Mikel Robinson works on an assignment during English/language arts class at Stuart-Hobson Middle School. The 8th grader's work has improved in the past few months. —Jared Soares for Education Week

COMMON CORE: A STEEP CLimb
SECOND OF FOUR PARTS
Into the Common Core: One Classroom's Journey

By Catherine Gewertz

Washington

For nearly an hour, Dowan McNair-Lee has been walking her 8th grade English/language arts students through ways to identify the central idea of a text. She's come at it from several angles, and no light bulbs are going off.

Using an article about labor leader Cesar Chavez's grape boycott and hunger strike, these students at Stuart-Hobson Middle School are doing a "close read," a skill prized by the new Common Core State Standards being put into practice in the District of Columbia. Ms. McNair-Lee had read the article aloud, then students read it on their own. Now, the class is diving into it together, analyzing word choice, structure, and other features of the text to determine its main idea.

Recent interim test results told the veteran teacher that this is a weak zone for her students. On end-of-year exams, four months from this December morning, main idea is a key focus. Students haven't done well on citing evidence from text to support an argument, either. They're going to have to step it up.

The teacher draws their attention to the article's title, captions, subheadings, to its first and last paragraphs, for clues to the main idea. Ask your selves which ideas are discussed throughout the whole selection, she tells them. Which details are repeated, or given lots of attention? She starts dropping bread crumbs for them to follow.

"What is it about the personal experience of injustice that makes some people decide to help others, while other people help only themselves?" she asks, glancing around the room. "Injustice causes some people to act. That's an inference, right?" Silence. She asks: "What's an inference?" More silence.

As an English/language arts teacher in the common-core era, Ms. McNair-Lee is part of a huge national push to turn millions of students into strong readers and writers. In its second year of K-12 implementation in literacy, the District of Columbia is farther along than many in putting the standards into practice. But it also faces long odds as it works to help its largely disadvantaged student
Those odds show in the momentary silence in Ms. McNair-Lee's classroom. Special education teacher Christopher Purdy, who co-teaches with her for three class periods a day, jumps in: "I infer that it's chilly outside because you are wearing gloves."

Remember, Ms. McNair-Lee tells the students, you can combine the text with your own knowledge to make inferences that can shed light on the main idea. She models it for them, pointing to the last paragraph, which reports that 50,000 people attended Mr. Chavez's funeral. "So I'm gonna make an inference here," she says, writing it on the board: "He made a difference."

"I know that this way of doing things takes a lot more effort than what we're used to doing," the teacher says. "But you need to know this."

*I know they can do this*, Ms. McNair-Lee thinks. Her most challenged class gained 9 points on a recent interim test; this group's skills are a bit stronger.

But when they use the same approach on an article about migrant strawberry pickers, there's no traction. She had hoped students could grasp the concept in time to do a brief essay that night on the article's main idea. Glancing at the clock as the bell rings, she makes a midair correction: The essay will have to wait.

"They didn't get it," she sighs as she watches them pour out the door into a noisy passing period.

The concepts might be hard for these students, but their own distractions aren't helping. There's a dance in half an hour, and restless chatter punctuated the main-idea lesson. Many struggle with organizational skills; on sneakered feet, they glide into class with teetering stacks of dog-eared papers atop their binders.

They're preoccupied with high school applications and interviews, since in the District of Columbia nearly half the 8th graders enter lotteries or apply to selective programs rather than automatically attending their neighborhood high schools.

During one recent class, these substrata anxieties bubbled to the surface. "I don't wanna leave," one girl said, plaintively, during a class discussion about high school interviews. "I don't wanna grow up," another chimed in. "Well, babies," Ms. McNair-Lee said, her voice suddenly slow and soft, her hand on one girl's shoulder, "it's inevitable."

Despite such distractions, by late January some small academic victories are accruing. Students plumbed an article about Robert Frost to see how his life influenced his writing of "Out, Out," a wrenching poem about a boy losing his hand to a woodcutting saw.

