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Teachers Lead the Way in Nevada Leader's Common-Core Project

By Alyssa Morones

As districts across the nation grapple with implementing the Common Core State Standards, Aaron Grossman is already leading the way in Washoe County, Nev., where the strategy for helping teach the new reading and mathematics standards is being driven by those who are counting most on the guidance: the teachers themselves.

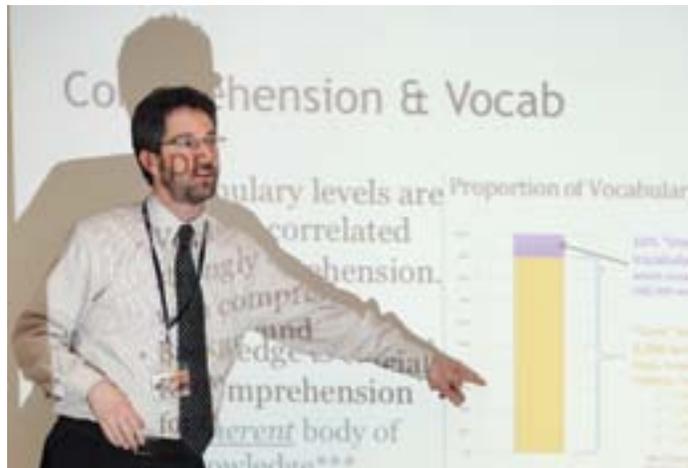
While interpreting and bringing the new standards into the classroom can be a tricky and convoluted process, Mr. Grossman and his team are working with teachers to devise a set of best practices and to help both teachers and students reach their full potential in a special initiative called the Washoe Core Task Project. Mr. Grossman, a teacher on special assignment to the district's department of curriculum and instruction, and his colleagues are helping teachers carry out the common core in their classrooms by finding and providing them with resources and original sources, and then gathering and synthesizing teacher feedback as they test out new lessons and curricular materials in their own classrooms.

What sets this project apart is what has made it so effective.

"Aaron pushes teachers to take on a leadership role," said Jodie Westmont, a special education teacher in Washoe County, a 63,000-student district that includes the resort areas of Reno and Lake Tahoe. "So many times, it's just administrators given these roles. He's provided those opportunities to teachers."

"He sees within teachers their true power to work together to improve resources and outcomes for teachers and students alike," said David Coleman, one of the authors of the common-core standards and a founder of Student Achievement Partners, a nonprofit aimed at creating and disseminating materials, based on the common core, to improve teacher and student achievement.

The Nevada state board of education officially adopted the common standards in October 2010. Washoe County, the state's second-largest district, began the hard work of implementing the new, more rigorous academic standards the following spring. The project began with just 18 teachers and has grown to include more than 1,000 educators and 25 of the district's 63 schools.



Aaron Grossman, Washoe County Common Core K-6 ELA Program coordinator, leads teachers through a discussion on how to implement the lessons into their classrooms

The road to common-core implementation isn't an easy one anywhere in the United States. Districts and teachers continue to struggle with finding instructional resources adequately aligned to the common core, and there's still a big need for useful forms of professional development and continued coaching support for teachers. Meanwhile, states remain uncertain of what to expect from the common-core tests scheduled to take effect next school year.

While the standards were meant to be a major transition for educators, Mr. Grossman said he wasn't seeing the same sort of dramatic shift reflected in the textbooks and other resources that claimed to be aligned with the core standards.

He sought to address those issues in his own district by going directly to the writers of the common core and others intimately involved in their development, which was spearheaded by the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers.

"I thought the most obvious way was looking through the lens of what the authors were saying," said Mr. Grossman.

Roots of the Project

A native of Montana, Mr. Grossman, 41, has spent his career in schools whose low-income populations were large enough to qualify them for federal Title I funding. He began with the Montana Reads program with Americorps, where he helped match college students to classrooms or students to promote literacy. He

started teaching 6th grade in Washoe County in 2002 at a Title I school. From there, he became a site-based school improvement coordinator, responsible for making sure that curriculum materials were aligned to state tests.

He felt limited in his capacity to serve all the district's schools in that position, though, and later moved to his current role in the department of curriculum and instruction to aid Washoe schools in their transition to the common core.

Mr. Grossman began by finding and sharing with teachers a video of Mr. Coleman, now the president of the College Board, in which he talks about the standards and their origins. Then he went on to reach out to individuals who worked closely with developing the common core.

While Washoe was just one of the many districts across the state implementing the new standards, once it launched the Core Task Project and began "leveraging the video and free content" available from standards developers and others, the school system's implementation started looking different from the rest of the state's, said Mr. Grossman.

"Without an acute understanding of why the standards were written, all decisions become unnecessarily challenging," he said. "The Core Task Project really is about teachers trying to figure out what it means to do common core. We selected a path where we share a message that is unfiltered. We go straight to the sources."

To carry out the project, Mr. Grossman joined forces with colleagues Torrey Palmer,

the district's K-6 language arts coordinator, and Cathy Schmidt, an implementation specialist in the district. Their aim was to provide teachers with materials, strategies, and resources that are "vetted, scalable, and free," said Mr. Grossman. The teachers, in return, test these strategies in their classrooms and provide feedback.

"I think this project affords teachers the chance to really experience an instructional shift," said Ms. Palmer. "It's so connected to student learning, very data driven, and very authentic."

Unfiltered Message

"So many times you go to training where they talk at you. At the [Core Task] trainings, [Mr. Grossman, Ms. Palmer, and Mr. Schmidt] talked at us for a little while, and then we got to go try a new approach and come back and tell them what we thought," Ms. Westmont said. "It very much facilitated discussion between teachers."

Ms. Westmont, an instructional coach at the time, became involved in the project when it launched in October 2011.

That also meant a heightened level of accountability, according to Ms. Westmont, since teachers were asked to return from testing the implementation strategies ready to discuss and assess their effectiveness in the classroom.

"The effort here in our district feels different for a lot of people," Mr. Grossman said. "It's teachers building stuff from the bottom up."

For example, rather than sending a few individuals to common-core conferences, the Core Task team would show teachers tapes of those conferences.

"This isn't me filtering and telling [teachers] what is most important. We got out of the way," said Mr. Grossman. "We just allowed people to hear the message."

Once the teachers saw and discussed their resources, they tested the techniques in the classrooms.

At the end of each meeting, teachers who had tested the new teaching techniques were asked to reflect on their experience and outcomes. The project then aggregates all that information to refine its strategy.

"[Mr. Grossman] definitely led the charge in terms of pointing us in the right direction with the instructional shift," said Ms. Palmer. "He found some fantastic content and primary-source material."

