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Integrating the Common Core into Educator Effectiveness Work

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December 2011

We are working through a period of extraordinary change and uncertainty, in public education as well as for society generally. The demands are immense and the stakes are high. Education is rightly seen as a key strategy for increasing social mobility and strengthening long-term economic growth, but one that is not currently realizing this potential.

To improve public education, two policies have emerged above (or perhaps undergirding) all others: the Common Core State Standards and new teacher effectiveness initiatives (generally including instructional frameworks and teacher evaluation systems). On their own, each initiative has profound implications for management and leadership. Taken together, these developments have transformative potential.

Current systems, however, are structured to pursue these lines of work in parallel, squandering their synergistic potential and diminishing the impact of each. It is imperative for systems to integrate the work of Common Core and teacher effectiveness -- to leverage limited capacity and build coherence for front-line practitioners.

What is the Common Core?

The Common Core State Standards (Common Core or CCSS) articulate an aspiration of educating every young person for active citizenship and success in college and work. This is a simple concept, yet it is a revolutionary one for American public education. It takes the rhetoric of college- and career-readiness and describes concretely the knowledge and skills students need to succeed. Never before have we oriented whole systems around the goal of preparing *all* students to be researchers, writers, and problem-solvers.

The Common Core are a set of rigorous expectations in Mathematics, English/Language Arts, and literacy across the curriculum. Drawing from exemplars across the country and across the world, the Common Core explicitly aims our schools at preparing every student for success in postsecondary education, career pursuits, and active citizenship. More than any American standards before them, these standards stress students' ability to grapple with complex issues; to apply knowledge; to synthesize information from multiple sources and divergent perspectives; to reason critically; to marshal evidence for informing and persuading.

It's important to acknowledge that the Common Core represents an act of synthesis more than an act of creation. Great instruction has always been aimed at these higher-order thinking skills. We are fortunate to have examples of great instruction all over the country,

including inspiring (albeit isolated) examples of the highest performance in schools with overwhelming majorities of students from low-income families and students of color. The goal now is to make this systematic and universal.

One of the biggest differences between CCSS and prior state standards is the emphasis on application of knowledge and problem-solving. The new standards are thinner on specific content knowledge than most predecessors, emphasizing valued skills and abilities. In addition to core content in mathematics for example, there is a description of mathematical practices that need to be reinforced throughout the curriculum, such as perseverance in solving challenging problems and critiquing the reasoning of others.

Because Common Core aspires to strengthen students' critical thinking, communication skills, and problem-solving across disciplines and content areas (through the literacy and writing standards as well as the mathematical practices), it touches teaching in every classroom and every subject.

As Common Core potentially gets entangled in discussions of federal power and election-year politics, it's important to keep in mind where these standards came from and what they represent. The higher-order thinking and problem-solving skills emphasized in the Common Core are crucial for students' ultimate success, and must be a specific focus of instruction. This is essential work whether the Common Core exists or not. What the Common Core provides is a platform for going further, faster.

How Is This Related to Teacher Effectiveness?

At precisely the same time we are wrestling with what it means to educate students to the Common Core, many of our systems are consumed with defining what it means to be an effective teacher and how to measure it. These efforts include the design and implementation of new teacher effectiveness frameworks and evaluation systems. This work is as ambitious and challenging as the Common Core in its own right. In addition to formidable technical and logistical hurdles, the work is pushing against cultures and traditions where performance on the job was not seriously examined or consequential for professional standing, compensation, or advancement.

One of the most potentially powerful developments coming out of this work is the focus on teaching frameworks. Tremendous energy and resources are concentrated on adapting and/or adopting frameworks that describe expectations for instructional practice. These frameworks create shared language for refining practice, for supporting professional growth and development, and for evaluating teachers' performance on the job.

Typical teaching frameworks articulate dozens of observable teacher behaviors (some also include examples of student behaviors). Described in some detail are the distinctions between performing these tasks at various levels of proficiency; e.g., highly effective, minimally effective, etc., (or analogous categories). These frameworks and rubrics codify a school system's expectations for good teaching and represent foundational documents for the profession.

Two factors make it essential to integrate Common Core into teaching frameworks: focus and fairness.