For end-of-unit projects, they wrote plays, poems, and essays, or made short films about the articles they'd read, displaying creativity and humor, as well as a grasp of the content, and they wrote papers...
comparing their own interpretations with the original texts.

Just getting them to the finishing line, though, took more class periods than Ms. McNair-Lee had anticipated; she had to drop the district-recommended excerpts of *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* to allow time for completion.

And still, more than a few students didn't complete the project, which counts for a goodly chunk of their grade this term. Among those students is Mikel Robinson, whose sunny personality and natural leadership haven't helped him overcome the D he's carrying in English.

"Many of my kids haven't mastered the basics of just getting a project done," Ms. McNair-Lee says one day. "It's frustrating for me because this is how I see what they know. And it worries me when I think about them in high school."

At an empty school two miles away, about 30 of the district's secondary-level instructional coaches are getting another round of training for the current English/language arts focus on complex text. Their ability to convey these ideas and practices to teachers at their assigned schools is a key conduit of the district's hopes for the common-core standards.

Stuart-Hobson's coach, Sarah Hawley, had a scheduling conflict that kept her from this training. But teachers will be hearing most of the same messages at their own training in two weeks.

At big tables in the multipurpose room, the coaches study a lengthy excerpt from a nonfiction book, Blaine Harden's *Escape From Camp 14*, a profile of a North Korean political-prison-camp escapee. Guided by Corinne Colgan, the district's literacy and humanities director, and Jessica Matthews-Meth, a secondary-level literacy designer, the coaches work on ways to "scaffold," or build supports into a close reading of the text.

Ms. Matthews-Meth reminds them that the common standards are "bracketed" by Standard 1, deducing literal and inferred meaning from complex text, and Standard 10, reading complex text independently and proficiently.

"That's the bear," she says. "How do we get them from one to 10?" Today's session, then, is about "how to take off the training wheels" gradually.

The coaches read the excerpt, using several annotation strategies to see what works best. They pay special attention to difficult words, deciding which ones students might understand by deducing meaning from context, and which might demand more teacher-led help. In small groups, they craft a sentence capturing the central idea—the dehumanizing effect of prison camps—and they discuss how the author refines the idea with specific details.

They write sets of questions that drive students back to the text to find information supporting the main idea. How many of your teachers already ask these kinds of questions? Ms. Matthews-Meth inquires of the coaches. Few hands go up.

The coaches know what a high bar this is. "We cannot use grade-level text," says one. "It would not work with our students."

Ms. Matthews-Meth suggests using excerpts with struggling readers to avoid reaching "frustration level."
"Good morning, scholars," comes Ms. McNair-Lee's customary greeting as her fourth-period class settles in on a frigid February morning. "Good morning, Ms. McNair-Lee," comes the semi-cheerful response. They've begun Unit 4, built around comparing works of art and literature.

It's a good thing these units are optional, because Ms. McNair-Lee wrinkled her nose when she looked this one over. "It doesn't flow. It bounces around from genre to genre," she says. She's thrown out big swaths of it, working with her new student-teacher, Michael Anderson, to devise different material.

Today, students are looking for connections between the 1982 painting "Charles the First," by the New York City artist Jean-Michel Basquiat, and the song "Most Kingz" by the rapper Jay-Z, both ruminations on the risks of accomplishment and fame. Students have been studying a variety of ekphrastic texts—writings that react to art.

"We are practicing reading art just like text," Ms. McNair-Lee tells them. "It's a lot about interpretation. There is no right or wrong. But I want to challenge you to see that you have evidence to support what you're saying. This is going to get our arguing skills up." Common core, she thinks. Citing evidence to support an argument.

Things are clicking; she beams as students clamor to answer her query about the roots of the word "ekphrastic." Several call out at once: "Greek!" They pore over a 1923 Paul Klee painting and a poem by Nina Nyhart, extracting tidbits to build an argument about connections between the two.