One of the individuals Mr. Grossman contacted in gathering authentic materials for teachers was David Liben, a senior content specialist with the literacy and language arts team at Student Achievement Partners, and his wife, Meredith Liben, the director of that team.

"Aaron has been instrumental in getting this

going and getting questions answered," said Ms. Westmont, the special education teacher. "We joke that he emailed [David Liben] so many times that Liben had no choice but to email him back. He finds answers."

Since their first discussion about common-core implementation, Mr. Grossman and the Libens have collaborated on a variety of projects, including creating video resources and a course for iTunes University intended to help teachers understand the common-core shifts in English/language arts and literacy and how this might change classroom practices.

David and Meredith Liben have visited the district multiple times to work with Mr. Grossman and his team.

The work by Mr. Grossman, Ms. Palmer, and Ms. Schmidt on the Core Task Project also led to their fellowships with Student Achievement Partners, in which they help to disseminate information and tools for implementing the common core to educators across the country.

"I was really impressed with how they were approaching the transition and how aggressively they were making changes and working collaboratively with teachers," said David Liben. "Aaron was able to bring the standards into Washoe, and he's done so in a hands-on way with teachers that I think is unique."

What's more, Washoe's students are benefiting from Mr. Grossman's and the Core Task Project's efforts.

"I can confidently say that by engaging in this work, we are moving our students closer to college and career readiness," Ms. Palmer said.

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Common Core Redoes the Math

By Liana Heitin

After a long and frustrating homework session with his 2nd grade son one day last school year, Jeff Severt dashed off a letter to the teacher.

"I have a bachelor of science degree in electrical engineering. ... Even I cannot explain the common-core mathematics approach, nor get the answer correct."

A word problem about a fictional student named Jack had put Mr. Severt, of Cary, N.C., over the edge. It asked students to look at Jack's "notes," including a number line with arcs indicating he'd skip-counted backward, and figure out where he went wrong in calculating 427 minus 316. "Write a letter to Jack telling him what he did right and what he should do to fix his mistake," the problem said.

Mr. Severt's wife snapped a picture of the "common core" math problem and the note to the teacher, and put them on Facebook. The post went viral.

Reactions to the problem ranged from angry aspersions cast at the federal government (the supposed purveyors of the Common Core State Standards) to strong defenses of the teacher and the task. Many people sympathized with Mr. Severt's frustration that the problem made a simple subtraction task into a complicated, multistep production.

The response from the lead writers of the common standards for math was perhaps the most interesting: The problem wasn't part of the common core, said mathematicians William G. McCallum and Jason Zimba. It was simply the product of a badly written curriculum.

The episode serves to illustrate the complex challenges and competing demands that schools and teachers face as they work toward implementing the new math standards.

The common standards for math differ from most previous state standards in significant ways. They are fewer in number, connect more broadly across grade levels, and emphasize conceptual understanding along with the procedural skills that schools have traditionally taught.

A recent survey by a research team at the University of Arkansas, in Fayetteville, led by education professors Jason

Endacott and Chris Goering found that 62 percent of the 191 math teachers who responded said they "agree" or "strongly agree" that the common-core standards are "more rigorous" than their state's previous standards. An additional 19 percent said they "tend to agree." (The survey was not nationally representative, though it drew on responses from teachers in all but one state that adopted the common core.)

Curriculum Confusion

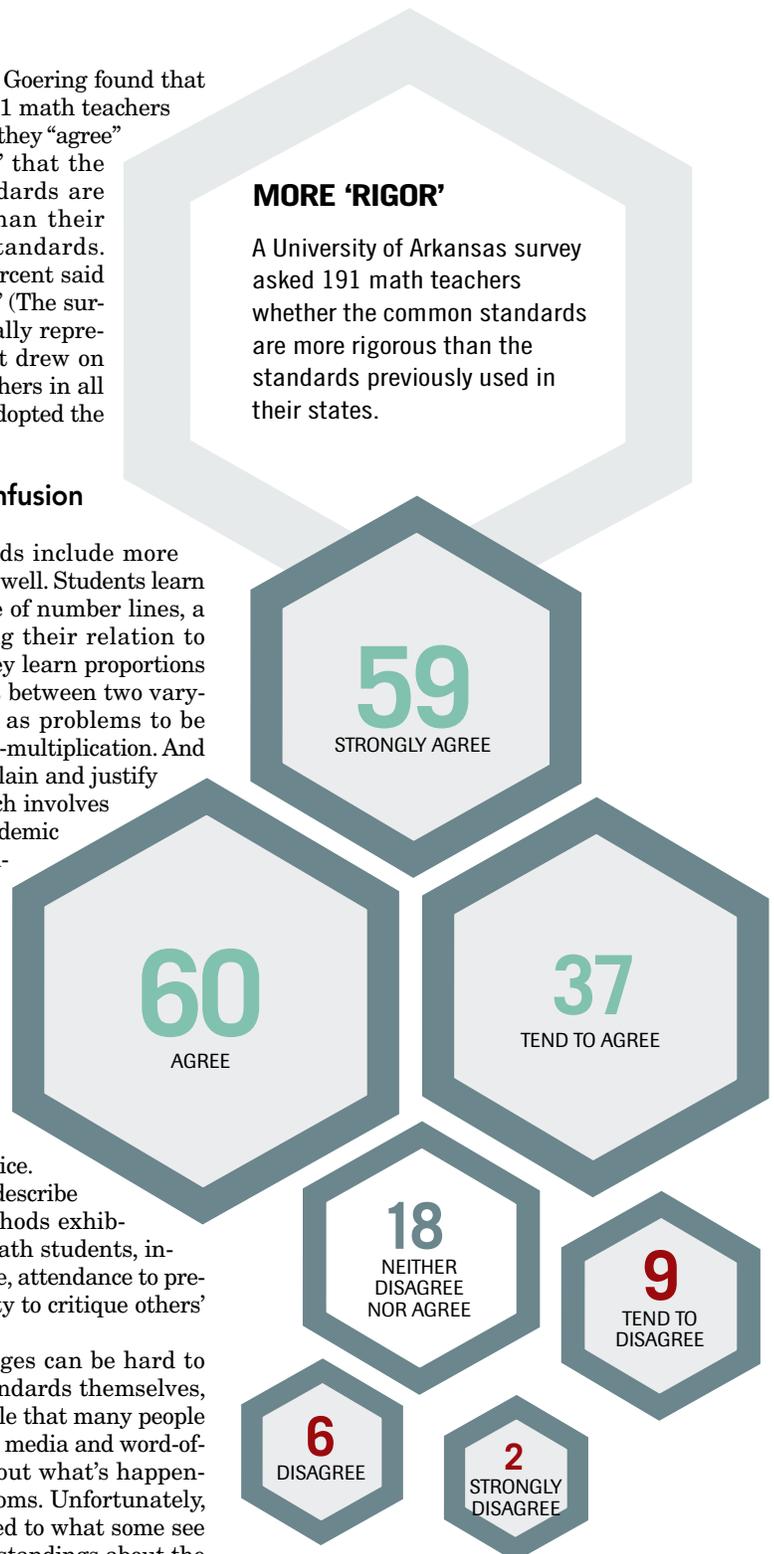
The new standards include more granular changes as well. Students learn fractions by the use of number lines, a way of emphasizing their relation to whole numbers. They learn proportions as the relationships between two varying quantities, not as problems to be solved through cross-multiplication. And they're asked to explain and justify their solutions, which involves increased use of academic language—a particular challenge for English-learners and students with below-grade-level literacy skills.

