Four Questions on Common Core and Reading Assessment

By Breyette Lorntz

A high level of scrutiny and uncertainty surrounds the first assessments tied to the Common Core State Standards. Questions abound. How will these assessments interact with other assessments? How will they affect reporting trends in student achievement and/or graduation requirements? How can states and districts work together to help teachers meet this new challenge?

In this milieu, planning for professional development for teachers cannot be forgotten. In fact, it’s essential to giving districts a running start when these common-core assessments arrive. Reading teachers are perhaps the key component of success on this front.

Here I present four questions to guide districts in supporting teachers during this transition. My colleagues and I believe these questions will help ground and steer districts to ensure teachers and students alike are ready.

First, some brief background: Beginning in 2014-15, elementary and secondary students will be expected to take computer-based reading assessments created by either the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) or the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC). While these assessments are still in development, it’s expected that they will represent a departure from the standard approach to student testing and may include a variety of testing-item types, such as constructed response, extended performance tasks, and selected responses.

For us, the first guiding question for preparing professional-development activities and resources immediately emerges. In a transition to the common core, what kind of professional development will clarify which previous strategies associated with past assessments should be kept and/or adapted, and which should be discarded? This question should be raised with teams of reading teachers, both schoolwide and grade by grade. Assessments related to advanced student learning not described by the common core should also be addressed. We believe previous lessons learned about alternate assessments and special populations, such as English-language learners, deserve special attention.

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Our second question relates to the alignment of content and assessment. There are no common-core content domains for reading, like those that are available for math. Therefore, what kinds of professional development should be designed to support the identification of curriculum-mapping and instructional strategies for reading? This question demands a long-term view toward comparative student growth across grades.

Moving into an era of sharing made possible by multistate collaboration for assessment, we have documented a proliferation of free online trainings at the state level that support transitioning to reading within the common core. Superlative examples of state-level offerings include those developed by the Oregon and Maine education departments. What is not so clear, leading to our third question, is which professional-development activities and resources should be generated at the district level?

Based on my organization’s research on behalf of a midsize public school district in the Midwest, it appears that extensive support programs for teachers are not as common at the district level. A few standouts at the district level include Orange County, Calif., and the city of Baltimore. Orange County, which comprises 28 K-12 school districts serving more than 500,000 children in Southern California, provides a variety of partial-, full-, and multi-day professional-development seminars for teachers and administrators related to the common-core English/language arts standards. Baltimore, the 36th-largest school district in the country, with more than 84,000 students, is also integrating common-core training resources into the district’s existing professional-development framework. The work in both Orange County and Baltimore illustrates a larger lesson: In deciding what kind of professional-development opportunities to create at the district level, a focused approach should be used, one that is resplendent with examples of both content and practice.

Our fourth and last question homes in on the technology literacy of teachers. As common-core assessments will be computer-based, attention must be paid to the theoretical and practical technology-based skills that teachers possess. Appropriate technology-based skills related to instruction and to formative, interim, and summative assessments of reading must be considered, leading to our final question: What professional-development activities would ensure the kind of teacher proficiency needed to administer, understand, and interact with computer-adaptive and computer-based testing specific to reading? A baseline of teacher knowledge, skills, and attitudes related to technology must first be carefully documented before any professional development can be designed. Likewise, corresponding documentation of teacher growth should be maintained throughout the process.

It is clear that basic professional-development needs among teachers implementing the common core include training on literacy assessment, technology skills, practical learning experiences oriented toward the new standards and assessments, time for professional collaboration, a teacher-leader in each school, and continuous networking between teachers.
Even as we await the development of assessment tools for the standards, professional development related to reading must be instituted now so that districts will be ready when they arrive. If districts consider our four questions, they will have a head start.

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