





Craft the Right Message

Effective communication is a necessary skill for school leaders—especially when discussing transitions such as Common Core State Standards.

By Kristine Gullen and Martin Chaffee

Communication is an essential component of effective leadership, and members of your school community expect you to be able to offer your perspective on current topics on education. When stakeholders ask you about issues—whether it is while you are in the school building or even when you encounter them when you are out running errands on the weekend—are you ready with a clear, confident, and concise reply? Or do you struggle to come up with a response?

So much can take place in a casual 60-second exchange. When it's over, these brief conversations should leave the impression of a leader who is thoughtful and up-to-date, and who has great clarity. School principals must master taking the issues of the day and grounding them in a sound educational vision that benefits student learning.

Common Core Sound Bites

As educational leadership consultants, we hear principals struggle to respond to questions about the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). The CCSS is a complex initiative, and a challenge shared among principals across the nation—all of whom need to be ready with clear, consistent communication. Crafting a message that connects the CCSS to a vision that supports high levels of student learning is imperative. So what does this response sound like, and how can it be personalized and tailored to support the unique needs of each information seeker in your school or community?

Having an effective reply requires establishing clarity on how the instructional shifts of the CCSS will impact the learning and teaching in your building, and then targeting the communication for individual stakeholder groups. We've established a four-step process to help develop and strengthen your message.

Principal ONLINE

Access the following Web resources by visiting *Principal* magazine online: www.naesp.org/MayJun14

Visit the National PTA website to access their **Parents' Guides to Student Success** series. The guides, which are available in English and Spanish, explain what students should be learning in English language arts and mathematics in each grade, once Common Core is fully implemented.

School principals must master taking the issues of the day and grounding them in a sound educational vision that benefits student learning.

1. Understand the complexity of the CCSS. In *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, Stephen Covey encourages us to “begin with the end in mind.” Provide an opportunity for you and your staff to examine primary source documents that assess the standards. It is vital for teachers to analyze the knowledge and skills needed for the soon-to-be-tested expectations of the CCSS, juxtaposed with the current state of learning and instruction in your school. Multidisciplinary projects, digital literacy, perseverance, critical thinking, and writing across the curriculum are just a few of the gaps and shifts educators have shared with us when making this comparison.

2. Identify stakeholders. Determine who will need information about CCSS. These individuals might include teachers, community members, social workers, coaches, curriculum publishers, speech therapists, and special education directors, among other stakeholders in and around your school and district.

3. Take the perspective of a stakeholder. After identifying all the possible audiences, go back to the gaps you and your teachers discovered between current practice and CCSS. Ask yourself what information would be most beneficial to each stakeholder group. Of course, there will be some overlap in content within and between stakeholder groups.

For example, teachers will want to know about cross-curricular projects,

problem-solving, academic digital literacy skills, and citing and using multiple data sources. Community members might also seek information about problem-solving, but may also be interested in college- and career-readiness, improved reading and writing skills, and learning outside the classroom.

4. Craft a clear, concise, and targeted message. If you only have one to two minutes to share your thoughts about CCSS, what information is most important to communicate to the person standing in front of you? Casual, impromptu questions may require an “elevator speech” response.

The goal is to craft quality, concise information for specific stakeholders. For example, the tone and tenor of a discussion are different when talking to parents who are dropping off their children versus when you are chatting after a meeting with a school board member or responding to a reporter from the local newspaper.

Remember to make it personal. Speak to the needs of your students. The chart on the next page presents narratives that were created by educators as we facilitated this process.

On Assessments

In addition to communicating about Common Core instructional shifts, you should also be equipped to talk about assessments. Be mindful that with any new change there will be, what Michael Fullan articulates in his 2001 book, *Leading in a Culture of Change*, an implementation dip in performance and confidence. Early stages of implementation test a leader's ability to successfully communicate. This applies to new assessment systems, as well. Here are some pointers for discussing Common Core assessment results.

■ **Underscore the importance of raising standards.** The Common Core initiative is meant to encourage higher-order thinking skills and bet-

ter prepare students for college and career. The assessments are a part of that process.

- **Properly frame the assessment results.** The Common Core gives us the opportunity to improve assessment systems so that they can inform teaching and improve learning. This is a multi-year effort that will benefit students for a lifetime.
- **Encourage collaboration among stakeholders.** Parents, teachers, school and district leaders, and community members alike should seek increased collaboration to ensure that this transition is a success.

Be Prepared

Taking an issue and understanding its implications at the local level is imperative to effective communication. When a question is posed about a national topic, what is often being asked is much more personal. An informal inquiry such as, “What do you think about the Common Core?” may really imply, “How does implementing the Common Core impact my student (or community or classroom)?”

Examining primary source documents to identify gaps in current practice and being mindful of unique stakeholder perspectives builds the knowledge needed to create an informed, local response. Connecting this information to your educational vision and how the CCSS support the growth of student learning and teacher practice is the goal.

Being a principal is a 24-hour, seven-day-a-week vocation. So the next time (and there will be a next time) you are walking out of a restaurant and someone approaches and asks, “What do you think about ...?” what are you going to say? 📍

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Sample Narratives for Different Stakeholders

KEY MESSAGES FOR TEACHERS: MOTIVATION, SUPPORT

After looking at sample Common Core assessments, we discovered a gap in our current practice and the types of lessons that are needed to prepare our students for the new standards. Examples include projects that speak to real-world problems that use skills and knowledge learned across content areas.

We will need to design more learning experiences that require deeper levels of cognitive processing, such as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. We will also examine the tests we currently use to see if the questions we ask reach the level of rigor found in the upcoming assessments. It is not enough for students to identify and recognize a correct answer; they have to persevere in creating and producing solutions to multifaceted problems. This important work focuses on the skills and learning our students need.

Together, we can do it.

KEY MESSAGES FOR STUDENTS: INFORMATION, ENTHUSIASM

We know that you will do your best when you know why we make changes in our classroom’s instruction and assessments. Much of the work you are currently assigned can be completed in a typical class period. Yet, few problems in life are solved in 45 minutes. They require time for collaboration, deep thinking, and analysis. This new way of assessing your ability and learning will occur in a couple of years, so we want to make sure you have an opportunity to practice.

In your classes, you will tackle projects that will require you to use technology along with the knowledge you have learned in many subjects. This is an opportunity for you to shine, show your talents, and solve meaningful, real-life problems. You are going to love this.

KEY MESSAGES FOR PARENTS: ASSURANCE, INFORMATION

Our teachers have spent time reviewing the Common Core Standards and practice assessments. These standards require an integrated approach, one that combines learning from many disciplines to solve problems—just like in the real world. It will be important for your child to strengthen his or her critical thinking skills and find and use multiple types of data. These are skills needed in work and in life.

Our teachers and our students will be working together more, using technology, and demonstrating what they have learned in new ways. We will be supporting and yet challenging students to persevere through complex tasks and seek out needed information. These new standards, connected to the great work our teachers already do, will support and deepen learning for your child.

KEY MESSAGES FOR COMMUNITY MEMBERS: ASSURANCE, INFORMATION

As we progress and continue to grow as a school district, we will begin to implement new standards in our classrooms that will ensure college- and career-readiness for our children. This change will bring with it a shift in how we look at our teaching methods. During this change, you will see an increase in the need for improved reading and writing skills as well as a need for our children to work independently and persevere through difficult tasks.

Students will be challenged with using skills they learned in solving real-world problems. We will be connecting their learning to the world outside the school walls like never before. We look forward to taking this journey with you and appreciate your support.