In addition to the content expectations, the common core includes eight Standards for Mathematical Practice. Those expectations describe the habits and methods exhibited by proficient math students, including perseverance, attendance to precision, and the ability to critique others' reasoning.

Some of the changes can be hard to tease out of the standards themselves, so it's understandable that many people have relied on social media and word-of-mouth accounts about what's happening in math classrooms. Unfortunately, that tendency has led to what some see as critical misunderstandings about the common core—perhaps the most fundamental and widespread of which is that the standards are a "curriculum." The

MORE 'RIGOR'

A University of Arkansas survey asked 191 math teachers whether the common standards are more rigorous than the standards previously used in their states.



SOURCE: Jason Endacott and Chris Goering, University of Arkansas, 2013

standards are intended to be benchmarks for what students should know and be able to do. Curriculum, on the other hand, as Tom Loveless, a nonresident senior fellow at the Washington-based Brookings Institution's Brown Center on Education Policy, wrote in a recent blog post, "is the 'stuff' of learning, the content of what is taught in school—especially as embodied in the materials used in instruction."

But the distinction between what students should know by the end of the year (standards) and the specifics of how they should learn it (curriculum), can be blurry. For example, the common core doesn't say 3rd grade students have to draw pictures when solving word problems involving multiplication. But it does require them to "use multiplication and division within 100 to solve word problems in situations involving equal groups, arrays, and measurement quantities, e.g., by using drawings." Many teachers and textbook-writers will inevitably interpret picture-drawing as a key element, and some may go on to require it with every problem—even though a separate 3rd grade standard states that students are also expected to memorize their multiplication tables.

Not surprisingly, as this report details, math-education experts see the development of more tailored and authoritative curriculum resources, along with improved professional-development opportunities for teachers, as critical to making the new standards work in classrooms.

Political Pushback

On top of the confusion about what's in the new standards, the common core has been the subject of heated political battles across the country. When the new standards were introduced in June 2010, they were adopted in rapid succession by nearly all of the states. In many states, however, the standards have since encountered significant opposition. In the past year, Oklahoma and Indiana have bowed to political pressure and repealed their adoption of the framework.

The political debates have often been less about the content of the standards than the process by which the common core was adopted. Case in point: Indiana has since adopted standards that are very similar, if not identical, to the common core in many areas. Some opponents of the common core continue to regard the standards as an unprecedented federal intrusion into schools. In fact, the federal government was not involved in writing the standards, but it did provide financial incentives for states to adopt them.

The common-core-aligned tests, scheduled to debut this spring in many states, have also heightened anxieties about the standards. The Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers and the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium received a total of about \$360 million from the federal government to develop the new computer-based tests. Those assessments are expected to be more difficult than previous state tests, with the math sections including complex performance tasks. That has raised concerns for many teachers, especially those in states that plan to link educators' evaluations to students' scores.

Mr. Severt, of Facebook renown, eventually replied to the barrage of comments on his son's math problem. He explained that his son, who has autism spectrum disorder, "knew the math answer immediately in his head. But this problem required a narrative answer utilizing a number line. While he knew the math, he balked at the answer being a writing assignment—his greatest anxiety." Mr. Severt decried the focus on "next-level critical thinking" over basic operations with such young students. At the same time, he defended the assignment to a point, calling it "creatively valid."

Indeed, the new math landscape in schools is marked by hard questions and daunting instructional shifts.

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New Tools Gauge Lessons' Fidelity to Common Core

By Catherine Gewertz
Arlington, Va.

The 53 teachers gathered around tables here have been called to a new kind of jury duty. But they won't be deciding whether a fellow citizen is guilty of a crime: Their charge is to pass judgment on stacks of instructional materials.

Amid papers and coffee cups, they pore over a 90-page curricular unit on constitutional freedoms. In Socratic rounds of discussion, they explore the high school unit from dozens of angles, looking for fidelity to the common core.

How clearly does the unit state its purpose? Does it expect students to read texts that are rich and complex enough? Does it offer sufficient support for students who are struggling? Does it provide good, clear ways to assess how well students are learning as they go along?

These teachers are trying to answer one of the most vexing questions in the age of common-core instruction: Which materials fully reflect the new standards for English/language arts and mathematics? They've come to this suburb of the nation's capital from more than 20 states to learn and practice a new rating system for lessons and units that purport to be "fully aligned" with the Common Core State Standards.

The new system, called EQuIP, represents one way that teachers are trying to make sense of the flood of curricular offerings that's been unleashed by the nearly nationwide adoption of the common standards.

There are other tools or processes, too, that are designed to evaluate instructional materials for common-core alignment. The two national teachers' unions have launched free portals where teachers can post and comment on lessons. Student Achievement Partners, whose founders led the writing of the common standards, has a set of free online tools that can be used to judge the fidelity of instruc-

tional materials to the standards.

Reviewing Materials

For-profit groups—like the Austin, Texas-based Learning List, which uses panels of judges to size up instructional materials—are also wading into the alignment-evaluation business. The Business Roundtable is talking with partners about creating a group to do “Consumer Reports-type reviews” of common-core materials.

And a group of experts led by Maria M. Klawe, the president of Harvey Mudd College, is creating a nonprofit to review the most widely used common-core math materials.

The EQuIP program was created by Achieve, a Washington-based nonprofit organization that played a key role in launching the common-standards initiative in 2009. Achieve has worked for many years with states on academic expectations and accountability.

The approach for EQuIP originated with the work of three states—Massachusetts, New York, and Rhode Island—that designed a set of criteria to use in judging lessons and units for alignment with the standards.

