *Do more read-alouds of excellent literature.* In the course of reading, think aloud to show students how readers figure out vocabulary, question the author, make inferences, reread when confused, notice the author's craft, and so on. Your read-alouds should include more emphasis on nonfiction.
- *Embed shared experiences in your teaching.* Before asking students to read complex text, read complex text with them. Demonstrate "close reading" and reason through how to find, use, and analyze evidence from the text to make meaning and support a point of view.
- *Organize curriculum through emphasizing big ideas and important concepts.* The best place to start is with the K-12 Common Core anchor standards for reading. These include key ideas and details, craft and structure, integration of knowledge and ideas, and range of reading and level of text complexity. Beware starting with small pieces of the standards; teachers and students can get stuck in the details and never get to the highest levels of understanding.

The Common Core State Standards are a worthy ideal of what's possible for our students but they should be approached with perspective. Standards do not transform teaching and learning; effective teachers supported by knowledgeable principals and administrators do. Implementation and "how" to effectively instruct and assess student learning requires years of professional learning with skillful teachers, coaches, and leaders in a culture of trust, inquiry, coaching, collaboration, celebration of strengths, and, yes, even joy. In such learning cultures, students, teachers, and leaders thrive. It is up to knowledgeable administrators to ensure teachers and principals do not continue to drown in a culture of minutiae over testing and teaching to individual standards. Rather,

savvy and courageous administrators ensure that being accountable for students' engagement, enjoyment, and success as readers, writers, and thinkers comes before any set of standards, assessments, or mandates.

Regie Routman is an educator who works with teachers and administrators in underperforming schools to increase and sustain reading and writing achievement for all students. She is the author of many books and resources, most recently [Read, Write, Lead: Breakthrough Strategies for Schoolwide Literacy Success](#) (ASCD, 2014). She can be contacted on regieroutman.org.

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