A Path Forward

Recommendations from the classroom for effectively implementing the Common Core

Teacher Action Team on the Common Core State Standards
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Introduction

“Any kind of change needs time and money – there’s a learning curve.”

Courtney Summer, English Teacher, M.S. 223

As teachers, we know that our education system is not serving all students. We don’t need to cite the usual numbers (graduation¹, college readiness², and international competitiveness rates³) to make this point; instead, we see it every day in our schools and our classrooms.

That’s why we support the Common Core. These standards⁴ create clear, aspirational goals that all students – with the help of their parents and teachers – should strive for. Of course, higher standards will not in and of themselves raise student performance, but they are a necessary step towards the goal of ensuring that all students can attain a higher education and career worthy of them. A finish line will not ensure that we’ll get there, but it will help us know where we’re going and give students, parents, and teachers accurate information about where each child is on his or her path towards this goal.

We’ve watched with sadness and frustration as the Common Core – which was initiated and adopted⁵ by states (with federal support) and written⁶ and revised⁷ with teacher input – has morphed from a pedagogical tool into a political football. The New York State Assembly recently passed a bill⁸ that would halt Common Core’s full-scale implementation, by prohibiting student growth on Common Core–aligned assessments from being one part of teachers’ evaluations.

Of course, good policy is only as good as its implementation. In New York, as in many other states across the country, there have been some strengths to the Common Core rollout, but there have certainly been many missteps. Regardless, it’s unfortunate that a rocky implementation has led to ideological attacks on the standards themselves. The rollout of the new standards in New York City has been difficult for many reasons, not least of which is the fact that our City is the largest school district in the country, so making such a monumental shift in teaching and learning will naturally be a challenge for the over one million students and 78,000 teachers in the City.

Of course it isn’t easy; we know that first hand. At the same time, if this transition were to be accomplished without challenges that would tell us something: specifically, that such a change would not be particularly meaningful. In other words, we support these standards not despite, but because, the difficulty entailed is so necessary.

That being said, there are many ways in which the Common Core’s implementation can be improved in New York City and State. Several months into the school year, some educators don’t have aligned curriculum; others haven’t received enough professional development and support; and all of us feel that we haven’t had enough time to collaborate with our colleagues. Nevertheless, classroom teachers have been working to implement the standards as best we can with the tools we have at our disposal. Yet the need for practical solutions to the implementation challenges has been overshadowed by the politics—perhaps because it’s easier to argue than to fix.

But for our students it is critical that we do not let the politics drive the discussion, and instead engage in a productive conversation about how best to adjust course, improve implementation of the standards, and ensure all of our students receive a high-quality education.

That’s why we’ve made our own set of solutions-oriented recommendations to address many concerns related to the Common Core in order to achieve the universally shared goal of giving students the education they deserve. We are glad that some – including the Board of Regents⁷ and Governor Cuomo’s Common Core Implementation Panel¹⁰ – are focusing on solutions, and we believe that the most actionable and useful ones should be pulled and implemented in order to better serve students.

After analyzing the current challenges with implementation – drawing from our own experiences and from what we’ve heard from others – we developed three categories of concerns and proposed solutions within each. Although this is not an exhaustive list, and it is crucial that problems are responded to as they develop, we believe that these solutions will go a long way towards addressing the concerns of parents, educators, and students.

“Delay could create chaos and probably would be the end of the Common Core.”

Rob O’Leary, English Teacher, High School for Law and Public Service
Recommendations

1. Teachers should be offered the opportunity to return to school a week early to receive high-quality professional development – as well as time to collaborate – that continues throughout the school year.

2. Teachers need to be offered quickly digestible resources on where we can find support and high-quality Common Core–aligned lessons.

3. The state needs to ensure that curricula are independently audited for alignment, with a particular focus on curricular differentiation for students with special needs.

4. The New York State Education Department (NYSED), NYCDOE, and individual schools need to work to clearly communicate the value of the Common Core to parents, as well as how parents can help their children complete Common Core–aligned work.

5. Districts must clearly communicate to teachers how they’ll be evaluated.

6. By next school year, districts - with the support of NYSED - should ensure that all teachers’ student growth scores are based on subjects and students that they actually teach.

7. Principals must continue to receive training on how to fairly evaluate teachers; the training should include a section devoted to ensuring that lessons are Common Core–aligned, and evaluators should continue to have their evaluations normed annually.

8. NYSED should independently audit Common Core–aligned state tests to ensure quality.

9. Schools and districts should use multiple measures for high-stakes decisions for students.

10. The state should release state exams and detailed data in a timely manner so that teachers can use this information to improve our instruction.

