THE COMMON CORE

Insights Into the K–5 Standards

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The Common Core State Standards are becoming an integral part of our teaching. In this article, we offer insights into their structure and implementation.

The United States is actively engaged in a dynamic yet subtle Common Core revolution. States and territories are abandoning their self-designed standards and adopting the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) at an amazing rate. Currently, more than 90% of the states, the District of Columbia, and the U.S. Virgin Islands have agreed to these standards. The state of Kentucky, which has led the way, was the first to assess students using the Common Core Standards in spring 2012. Other states are waiting for the results of two national assessment consortia—Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers and Smarter Balanced—to be available in 2014–2015.

The Common Core State Standards (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers [NGA & CCSSO], 2010a) encompass multiple characteristics. According to the standards document, they:

- Are aligned with college and work expectations
- Are clear, understandable, and consistent
- Include rigorous content and application of knowledge through high-order skills
- Build upon strengths and lessons of current state standards
- Are informed by other top-performing countries, so that all students are prepared to succeed in our global economy and society
- Are evidence-based

What is the essential philosophy of the CCSS? What do educators need to know to use the College and Career Readiness (CCR) Standards and CCSS effectively? What do classroom teachers need to do differently to help their students achieve? What is the role of professional development in the implementation of the CCSS? In this article, we respond to these four questions and discuss a variety of challenges that remain as states and school districts implement the Common Core.

What Is the Essential Philosophy of the Common Core?
The Common Core State Standards emerged from the convergence of several factors: (a) the desire for one set of common standards to enable students
to compete on a global scale; (b) the efforts of the CCSSO and the NGA to coordinate a state-led effort to create a set of English Language Arts (ELA) and Mathematics Standards that would ensure that all United States students were prepared for college and the workplace; and (c) the Gates Foundation’s ambitious goal to have all students graduate college-ready.

The College and Career Readiness Standards were released in draft form in September 2009. After they were reviewed by task forces and the public had opportunities to comment, the CCSS were published in June 2010.

The essential philosophy of the Common Core is represented in the College and Career Readiness Standards. As noted in the CCSS for English Language Arts, “The CCR standards anchor the document and define general, cross-disciplinary literacy expectations that must be met for students to be prepared to enter college and workforce training programs ready to succeed” (NGA & CCSSO, 2010b, p. 4). The CCSS Initiative (NGA & CCSSO, 2010b) suggests that students who are college and career ready can be characterized as:

- Demonstrating independence
- Building strong content knowledge
- Responding to the varying demands of audience, task, purpose, and discipline
- Comprehending as well as critiquing
- Valuing evidence
- Using technology and digital media strategically and capably
- Understanding other perspectives and cultures (p. 7)

States have been highly motivated to support the CCSS for two reasons. First, adopting a “common set of standards” was a requirement for states applying for federal Race to the Top funds. A second, less influential factor was that, although they have adopted the CCSS, individual states may modify them by adding up to 15% of new content. Multiple states have declined to make any changes, and some states, such as Kentucky, chose only to give the standards a new title (Kentucky Core Academic Standards) (Kentucky Department of Education, 2010).

New York has also interjected a variety of benchmark details that support topics such as making connections, cultural diversity, a variety of genres, and higher order thinking.

**What Should Educators Know to Use the CCR Standards and the CCSS Effectively?**

Because the Common Core State Standards are multifaceted, using them is a complex task. To begin, the CCR Anchor Standards provide a foundation for the standards. These standards specify what students should know and be able to do to by the end of 12th grade to succeed in college and the workplace. The CCSS are organized according to the College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards. The CCR
Standards are the broader, more general anchors; the CCSS are the more specific benchmarks that underpin each anchor. The grade-specific CCSS connect to the College and Career Readiness Standards as benchmarks of what students in each grade level, K–12, should know and be able to do to reach the CCR Standards by the time the students graduate from high school. The K–5 CCSS are divided into two general categories: English Language Arts and Mathematics. We have included Figure 1, which features an overview of the CCSS English Language Arts K–5, as an example of the focus for each standard. The CCSS in their entirety are available online at www.corestandards.org.

