

Slicing and Dicing the ELA COMMON CORE Standards

As schools move toward implementing new standards for English language arts, research-based ideas help address critical issues.

BY VIRGINIA GOATLEY

The English Language Arts Common Core State Standards (ELA CCSS) come at a time when many reading teachers, literacy coaches, and classroom teachers seek more extensive literacy practices than the policy mandates of No Child Left Behind and Reading First. These initiatives placed requirements for instruction in core aspects of reading at the forefront, but left other less-privileged elements of literacy too often forgotten. Implementing the ELA CCSS gives educators a chance to step back, think critically, and make decisions to help foster improved instruction. With the Common Core, educators are engaged in conversations about the “six instruction shifts” (see “Shifts to Align Schools With ELA CCSS”) and other components of the ELA standards that offer new ideas or reminders of the broader context for literacy instruction.





As we take advantage of opportunities presented with the Common Core, it is important to keep balance and research-based knowledge as an instructional priority.

Perhaps your school adopted a best practice on one of the components years ago. Your school might be successfully implementing a practice, but in an instructional manner that could be improved to make better use of time and require more student engagement. Your state might already have extensive standards in a particular ELA area, such as writing, so the conversation differs in your state than in other states. Regardless

of the situation of your individual school, as curriculum and assessments develop, and national leadership provides more direction, an ongoing conversation about the instructional components needs to continue to be integrated across all aspects of implementation.

The Buzz on ELA Standards

Perhaps the most controversial topic in the early stages of the Common Core implementation is the issue of “close” or “deep” reading of text. With decades of research by David Pearson, Richard Anderson, Donna Ogle, Taffy Raphael, and many others on read-

ing comprehension and background knowledge, the findings show that prior knowledge plays an important role in how students read and understand new texts. However, in some classrooms, so much time is spent on prereading strategy instruction to prepare students to read a text that they have little time to read or understand the text.

With this focus, a key point is for all students to read texts closely, learning to use context cues and seek more information to understand and interpret texts they read. How do we engage students when they do not have background knowledge about a

topic? What happens when students read a text on a topic familiar to them, yet only read the text with their own perspective in mind? The need to engage students in textual close readings becomes a key issue, while also seeking balance in prereading strategy instruction and supporting students in reading texts independently on topics new to them.

Matching Books to Readers. ELA CCSS Standard 10 is often referred to as the “text complexity” standard. Page 31 in the ELA CCSS describes factors for measuring text complexity: quantitative and qualitative data and matching readers to the text and task. Matching texts to readers requires teachers to continue to make many decisions on a daily basis about text selections for students. The Common Core’s goal is to move students into more complex texts earlier in their schooling to significantly improve the text levels they can read by the time they enter college or begin a career.

In their book *Text Complexity*, Doug Fisher, Nancy Frey, and Diane Lapp offer an overview of each factor with descriptions of teacher decision-making used to implement this practice. Elfrieda Hiebert has also written and spoken about issues of text complexity, particularly in the early grades, where the quantitative and qualitative measures need to be considered carefully in text selec-

Principal ONLINE

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✦ The **International Reading Association** provides resources and external links to many websites relevant to current conversations on the ELA CCSS.

✦ In this series of three blogs, Virginia Goatley and Brenda Overturf share information and opportunities presented in the **ELA Common Core**.

✦ Learn more about the **six instructional shifts** of the ELA CCSS.

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tion. Many educators have expressed concerns about putting too many expectations on the youngest readers, requiring them to read more difficult text too early. As the Common Core moves toward full implementation, it will be important to continue to seek information on the challenges and dilemmas of matching books to readers, especially as more research is published that directly studies these factors.

Disciplinary Focus. In the past, teachers used thematic units and interdisciplinary teaching in many ways. In some cases, this led to an integrated conceptual unit with critical ideas across subject areas taught in ways that students learned concepts from more than one discipline. In other cases, this approach resulted in superficial conceptual development and often targeted only one discipline, for example, by using only historical fiction to teach history. With the Common Core, educators will need to think in new ways about authentic teaching across disciplines, both to engage students and to retain the core content of history, science, mathematics, and literature.

