Introduction

Meeting the Common Core With Common Sense

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) have been maligned, extolled, dismissed, and microanalyzed, sometimes simultaneously—especially when groups come together for the specific purpose of understanding the standards and how they may substantially change teaching practices. The national rhetoric online, in journals, and at educational conferences reflects a significant amount of discord reminiscent of the reading wars a decade ago. Not surprisingly, when sweeping changes are mandated from outside a school, dissonance often follows that is long-lasting and harmful not only to students, our first priority, but to the school community or district at large. Reason is often subjugated to near-panic as decisions are made, money is encumbered, and mandates are created without anyone asking what is practical and doable with a given set of students. If ever there was a time for a calm and reasoned response to sweeping changes, it is now.

Many books have flooded the market recently offering an analysis of the standards, strategies for implementing the standards, and a Pandora's box full of secrets to mastering the CCSS. These books have a place in our professional library because without an understanding of the standards, we can't even fairly discuss them. We need appropriate strategies to help us implement the many new competencies in the standards. What we also need, however, is permission to move the students we have—not the ones we wish we had—higher up the ladder toward success in a reasonable manner rather than naively insisting that all students can and will meet a set of standards created by people who have never assessed their abilities, skills, or life circumstances.

If we envision the standards as a starting point rather than a finishing line—a goal that, in fact, may not be attainable for everyone—our

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expectations and blood pressure will return to a normal range. Much like the first model year of a new car, the CCSS will have kinks to be worked out, feedback to be analyzed, and maybe even a recall or two. That's the nature of anything new, and a commonsense approach involves not only examining the standards but examining the students, resources, faculty, and data that are unique to each school and district. With a picture of who we are, we can then take appropriate steps to use the standards in a way that will help us move all of our students forward instead of fearfully allowing them to push us places where we simply can't afford to go.

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Defining "Standards"

In thinking about standards, the word itself might well be the first topic for faculty or professional learning community (PLC) dialogue. Consider, for example, sharing responses to these questions:

- What is the purpose of standards?

- Generally, what are the benefits of standards? The disadvantages?

- How have standards shaped education or classroom practices in the past?

- To what extent have such standards been successful and/or unsuccessful?

- What latitude is there within any given set of standards? Within the CCSS?

- When thinking of standards in areas other than education, when are they most necessary, such as standards for constructing bridges or inspecting meat processing plants? In what areas might standards be counterproductive, such as when standards are applied to aesthetics or creativity?

Everyone may agree that standards are necessary for safety or to ensure the quality of products or processes, as in factories, but we might find some disagreement when talking about standards for education. Then again, we may have little to say about standards in general, but solidly approve of a certain standard or vehemently disapprove of a different one.

While some argue for the inherent value of standards, one of the dangers is a tendency toward "standardization" of every point on the continuum toward one commonality. This tendency was seen, for example, when Impressionist art in the late 1860s deviated from the art standards of the day with its rather "messy" style of short visible strokes that created an impression of reality rather than the accurate, lifelike paintings that defined the standard. Many Impressionist painters died under the shadow of ridicule from the standard-bearers without knowing how much their works would be valued in the future. When standards are implemented without regard for variations, we run the risk of excluding works (and people) of enormous value.

The idea of creating standards that will move students toward "college and career readiness" sounds reasonable, and implementing the standards may, indeed, help the majority of students move higher on the learning continuum, but we also risk leaving behind hundreds of thousands of students who may never be able to fit the mold. These same students, however, may have much to offer the workplace, society, or their own community. So, what happens to students who come from a literacy-impoverished background, students with limited English language skills, students who are disengaged or unmotivated, students who are not able to devote the time necessary to master the CCSS, or students who see and respond to the world, like the Impressionist painters, in a different way?

Teachers all across the nation have stories of students, even capable students, who simply will not do work outside of class, refuse to read assigned texts, write as little as possible, skip school until they are on the verge of dropping out, and are not motivated by grades or other extrinsic rewards.

"My students' real lives exist outside of this building, and we are doing everything we can just to get them to show up," a high school English teacher told us recently, literally wringing her hands as she talked. "If they can make a D—and in our district, teachers aren't allowed to give a grade below a D—many of the kids are completely satisfied. Challenging text? Analyzing how an author 'draws on and transforms source material in a specific work'? Writing using precise language? *Please.*"

> What happens to students with limited English language skills?