When addressing the CCSS, there are six essential tasks in which grade K–5 teachers need to engage:

1. **Read the College and Career Readiness Standards to gain an overview of the expectations of the Common Core.** The CCR Standards delineate what students must know and be able to do when they graduate. In the English Language Arts Standards, there are four strands of CCR Standards: Reading, writing, speaking and listening, and language. Understanding the substance of each CCR Standard will help teachers clarify the content of the Common Core State Standards.

2. **Within each category, read vertically within each grade level, from kindergarten through grade 5, to gain a general understanding of how the standards are structured and what the more specific expectations are.** In this task, it is clear that reading teachers are not only responsible for the Reading Standards, but also for writing, speaking and listening, and language. This is particularly necessary because essential topics, such as vocabulary, which teachers would traditionally expect to encounter in the Reading Standards are included in the Language Standards.

   Understanding what students are expected to know before and after they are taught at a particular grade level provides the teacher with knowledge of what students should know coming into class and what they will need to know when they leave that class. This is necessary information for understanding students as well as planning instruction.

3. **Within each standard, read horizontally to fully understand what each grade-level standard actually encompasses.** The Common Core State Standards are not structured in a way that allows a fifth-grade teacher to teach only the fifth-grade standards. To fully understand what each standard requires, every grade-level teacher needs to ensure that all of the preceding standards within a given anchor are being met. For example, Reading Informational Text Standard 1 for fifth grade is as follows:

   Quote accurately from a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text.

   However, the first-, second-, third-, and fourth-grade standards for the same benchmark address the following:

   - Grade 4: Refer to details and examples in a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text.
   - Grade 3: Ask and answer questions to demonstrate understanding of a text, referring explicitly to the text as the basis for the answers.
   - Grade 2: Ask and answer such questions as who, what, where, when, why, and how to demonstrate understanding of key details in a text.
   - Grade 1: Ask and answer questions about key details in a text.
   - Kindergarten: With prompting and support, ask and answer questions about key details in a text.

   As a result, a more accurate phrasing that details what teachers and students need to know in Standard 1 for grade 5 is as follows:

   Ask and answer questions about key details in a text. Demonstrate understanding of key details by asking and answering who, where, what, why, when, and how. Ask and answer questions to demonstrate understanding of a text, referring explicitly to the text. Refer to examples in the text when explaining the text and drawing inferences from it. Quote accurately from a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text.

4. **Within each standard and across standards, know what to teach students to help increase their understanding.**
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Knowing the content of the standards is essential for teaching students how to meet them. This will require studying each of the standards in depth and aligning the content with viable teaching strategies.

5. Assess students in relation to their knowledge of the standards to plan effective instruction. Before educators begin teaching about the CCSS, background knowledge needs to be assessed. The results of such assessments will provide a beginning point for effective instruction and illuminate any gaps in knowledge that may exist.

6. Within each standard and across standards, use formative assessments to measure student progress. According to the International Reading Association (2012), formative assessment is a process that teachers use to obtain information about various aspects of students’ literacy. Examples of formative assessment strategies include teacher observation (discussion, patterned partner reading, whisper reading), strategy applications (Semantic Question Map, Bookmark Technique, Retellings/Summaries—multiple formats), and brief written responses (journal entries, written conversations, Tickets Out).

These assessments occur every day during teaching and learning and provide information to inform both processes. Using formative assessments is not only an effective way to monitor student progress, but also a viable way to glean information for planning future instruction.

What Can Teachers Do Differently to Help Their Students Achieve?

The Common Core State Standards are different from many state standards in terms of structure and content. For example, when considering structure, the CCSS are directly linked to the College and Career Readiness Standards, while state standards have traditionally stood on their own. When thinking about content, the ELA Standards focus on skills such as interpretation, argumentation, and literary analysis, while more traditional standards focused on reader response and comprehension.

Elementary teachers who have been implementing the ELA Standards find that their thought processes about curriculum, instruction, and assessment are being continually challenged. Even though standards for each grade level are provided, they are broad, and there is little direction about how to teach students to meet them. In fact, that is left for the teachers to determine.