"You all have done some very high-level work today," their teacher says, smiling. "Give yourselves a pat." Laughing, the students reach back, patting their own shoulder blades.

A few days later, though, the mood is more somber. In a lesson about figurative language, students are analyzing how authors compare nouns. They're mulling a quote from Lois Lowry's The Giver: "It was as if a hatchet lay lodged in his leg, slicing through each nerve with a hot blade."

But they're tongue-tied when Ms. McNair-Lee asks if the quote compares two nouns. Finally, a boy from the front table, where Mikel sits quietly, ventures that it compares "hatchet" and "hot blade."

She takes them step by step through another quote, "The rain sounded like bullets." Does it use literal references? she asks. No, one student says, they're not actual bullets. Does it compare nouns? Yes. Does it use "like" or "as"? Yes. They're getting it. Could it be literal? No. Is this an example of a literary device? Yes, a half-dozen students say.

What kind of literary device is this? Ms. McNair-Lee presses. "Simile," says a small voice at the back of the room. The teacher remembers a question from the last interim assessment, asking students to identify the literary devices in the cited text passage. She anticipates something similar on the year-end test. "Simile," she says, smiling and nodding.

Moments later, a stumbling block: No one can identify the verb in a short sentence: "Life is a dream."

Ms. McNair-Lee resorts to a physical demonstration. She
calls two students up front and has them stand on either side of her: the subject and the object. In the middle, she’s the verb.

"The subject is the one doing the action," she reminds. "The verb is the action." Her frustration is tangible.

Later that afternoon, one of Ms. McNair-Lee's higher-skills classes breezes through the literary-device exercise. Confidently, they navigate their way through figurative language, personification, and hyperbole.

A week later, with students off school for the day, Ms. McNair-Lee and Ms. Hawley join hundreds of district teachers and coaches for a professional-development day. They undertake the same close reading that the coaches tackled two weeks before, trying a variety of strategies to build scaffolds into the difficult reading.

Ms. Matthews-Meth, who co-facilitated the coaches' training, tells them that this is about finding ways to expose students to complex text without overwhelming them. It's about balancing support with the right amount of "academic press." The teachers work together to write text-dependent questions for the reading.

Later that morning, Ms. McNair-Lee and other members of the Stuart-Hobson team attend a session with the district's literacy leaders to analyze and give feedback on a new close-reading module that's been developed for Unit 4. The session reveals gaps in the district's work to convey its resources and messages to teachers.

Several ask where to find the texts listed in the district's scope-and-sequence, apparently unaware, halfway through the year, that links are available through the online educator portal. Others say many of those links don't work.

Additional questions show confusion about key district goals: Are we supposed to stop doing shared reading and just let kids attack text cold? asks one middle school teacher, noting that she has received conflicting messages on the issue at today's training.

Abby Welsheimer, Ms. Hawley's coaching supervisor, responds that it depends on what a teacher is doing. "We want kids to experience the text, ... then move on and ask questions," she says. "But if you know your kids aren't getting it, you have to be flexible."

Back at their own school for the afternoon, Stuart-Hobson's team members settle in for a plunge into the results of the Unit 3 interim test. Around a big conference table in the main office, the

### The Players

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Chief of Teaching and Learning  
District of Columbia schools
- Oversees curriculum, instruction, assessment, and professional development
- Led the design of optional instructional units and modules, along with required interim assessments and professional development, for common standards

Read his profile, "Glimpses of Poverty Lead Administrator to Education"
English/language arts team gathers with Ms. Hawley and Assistant Principal Katie Franklin.

This test took aim at eight of the common standards, and the results—appearing on laptop displays and on stacks of printouts—show red-and-green breakdowns at the student and class levels, standard by standard.