While it may seem that this teacher, typical of many others, is making excuses for not being able to meet the CCSS, our take is that she is over-whelmed by the vast amount that is being required of her, especially since she felt she wasn't successful *before* the CCSS were mandated. The state might as well tell her to transform her students into giraffes. She sees no way that it can possibly happen, and the discouragement that accompanies such realization contributes to the problem. To insist that all students conform to a set of standards outside their present abilities or mind-sets is to significantly reduce their chances of ever becoming college or career ready. It is a paradox that the same set of standards has the ability to stretch some students and limit others.

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This book is about those students who *will not* or *cannot* readily adapt to the challenges inherent in the CCSS. Each chapter focuses on how to scaffold such students' learning through active and engaging, research-based practices that will help those who have not been successful in the past. As with most important documents, the CCSS have within them room for interpretation, and it is incumbent upon districts to make time for teachers to work together as they adapt the standards in light of their students' backgrounds, abilities, motivations, and learning rates.

An Introduction to the Standards

While the standards explicitly delineate goals for what students should learn, we argue that it is the spirit of that learning, not blind adher-ence to the standards, that should be uppermost in our practice. In the introduction to the standards, there is carefully crafted language that offers much reassurance. Unfortunately, many workshops about CCSS go directly into opening the large package of nuts and bolts before look-ing at what the standards are hoping to build. This picture or "vision," as the CCSS authors refer to it, emphasizes what it means to be a literate person in the 21st century, noting that such skills have wide applicabil-ity outside the classroom or workplace. Specifically:

- According to the authors, "Reading is at the heart of understand-ing and *enjoying* complex works of literature." The language in this sentence does not say that students should be *forced* to read complex works of literature but, rather, says that they be led

to *enjoy* them. And what does "complex" mean? The ideas in Lois Lowry's *The Giver* or Veronica Roth's *Divergent* are certainly complex. Are we to jump immediately to the conclusion that "complex" means "difficult" or reading beyond the level of the reader? We suggest that the words "complex" and "challenging" need discussion among faculties before they attempt to create tasks based on the terms. Challenging text and complex works of literature can mean one thing to a proficient reader and quite another to a striving reader.

- Students who meet the standards "are able to pick carefully through the staggering amount of information available today in print and digitally. They seek the wide, deep and thoughtful engagement with high-quality literary and informational texts that builds knowledge, enlarges experience, and broadens worldviews." This statement rings with possibilities for engagement and implies that we have the *opportunity* to present students with a wide variety of texts, freeing us from the constraints of a single textbook series or program. It also speaks to making learning relevant and meaningful for each student.

- Students will "learn to reason in a cogent manner and use evidence that is essential to private deliberation and responsible citizenship in a democratic republic." These skills are developed over time—a lifetime, actually. The authors of the standards surely expect us to give students enough time to not only use but come to value these skills.

Important Considerations

Perhaps the most important sentence in the entire set of standards is this:

> *The standards leave room for teachers, curriculum developers, and states to determine how these goals should be reached and what additional topics should be addressed.*

The next most important may be this:

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> *Teachers are thus free to provide students with whatever tools and knowledge their professional judgment and experience identify as most helpful for meeting the goals set out in the Standards.*

While many feel they are being cookie-cut into a "standard" educator, whatever that is, or must follow lockstep through the CCSS, the intent of the standards appears to be just the opposite. It's been a long time since teachers have been encouraged to use their "professional judgment and experience" or given the freedom to do so. Administrators and district or state staff who overlook this most important directive will certainly fail to meet the inherent goals of the standards.

We appreciate the fact that the authors advocate an interdisciplinary approach to literacy and that they suggest that the standards not be seen as isolated skills. For example, the authors note that, "often, several standards can be addressed by a single rich task." The term "rich task" is especially pleasing to us because it denotes more, much more, than having students fill out worksheets, answer questions at the end of chapters, or complete the types of assignments that have caused rampant disengagement across the disciplines. The language in this section, such as "gather," "synthesize," "report," "conduct original research," and "solve problems," suggests active, innovative teaching based on inquiry—with "research and media skills" embedded. Good teachers have long been utilizing just such an approach.

Those students for whom school has been a challenge not because it was too difficult but because the test-prep culture bored them into dropping out at last have a chance to engage in learning as it should be—*if* schools embrace the introductory material of the standards as seriously as they do the rest of the document.