Teachers are intensively focused on aligning instruction to teaching frameworks. This is precisely what we've asked of them, and it's very high-stakes work for teachers. In most of our systems, ratings of performance against these frameworks will significantly determine whether a teacher will keep his or her job in the coming years (in addition to other positive and negative consequences). Understanding, internalizing, and performing against these frameworks – and calibrating expectations with external observers – is a huge and time-consuming challenge. It is foolhardy to expect teachers to strive for instruction that is different from what they will be measured on and held accountable for.

If Common Core standards have implications for instruction – and they certainly do – then those expectations must be reflected in teaching frameworks, and ultimately teacher evaluations. If not, they are extraneous to teachers' core responsibilities. Already, policy changes and public communications have created a tough environment for fostering innovation and experimentation with new and different ways of teaching. We cannot afford a dynamic where teachers are asked to choose between what they *have* to do for evaluations right now, and what they *should* do for long-term success.

Common tests developed to assess Common Core are coming on-line in the 2014-15 school year. Student results on these tests are intended to gauge teachers' effectiveness, with very real consequences for teachers' performance ratings and job security (and potentially their salary, too). Value-added scores from the Common Core-aligned assessments will play a significant role in teacher evaluations and accountability. To avoid a "gotcha" scenario, it's imperative that the time between now and then is used deliberately to transition instruction so that teachers – and students – are prepared for what's coming.

Fairness demands that we analyze ways in which Common Core impacts instruction, make that explicit, and equip teachers with the guidance, tools and supports to align practice. It's not adequate to determine that a teacher *could* teach to the Common Core and meet the expectations in teaching frameworks. Rather, system leaders must determine whether performing well against teaching frameworks *demand*s instruction in which the Common Core is delivered.

What Does Integration Look Like?

As separate initiatives, Common Core and the new focus on teacher effectiveness will overwhelm front-line educators with competing priorities, overlapping timelines, and inconsistent expectations. Deliberately envisioned as parts of a whole, however, these initiatives have the potential to be not merely complementary but deeply synergistic and transformative.

It is overly simplistic to think of Common Core providing the “what” and teaching frameworks supplying the “how.” Common Core does possess new content, but also possesses clear and important implications for instruction.

Students are expected to be able to glean evidence from close examination of source materials; to construct logical arguments and critique reasoning of others; and to persevere in solving complex problems, to name three prominent examples of skill-development expectations with clear ramifications for instruction. In the Common Core, these are described as student competencies; now, they need to be described in terms of the teaching that develops them.

The timeline for the implementation of new teaching frameworks as part of evaluation systems and implementation of the CCSS is almost exactly the same. If system leaders ensure a unified, coherent approach, the two will mutually reinforce each other – and have deeper, more lasting impact than past, more discrete improvement efforts. If they are not integrated into a single body of work, capacity will be unable to fully deliver on either, and the impact of each will be undermined.

There are natural opportunities to unify the work. Already, however, we are seeing traditional approaches that treat these as separate, parallel initiatives. Common Core often is assigned to the office of curriculum & instruction or teaching & learning; new teacher evaluations increasingly are managed out of an office dedicated to human capital, educator effectiveness, or talent development (often in an attempt to avoid the dysfunction of traditional HR offices). Without deliberate, proactive management, public school systems could treat these new initiatives as projects – assign them to separate teams; establish separate timelines, goals, and reporting structures; and hope that they are integrated at the school level or by individual teachers. Having one or two people serve on both teams to ensure “coordination” and “alignment” is inadequate.

To take advantage of this historic opportunity, we need to make the work of teacher effectiveness and Common Core one and the same.

Guiding Questions for System Leaders:

Below are a couple of guiding questions to help school systems assess the level of integration of their teacher evaluation work and CCSS and how to strengthen it.

1. What are the biggest shifts in instruction required by the Common Core? Asked another way: How do current practices need to change to prepare all students for active citizenship and success in college and career pursuits?
2. What is the relationship between performing well against current teaching frameworks and teaching that is aligned to Common Core expectations?
 - a. To what extent and in what ways are Common Core expectations represented in our framework?
 - b. Is it possible to meet framework expectations without delivering instruction that builds skills required under the Common Core?
 - c. Are there descriptions of practice in current frameworks that are in tension with Common Core expectations?
3. Who is responsible for integrating Common Core into teaching frameworks and how will it get done?
 - a. What offices or individuals can/should lead this work?
 - b. Who should be deeply engaged in this process? Who should be consulted?
 - c. Are there opportunities to leverage capacity across school systems to strengthen and accelerate this work?
 - d. How will you know whether this responsibility is met?