The Tri-State Rubric, as it came to be known, created a buzz as other states tried it out and sought training to spread its use among teachers and curriculum writers. Achieve renamed the project EQuIP—for Educators Evaluating Quality Instructional Products—and began training for states, districts, teachers’ unions, colleges of education, and others interested in using it.

Achieve selected its first round of teacher-jurors last June. It chose a second group in November. Both groups came together late last month for training and practice using the rubrics—checklists of criteria—to evaluate math and English/language arts lessons and units that had been submitted by states, districts, groups of teachers, and nonprofit curriculum developers.

Jurors have reviewed about 40 of the 125-plus lessons and units that have been submitted so far, and of those, only nine have been deemed sufficiently aligned to be posted as resources on the EQuIP website, according to Alissa Peltzman, a vice president of Achieve who leads the project.

Curricular materials produced by large publishing houses—which dominate tens of thousands of classrooms—haven’t been submitted to EQuIP for review, Ms. Peltzman said. EQuIP doesn’t anticipate evaluating much from that sector, either, in part because of licensing restrictions that limit those materials’ use, she said, and in part because it

Evaluating instructional Materials

Educators who review curricular units and instructional lessons as part of Achieve’s “EQuIP” program evaluate four aspects, or “dimensions,” of the materials submitted. Below are highlights of some of the English/language arts criteria they consider.

lacks the capacity to analyze such a big volume of materials.

At the session here in Arlington, Va., reaching consensus on whether a lesson was aligned wasn’t easy or quick. It took all day to evaluate and rate the constitutional-freedoms unit, with rounds of detailed analysis and areas of disagreement.

One table of teachers, for instance, was deeply divided on whether the unit lived up to a key criterion in the rubric: stating a “clear and explicit purpose for instruction.” The teachers also disagreed about whether the unit met a criterion that required materials to demand a good deal of writing

DO THEY:

I. Aligning to the Common Core State Standards.

- Target a set of grade-level standards?
- Include a clear and explicit purpose for instruction?
- Choose texts that measure within students’ grade-level band?

II. Reflecting key shifts of the standards.

- Require students to read text closely for evidence and deep meaning?
- Facilitate rich, rigorous evidence-based discussion and writing through thought-provoking, text-dependent questions?
- Expect students to draw evidence from texts to produce clear, coherent writing that informs, explains, or argues?

III. Responding to students’ varied needs for instructional support.

- Cultivate student interest and engagement?
- Integrate appropriate supports in reading, writing, listening, and speaking for students who read below grade level, are English-learners, or have disabilities?
- Provide extensions and/or more advanced text for students who read well above grade level?

IV. Regularly assessing whether students are mastering the content and skills in the lesson/unit.

- Elicit direct, observable evidence of degree of mastery?
- Assess student proficiency with methods that are unbiased and accessible to all students?
- Provide sufficient guidelines for interpreting student performance?

NOTE: A full version of this evaluation rubric and a companion document for mathematics are on the EQuIP website at www.achieve.org/EQuIP.

SOURCES: Achieve; Educators Evaluating Quality Instructional Products

based on evidence in a text.

One middle school teacher criticized the unit for providing “scaffolding,” or support, for students in the assignments but not in the readings. A group of elementary school teachers at a nearby table got into an animated debate about whether the unit’s reading material from primary and secondary sources was challenging enough, yet still accessible to students.

Terri King Hunt, a teacher from Atlanta, told the group that she thought the unit fell short on that criterion.

“You could say you threw a lot of material at them, but what did they get out of it?” she said.

Next to Ms. Hunt, Kay Dugan, an assistant superintendent from Bensenville, Ill., pressed her colleagues to “be hard” in sizing up how well the unit provides ways to assess student learning day to day. “We need to get better at giving students feedback through formative assessment,” she told them.

Cautionary Notes

Since this was a sample exercise, votes on rating each “dimension” of the materials were taken by a show of hands. Collectively, the teachers voting showed they thought the unit needed significant revision.

Had it been a real evaluation, three or more reviewers would have graded each dimension on a scale of 0 to 3, and written explicit feedback to guide developers in revising the materials. Then a “lead reviewer” would have written one evaluation, summarizing the feedback and assigning an overall rating.

The materials rated “exemplar” or “exemplar if improved” would be posted on EQuIP’s website. Those needing more revision, or not yet ready for review, would not be posted, but feedback would be returned to the developers.

Guiding curriculum developers is a central aim of the EQuIP project. In fact, a section of the training was devoted to giving effective feedback.

“It’s easy to get cranky, like ‘Why didn’t you do this?’ and ‘If I were teaching this, I’d do it this way,’” Judson Odell, one of the facilitators of the training, told the participants. “Try to stay positive.”

The first round of EQuIP judging returned individual reviewers’ comments to developers. That feedback could be “conflicted and confusing” because of the differences in each reviewer’s comments, Ms. Peltzman of Achieve said. So another layer—the lead review—has been added to the process in an attempt to send clear, overall messages about the revisions needed.

Evaluating instructional materials for quality or alignment is inherently thorny and subjective, and reaching consensus can be tricky. Assembling juries of experts to make those choices is hardly new.

In 19 states, panels comb through submitted materials and decide what to include on an “adoption list” from which districts must choose if they purchase materials with state funds. Elsewhere, districts are left to shop for themselves.

Even those who welcome the evaluations by EQuIP and other organizations voice cautionary notes about the process.

Sandy Hayes, the immediate past president of the National Council of Teachers of English, said the EQuIP guidelines are “terrific tools

for conversation” as teachers write lessons together in their schools. But she worries that a rating system could subtly work to narrow the concept of “good” materials.

“In talking about what’s good, sometimes people can be silenced, or there’s this ‘group-think’ that happens, when you find yourself compromising to get consensus,” Ms. Hayes said. “I just wonder what’s lost in that process.”

Another risk in creating panels to evaluate materials is that their findings can be viewed as silver bullets.

Jim Burke, an English teacher at Burlingame High School in California, said it’s important to avoid mistaking any panel’s approved materials for a “total curriculum solution.”

“It does give you some assurance of quality about the ‘what,’ but it doesn’t deal with the heart of the work—the ‘how’—how you are teaching your students,” he said.

Educators who had come to the Virginia training and EQuIP jurors were eager, however, to see how the process could help them, and cadres of colleagues back home, move forward with the common standards. They seemed particularly interested in its value as a tool for creating their own instructional materials.

In Idaho, a small team of literacy coaches at the state department of education will use the EQuIP process this spring to help 250 teachers write model units, said Christopher Butts, one of the state coaches, who is serving as an EQuIP juror.

