

APPR: From Survival to Sustainability



By Bruce H. Crowder, EdD

The purpose of reform should be to improve the status quo. However, even the best intentions may be endangered without careful planning and provision, such as clear communication. Transformation poorly initiated may bring about a less than optimal result. New York State education reform is at a precipitous state. **In order to shift from survival to sustainability, it must garner local support and passion.**

APPR: HOW DID WE GET THERE?

Approaching the end of year two of the Annual Professional Performance Review (APPR) implementation, an atmosphere of confusion and healthy skepticism lies over the condition of NYS education. A public understanding of the accountability law is lacking. A review of the history is helpful. It began with Race to the Top (RTTT), the federal program funding the current educational reform. This was the impetus and monetary stream for state adoption of education accountability, along with Common Core State Standards (CCSS). Deadlines for RTTT competition both facilitated and complicated this phase because the process in most states was shortened to only a few months. By accepting the RTTT funding, NYS was required to implement principal and teacher accountability with a complicated reform agenda. School districts needed an approved negotiated plan for accountability, implementation of new standards (CCSS), and new assessments aligned with CCSS. Education Law §3012-c and §100.2(o) and Subpart 30-2 of the Commissioner's regulations established the requirements for the school years 2012-13 and beyond. There would be limited financial and material support to implement the reform.

Prior to the implementation of APPR, the Common Core was supported throughout the nation. The National Governors Association (NGA) and Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) acted as policy entrepreneurs in developing CCSS. This was a successful move to fulfill the idea of national standards for K-12 English language arts (ELA) and mathematics. Data from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) showed low achievement of U.S. students when compared with the nation's global competitors. Unlike the United States, countries with high-achieving students focused on rigorous and coherent national standards.

APPR IMPLEMENTATION: WHERE ARE WE?

What erupted from the state's hasty adoption of the reform agenda was frustration. School districts were on their own in understanding the law and implementing it with limited guidance. SED had not rolled out EngageNY, nor were regional teams in place. With an emphasis on accountability, school-based planning, time for collegiality and sharing, and instructional improvement were restricted. Also, adoption of the Common Core required the development of new curricula and newly aligned local assessments. Attempts to create new K-12 curricula and assessments as a single reform initiative in the same time frame have proved to be unreasonable.

The first round of state testing for accountability and student acquisition of CCSS in the spring of 2013 found that nearly 70 percent of students tested in ELA and mathematics in grades 3-8 failed the tests. The results were to be factored into the measure of principal and teacher effectiveness against learning standards not yet implemented. Worse, students were unfamiliar with Common Core aligned assessments and their different formats and contexts. No wonder such a prophesized disaster was to take place. A harsh reaction of educators, parents, and students followed with a focus on Common Core and testing. The disconnect between state testing and instruction placed educators in limbo.

APPR: WHAT IS THE EARLY RESPONSE?

As leaders at the State Education Department (SED) initiated information forums about the Common Core, their affective forecasting misjudged the public's concerns; they got lambasted. Attempting to introduce the Common Core to the public after the full reform was being badly implemented resulted in a flood of criticism, primarily directed at testing. Likewise, there was criticism of the Common Core as the basis for unreasonable learner expectations. Unsurprisingly,

APPR was the elephant in the room at each of the informational forums. Either out of ignorance or arrogance, the SED failed to take the pulse of educators and the public with the rollout of APPR. To its detriment, SED neglected to relate the Common Core to APPR. If they had, it may have helped, but ultimately would not have changed the public's reaction. What has become clear is the state can require reform, but not transform it into practice. Press coverage of the forums prompted a series of discussions and actions, particularly those dealing with testing.

