

*If we want uncommon learning for our children in a time of common standards, we must be willing to lower the voices of discontent that threaten to overpower a teaching force who is learning a precise, deliberate, and cohesive practice.*

-Sarah Brown Wessling, 2010 Teacher of the Year

## **Oakland Schools' Response to Critics of the Common Core Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy**

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Oakland Schools strongly supports the adoption and implementation of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). While some critics claim that the CCSS are not well crafted, will only create more work for teachers, and will lower student achievement, we maintain that holding our students to these rigorous standards will improve the quality of teaching and learning in English Language Arts classrooms statewide. As Lucy Calkins, professor at Columbia University's School of Education explains, "The Common Core is, above all, a call for accelerating students' literacy development. The most important message centers around lifting the level of student achievement, not around course coverage and compliance"(17). The rigor of the new standards calls for a depth over breadth instructional approach to content and skill development, which will benefit all learners.

### **Are These High Quality Standards?**

Standards are outcomes that indicate what students should be able to do. "Standards also refer to the desired *qualities* of student work and the degree of *rigor* that must be assessed and achieved"(McTighe & Wiggins). Curriculum provides a plan for the learning that must take place in order to achieve said outcomes, qualities, and rigor.

The CCSS's quality has been and will continue to be hotly debated. But the consensus among education leaders and scholars like Jay McTighe, Heidi Hayes Jacobs, Lucy Calkins, and Carol Jago is that these standards are a positive development in addressing the demands students will face in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As Carol Ann Tomlinson, Professor and Chair of Educational Leadership, Foundation, and Policy at the Curry School of Education, University of Virginia explains, "[The CCSS] are ingredients for curriculum—better ingredients than many we've had in the past. But they are not dinner. They are contemporary building codes—better suited to the 21st century than many previous sets of building codes. But they're not the buildings"(90).

We agree with Tomlinson. While it is true the CCSS were not piloted before they were adopted, they have provided a vertically aligned and carefully spiraled framework on which to build rich and rigorous curriculum that will prepare students for college and career. As McTighe and Wiggins point out, "...The whole point of Anchor Standards in ELA...is to establish the genres of performance (e.g., argumentation in writing and speaking) that must *recur* across the grades in order to develop the capacities needed for success in higher education and the workplace"(10).

## **Just Making More Work for Teachers or Creating Opportunities for Curricular Collaboration?**

In response to Michigan's adoption of the CCSS, ISDs and RESAs across Michigan have collaboratively developed high quality English Language Arts (ELA) curricular units through a project supported by the Michigan Association of Intermediate School Administrators (MAISA). The MAISA ELA units were designed and written by educators, then piloted in classrooms across the state so teachers could provide feedback to the curriculum writers to focus their revision.

This extensive cross county work is unprecedented in Michigan and points to the power of adopting national standards. As the units are taken up statewide, teachers are sharing implementation strategies and resources, and building networks at a rate and with a reach we have never seen before. Research tells us that this kind of peer to peer collaboration improves teaching quality as teachers reflect on and evolve in their practice through dialogue with other educators.

## **How Do the Standards Address 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills?**

While some critics say the CCSS are too rigorous and will result in low student achievement and poor test scores, we maintain that they address the skills needed for students to thrive in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Education thought leader Heidi Hayes Jacobs characterizes the CCSS as, "a forward-thinking set of ideas just waiting for a place to live in our classrooms and in our school year" (as qtd in Pipkin).

The nature of work in America has changed. In their book *The New American Workplace*, Lawler and O'Toole write, "In plain English, today more large American companies can make more money selling knowledge than they can by making and selling things" (26). But because education has not kept pace with the swift changes in work, a growing number of workers will not possess the skills needed to do the 21<sup>st</sup> century skill-based positions that will be available between now and 2020. So 12-24 million of those positions will go unfilled (Guilfoyle).

The CCSS address this shift in work and correlated job skills. Students who master the CCSS will leave high school possessing the kind of intellectual independence and strong critical thinking skills necessary to succeed in today's global economy due to the ELA standards' focus on:

- close reading across multiple texts and text and media formats,
- articulating evidence-based arguments,
- independent research,
- writing as a recursive process,
- using technology to publish, interact, and collaborate, and
- oral language—listening, discussion, and public speaking.