Suzanne Snider, a curriculum coordinator, said many of the teachers in her districts in California’s San Bernardino County “haven’t had a lot of direction” in figuring out what constitutes real alignment to the common core. “Teachers have been going on Pinterest, for goodness’ sake,” she said. “We really need this.”

Different Uses

States, districts, and vendors have been using the EQuIP tools in a variety of ways. The Maryland education department submitted sample lessons and units, and found the reviewers’ feedback “explicit and valuable,” said Ava B. Spencer, the state’s English/language arts coordinator. Teachers are working on revisions based on that feedback, she said.

In North Carolina, the state education department has used the EQuIP rubrics in training to help teachers think about how to design their own curriculum materials, said Julie Joslin, who oversees English/language arts. Eight regional programs in the fall of 2012 proved so popular that the department added seven more the next winter and spring, she said.

“We would get phone calls all the time, ‘Is this a common-core-aligned lesson?’” Ms. Joslin said. “Teachers were struggling to under-

stand what that is, and the rubric does help with that.”

Washington state has used EQuIP’s evaluation criteria as it searches for open education resources to build a digital library that the state legislature mandated in 2012. But “one of the big questions people had about open education resources was ‘It’s free, but is it good?’” said Barbara Soots, the state’s program manager for such resources.

In scouring instructional materials from such sources as the Library of Congress, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and those developed by other states, including New York and Utah, Washington state’s panel of reviewers is employing a handful of evaluation tools as guidance, Ms. Soots said.

Along with EQuIP, which evaluates lessons and units, it is also using Student Achievement Partners’ Instructional Materials Evaluation Tool, which is more focused on full-course content, she said.

‘A Wild West Moment’

Expeditionary Learning has been both a consumer and a subject of the EQuIP process. The New York City-based nonprofit company, which runs 170 regular and charter schools, used the criteria to shape an English/language arts curriculum for grades 3-8 in New York state, and then submitted the curriculum to EQuIP reviewers for evaluation.

Scott Hartl, its chief executive officer, said he viewed participation in the evaluation process as important because of the way the curricular landscape is evolving in the common-core era.

“It’s a Wild West moment, with lots of people saying their materials are aligned to these new expectations,” he said. “We wanted our curriculum to go through the rigors of smart folks with a common vision looking at our stuff in relationship to what was out there.”

No curriculum developer can rightfully draw conclusions yet about what’s good, Mr. Hartl said. That will be left to time and experience.

“There has been a tremendous wave of innovation and new-product creation that eventually will get sorted out by real-life market forces,” he said. “That’s what will show us the results.”

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COMMENTARY

Interview With Two Contributors to the Common-Core Literacy Standards

As part of a series on the implementation of the common core, we talk with Catherine Snow, Patricia Albjerg Graham Professor of Education at Harvard Graduate School of Education and a member of the validation committee for the Common Core State Standards, and Sue Pimentel, founding partner of the nonprofit Student Achievement Partners and lead writer of the Common Core State Standards for ELA and literacy.

Interview by Marc Tucker

Q Sue, let me begin with you. You played a central role in developing the common core standards for English literacy. What do you see as the biggest implementation challenges?

SUE PIMENTEL: Teachers aren't being given enough time to work together to develop the materials and teaching techniques that will be necessary to effectively implement the common core nor are they being given enough time to observe and critique each other's teaching. Teachers will not learn how to do what they need to do spending just a couple of hours in workshops. They need to be working in teams in their schools to improve the materials they use, the lessons they teach, and the methods they use. Presently, there are not enough high quality materials and professional development resources, aligned to the common core, available to the teachers. The time needed to transform the way students are taught stands in stark contrast to the rush to evaluate teachers based on old assessments that are not aligned to the common core. It doesn't seem fair and is creating a great deal of distrust of state officials — who are in fact trying very hard to help teachers implement the new standards. Indeed, tying the new common core assessments so soon to teacher evaluation is clearly alienating teachers from the standards themselves.

CATHERINE SNOW: I think it is clear to anyone with a grain of common sense that there should have been a five-year amnesty on consequences for testing when implementing the common core. This would have allowed for developing the aligned materials. It would have been fairer and smarter to help teachers focus on teaching and learning instead of assessment and accountability. Even in states that have been way out in front of this, there has been massive oversimplification of what the common core is. You don't get the sense that teachers have been touched and inspired by the visionary version of the common

core. 'Experts' advising teachers have reduced the standards to a handful of stereotypical mantras, short-circuiting their complexity and richness. So teachers get a very distorted, reductionist version — Give students complex texts and make them close read and then everything will be fine. This ignores the exciting parts of the common core — the integration of reading and writing, the notion of cross-disciplinary projects. It flies in the face of developmental theory: you can't give 9th grade students, who have been exposed to a completely different educational regime, the texts associated with much more rigorous standards, and expect them to do close reading immediately. Introduce these tasks in the first grade and build them up instead of imposing a full-blown version on teachers and students who are totally unprepared for it.

Q We have the standards and new tests aligned with the standards are being developed. What seems to be missing in the filling in the sandwich, the curriculum.

CS: Exactly so. All great teachers need is a reading list, but the vast majority need much more. They need a really good curriculum that scaffolds teachers step-by-step so they have a chance to develop the skills and knowledge they need to be successful at a high level. We should provide curricular units that bring together rich resources for kids to read and supplementary resources for teachers to read, organized around big questions that are likely to be engaging. For example, if you are spending six weeks on tidal pools, you would have computers for research, 150 books in the classroom about tidal pools and a purpose: 4th graders will teach 2nd graders a lesson on this topic.

SP: I really like what New York State has done and when I look across the country I think it's the best effort on the curriculum front. Many schools

and districts in other states are using the materials although some in New York are not. The materials start with a topic that in many cases integrates content from science, social studies and reading. Students read and write about materials of all kinds related to that topic. They closely read some grade-level texts together, independently read others and they create projects related to it. As they engage, their knowledge grows and their vocabulary grows. Students bring that knowledge to bear on future readings so they can handle texts on similar topics that are more complex. One characteristic of a good text set built around a topic is that they include texts written at many different levels, so whatever their strength as a reader, students are able independently to access some texts, build their knowledge, and contribute in class. Teachers need text sets like that.

Q Let's return to the question of professional development.

SP: There is an irony here. The approach of too many states and districts has been precisely the form of instruction that the common core argues against. Too often teachers are corralled into school gymnasias and told either a) they have to do things entirely differently or b) they are doing the common core already and no change in practice is necessary. Neither is true, and neither will work. The approach has to be from the bottom-up. We need to find ways to involve teachers in collegial groups in their schools tasked with working through the curriculum, and developing lessons, teaching techniques and tools that will bring the common core standards to life.