As stated in the introduction to the CCSS, “By emphasizing required achievements, the Standards leave room for teachers, curriculum developers, and states to determine how those goals should be reached and what additional topics should be addressed” (NGA & CCSSO, 2010b, p. 4). Yet the expectations have clearly been set for students to be able to read texts on grade level with appropriate text complexity, and write, speak, listen, and use language effectively. This has left educators wondering how to teach the aspects of literacy emphasized in the standards.

“Elementary teachers who have been implementing the ELA Standards find that their thought processes about curriculum, instruction, and assessment are being continually challenged.”
Many teachers will find they need to adapt their instruction to help students meet the expectations of the standards. One example of how instruction may need to be different can be found in the challenges of Reading Standard 8 for Informational Text. It focuses on how an author uses reasoning and evidence to support points in informational text.

College and Career Reading Anchor Standard 8 states that, by the end of high school, students will “Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, including the validity of the reasoning as well as the relevance and sufficiency of the evidence.” In grades K–5, teachers are responsible for helping students learn a progression of skills that lay the foundation for middle school and high school instruction about using formal arguments to persuade a reader. The K–5 skill progressions for Reading Standard 8 are delineated in Figure 2.

Of course, before students can analyze a text to determine the validity of the authors’ reasoning and the sufficiency of evidence, the students first need to be able to comprehend...
and the reasons the author offers to support each point.

Second-grade teachers should build on what students already know to teach them how to determine and describe particular ways in which authors use reasoning to support their ideas. By the end of third grade, teachers should have taught students to recognize and describe text structures that are typical in informative and persuasive texts. By the end of fifth grade, teachers should ensure that their students are prepared to explain how the author supports each point in the text with corresponding reasons and evidence.

Teaching these foundations of Reading Standard 8 at the elementary level is vital, because by the end of sixth grade, students are expected to “trace and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, distinguishing claims that are supported by reasons and evidence from claims that are not” in English Language Arts, “distinguish among fact, opinion, and reasoned judgment in a text” in Literacy in History/Social Studies, and “distinguish among facts, reasoned judgment based on research findings, and speculation in a text” in Science and Technical Subjects. This instruction is the foundation for teaching rhetoric at the high school level—the art of using formal argument to persuade a reader or listener. These teaching examples also clearly delineate why CCSS need to be read through and across grade levels.

Because the Common Core State Standards require that both literature and informational text be taught in grades K–5, elementary teachers are finding they need to focus much more instruction on informative and persuasive texts than they may have before. Teachers need access to texts of appropriate interest and complexity to teach the standards using texts that inform or attempt to persuade the reader, such as books, magazine and newspaper articles, and relevant websites. For the literature standards, students need experience with adventure stories, folktales, fables, legends, fantasy, realistic fiction, poems, plays, myths, and traditional literature from diverse cultures. These genres may also differ from those, such as mystery, that students may have studied in the past.

As Mary (all names are pseudonyms), a fourth-grade teacher in Kentucky, has experienced, trying to determine instructional methods and materials to teach the CCSS is challenging. She has also observed that her teaching emphases have changed:

“When teaching the strategies, teachers should use explicit instruction and gradually release responsibility to the students as their ability to use the strategies increases.”
“With the Common Core, I find myself working with other teachers, studying each standard.”

Before the Common Core, much of my reading instruction focused on teaching reading comprehension strategies. Our state standards were pretty explicit about what to teach. I knew exactly what to teach and which strategies to use. With the Common Core, I find myself working with other teachers, studying each standard, trying to decide what the standard means and what students should be able to do when they achieve it. Once we figure that out, we need to think about what the Standards should look like in practice and determine what kind of instruction it will take to meet them. We also need to make sure we are using appropriate text complexity in instruction and integrating good formative assessments.

Previously, with state standards, Mary planned reading instruction with a focus on comprehension. She spent time introducing the text, teaching essential vocabulary, and encouraging students to make predictions and ask questions about the text. She taught comprehension strategies such as making connections, monitoring, visualizing, and summarizing.

She also invited students to respond to the text in a variety of ways. Mary taught those skills and strategies that were clearly delineated in the state standards. She documented what she had taught and noted students’ progress in meeting the state standards through formative assessments and required district measures.