Research by Elizabeth Moje and Robert Bains provides insight into what this instruction involves and how to implement units that engage students in discussion and problem-solving. This is an opportunity for more collaboration by teachers across subject areas and grade levels as they consider the curriculum from the perspective of students experiencing concepts across their classrooms. Further, researchers such as Cynthia Greenleaf are helping us understand

how to apprentice readers in the content areas as they move across grade levels and continue to learn how to read texts in various disciplines.

Informational Texts. When I taught first grade many years ago, my students loved to read books about such subjects as dinosaurs, flowers, butterflies, construction, and sharks. In an era when there were few informational texts for early readers, the children’s encyclopedia volumes in the room had worn-out pages from students flipping through them to find answers to their questions. Yet textbooks focused almost exclusively on stories and poems, perhaps a result of an old focus on young children “learning to read” in the primary grades to be ready for “reading to learn” in upper elementary. I believed, as did my colleagues, that many of my students were just as interested in reading to learn as they were learning to read, especially with exciting topics that engaged them.

Nell Duke’s research raises challenging questions about old practices and shows how informational texts can be an integral and critical component of early reading instruction. The Common Core provides clear expectations for the inclusion and extensive use of informational texts. Keep in mind, the text exemplars in Appendix B are only examples. Schools should extend and expand their collections to increase the diversity of texts to engage students in a wide range of topics.

Writing. With a goal toward writing to persuade, argue, entertain, express opinions, inform, and so forth, the CCSS writing standards remind us why we want children to learn to write

and to use writing for their own purposes. In real world situations, writing has an audience and a purpose. Too often, in classroom practice, writing became an activity written for the teacher with little application to literacy practices outside of school. The writing standards place a strong emphasis on these real reasons for writing and remind educators that writing also needs to be an in-depth component of literacy instruction.

Technology and Digital Media. We need to continue to discuss technology throughout the implementation period. As with any concept that is interwoven through a document, rather than as a stand-alone component with more emphasis, technology could become secondary or viewed as unimportant. If we think about the past decade and the ways in which technology is revising and refining our notions of literacy and literate expectations, including how we read and produce texts, technology will

continue to influence our students on a daily basis.

As writers, students need to be effective in producing and publishing writing to communicate with others (see Standard 6 for writing). Researchers such as Donald Leu and Julie Coiro are studying online comprehension strategies, and Bridget Dalton is showing how students interact with digital media. This research helps us understand how students also need to learn to be critical consumers of the texts they read online, including creating a strategy for how to understand and verify the accuracy of information.

Seeking a Successful Transition

As with any transition in instruction, educators might be both excited and resistant. Implementing CCSS can be an opportunity to make long-desired instructional changes or it might be viewed as simply another intrusion on premium time and routines. Two