CS: The best teachers in the school need to lead these development groups and demonstrate the lessons. Everyone needs an opportunity to see others' teaching. Teachers have to have time to talk to one another about it! We are not talking here about 20-minute planning periods. I think we have to do something about how the school day is organized. We have to treat teachers like the professionals they are. That would generate the impetus we need.

SP: We are unlikely to succeed unless we look hard at how we organize schools. Teachers can't do something different unless they are given time to figure it out, and provided good feedback along the way. We have teachers doing lots of things they don't need to be doing such as proctoring the lunchroom, monitoring the playground,

and supervising bus duty. We need to change that so teachers can focus on their primary responsibility.

Q What's the bottom line?

CS: Without some big changes in the way the common core is being implemented, this really elegant vision could crash and burn through poor implementation or premature assessment, and then it will be 20 years before anyone gets the courage to try again. I think Secretary Duncan made a serious error by linking it to Race to the Top — he opened it up to the critique by the right that it is a Federal effort. If a few states can implement it really well, maybe that will be enough to save it.

SP: I want to underscore the point made earlier that we need to unhook assessment from teacher evaluation for a while. By waiting and checking to make sure that assessments are good and we are getting good information from them, teachers won't feel that assessments are the enemy and will embrace their primary function — to improve achievement.

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COMMENTARY

The Standards Are Working in My Classroom

By Jeff Baxter

"Call me Ishmael," Professor Nellick read aloud to my college English class. It was an odd sentence from the start. Who was Ishmael? The name didn't sound American. And why would Herman Melville open a novel with this sentence? For the next two classes, our professor pressed, challenging me and my classmates to puzzle it out for ourselves.

I was soon pondering the meaning of other carefully chosen words, places, and names in Melville's classic, *Moby Dick*. Why "damp, drizzly November in my soul"? Why "Queequeg" and "Pequod"? Before long, these questions brought the novel alive in my mind, and I was hooked. I changed majors from biology to English, and eventually became an English teacher myself.

Inspired by Professor Nellick's demanding and engaging instructional approach, I have now taught *Moby Dick* to my high school English students for 21 years. But four years ago, I began to consider how I could make the novel even more relevant and captivating for students as my department began translating the Common Core State Standards into our school's curriculum.

The common core challenges teachers to provide high school students with an appreciation of the foundational works of American literature. The standards' emphasis on depth of understanding over breadth prompted me to re-evaluate how to better employ the study of language, how to enrich the reading of *Moby Dick* with activities that emphasize speaking and listening skills, and how I could enhance students' understanding of Ishmael's epic journey through more thoughtful writing assignments.

My students now marvel at how gaining familiarity with biblical and classical allusions adds layers of meaning to the novel. They work with each other to discover how

Moby Dick's tone and themes have (and continue to) influence other genres, from LeRoy Nieman's artwork to Elton John and Bernie Taupin's "Hey Ahab." They pore over the last paragraph of President Obama's first inaugural address to explore how it relates to the novel's ironic conclusion in which Ishmael is the only one left to tell the tale.

As a result, my teaching of *Moby* has become much more than an exploration of a whaling vessel named after a defeated Indian tribe, an obsessed whaling captain, and an impetuous "simple sailor." It opens students' eyes to the enduring power and magic of literature.

Through the Pequod's journey on the high seas, my students begin to appreciate their own world in all of the beauty and peril, comfort and threat that Ishmael observed and Ahab cursed. Reflecting on the character qualities of the fanatical Ahab, students can gain insight into examples of real-world evil, exhibited by the likes of Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin, and Saddam Hussein, or other obsessive, paranoid individuals.

"Ignorance is the parent of fear," Ishmael cautions readers in one passage, and that is true not only in history and literature, but too often in the petty, day-to-day skirmishing of local, state, and national politics. Sadly, in too many communities across the country, the common core is being held hostage by exactly the kind of fear Ishmael warned against.

That the common core has become a punching bag in my home state of Kansas and other places has more to do with political partisanship than reasoned review. After I spoke to a joint session of the Kansas House and Senate education committees earlier this year, I was approached by two adults armed with anti-common-core fliers. I asked them to which of the standards they objected, and neither had an answer. It wasn't, they said, about "particular standards," but that "the federal government is mandating them," and "they are just too hard." Clearly, they had no idea that the standards are not mandated by the federal government, or about the elegant and synchronous content of the English/language arts standards that build seamlessly on prior learning. And our students, in my experience, can handle the rigor.

The standards elevate the English language, invite students to discover the enduring relevance and wonder of great literature, and have improved my teaching of this classic novel. While questions about implementation and appropriate uses of the common core persist, the challenges are not insurmountable: Individual states will decide on the proper role of the common core and its aligned assessments, and the appropri-

ate use of those assessments in evaluating teachers. The bottom line is that the common core is not education's version of Ahab's "ungraspable phantom," despite what some politicians would have us believe.

We can only conquer our fears by confronting them, and every year at the beginning of the second semester, a new class winces when I hand out the thick novel. By the time I ask students to hand their copies back in at the end of the third quarter, they wince again, this time at the thought of parting with a story that has in many ways become their own.

My own love of this great novel began with an inspired and inspiring educator, and *Moby Dick* was a classic of American literature long before the common core existed. But the common core not only sets higher expectations for what American students can achieve, it has also helped enliven and enhance my own teaching of this important work, and likely that of other educators. It is helping to ensure that "Call me Ishmael" will resonate even more deeply with the next generation of students.

Jeff Baxter is a high school English teacher at Leavenworth High School in Leavenworth, Kan. He was the 2014 Kansas Teacher of the Year.

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COMMENTARY

How Movies Can Connect Students to Writing and the Common Core

By Nancy Barile

As the focus on high-stakes testing increases, I worry that my students are only being prepared to think and write in one way: the way the tests ask them to. When my state adopted the Common Core State Standards, I immediately began wondering how I could help my students meet its requirements—especially with writing.

As I started brainstorming, I found myself turning to movies. I discovered I could use film to create writing assignments that would engage students and help them develop key skills required by the common standards, such as using evidence to support claims, analyzing literary and informational texts, and using precise words, telling details, and sensory language.

I was also drawn to movies because students love watching them. After viewing a film, students often have strong opinions that they want to discuss. They may debate a movie's message or share how a particular film relates to their own lives. Film even engages reluctant learners by dramatizing events and personalizing history.

A few years ago, I launched a "Film, Writing, and the Common Core" (FWCC) course as an English language arts elective at my school. It has become so popular that we now offer two sections. Since starting this course, I've seen my students become excited about writing in new ways. They are anxious to explore ideas like race, class, gender, and other issues that impact them as teenagers. Writing about film also gives them a much-needed opportunity to develop their own voice through class discussion and writing.