Without adequate understanding, educators and the public were astounded by what was happening to their schools. With abysmal student testing results on the initial phase of implementing the Common Core, it was logical for all stakeholders to be concerned. In addition, without support teachers were attempting to implement the new standards which created student frustration, particularly in mathematics. The Common Core is not a curriculum. Rather, it functions as the platform for developing and launching new curricula for ELA and mathematics in grades K-12. As yet, this has not taken place. Past practice would show that it will take three to five years to develop new curricula. Instructional modules provided by SED as examples of Common Core curricular materials are inadequate and have not earned the respect of teachers. Throwing untested materials into the reform has not helped.

APPR SURVIVAL MODE: HOW DO YOU BREATHE UNDER WATER?

APPR Survival Mode: How do you breathe under water?

While there is general support for accountability and the Common Core, the requirements within APPR law are fraught with considerable challenges, most of which needed to be beta-tested in advance to remove barriers and refine the process prior to implementation. This was not done. Therefore, the current

teaching and learning environment is dominated by excessive numbers of teacher/principal observations that have overwhelmed administrators and constrained teaching practices. Because of the nature of observations, there is little or no time to foster a collegial approach to identify instructional and curricular challenges for improvement and to implement the Common Core. Instead, educators are forced to obsess over their individual effectiveness as measured by observational rubrics and test scores that may be meaningless. Beyond state assessments, schools are required to test all other subjects in grades K-12 for accountability. Kindergarten through grade 2 testing is evolving as an issue. Educators may find themselves forced into an institutional survival mentality, while desperately reaching for a lifeline.

WHY COMMON CORE?

The Common Core is the foundation to prepare our students for a world with new challenges and more rigorous employment requirements. However, this alone is not sufficient to improve teaching and learning. The adoption of the Common Core is the right move to meet new international challenges and it is a necessary catalyst for building new curricula and teaching approaches. However, elementary teachers are not content specialists and as such do not currently possess the knowledge and skills to implement the Common Core, particularly in mathematics. But this is not to say they cannot acquire the knowledge and skills required. The deeper understanding that is essential in reading and math cannot take place without significant professional learning. Therefore, a continued emphasis on instituting the Common Core cannot occur without front-loading a staff training dimension with additional text and material support. It may be necessary for secondary teachers to work closely with their elementary peers. Therefore, testing teachers and principals on standards not in place at this stage of the reform is counterproductive.

Aside from school safety, curriculum is the next key foundational factor in influencing teaching, learning, and assessment practices.

RTTT: WHAT TESTING BARRIERS THREATEN SUSTAINABILITY?

A most disturbing RTTT-related issue at this moment is the unwillingness of SED to release 2013 item-specific data and information from which teachers and principals can analyze their results to determine student strengths and areas of challenge! How can we expect teachers to develop student learning objectives (SLOs) that are influenced by state testing results in a prior year or engage in related professional learning without this information? By being blindsided, teachers cannot possibly craft and set improvement targets with appropriate and timely interventions. Hard to believe, part of a principal and teacher measure of effectiveness is based on test scores to which they do not have access! The SED’s release of a few test items from the spring 2013 testing is meaningless.

PREREQUISITE RECOMMENDATIONS FOR APPR SUSTAINABILITY

The move from survival to sustainability can only be carried out at the local level. The Common Core has the promise to reform American education. If not Common Core, what else? As the reform continues, here are recommendations to consider for sustaining the most vital aspects of it.

At the state level:

- institute a hiatus on using state testing results for accountability for three years
- release NYS item-specific student test data and information
- identify and share model APPR approaches
- streamline use of network teams to assist districts



At the local levels with networking of school districts:

- select efficient, integrated technology systems to support implementation
- provide intensive Common Core professional learning, particularly in math
- share PreK-12 curriculum maps for math and ELA
- list access to authentic, balanced texts by grade and subject
- share Common Core curricular materials, (e.g., units)
- share Common Core related test items for ELA and math

While there are other factors that may help us transition from the current survival mode, these recommendations will do much to reduce unreasonable pressures and improve implementation success. The path that will take us from mere survival to true sustainability requires immediate action by all involved in the reform process.

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