## **Why Text-Based Answers?**

The CCSS ask students to “Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text” (Common Core). By asking that students’ responses remain anchored in the text, their writing and discussion about a work will be more substantive and will allow them to engage with increasingly more complex texts over time.

The tendency for students to personally relate to what they read is natural and helps them engage with a text. But remaining in the personal engagement realm limits the conversation. If the academic goal of reading a text is to analyze it and develop a clear interpretation--an evidence-based argument--students must read like detectives, searching for clues that will help them develop their case.

Such reading comprehension skills are critical to success in college and career. The National Center for Education Statistics reported in 2004 that while needing to take one or more remedial/developmental courses of any sort lowers a student’s chance of eventually earning a degree or certificate, “the need for remedial reading appears to be the most serious barrier to degree completion”(63).

The MAISA ELA curriculum units and Oakland Schools’ support of CCSS implementation focuses on multi-draft reading of texts. By performing multiple readings and building background knowledge, students can grapple with not only the facts presented in a work of fiction or non-fiction, but also the central ideas, arguments, and themes, as well as the structure the writer has employed to convey that content.

## **Text Based on Grade Level or Student Reading Level?**

The Common Core specifies that the texts assigned to students should be at grade level as determined by qualitative and quantitative dimensions as well as reader and task considerations (motivation, knowledge and experiences). There has been some controversy surrounding the CCSS about how to handle students who are not reading at grade level. How can they succeed in reading grade level texts?

The MAISA ELA curriculum units take a balanced literacy approach to the teaching of reading, emphasizing the importance of student engagement. The reading workshop model allows students not reading at grade level to engage with grade-level anchor texts during mini-lessons and full class instruction. This guided reading is balanced with reading texts during literature circles and independent reading that reflect students’ individual reading level. The International Reading Association supports such an approach. “Athletes vary their routines to build strength, flexibility, and stamina; likewise, readers need reading experiences with a range of text difficulties and lengths if they are to develop these characteristics as readers”(1).

## **Is Fiction Being Pushed Out of the ELA Curriculum?**

The controversy over the amount of informational text the CCSS require students to read is the result of a misinterpretation of the Common Core's introduction. The introduction states that by 12<sup>th</sup> grade, students should be reading 70% informational text (Common Core). Many critics have interpreted this to mean students will be reading 70% informational text in English class. But this is not so. Reading and literacy instruction must be shouldered by all disciplines according to the CCSS.

Carol Jago, former NCTE President and Associate Director of the California Reading and Literature Project at UCLA commented on this controversy:

What seems to be causing confusion are the comparative recommended percentages for informational and literary text cited in the Common Core's introduction. These percentages reflect the 2009 NAEP Reading Framework. I served on that framework committee and can assure you that when we determined that 70% of what students would be asked to read for the 12th grade NAEP reading assessment would be informational, we did not mean that 70% of what students read in senior English should be informational text. The National Assessment for Educational Progress does not measure performance in English class. It measures performance in reading, reading across the disciplines and throughout the school day.

Still, this ongoing discussion underscores that the new requirements will be an adjustment for many English teachers. As education scholar Lucy Calkins explains, "For many schools, the Common Core Standards are a wakeup call, reminding people that students need to read more nonfiction texts across the curriculum as well as to receive focused ELA instruction in nonfiction reading. It is a mistake, however, to interpret the CCSS as simply a call for more nonfiction reading. The standards also call for students to move away from simply reading for information, toward reading with a much more analytical stance"(18).

### **A Common Metric**

CCSS adoption allows for a common metric and scale to measure student achievement. Such consistency creates two important possibilities, as outlined by Chester Finn, senior fellow at Stanford's Hoover Institution and President of the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation:

1. We can compare student, school, district, and state performance in a straightforward and credible way.
2. Students who move across the state or across the country can be assured of learning the same things at the same grade levels.

While the CCSS will be implemented by educators in a way that best addresses the needs of their local population, these shared national performance expectations will ultimately provide a clearer picture of what American students are learning and are able to do.

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