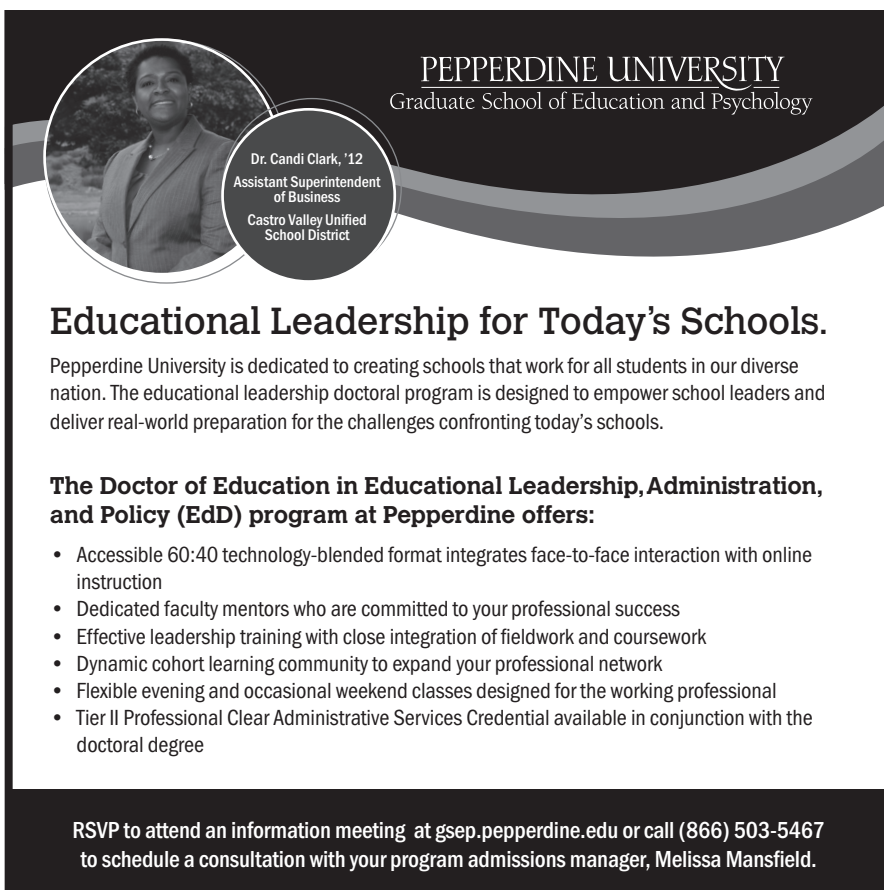
primary roadblocks already developing are districts seeking a quick fix by purchasing new programs, and educators who view this as instruction “we have always done” with no need to make any change.

Successful implementation requires ongoing conversations, professional learning, continuous background reading, and collaboration across grade-level teachers and specialists. There is no one program to purchase that encompasses what your school needs to accomplish. While most schools will likely need to invest in additional informational texts, it is possible your school already has some of the materials it needs, or can investigate less-expensive resources such as primary sources, newspapers, magazines, and Internet-accessible text. The instruction and teacher decision-making that goes along with teaching these texts likely needs to be updated to consider and reflect on what is working well and what needs to be improved.

Start by reflecting on which components of the standards your school is already accomplishing and pull together concrete examples of how the instruction is working. Then, you can focus more time on other areas where improvements need to be stressed. You could start with the easier aspects to implement, such as assessing how and where your school is using informational texts in classroom instruction. Then, work to increase opportunities for informational texts and collaboration on what instruction is most successful for students to read and produce their own informational texts. As you develop a system with indicators of success for the various components, you will have a better sense of where your school stands in preparing students for college and careers.

Shifts to Align School With ELA CCSS

To align curricular materials and classroom instruction with the ELA CCSS, educators will need to accomplish six shifts in instruction.



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SHIFT 1: Increase Reading of Informational Text. Under the CCSS, at least 50 percent of what students read should be informational; that figure increases to 55 percent for middle school and 70 percent for high school.

SHIFT 2: Growth in Text Complexity. Each grade level requires a “step” of growth in text complexity on the “staircase” to being ready for the complexity of college- and career-ready texts. Teachers create more time in the curriculum for close and careful reading and provide scaffolding and supports to make the central, grade-appropriate text accessible for students reading below grade level.

SHIFT 3: Text-based Answers. After reading a central text, students have rich and rigorous conversations about it. Teachers ensure that students make evidentiary arguments based on the text, both verbally and in writing, to assess their comprehension of the text.

SHIFT 4: Academic Vocabulary. Students constantly build the vocabulary they need to access grade-level complex texts. Think comprehension of words such as discourse and theory as opposed to homonym and onomatopoeia.

SHIFT 5: Writing from Sources. Writing instruction emphasizes use of evidence to make an argument and inform, including short, focused research projects starting in kindergarten.

SHIFT 6: Literacy Instruction in All Content Areas. Content area teachers in social studies, science, and technical subjects emphasize literacy experiences in their planning and instruction. 

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