11. NYSED should expedite review of districts’ APPR (evaluation) plans for the purpose of eliminating unnecessary tests.

12. Districts and schools should communicate to principals and teachers that excessive teaching to the test will not increase student test scores – and may even harm them.
Testing & Assessment

Teachers and students need high-quality Common Core–aligned assessments that can be used as tools to improve teaching and learning. Here’s what needs to change.

“People think Common Core means more ‘drill and kill’ - in fact, it’s just the opposite.”

Michael Loeb, Seventh Grade Special Education Teacher, Urban Institute of Mathematics

Problem: There is a lack of trust in the quality of Common Core–aligned assessments, and a general concern that state tests are inadequate and not measuring meaningful learning.

Solution: NYSED should independently audit Common Core–aligned state tests to ensure quality.

As teachers, there’s nothing more frustrating than effectively teaching a certain skill, but seeing an assessment that fails to adequately measure a student’s understanding of that skill. Tests can and must improve in quality; teachers, parents, and students know this, and that’s why some have lost confidence in the state’s ability to give fair assessments. We understand this, but we have not lost hope. We believe that, as Senator John Flanagan proposed, state assessments should undergo an independent audit to ensure they’re truly high-quality and aligned to the Common Core.

Problem: For students, there is often too much stigma and consequence based on a single test score.

Solution: Schools and districts should use multiple measures for high-stakes decisions for students.

Students, like teachers, should be evaluated based on multiple measures. Common Core–aligned exams should be one factor in making promotion and selective-enrollment decisions for students, but it should not be the only factor. Insofar as some students are held back because of one bad test score, that practice should immediately stop, as the Board of Regents panel on the Common Core recommended.

Moreover, teachers and parents should be given the tools to communicate with their students about what the test scores mean and what they don’t mean. The creation of a simple, practical document offering tips for parents in talking to their children would be extremely valuable in this regard.
Problem: State exams are not transparent enough and cannot be used to improve instruction.

Solution: The state should release state exams and detailed data in a timely manner so that teachers can use this information to improve our instruction. Assessments should largely be used as a tool for instruction, not punishment. So it’s concerning that questions and fully disaggregated data are not always released to teachers in a timely manner or at all. Ideally, teachers should be given detailed information on which questions his or her students struggled with, and then refer to the actual test to understand where students’ comprehension broke down. The point isn’t for teachers to increase teaching to the test; instead, this would allow educators to fill in gaps in our students’ understanding. Common Core–aligned tests should be publicly released after they’re given, and teachers should be furnished, in a timely fashion, with detailed data to help improve instruction. We realize that this might cost additional money. So long as we’re paying for quality tests that can help educators, we believe it’s a worthwhile investment. Moreover, releasing such information will help parents, teachers, and students better understand what the Common Core actually is.

Problem: Students, teachers, and parents feel overwhelmed by the quantity of testing in schools.

Solution: NYSED should expedite review of districts’ APPR (evaluation) plans for the purpose of eliminating unnecessary tests.

We agree with many educators, parents, and students that districts are piling more and more tests on students with limited consideration of their necessity or value. That’s why we support the notion, proposed by Senator John Flanagan, of expediting the review of district evaluation plans in order to ensure unnecessary testing is not taking place.

Problem: Some schools may be “teaching to the test” in a way that is replacing meaningful learning.

Solution: Districts and schools should communicate to principals and teachers that excessive teaching to the test will not increase student test scores – and may even harm them.

As New York City Chancellor Carmen Fariña put it, “if we do good teaching, that’s the best test prep.” In other words, high test scores can be achieved by quality educators teaching to high standards. However, many teachers report that too much time is spent teaching to a test. Sometimes such a practice is driven by an educator’s own fear of a low evaluation; other times it’s dictated by a principal hoping for improved test scores.

This practice should be discouraged, first and foremost because it fails to promote the deep understanding the Common Core aspires to. Moreover, teaching to the test doesn’t actually work to improve tests scores. At best, the research suggests that teaching to a test has little correlation with increased test scores; at worst, it may actually lead to lower test scores. This needs to be conveyed clearly and simply to teachers and principals: tests cannot and should not be “gamed” by excessive preparation, and those who try to do so will only hurt themselves and their students. The push to end excessive “drill and kill” should be embraced by all, so we were encouraged that the Governor’s Common Core Implementation Panel proposed limiting the amount of time spent on test prep.