To meet the CCSS, Mary knows that students will still need to be able to comprehend text. In her teaching, Mary knows she still needs to push her students to learn and use a repertoire of reading comprehension strategies, which are not emphasized in the CCSS, but also to learn other ideas that are stressed in the Common Core. As Mary has noted:

I still teach comprehension strategies, because my students definitely need them, but now I need to teach even more. For example, last year the extent of my teaching about author’s purpose to my fourth graders was to identify whether the author wrote the text to persuade, inform, or entertain the reader. Now, I put more focus on comparing and contrasting themes and patterns of events in literature and main ideas with supporting reasons and evidence in informational text. I guide my students to really dig into the writing and think about the underlying reasons the author wrote the piece in the first place.

Mary also integrates standards as she plans instruction. For example, when teaching Reading Standard 2 for fourth grade, she integrates a number of standards: Reading Standard 1, Language Standard 6, Reading Standard 6, Reading Informational Text Standard 8, Speaking and Listening Standards 1 and 2, and several Writing Standards. Reading Standard 2 for fourth grade in Literature is “determine a theme of a story, drama, or poem from details in the text; summarize the text,” and in Informational Text is “determine the main idea of a text and explain how it is supported by key details; summarize the text.”

To teach this standard, Mary plans lessons about inferring, how to determine an author’s message, how to summarize, and how to prepare an explanation of the text. She rarely teaches a reading lesson that does not involve identifying text-based evidence to support conclusions, so she has to teach her students how to pull words from the text that will support their explanations (Reading Standard 1).

In Literature, Mary teaches her students to infer the author’s “take-away message” (theme) and why the author values it (Reading Standard 1). Her students learn that theme is the vocabulary word for “take-away message,” plus they learn academic language found in the text selection. In informational text, students learn the term main ideas plus domain-specific vocabulary found in the text (Language Standard 6). Mary teaches her class to determine the author’s point of view (Reading Standard 6), because she believes that the point of view often
reveals a lot about why the author may have written the text.

In texts in which the author states an opinion, she teaches her students to determine claims the author has made and analyze the author’s reasons and evidence supporting the author's claims (Reading Informational Text Standard 8). Mary uses many instructional techniques in which students participate in collaborative conversations about the theme or main ideas and key details of the text (Speaking and Listening Standard 1). She also teaches her fourth-grade students to write narratives with an obvious theme (Writing Standards 3 and 9), develop opinion essays that include reasons supported by facts and details (Writing Standard 1), and create informational essays that include supporting facts and details (Writing, Standard 2). Mary observes:

For my students, learning a concept such as author’s purpose now takes a lot of whole-group and small-group discussion about text, writing, use of graphic organizers, and interactive experiences involving art, drama, and technology. I have to engage my students in different types of lessons for them to become critical readers of text.

Since they began teaching the Common Core State Standards in fall 2011, Mary and her colleagues have realized that teaching the concepts embedded in the CCSS for ELA cannot be accomplished in a series of isolated lessons. They know they must integrate what they know about best practice in the teaching of reading, writing, speaking and listening, and language and the CCSS every day. Comprehension instruction remains a critical curriculum component, as the Standards are interwoven in lessons across the curriculum. In standards-based lessons, teaching methods need to be carefully planned, and the content needs to be well-coordinated. Teaching the Common Core State Standards is an intricate task. The Standards cannot simply be checked off a list.

What Is Professional Development’s Role in the Implementation of CCSS?
As the CCSS are being implemented nationwide, educators are participating in professional development that is both in-depth and ongoing. Literacy professionals are planning carefully to ensure that connections among curriculum, instruction, and assessment support the Standards and related, newly designed CCSS assessments. Teachers are developing rich instructional tasks to motivate students and enable them to meet the Standards. Literacy professionals are creating formative assessments for everyday use that will provide insights into students’ progress in learning, as well as in meeting the Standards.

This type of comprehensive effort requires time, resources, and ample opportunities to study the Standards and plan for their implementation. To meet this challenge, teachers need time for extensive group planning, as well as access to a variety of instructional resources, and necessary funding. A recent study conducted by the Center on Education Policy (Kober & Rentner, 2012) found that providing professional development in sufficient quality and quantity will be a challenge for many states.

