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**Common Core: Now What?** Pages 24-27

**Making the Shifts**

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Here we are at the end of 2012. Who would have thought just three years ago that education would be in the position that it is in today—that 46 states, three U.S. territories, and the District of Columbia would have voluntarily agreed to share a set of standards for English language arts and literacy and mathematics? One would be hard-pressed to identify another initiative that has a greater potential to affect the teaching and learning that take place in so many classrooms across the United States. That being said, the widespread adoption of the Common Core State Standards has, to date, done little to change education. The adoption process itself was only the opening of the door.

So, here we are as U.S. educators, 46 states, thousands of districts, and millions of teachers, all with the task of implementing these standards. Over the last two years, I have talked with thousands of educators about the standards, and I have realized that one of the biggest risks we currently face is full-speed implementation without an understanding of the changes that the standards require. When a new reform initiative comes around, our instinct as teachers and education leaders is often to buy new tools to support the work. But in a time when the market is offering an enormous range of materials, educators need a secure understanding of the standards so that we can choose our resources wisely.

As we put the standards into practice, it is important to focus on a few shifts that have the most significant effect on students. These shifts should guide all aspects of implementing the standards—including professional development, assessment design, and curriculum. When educators attend to three core shifts in English language arts and literacy as well as in mathematics, the expectations for teaching and learning will be clear, consistent, and tightly aligned to the goals of the standards.

**The English Language Arts and Literacy Standards**

The English language arts and literacy standards include expectations in reading, writing, speaking, and listening that apply in English language arts classes as well as in science, social studies, and technical subjects. If all students are to be ready for college and career by the end of high school, it is not sufficient to solely address literacy skills; we must also consider the texts to which students apply these skills. The standards address lagging literacy performance with three key shifts.

**1. Building Knowledge Through Content-Rich Nonfiction**

Reading content-rich nonfiction in history, social studies, science, and the arts in elementary school is crucial for later reading growth and achievement. Students need to be grounded in information about the world around them if they are to develop the strong general knowledge and vocabulary they need to become successful readers. Nonfiction plays an important part in building students' knowledge about content.

In today's classrooms, however, a great amount of time and energy has been invested over the years in creating extended literacy blocks that often crowd out time for learning social studies and science. During these blocks, students overwhelmingly read stories; on average, fewer than 10 percent of elementary English language arts texts are nonfiction (Duke, 2004).

The shift to building knowledge from content-rich nonfiction does not mean disregarding literature. Literature plays an essential role in building students' reading skills and developing their love of reading. The standards celebrate the role literature plays in building knowledge and creativity in students. As teachers implement the standards, our students will need to read rich literature as well as content-rich nonfiction in elementary school.

In later grades, history, social studies, and science teachers will equip students with the skills needed to read and gain information from content-specific nonfiction texts. In middle school and high school, nonfiction texts are a powerful vehicle for learning content as students build skills in the careful reading of a variety of texts, such as primary documents in a social studies class or descriptions of scientific observations in a science class.

**2. Reading and Writing Grounded in Evidence**

The Common Core State Standards emphasize using evidence from texts to present careful analyses, well-defended claims, and clear information. Rather than asking students to respond to questions they can answer solely from prior knowledge or experience, the standards prioritize questions that require students to read texts with care. Quality text-based questions, unlike low-level "search and find" questions, require close reading and deep understanding of the text.

The standards also require narrative writing throughout the grades. Narrative writing enables students to develop a command of sequence and detail that is essential to the argumentative and informative writing emphasized in later grades. The standards' focus on evidence-based writing and speaking to inform and persuade is a significant shift from current typical practice. Today, the most popular forms of writing in K–12 draw from student experience and opinion, which alone will not prepare students for the demands of college and career.

**3. Regular Practice with Complex Texts and Academic Language**

The standards focus on text complexity because the ability to comprehend complex texts is the most significant factor differentiating college-ready from non-college-ready readers. To prepare students for college and career, the standards include a staircase of increasing complexity in assigned texts.

The complexity of a text is determined by a number of factors, including syntax and vocabulary. To understand complex materials, students need support in developing the key academic vocabulary common to those texts (ACT, 2008). These are words that commonly appear across genres and content areas and that are essential for understanding most informational text (for example, *ignite, commit*, and *dedicate*). This shift toward complex text requires practice, supported through deliberate close reading.

**Delivering on the Potential**

The Common Core State Standards are built on the best of the state standards and learning expectations that preceded them. Unlike many state-level initiatives, however, the standards offer much more than a distribution of topics across the grades. They make it possible for us to deliver on a promise to our children that they will graduate prepared for college and career.

The standards cannot be seen as *one more thing* to put on our agenda. Instead, the standards must be integrated into our daily work in classrooms, schools, districts, and states. The shifts for English language arts and literacy and for mathematics reinforce the idea that a few things done well will have significant positive impact on our students. Let's focus on those few things together.

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