Using Common Sense: What Is Not Covered by the Standards

Just as a nonexample is important when defining what *is,* the information on page 6 of the CCSS is important in understanding not only the language of the standards but their intent. As the standards are evaluated and interpreted, some may take liberties in narrowing the

curriculum and standardizing instructional approaches. The following items caution against that approach.

- "The standards define what all students are expected to know and be able to do, not how teachers should teach." Teachers can take heart in the fact that they can try out new practices, engage students in creative and innovative activities, and expand their teaching repertoires while still meeting the standards. Further, this first item reassures readers that the standards "do not—indeed, cannot—enumerate all or even most of the content students should learn." Those who insist that the literature exemplars, for example, or content that is mentioned in the standards should be an iron-clad part of the curriculum are simply wrong. All that is required is a "content-rich curriculum"—one that teachers should have a role in creating.

- "A great deal is left to the discretion of teachers and curriculum developers." Many teachers have told us that in the past they have been directed to spend hours engaged in test prep and have had little say in that mandate. This item seems to let teachers off the "test prep" hook. "While the Standards focus on what is most essential, they do not describe all that can or should be taught."

- The standards do not dictate the "nature of advanced work for students who meet the Standards prior to the end of high school." This item goes on to mention "literature, composition, language and journalism" as topics available to such students. One could easily infer that individually directed studies and electives such as debate, creative writing, and drama could fill this gap.

- The authors of the standards do provide flexibility in the support and intervention offered to students who are well below or well above grade level. Thankfully, they state that "no set of grade-specific standards can fully reflect the great variety in abilities, needs, learning rates, and achievement levels of students in any given classroom." That admission opens the door for students who need extra support or more challenging assignments,

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offering an antidote to what often happens when standards are used to standardize students.

- The standards allow for accommodations for those students needing them and clearly state that the standards do not "define the full range of supports appropriate for English language learners and for students with special needs." And the authors also admit that students acquiring English do not need to display "native-like control" of conventions and vocabulary, a huge relief to teachers of students whose first language is not English.

- Lest anyone think the standards exclude affective components of learning, a last item notes that "attention to such matters as social, emotional, and physical development," especially in the early grades, is a component of the standards. The authors did not intend that PE, art, and music be eliminated from the curriculum, and districts that are considering such a move in favor of a more academic approach to schooling should think again.

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A Portrait of a Young Student: What We Cover in This Book

Page 7 of the introduction to the CCSS offers a portrait of students who "exhibit with increasing fullness and regularity these capacities of the literate individual." In our quest to capture the spirit of the standards as well as the specifics, we've paid close attention to the characteristics of a successful student presented in this part of the document—and we've considered where students and teachers may feel challenged by these goals. These items create the skeleton on which the standards hang and, thus, provoke the questions and statements that we pose as the titles of each chapter of this book.

Below, we offer a brief overview of the chapters and our purpose for raising these eight questions and challenging statements. In the chapters themselves, however, you'll find that every discussion of these areas begins with an anecdote drawn from a real classroom and continues with practical strategies for applying the standards to our work with real students. We also include, in each chapter, a variety of material, from quotations to book lists to suggestions for classroom activities, in shaded boxes

that accompany the text. We hope you'll approach each of the following areas with the understanding that the questions we pose, the statements we offer, and the practices we suggest as responses to those statements and questions all offer not absolute answers but possibilities for continual inquiry by teachers as they seek to engage and motivate students.

Chapter 1. How Do We Reach Reluctant Students?

The first characteristic of college- and career-ready students offered on page 7 of the standards states that such students "demonstrate independence." But what about students who have never learned such independence and who might not know what to do with it if it were given to them?

Students such as these often do not participate in learning because they are not engaged in that learning. In this first chapter, therefore, we introduce "Our Standards for Motivation and Engagement," which we refer back to throughout the rest of the book. In addition, we focus on creating "self-directed" learners. Teachers of reluctant learners tell us that their students lack the self-efficacy and the necessary skills to become independent or even interdependent learners. Literate individuals, according to the CCSS, have the ability to find and use resources to assist them in their tasks. Many students have become victims of "learned helplessness" as they sit in class passively, dependent upon the teacher or another student to help them complete tasks or assimilate new learning. With the standards in our back pockets, we can make conscious decisions to throw away the worksheets and help students learn how to ask relevant questions, seek clarification, and articulate their own ideas. This requires that teachers become more facilitators than instructors as they help students move toward independence by utilizing practices that foster the engagement that can lead to self-direction and self-efficacy—the belief that one can accomplish a task and the determination to do so. While this will be a new way of working with such students, it is foundational in meeting the standards.