Here are some things I've learned in trying to make film projects work.

Choose films that students probably haven't seen before—such as classics like "One Flew

Over Cuckoo's Nest" and "Do the Right Thing," or sleepers like "Breaking Away" and "Billy Elliot." I'm not going to lie—most movies I show are personal favorites. A teacher's enthusiasm can be contagious!

Have parents/guardians sign permission slips, especially for R-rated movies. On the slip, stress that the movie is relevant to the learning process and that the student will be viewing the film under your supervision.

Read reviews and criticisms about movies online. See if there is an interesting topic that could launch a powerful writing assignment. That's how I decided to connect the cult classic "The Warriors" with the famous Battle of Cunaxa at Babylon. It's also how I came up with the idea of having students write a psychological analysis of Alfred Hitchcock's "The Birds" in which they tried to uncover why the birds attacked people.

Sit down with the standards and brainstorm which movies might help you nail each benchmark. I was looking for compelling ways to have students demonstrate an understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meaning (L.9-10.5). After showing "The Graduate," I had students listen to Simon and Garfunkel's "Sound of Silence" album and reflect on the lyrics, which mirror the main character Ben's isolation and alienation. Students then wrote soundtracks for their own lives, paying particular attention to the facets of the standard.

Think about specific issues that affect your students. An exploration of negative cultural stereotypes in "Sixteen Candles" launched some of the most exciting discourse I've ever heard in class. Examining the challenges immigrants experience in a new country, in connection with "Bend It Like Beckham," also resonated with my students, many of whom only recently came to the U.S. themselves.

Consider what pedagogical approaches and technology you can use to engage students. I use "flipped" learning to facilitate learning through discovery. I create instructional and background videos that help students practice grammatical concepts and learn more about historical periods. Students also use technology like Google Docs to collaborate on projects and graphic design software to design movie posters based on advertising and marketing theory.

Adapting Movies for Your Classroom

Invite a wide range of students to participate. My FWCC course has proven especially effective for English-language learners and students with learning disabilities or behavioral problems. During the first course, I was worried about getting butts in seats, so I went to guidance and told them to put any "hard-to-place" or "at-risk" kids in the class. Later, it

Sample Lessons

FILM: "BOWLING FOR COLUMBINE"

Student writing piece: Synthesis essay

Standards addressed: Examining multiple sources of information to make informed decisions and solve problems (RI.11-12.7); evaluating the accuracy of sources (W.11-12.1a); and presenting findings and evidence while addressing opposing perspectives (W.11-12.7).

Lesson Description: Students begin by reading expert Keith Beattie's definition of a documentary as a film that "represents the observable world." Then they watch director Michael Moore's "Bowling for Columbine." Next, they read the Free Republic article "Bowling for Columbine: Documentary or Fiction?" which argues that Moore's movie is fiction and not a true documentary. Students also watch the YouTube video "Six Degrees From Truth: Michael Moore" which claims that "Bowling for Columbine" is loaded with fallacies, misinformation, and visual manipulation. After reading Moore's rebuttal to these criticisms on his website, students evaluate each source and synthesize all the information in an essay to decide whether "Bowling for Columbine" is a true documentary.

FILM: "FATAL ATTRACTION"

Student writing piece: Critique

Standards addressed: Collaborative discussions (SL.9-10.1); feminist critique of a film, TV show, or music video (Massachusetts Reading Literature Standard 8).

Lesson Description: Watching "Fatal Attraction" in class is always an enormous amount of fun (parents/guardians sign a permission slip, and I fast-forward through the particularly steamy scenes). I can assure you that no one is ever absent on day two's viewing.

After watching the film, students read a feminist critique (written in college, by yours truly) and begin to see the movie through a new lens. They discuss gender roles in the film and then write their own feminist critique of another film, TV show, or music video. Students choose a wide variety of media to examine, from "Batman" to "Friday Night Lights," and analyze gender stereotypes and portrayals of gender. An assignment like this causes an "awakening" to gender issues that carries over to students' critical analysis of other films and books (and often results in students telling me I've ruined some movies for them forever).

FILM: "PRETTY WOMAN"

Student writing piece: Claim

Standards addressed: Asserting and defending a claim (W.11-12.1); and conveying what is experienced, imagined, thought, and felt (Massachusetts Speaking and Listening Standard 2).

Lesson outline: After watching "Pretty Woman," students (who are reading "Hamlet" in their English class at the same time) analyze Polonius' observation that "apparel oft proclaims the man." A lively discussion ensues about Vivian's transformation from street prostitute to social doyenne merely by adjusting her wardrobe. I ask students: Is changing your social identity as simple as changing your clothes?

We then pursue a sociological experiment in which students come to school dressed differently than normal. They don't wear costumes; instead, they attempt to transform themselves through their clothing. After the experiment, I ask students to respond to Polonius' statement based on their own experience. Allowing students to test a hypothesis and take part in a real-life experiment that explores social behavior is extremely powerful.

became apparent that the diversity of the class was one of the main reasons for its success.

You don't have to create a separate film course to use these strategies. Film can be used effectively in almost every English language arts classroom and elective. For example, you can easily pair movies with literature, such as a coming-of-age movie when you're studying *Catcher in the Rye*. And film is certainly not limited to the ELA classroom—it can spark compelling discussions and powerful writing in history, social studies, technology, science, music, and art classes as well. If

you're looking to hit nearly every standard in the common standards, a course like this is a fun, engaging, and effective way to do it!

Nancy Barile, a National Board-certified teacher, has taught English language arts at Revere High School, in Revere, Mass., for 19 years. She advises the culture club and future teachers club, and is an adjunct professor at Emmanuel College. A CTQ Collaboratory member, Barile won The Kennedy Center/Stephen Sondheim Inspirational Teacher Award in 2013 and serves on the College Board New England Regional Council.

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COMMENTARY

The Common-Core Assessments: What Math Teachers Need to Know

By Alison Wright

As you surely know by now, the Common Core State Standards in language arts and math were designed to get students to engage in problem solving, communicate effectively, and think more critically. As a result, new assessments had to be developed that can effectively measure mastery of complex skills. Two state consortia—the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers, or PARCC, and Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium, or SBAC—have been contracted to develop a set of literacy and math assessments to do just that starting next school year.

As a high school math teacher in Kentucky, I want to make sure that I fully understand the scope of the available assessments from both consortia. Even if my state does not use one of the consortia's assessments next year, I want to continue to be able to collaborate with high school math teachers nationwide. I need to be able to provide my students with the same high level of instruction that is available to students who are being assessed through PARCC or SBAC.