To successfully implement the Standards, educators need to not only have access to myriad professional development opportunities at the state, regional, and district levels, but also to begin with a Common Core Implementation Plan. Such plans should include a timeline of professional development and strategic tasks, as well as a clear delineation of participants and their responsibilities.

Kentucky, which assessed its students based on the CCSS in spring 2012, is an example of a state that has ensured a statewide, systemic approach to professional development based on the CCSS (Overturf, 2011). For example, in regional, monthly CCSS implementation meetings in Kentucky, teams of teachers and school administrators from every school district in the state and university professors from all institutions of high learning have been required to participate in ongoing professional development to ensure the successful implementation of the Common Core. The purpose of the meetings was to analyze the Standards, develop assessments, plan for instruction, and learn from each other. It was—and continues to be—a truly collaborative effort.

The Kentucky Department of Education website (www.education.ky.gov) now features a variety of instructional resources for school districts and teachers. These resources, many of which emerged from the...
“To begin to accommodate students, teams of teachers developed formative assessments, including questions to informally gauge students’ knowledge and ability to contend with each standard.”

monthly regional meetings, include a Model Curriculum Framework, English Language Arts (ELA) Deconstructed Standards With Learning Targets, and webcasts about the Standards. Kentucky also distributes an electronic newsletter every month that includes updates and resources for teaching the Standards, hosts periodic Twitter days in which educators share resources they are using to teach the Standards, and provides an online database of lessons, resources, and assessments.

To lead CCSS initiatives at the school district level, personnel need to be proactive in supporting building-level administrators and teachers, providing material and financial resources, ensuring curriculum alignment support, and leading professional development opportunities. For example, in the first year of implementation of the Common Core, Kentucky’s Jefferson County Public Schools developed a summer institute to introduce the CCSS to elementary teachers. Representatives from each elementary school participated in the professional development institute and prepared to lead CCSS professional development in their schools.

The district then placed all professional development materials online. These included links to the Standards, materials from the training sessions, directions for developing a standards-based writing workshop, and a document containing standards-related terminology. Ongoing district support included posting tools for implementing the ELA Standards that featured grade K–5 curriculum standards maps, K–5 curriculum unit maps, K–12 standards progression documents, and sets of reading tools such as posters, rubrics (scoring guides), and resource lists.

Jefferson County also created Standards-Based Guided-Practice (SBGP) documents that featured student passages, related questions, and additional queries that required students to compare and contrast passages. Teacher support materials including detailed lesson plans on how to teach to help students reach the Standards were incorporated in the SBGP documents. The district also sent sets of texts representing required text complexity at each grade level to be made available for teachers in schools’ library/media centers.

At the school level, administrators in Kentucky have found that their efforts to help teachers understand and teach the CCSS is a massive task that requires time, funding, and instructional resources. Stacey is a principal in a Kentucky elementary school that is implementing the Standards. Stacey has found that most of her school’s professional development resources for the first year of implementation need to be focused on supporting teachers learning the Standards.

To facilitate group learning and planning, a strategic professional development plan was put into place to support implementation of the CCSS consisting of multiple levels of professional development. This included a five-day school-based summer institute for the entire faculty and the establishment of professional learning communities (PLCs) focused on the Common Core. Stacey also engaged teachers in meetings with grade-level teams, extended faculty meetings, and after-school professional development opportunities. As Stacey has noted, “We were compelled to do a tremendous amount of professional development in our school, because the Standards were so very different from what we had used in the past.”

During the five-day summer institute, teachers met in grade-level teams to deconstruct the CCSS and plan for the first six weeks of the school year. Participants took active roles in a variety of activities designed to help them explore the standards and determine vertical and horizontal alignment for the grade levels they were teaching. This was an eye-opening experience for many teachers. As Stacey has noted:

“When my teachers saw the vertical alignment for the first time, they were amazed at the jumps in conceptual development from some grade levels to the next. We realized then that instruction can no longer be viewed as a primary set of goals and an intermediate set of goals. It is about consistency in K–5, on into middle school and then into high school.