Chapter 2. Why Scaffolding Complex Text Is Crucial

This second characteristic in the CCSS introduction's portrait of a college- and career-ready student describes one who is actively learning in order to

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"build strong content knowledge"—researching, speaking, listening, writing, and reading purposefully. It does not describe a student who takes notes as the teacher lectures, simply watches a PowerPoint, or reads an assignment for the sole purpose of answering questions from a textbook. In this chapter we look at scaffolding as a way to build content knowledge and skills. We also discuss text complexity and what it means for learners who are not yet able to unlock difficult complex text. It is telling that this item is written not to suggest that the *teacher* build strong content knowledge for the student but to require that *students* do the building. This, too, may require a shift in practice for many teachers of striving learners.

Chapter 3. How Do We Engage *All* Students in Reading and Writing?

In many schools of the 20th century, students completed an assignment for the purpose of having the teacher, usually as the only audience, read it, evaluate it, and post a grade. Because the technology-based, global communication of the 21st century requires an entirely new way of looking at classroom tasks, the third characteristic of a successful student presented in the CCSS introduction notes that such a student responds "to the varying demands of audience, task, purpose, and discipline." Students must now take into account not only various audiences beyond the teacher but how their goals and strategies for communication will vary according to the audience, especially when writing or speaking. When writing, they must also consider how to use language correctly and appropriately, as literate individuals do. Helping students communicate through reading, writing, speaking, and listening is the job of each teacher in a school where everyone works together to build the literacy skills of *all* students. This chapter provides engaging practices that create opportunities for students to interact with readers, writers, and peers as they use literacy skills for a variety of tasks.

Chapter 4. How to Go Deeper: Creating Analytical Thinkers

The focus on comprehension presented by the CCSS introduction, which suggests that students "comprehend as well as critique," is not new. Reading strategies abound in books, articles, webinars, conferences, and in-service workshops, but we have come to realize that the

act of comprehending, especially comprehending complex text, is not as simple as applying a strategy. Additionally, current thinking advocates replacing one set of skills that students use ubiquitously across the disciplines with instruction regarding reading and writing *within* the disciplines. Students must learn how to use literacy skills unique to science, social studies, English, and math and, at the same time, understand how such skills are related.

The introduction of critique also brings to the table a new way of looking at comprehension and analysis. While we have always paid lip service to "thinking critically," the 21st century definition includes critical literacy, a type of literacy where students understand how language is used to accomplish social ends. Students who engage in critique see literacy as more than just decoding a text or gaining surface understanding of the author's ideas. Critical literacy reshapes comprehension as a tool for understanding nuances of meaning and interpretation. Thus, students must learn to read and research as skeptics, question the author's assumptions, and assess the veracity of claims. As they present their research and arguments in written or oral form, they reinforce the skills they learned while reading thoughtfully and critically.

Once again, the CCSS introduction paints a portrait of a student who reads actively with individual purposes instead of scanning merely for information or to answer questions. Unfortunately, many striving learners are victims of the beliefs by educators that they must first be able to read on "grade level" before reading critically. Striving learners who engage in critical literacy deepen comprehension of all texts and, more importantly, become empowered as readers. Chapter 4 offers suggestions for teaching critical literacy, deep comprehension, and argumentative writing.

Chapter 5. Why Evidence Matters: From Text to Talk to Argument

The fifth characteristic of college- and career-ready students, according to the introduction, is that "they value evidence." Students love to prove their points as they argue persuasively, often with the goal of leaving those who disagree in the dust. Teachers can use students' inherent love of argument to teach them how to use evidence in all aspects of their academic and social lives. As they read informational

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text, they will evaluate claims that are presented in terms of validity and sound reasoning. They will also learn how to use evidence in speaking and writing to support assumptions, make points, and bolster arguments. This chapter offers activities that will help students see evidence as something that can be useful and relevant rather than as a box of dry facts dropped into an assignment in order to meet their teachers' requirements. Students who learn to use evidence in meaningful ways discover the intrinsic value in it.