Eighth graders had to read an article on rooftop gardens and answer questions about its central idea and supporting details. Two more excerpts, from articles about living outdoors, had similar questions and a brief essay comparing the authors' attitudes about the topic. The students read poems by William Wordsworth and Nixon Waterman and answered questions about word definitions, tone, the symbolic meaning of nouns, and how word choice illustrates a character's point of view. They wrote brief essays on how the setting in Wordsworth's poem helps develop its central idea.

And there's that literacy-device question Ms. McNair-Lee had anticipated: Which device is used in the Waterman poem—idiom, metaphor, simile, or personification? Only 48 percent of Mikel's class got that one right.

There's some great news here, though: Every one of Ms. McNair-Lee's classes hit "proficiency" level—shown in green on the results—on questions about determining the central idea in an informational text.

But students are all over the place on citing textual evidence to support an analysis of a text's meaning, with many below proficiency, marked by red squares on the printouts. "Oh, my children," Ms. McNair-Lee says, leafing through the results and shaking her head.

Mikel's class printout shows a sea of red. A few students scored better than she'd have guessed, but overall, she's disappointed with the class. "Something was missing from my teaching," she says.

Mikel's own column, too, is a swath of red, with only one green box—for determining central idea in informational text. "He didn't do well at all," his teacher says. "We gotta work."

Ms. Franklin brainstorms with Ms. McNair-Lee and Mr. Anderson, her student-teacher, about how they'll approach their classes' weaker zones as they resume teaching. They write up a plan and head back to their
empty classrooms.

Walking slowly down the quiet hall, Ms. McNair-Lee feels exhausted and heavy. With 47 percent overall, Mikel did much better on this interim test than the last two, on which he answered fewer than a quarter of the questions correctly. But that's nowhere close to where he needs to be, his teacher knows.

"I don't think he's not getting it," she says. She notes that Mikel can often articulate key ideas of a lesson when she works one on one with him. But she can't often provide that kind of personal support in class.

"Should I do more tutoring after school?" she wonders aloud now, still seeing in her head that long column of red squares below his name. "I have my door open every day till 4:30, and he rarely comes. At what point am I doing enough?"

Ms. Hawley's coaching is meant to help with such struggles. In an upstairs classroom, Ms. McNair-Lee waits for a group session with half the 8th grade team about building students' content and vocabulary knowledge through a "structured struggle" with text. A 45-minute session turns into 25 minutes when, one by one, Ms. Hawley and the other teachers arrive late.

They revisit the excerpt studied in the coaches' and teachers' professional-development sessions, practicing the strategies they learned for close reading and text-dependent question writing.

Doing multiple reads of the same text risks being boring for students, says social studies teacher Sean McGrath. How do we deal with that? Ms. Hawley advises that teachers focus students on something a little different each time they read the text.

"Maybe because I don't do it right, it just seems so inauthentic," Mr. McGrath says. Ms. Hawley makes plans to co-teach a class with him to work on this issue together.

This is tough stuff, especially for teachers of subjects other than English, who are now expected, under the common core, to teach literacy skills that help students access materials in the different disciplines.

Later, after co-teaching with Mr. McGrath and observing the kinds of questions Ms. McNair-Lee poses to her own class, Ms. Hawley reflects on the nature of the work. "One of the biggest struggles with diving into the common core," she says, "is that we are all learning it together."
It's late February, and 8th graders are in the auditorium for an awards assembly. They're a jumble of nudging elbows and twirling pencils, never quite quieting down. On the stage, Mikel joins a group being recognized for improving in one or more subjects—in his case, history and prealgebra—and failing none. By the next grading period, he'd be out of the running for that award, with two F's on his report card.

"Good morning, scholars," Ms. McNair-Lee says to her fourth period on a cold early-March morning. Mikel is subdued today; he's got a deep ache in an upper molar. He and his tablemates are supposed to be contrasting a character from Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* with a woman depicted in a 1944 painting by the American artist William H. Johnson. But Mikel spends most of the period with his head down on folded arms.