Although Kentucky adopted the common standards several years ago, the accountability assessments that my Algebra 2 students currently take contain only multiple-choice items. It is exciting to me that both the PARCC and SBAC have developed summative mathematics assessments that are expected to go beyond multiple choice to determine students' understanding and their mastery of skills.

Taking Samples

The sample test items available online can give teachers a pretty clear understanding of what the new assessments will entail. A sample PARCC performance-assessment item for Algebra 2 requires the student to find the intersection points between a linear function and a rational function, which is something that I have never seen before on a summative math test at this level. (Usually students are required to find the intersection point between two linear functions). Students not only have to identify the intersection points; they also have to explain their reasoning and

Calculated Differences

PARCC has developed two sequences of exams to be given at the end of each high school mathematics course. One follows a traditional math pathway of Algebra 1, Algebra 2, and Geometry. The other is designed for students who are enrolled in integrated math courses that combine the different strands. SBAC's approach is a bit different, containing optional interim exams for all high school grades but only providing a required exam for 11th grade students.

Similar to the College Board Advanced Placement math exams, both tests will have calculator and non-calculator sections. For the calculator-allowed portion of the PARCC assessment, students will use an online calculator that is similar in function to a TI-84 graphing calculator, which could be an issue for schools like mine that primarily use the TI-Nspire. The SBAC exam also has a pop-up online calculator for students to use on certain problems, but it doesn't mimic the TI-Nspire or the TI-84; instead, students can use the calculator in scientific, regression, or graphing mode.

In terms of how the tests will be scored, PARCC has developed performance-level descriptors, or PLDs, that describe what students know and can do relative to common-standards content. For example, the Algebra 2 PLD for equivalent expressions requires a student at the distinguished level to be able to "use mathematical properties and structure of polynomial, exponential, rational, and radical expressions to create equivalent expressions that aid in solving mathematical and contextual problems with three or more steps required." A student who has only partial command of the standard can "use provided mathematical properties and structure of polynomial and exponential expressions (not radical or rational) to create equivalent expressions." There are 15 different PLDs for the Algebra 2 assessments alone.

SBAC uses a similar system that involves achievement level descriptors, or ALDs. Five claims detail what students should be able to do during the time of the assessment—one overall claim and four separate domain claims. For 11th grade, the composite claim is that "students can demonstrate college and career readiness in mathematics." The other claims cover concepts and procedures, problem solving, communications and reasoning, and modeling and data analysis. The ALDs are then provided for each assessment item based on a student's knowledge and skill of each particular claim.

find the zeros of a third function, which is the difference between the first two functions. This requires mastery of common standard A-REI.10-11 ("represent and solve equations and inequalities graphically"), as well as common-core mathematical practices three ("construct viable arguments and critique the reasoning of others"), and seven ("look for and make use of structure").

Each assessment consortia has put forth ideas that I appreciate as a math teacher. For example, PARCC plans to release one-third of the assessment items after the tests are taken each year (similar to how the College Board releases the Advanced Placement free-response questions). SBAC plans to provide classroom activities related to each performance task that will allow students to become

more familiar with the context of the problem before attempting the actual test.

For a performance task entitled "Crickets," for example, the students first learn from their teacher selected information about why crickets chirp, and have an opportunity to practice calculating the average number of chirps per minute. Then students complete the performance-task assessment, which involves determining the relationship between temperature and chirping rates of snowy tree crickets. This way, the assessment is measuring students' knowledge of content rather than context.

A Challenge for Teachers

If you're anything like me, you might be a little nervous about the new assessments and

the difficulties that students will most likely encounter, given the increased rigor compared with most current state tests. This will definitely be a time of transition for both students and teachers as we get accustomed to the new expectations.

I have to say, however, that I'm optimistic that the new assessments are steering student learning in the right direction. Until now, there has been little to no connection between daily formative assessments and state-mandated summative assessments. In my classroom, I strive to assess what my students understand based on their thinking processes. I want to know more than just whether or not the student can circle the correct letter. I want to know how well my Algebra II students can think abstractly and connect new topics to prior knowledge, for example. Most math teachers will agree that this type of daily assessment is essential to both how we teach and what we teach, and is more valuable than data received from a summative multiple-choice test. It has been frustrating to me that in the past few years, students could be deemed college- and career-ready by means of the latter type of assessment.

But with this new wave of assessments, I see this starting to shift. Both consortia assessments will include some multiple-choice questions, but many items will require students to interact with the questions beyond just choosing one correct answer—and the data that teachers will receive in turn goes beyond a scale score. For example, one of the Smarter Balanced 11th grade practice items displays a set of six radical equations, and the student must select all of the equations that have integral solutions. Even though there are definite right and wrong answers, the students are scored on a continuum. If a student correctly identifies the equation that contains a rational exponent but struggles with the equation with the negative exponent, then that provides me with much more information than I could get from a multiple-choice question. To me, this looks more like a solid formative assessment activity that I might do in my classroom.

New Instructional Foundations

When I first read the common standards in math a few years ago, I was ecstatic about their rigor and the inclusion of the mathematical practices. However, I was skeptical that assessments could be written that actually measure a student's mastery of such complex standards as well as college and career readiness. Based on the sample assessments and the ALDs and PLDs, I am hopeful that both PARCC and SBAC have developed assessments that are closer than ever to assessing students' conceptual understanding as well as proficiency with mathematical practices.

If the assessments are able to truly provide teachers, students, and parents with valid data about student learning, "teaching to the test" becomes a good thing. Teachers will no longer encourage students to follow specific steps or memorize formulas because the new assessments will measure whether or not students truly understand mathematical thinking. This means that teachers will need to collaborate and develop lessons that balance procedure and understanding. The mathematical practices—which include constructing viable arguments and critiquing the reasoning of others, modeling with mathematics, and look for and make use of structure, to name a few—will have to become the foundation of instruction as opposed to add-on enrichment activities.

Many math teachers recognize the standards and the mathematical practices as simply "good teaching." Modeling with mathematics, for example, is certainly nothing new, but what is different is that now it is a standard. This, to my mind, means good instruction for all students.

My hope is that the new CCSS-aligned assessments, whether PARCC, Smarter Balanced, or new assessment that have not yet been created, will support this kind of instruction. Like many teachers, I am not afraid of being held accountable (in fact I embrace it), as long as the test is measuring the type of learning that I know is best for my students.

Alison Wright teaches Algebra 2 and AP Calculus at Lafayette High School in Lexington, Ky. She is a National Board-certified teacher with more than 10 years of experience.

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