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Chapter 6. How Using Diverse Media and Formats Can Ignite Student Learning

In the past, teachers have had to drag striving readers to the textbook and often end up reading the text to students, many of whom seem incapable of making their fingers turn a single page. Now, the same content that was "boring" in print is suddenly engaging in a digital format. This is perhaps the one area where intrinsic motivation is built into the goal of the standards, expressed in the introduction as the ability to "use technology and digital media strategically"; all we need to do is help students *learn* how to use this media strategically. That means rethinking how to implant technology into our daily classroom practices as an integral tool of learning.

This chapter will help teachers use the tools of technology and digital media to infuse literacy in all its forms—reading, writing, researching, speaking, and listening—into presentations and projects that deal with inquiry and essential questions, thus heightening student engagement and building independence.

Chapter 7. Why a Culture of Reading Is Critical—and How to Create One

The idea of creating a culture of reading brings joy to the hearts of English language arts teachers everywhere, especially when they read the following sentence that may epitomize their belief about literature: "Through reading great classic and contemporary works of literature representative of a variety of periods, cultures, and worldviews, students can vicariously inhabit worlds and have experiences much different

than their own." Yes, the standards do dictate that content-area teachers in upper grades use informational text more than fiction, but this element clearly shows the CCSS value literature, both classic and contemporary, and see it as an essential resource for helping students become responsible and sensitive citizens in a world of increasing divergence. In this last chapter, we provide examples of how texts can be used to foster deeper understanding of other perspectives and cultures through inquiry and literature circles as well as through independent reading. There are also tips for creating text sets, classroom libraries, and environments that allow students to "vicariously inhabit worlds and have experiences much different than their own" as the last descriptor of successful students suggests they should.

Chapter 8. What Do We Do About the Language Standards?

The seven characteristics of successful students we address above, those outlined on page 7 of the introduction to the CCSS, mention language and conventions in passing. There is not a specific description related to language, nor should there necessarily be one—we believe that conventions are one tool students use to communicate and think deeply, not an end in themselves. Yet the presence of the language standards in the CCSS demands our consideration. How do we teach to and with these standards? What do we know about grammar and vocabulary instruction? In this final chapter, we discuss the need for integrated and engaging instruction in these areas that allows teachers to support students as they make progress toward the characteristics we've discussed here.

Keeping the End in Mind

ReLeah once knew a kid who was a promising soccer player. In the "standards" of soccer he had mastered every competency and, what's more, he could demonstrate proficiency. The summer of his sophomore year, right before he was to go to soccer camp, however, he announced to his parents that he was quitting the team—dropping out. His parents tried to get him to reconsider, but he was adamant. During hours of discussion, they came to understand—and to help him understand—why he had made that decision and what had prompted it.

The coach had failed to keep the end in mind. His unilateral focus on achieving the skills of the game without a great deal of regard for the "human" side of the sport left the boy feeling that his accomplishments had no real intrinsic value. He had mastered the discrete skills necessary to become a solidly good player, but the camaraderie so important in any team sport was missing, and he couldn't shake the feeling that the time he spent in practice wasn't relevant to his "real" life. His original purpose for playing soccer—not only to learn how to play, but also to enjoy the sport, develop relationships with other athletes, and feel good about his abilities—had somehow been subjugated to simply winning. Further, it seemed to him that no matter what he accomplished, it was never good enough; he felt he was always just under the mark no matter how hard he tried. In pushing for excellence, his coach had failed to give this boy the autonomy he needed to grow as an athlete and as a person.

In discussing this unfortunate scenario, we become concerned that in our push to have students "master the standards," we may lose those students altogether, especially those for whom school has never been easy. In the end, it isn't most important that students "analyze how and why individuals, events, and ideas develop and interact over the course of a text" or that they "determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases." What *is* extremely important is that students learn how to be productive, responsible, and literate citizens who come to see education as a valuable stepping-stone to all of life's endeavors. If we use the standards to win the game at any cost, we may well see an increase in dropout rates and a widening of the achievement gap as many students, especially those on the precipice, come to disdain education rather than value its usefulness and take pleasure in its offerings.

As we turn this next corner in American schooling, we must not lose this opportunity to redefine how we will help those students who are most at risk. In the end, however, it is not the standards that will make a difference; it is the vast expertise and solid common sense of educators who know their craft, care about their students, and are willing to take on the hard work of change that will increase learning for *all* students.