Next period, his math teacher, Kelly Landers, walks him to the nurse. "Is there anything that can be done?" she asks the front-office staff. "There's no learning going on today."

The school nurse can't give Tylenol, and Mikel can't get a ride home until school is out. He spends the rest of the day resting in the academic-intervention classroom. In the coming days, a dentist would extract the tooth.

Quietly, Ms. Franklin enters a classroom, her arm crooked around a clipboard. She moves among the students during a chaotic morning warm-up, asking them to explain what they're doing. The children are her "window" into their teacher, with whom she's been working on classroom management. Ms. Franklin notes how the teacher's loud voice and scattered style amplify the students' nervous energy.

Today's visits by the assistant principal are "informal," for feedback only, not for evaluation. In another classroom, she examines student work; this teacher needs help on his question-prompts to push kids to another level, she notes.

Making her observation rounds at Stuart-Hobson, Ms. Franklin sees plenty that's inspiring: Teachers are digging deeper, trying new strategies. But she also finds cause for concern as the school goes full bore into the common core.

Too often, for instance, teachers ramp up the difficulty of questions they ask students, but fail to guide them. Not long ago, she watched as one teacher demanded sophisticated analysis of a Langston Hughes poem but didn't show her students how to read the poem in a way that facilitated it. She later worked with the teacher on ways to do that.

But even though the school district has provided training sessions for assistant principals that include observing good common-core practice, Ms. Franklin is frustrated with her own limitations. She's grateful that she has Ms. Hawley, the coach, as well as a "master educator" to provide teacher feedback.

"I can see the room for growth; I just don't always know how to get them there," says Ms. Franklin, who observes and gives feedback to 15 teachers every two weeks, as well as coaching on the spot. "Sometimes, I
feel like the blind leading the blind."


By the end of the month, they're finishing up lessons on figurative language and moving into allusions and irony.

Ms. McNair-Lee is tired, not quite over a flu that sidelined her for two days last week. The test dates loom large in her head. "Just as soon as I get some momentum, it seems like something happens," she says during a break. "And we only have like 12 instructional days left."

Today, the class is discussing types of allusions. "If I say I want to click my heels and go home, what kind of allusion is that?" Ms. McNair-Lee asks. "Literary," a couple students call out. Most recognize that a cartoon about the dangers of dating Henry VIII is a historical allusion.

Mikel doesn't seem clear on the concept. The teacher shows another cartoon, this time of a sad little train engine begging for change near a sign that says, "I Thought I Could, I Thought I Could."

"What kind of allusion is that, Mikel?" she says. Startled, he ventures: "Pop culture?" No, she says, it's literary. But she wonders: Did anyone read this story to him as a child?

At the district's glassy headquarters, Brian Pick has been shepherding the pieces of the common-standards project. He's hunkered down with the leadership team to analyze school-to-school literacy-assessment results. He's met with leaders of the human-capital department to ease the sting of positions cut there because $5.7 million is earmarked for the common core. He's visited a couple schools a week, looking for signs of what's working and what isn't.

Today, he and Ms. Colgan, the literacy director, are gathered around a 12th-floor conference table with 10 area superintendents. Laptops open and color-blocked papers spread out, they're building the professional-development calendar for 2013-14. Common core is the focus.

"We've learned we need to go right to the teachers, ... not rely on coaches to do the turnkey," Mr. Pick tells them. "We're more successful when we train teachers directly," Ms. Colgan adds.

That is especially important next year, they tell the superintendents, as the district focuses on the writing standards. One superintendent makes an impassioned plea to revamp new teachers' PD, replacing the focus on "administrivia" such as pension benefits with strong, clear guidance on the district's approach to literacy.

"Preach, baby," Mr. Pick says with a broad grin, prompting chuckles around the table. "We agree with you," says Ms. Colgan.

Next year, Mr. Pick says after the meeting, teachers will hear a more centralized set of messages about what the district seeks in its common-core teaching.

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