

“You Can’t Change the Results without Changing the Cause.”

# Shifting Education Paradigms

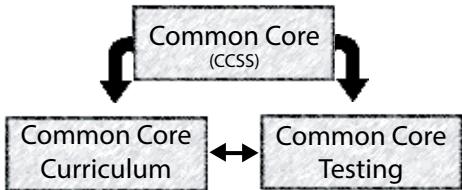


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By Bruce H. Crowder, EdD

When then presidential candidate Bill Clinton planned his campaign in his strategy room in Little Rock, on the wall in large print was the statement: *The Economy, Stupid!* He had a tough race to win. But he knew what the hot button was. Today, as an educator with a mission, I am inclined to say, *The Curriculum, Sweetie!* I am looking forward to the **leadership that not only acknowledges the curriculum hot button, but acts on it.**

While the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) provide a powerful blueprint for learning, the curriculum is the powerful integrator to support text and material, lesson planning, delivery, and assessment of the learning. Just as the standards are common, it also must be common to assure equity of learning opportunity. How else are administrators and teachers able to collaborate and improve the learning process? So, the learning is clear both horizontally and vertically. Such a curriculum is there to guide the learning without taking anything from the talent and experience of the teachers using it. And, if there is a management system to house all key elements of a Common Core-based curriculum, its display and access are enhanced and enriched.



The scenario above paints a picture of the most critical shift needing to be accomplished if Common Core is to be implemented. As currently acknowledged, shifts in reading and mathematics inherent in the Common Core are a reality as exhibited in the first two rounds of NYS testing results. What is most interesting is the cry from the state to the field prior to the testing to expect poor testing results. Why, then, is anyone surprised with the outcomes from the first two administrations of the tests?

A bigger question remains: Why would those promoting Common Core and the need for new tests paint such a dismal picture of the results before they happened? What is even more questionable is the need for the teacher/principal accountability law which depends on such results at this stage. Having raised key questions for which no responses are forthcoming, the leadership challenge looms before us.

Common Core presents a challenge with fewer standards compared to previous attempts but

with more intense expectations. Therefore, the era we are entering requires dramatic shifts in leadership, instruction, learning, assessment, and, as already stated, particularly in curriculum. In addition, the power of technology to support and manage these challenges must be employed. Principals will have to step up to meet these challenges unlike any previous period of change.

The initial leadership challenge rests squarely on principals to bring clarity to the Common Core through the fostering of professional learning. Now that NYS has released a good portion of ELA and math test items from the 2014 testing, along with a few from 2013, teachers are able to connect the standards with the measures used to evaluate student performance. In fact, the standards in and of themselves are merely learning objectives or, as some see them, broad guidelines about what students should know and be able to do. When they are used to drive the development of assessments to measure the degree of student understanding, they become real. With a careful examination of the nature and formats of the new tests and related scoring rubrics, teachers will see the need for instructional shifts to bring their students to deeper understanding in reading and math. It takes an education leader to set up these learning opportunities for teachers. Access to loads of Common Core materials is not the same as head-to-head engagement with peers in reviewing data and sharing insights.

Without a doubt, the greatest leadership challenge is access and/or development of a Common Core curriculum. In fact, the developers of Common Core now strongly believe that curriculum is the key to implementing the standards successfully. This is where the principals' leadership is necessary to inform the public that Common Core is not a curriculum. The standards are designed to drive the development of curriculum. While the SED has made an endeavor to provide curriculum modules for reading and math, the modules primarily serve an

illustrative purpose. Without training in their use, they may be avoided or used poorly. In addition, the modules need to contain the nature and formats of the new assessments. If they are not there, they need to be created and embedded. Teaching students in one mode and testing them in another can only result in disappointing performance.

A related consideration to support implementation of Common Core is textbooks. At this moment textbook companies are behind the curve. While some would like to promote their textbooks as Common Core-based, studies are showing that they are not there. There is no quick fix for implementing Common Core. It is a fact that curriculum development may take from three to five years. And it is questionable that this can happen within a local district. To meet this challenge, talent, resources, and time are needed – but are expensive. Technology to manage such an endeavor is also necessary.

The lack of Common Core curriculum is the most critical factor. What was curriculum yesterday and related textbooks have to change, as does the way teachers teach. This is at the heart of the Common Core challenge. With the potential power and influence of Common Core to reshape American education, the necessity of curriculum and appropriate methods of teaching must be developed and made available.

But in staying with the curriculum leadership challenge, principals may have to use or create consortia to share talent and resources to get the process under way. This may include not only the development of new teaching materials, but also the refinement of those already being used. However, good curriculum has always been the most difficult area of education to create. In truth, most school districts substitute the textbook as the curriculum. However, that is not to say textbooks are bad. They may serve a purpose of supporting a curriculum. In this way the curriculum draws what is good and necessary from a textbook and allows for the creation of what is needed.

As an important element within a



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curriculum, design and development of appropriate assessments are crucial. Where to begin? Leadership is the key to promoting an understanding of the new assessments. The past two administrations of Common Core testing have been abysmal, as stated earlier. However, the disconnect between teacher effectiveness and student performance may be the basis for serious harm to the reform. Student performance cannot improve as long as teachers do not understand what the tests require in the way of student skills and knowledge. Therefore, student preparation for doing well on the new assessments demands that they be given the skills and knowledge to complete them. To illustrate this matter simply, an analysis of the two years of released testing information shows that few students understand inferencing. They tend to confuse detail with inference. A simple review of the released testing information makes this matter patently clear.

While the SED has done well to release item-specific information for both the 2013 and 2014 testing

periods, it has not released a fuller dimension of the tests. For principals to lead grade-level teams in analyzing their testing results, the percent of correct multiple-choice responses is not adequate. This is also true of the extended responses, sometimes called the essays, which have a four-point scoring rubric. A mere display of mean scores leaves much to be desired. Principals need to be able to conduct distractor analysis when examining multiple-choice test items. This is where teachers can view the percent of students who opted for each item. Without this analysis, it is difficult to understand what made students respond the way they did. Was it a poor test item? Was it a matter of instruction? Was it a curricular factor? A similar concern relates to the extended responses in which the data needs to show the percent of students scoring at each level of the four-point rubric. This kind of analysis results in very important insight from which to make instructional and curricular adjustments.

There is no doubt that the nature of education and those that manage it will undergo dramatic change. However, working from the notion that each teacher is the curriculum is wrongheaded and naive. Common curriculum with observational criteria to monitor its implementation resides at the center of a successful education enterprise. Tracking instruction unrelated to a stated and distributed curriculum is an exercise in futility that may, in fact, result in positive observations, but not learning. The good news is that the current disconnect between teaching and student performance results can be improved. The cause for this to happen is a common curriculum, whether at the local, regional, or state level.

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