Because of gaps in student knowledge about the concepts represented in the Standards, the teachers in Stacey’s school realized they would need to become intentional about meeting individual students’ needs. To begin to accommodate their students, teams of teachers developed formative assessments, including questions to informally gauge students’
knowledge and ability to contend with each standard.

For example, in an informal survey of students’ knowledge of appropriate grade-level content vocabulary (Reading Informational Text Standard 4), teachers asked: Have you seen the word? Do you know what the word means? Can you use the word? These teams also worked on curriculum maps and developed plans for assessing student progress in meeting the Standards.

To further support the implementation of the Standards, the school’s master schedule was redesigned to ensure that grade-level teams had common planning time and teachers could continue to work together during the school year. Each team also worked together in a PLC once a month. PLCs are characterized by shared leadership, collective creativity, shared values and vision, supportive conditions, and shared personal practice.

The schedule provided time for each PLC to work together for four hours during the school day—two hours for ELA and two hours for mathematics CCSS implementation planning. The PLCs afforded teachers much needed time to discuss horizontal alignment and share ideas from classrooms at the same grade level, as well as analyze assessments and set learning goals. Teachers created formative assessments and analyzed data from district assessments to identify instructional gaps.

In addition, the PLCs worked collaboratively to develop prompts and applications, as well as the vocabulary needed to understand each standard at each grade level. For example, Reading Informational Text Standard 5 for grade 5 is “Compare and contrast the overall structure (e.g., chronology, comparison, cause/effect, problem/solution) of events, ideas, concepts, or information in two or more texts.” The PLC decided that using a prompt, a paragraph frame, and teaching vocabulary focused on informational text structures could be used to help the students meet the standard. The comparison/contrast text frame and vocabulary focuses included the following:

“I can compare and contrast ___________ and ___________ based on the ___________ (events, ideas, concepts). ___________ and ___________ are alike, because in the text, it says ___________ and ___________. ___________ and ___________ are different because in the text, it says ___________ and ___________.”

Vocabulary for this standard might include text structure, chronology, comparison, cause/effect, problem/solution, events, ideas, and concepts.

In extended faculty meetings, teachers met with groups across grade levels to ensure continuity from kindergarten through grade 5. After-school professional development opportunities, entitled Marvelous Mondays and Fabulous Fridays, gave teachers the chance to continue to study the Standards through teacher demonstration lessons and plan for implementation in six-week intervals. Teachers conducted backward planning—reviewing important vocabulary students should know, writing assessments, and developing lesson plans together.

Teachers also began study groups, participated in webinars, and read professional books and articles to continue to learn about the Standards. Stacey believes that the students in her school have directly benefited from the time school personnel spent engaging in professional development. She notes, “We have learned a great deal by analyzing and working with the Standards as a learning community.”

Implementing the ELA CCSS is a multifaceted task, but teachers across the country are working diligently to meet the challenge. As Stacey has noted:

“We have learned a great deal by analyzing and working with the Standards as a learning community.”
“Implementing the Common Core State Standards is not an easy task, but it is an urgent one.”

How Can Educators Meet the Challenges of the CCSS?

A variety of issues remain concerning the content of the Common Core State Standards and their implementation. The resulting responsibilities rest with states, school districts, and schools. States have the responsibility to do the following:

- Address the needs of struggling readers, English learners, students with disabilities, and pre-K students in relation to the Standards.
- Provide opportunities and resources for quality professional development that focuses on the content of the Standards, curriculum alignment, instructional methods, and the development of related assessments for teachers and building-level administrators.
- Provide resources, including time and materials, for teachers attempting to learn best teaching practices for the CCSS.
- Design and implement instruction and formative assessments that will help all students achieve.

In summary, implementing the Common Core State Standards is not an easy task, but it is an urgent one. Although we may encounter many obstacles to the Standards as they are now written, the potential rewards make our effort well worth the investment. We have a great deal of work ahead of us. We need to stand together and strive as diligently as possible to implement the CCSS in meaningful ways. This is a challenging task, particularly in a time of fewer teachers, larger classes, and more diverse populations.

REFERENCES