



TEACHER LEADERSHIP

Two Paths: How Will You See the Common Core?

APRIL 21, 2013

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As educators across the country implement the Common Core State Standards, we see two paths emerging -- and diverging.

The first path treats the Common Core as just another set of standards to implement and assess. Educators jump straight to the grade-level requirements and map them to their curricula in a compliance-driven exercise. It starts to look a lot like what we've been doing with the No Child Left Behind Act for the last 10 years -- a narrowed curriculum focused more on test scores than on college and career readiness.

The second path leverages the strengths of the Common Core to transform teaching and learning. It entails educators taking the time to understand what is visionary about these new standards and how they can help drive college and career success for students.

We are concerned that if the first path becomes the norm, the Common Core will represent a missed opportunity in U.S. education that will set us back decades.

The Common Core can and should serve as a unique transformational opportunity for our nation's teaching and learning systems. Educators who leverage these standards to teach and assess such competencies as critical thinking, problem-solving, and collaboration will lead the way to post-secondary and career success for more students.

While we view the adoption of the Common Core as a positive turn, these standards should be considered the floor and not the ceiling when it comes to achievement. Important student outcomes (financial literacy, global competence, and self-direction, to name a few) are not addressed. We believe it is critical to adopt a "Common Core and more" approach, as some schools are doing.

Visionary leaders see the Common Core as the leverage they need to dramatically change outcomes for students and the systems in which students learn. They call for students to not only master content and basic skills, but also critical dispositions like analysis, research, inquiry, and deeper learning outcomes, such as communication skills and critical thinking and problem-solving.

These promising implementations seem to have three distinct features to them.

1. Aligning the Common Core standards to 21st-century skills and deeper learning outcomes

First, some districts are using their Common Core implementation to reinforce their commitment to a 21st-century learning model. The Catalina Foothills school district in Tucson, Arizona has had a 21st-century learning model for seven years. When district officials began implementing the Common Core, their first task was to integrate the standards and their 21st-century learning objectives. They created working groups of 12 math and 12 English teachers (one for each grade) who are "mapping" their district's 21st-century learning outcomes with the Common Core standards.

Envision Education, the charter-management organization that one of us (Bob) heads, developed a "graduate profile" that integrates the Common Core with the "4Cs" (critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity) and preparation for a lifetime of learning. This profile guides all of Catalina Foothills' work with students, teachers, and leaders.

The graduate profiles center around three simple, concrete verbs: know, do, and reflect. The prepared graduate knows the content and the discrete skills of her academic subjects. She can do what typical college courses demand (research, analysis, inquiry) and master deeper learning outcomes. And she has the ability to reflect, a habit of self-awareness and revision that sets her on the path of continued growth and ultimately success in college and career.

2. Capacity-building through professional development

For leaders pursuing innovative implementations of the Common Core, changes in professional development are required. Some are using professional learning communities to build their professional development around critical thinking. The Manitowoc, Wisconsin public schools, for instance, are using the principles of authentic intellectual work and professional learning communities to help their teachers improve their instruction regarding critical-thinking skills in math and English/language arts. Meanwhile, at the Tahoma school district in Washington state, educators are being trained in the tools of "systems thinking" so they can pass that knowledge along to students as well as use such tools to understand what's being transformed in their own district.

The Metro Nashville district in Tennessee began an intensive high-school-redesign process six years ago, and, about three years ago, officials there began developing an intensive professional development strategy to help high school teachers improve their work in project-based learning. When the Common Core came on the scene, educators in Nashville concluded that project-based learning would offer a perfect implementation strategy because of its emphasis on problem-solving and communication competencies, both of which are in demand via the Common Core.

3. New assessment strategies

Finally, and importantly, many district leaders are using Common Core implementation to innovate their assessment strategies by focusing on performance assessment. If the Common Core standards define what students need to know and be able to do to be ready for success in college and career, student performance assessment is how students can demonstrate that readiness through their actual work product, not just a fill-in-the-bubble test.

The Deeper Learning Student Assessment Initiative, led by Envision, has developed rigorous and relevant performance tasks with corresponding rubrics to assess student work. The rubrics take into account factors such as analysis, communication, and reflection around the work product. In addition, students create and defend portfolios of college-ready work as part of their high school graduation requirements. The Common Core offers the opportunity to change the focus from assessment of learning to assessment as learning.

Nine California school districts that are part of the Linked Learning Initiative (high school pathways that link college and career preparation) have also formed the Advanced Pathway Performance Assessment system project, or APPA. APPA engages a select group in cutting-edge work to more effectively and systematically measure and support student development of the knowledge and skills they need to graduate prepared for college, careers, and life. Over the course of the two-year project, schools will begin to implement pathway-wide systems of performance-based assessment that include the use of common, outcomes-aligned rubrics and performance tasks, and a culminating student demonstration of learning and skill -- all aligned with the Common Core and the 4Cs.

As it stands today, we see too many educators treating the Common Core as yet another compliance exercise.

We still have time to follow a better path -- to treat the Common Core as an opportunity to transform teaching and learning and embrace a broad and expansive notion of college and career readiness. Thankfully, we have found some leaders headed down this path. More should follow.

Source: www.edutopia.org/blog/common-core-two-paths-bob-lenz-ken-kay

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