

# Getting Ready for Common Standards

By Douglas B. Reeves

Many school districts will find that their present curriculum already includes a good deal of the Common Core State Standards. However, most schools also will find at least a few areas in which teachers and administrators need to make substantial changes to be ready for the standards' implementation and the assessments that will support them.

Here are five essential actions for every school district planning to implement the Common Core.

## 1: Find common ground

The best way to reduce some of the anxiety is to learn the similarities between your present curriculum and the Common Core. One useful learning activity is for teachers to download the standards at [www.corestandards.org](http://www.corestandards.org) and simply highlight the ones they already are teaching. Rather than feeling overwhelmed by massive change, teachers can build on the foundation of the most successful instructional strategies they will continue to use.

## 2: More informational writing

One of the most significant -- and in my view one of the best -- Common Core innovations is the explicit inclusion of informational writing in many subjects. This includes not just English, but science and social studies.

More than a decade of research supports the strong relationship between nonfiction writing and improved student achievement. The consistent use of nonfiction writing across the curriculum remains the exception rather than the rule, however. As a cost-saving move, many states have reduced the use of writing on their state assessments, and the unfortunate result has been a reduced emphasis on writing in the classroom.

Schools getting ready for the Common Core must make a substantial commitment to increasing informational writing at every level, starting in kindergarten. My experience is that nonfiction writing can be fun and engaging for students of all ages.

The Common Core research dispenses with two common arguments in schools. The first is that "I'm not a writing teacher" when, in fact, every teacher in every subject is responsible for helping students to think critically, and writing is one of the best ways to master that skill. The second is that writing is not "developmentally appropriate" for kindergarten students. But when these students already are engaged in successful writing curricula around the world, then it's clear that the extent to which kindergartners write is a matter of adult expectations, not the developmental capacity of the children.

## 3: Prioritize

Successfully implementing the Common Core requires more than the delivery of binders of curriculum materials to the schoolhouse door. Teachers must get time to understand the standards and, most importantly, to identify the evidence that students have successfully mastered the learning expectations for each. Unfortunately, the time available for this sort of detailed analysis is far less than the task requires. Therefore, teachers and administrators should collaborate to identify the most important standards -- sometimes called "power standards" -- that have the greatest impact on student learning.

## 4: Embrace common formative assessments at the district level

One important lesson learned from the past two decades of the standards movement is that standards are an illusion when they are supported only by a single end-of-grade exam that assesses nine months of inconsistent curriculum and testing based on each teacher's idiosyncratic choices. Formative assessment -- that is, assessments that are administered periodically during the school year and are designed to inform teaching and learning -- can profoundly impact student achievement. However, assessments are not "formative" based on the label on the test, but on how they are used by teachers and administrators.

## 5: Use the standards as a floor, not a ceiling

Implementing standards does not have to result in the standardization of teaching and learning. One of the most empowering and important activities for schools preparing for the Common Core is to create a continuum of learning activities that include the standards requirements and create opportunities to exceed them. This is a way to embrace teacher creativity and defeat the notion that the use of educational standards must lead to stultifying classrooms.

Most importantly, school leaders and policymakers should resist the temptation to "wait for Washington" or other educational authorities to start making important preparations for the Common Core. Although some states may not change assessments until 2014, schools that start preparing now will have the greatest success -- and the least anxiety -- when it is fully implemented.

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