

Common Core and Low-Performing Students

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS), adopted by 45 states so far, provide an opportunity to change education practices so as to turn around the performance of student groups most in need of improvement.

And such turn-around is more important today than it's ever been. Throughout the nation, almost every subgroup of students performs poorly on measures such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress, and students with disabilities are typically the lowest-scoring subgroup. English learners don't fare much better. The gaps between these groups and higher-performing peers are huge.

"CCSS offer an opportunity to help all students be more engaged and successful in school—and have more opportunities when they graduate," says Sharen Bertrando, Special Education Development Program Specialist at WestEd.

Building on more than 20 years of experience as a teacher and program coordinator focused primarily on special education, Bertrando has coauthored, with WestEd's John Carr, *Teaching English Learners and Students with Learning Difficulties in an Inclusive Classroom: A Guidebook for Teachers*. Their book describes teaching practices that support students for the kind of learning that the Common Core emphasizes.

The developers of the Common Core intended these new standards to work well with all students, explicitly including English learners and students with disabilities. Bertrando contends that several characteristics of the CCSS are favorable for implementing teaching practices that research has shown to be effective with all students, particularly students with learning disabilities and those who are English learners.

"The Common Core gives us an opportunity to encourage widespread implementation of more effective practices," she says, "because the standards are so flexible, so broadly written, and they take an integrated, interdisciplinary approach to learning that is aligned to real-life application."

Integrating and Aligning Standards

Traditional state standards tend to consist of isolated expectations, chunking learning goals by grade and subject matter. They often include a laundry list of discrete pieces of knowledge or skills students are expected to acquire. The Common Core State Standards do include similar expectations—for example, an English Language Arts standard for grade 1 is to "identify basic similarities in

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and differences between two texts on the same topic (for example, in illustrations, descriptions, or procedures).”

But the CCSS are more than a list of discrete items. The essence of the Common Core is in its overall structure and organization. They include individual grade-level standards within an integrated set of learning progressions that build toward college and career readiness.

The CCSS consist of what Bertrando calls “staircased” learning progressions, building students’ knowledge and skills with increasing sophistication year by year until they achieve college and career readiness. For example, the Common Core item mentioned above is one step in students’ progression toward a college/career “anchor standard” for English language arts: “Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.”

Students are not expected to do this at a college level right away. Rather, the Common Core specifies a standard for each grade that ties to this “anchor.” By the end of grade 8, for example, students are expected to be at a more sophisticated level, able to “analyze a case in which two or more texts provide conflicting information on the same topic and identify where the texts disagree on matters of fact or interpretation.”

Another way the standards are integrated is that they have more of a real-world emphasis than previous standards. “The approach is more about integrating ideas, so you’re not going to teach just math, just English, or just social studies. It’s all integrated,” says Bertrando. “That’s the approach of the 21st century. You teach things in a context that makes them more related to real life.”

Such an approach is particularly helpful for students with learning disabilities, especially for those with autism spectrum disorder, because it is often very difficult for them to understand things that are not real or concrete, says Bertrando. The more integrated, “real-life” approach engendered by the CCSS tends to be more motivating for many of these students.

Combining Flexibility With High Expectations for All

With standards for all grades, even as early as kindergarten, “anchored” by college and career readiness expectations, the Common Core establishes particular steps for students to achieve by the end of each grade. These steps, in turn, are broken into the more detailed learning progressions used to organize shorter units of study. Recent developments in cognitive science, educational psychology, and assessment make it possible for teams of diverse professionals to take a new approach to defining these learning progressions.

Rather than sequencing instruction principally by specific chunks of content that must be “covered,” steps toward mastery of core knowledge and skills can be defined more by how most students progress toward learning them. With their greater emphasis on students’ cognitive processes, these kinds of learning progressions could serve as an important tool for developing Common Core-based instruction and assessment.

The Common Core has been designed to allow flexibility for how students reach high standards and demonstrate proficiency. For example, “the English Language Arts standards are fewer in number, and a broader range of skills can be used to attain them,” in comparison with most previous state standards,” says WestEd’s Carr. “So the Common Core standards support teachers in focusing



on what is most important in greater depth or perhaps a slower pace so that all students eventually can reach proficiency.”

He notes that this approach is especially helpful for English learners “who need ample time to learn a great deal of academic language and build background knowledge and experience that support reading comprehension.”

One of the 21st-century skills emphasized in the Common Core is collaboration. The introduction to the standards for English Language Arts and Literacy lists “speaking and listening; flexible communication and collaboration” as one of the key features of the standards. According to Carr, collaborative learning can be particularly important for students with learning disabilities and English learners because it promotes a rich environment for the use of academic language.

By working together with other students, English learners and students with learning disabilities hear their peers discuss ideas and rephrase what the teacher has said, which can help build their vocabulary and fluency. Small-group or pair work also can lower students' anxiety by giving them opportunities to speak to just one or a few peers before sharing their thinking with the teacher or the whole class.

Embedding Literacy Learning in All Subjects

One of the most significant ways the Common Core State Standards are integrated, or cross-disciplinary, is the way they address literacy. Rather than viewing literacy as an isolated set of skills to be taught only in English language arts classes, the Common Core suggests that literacy is the responsibility of all teachers. The Common Core includes reading standards for literacy in history/social studies, for example, and writing standards for literacy in science.

English learners and many students with learning disabilities tend to struggle with literacy, which affects their performance in all subjects. Increasing the focus on literacy instruction across subjects has the potential to boost the achievement of these and other students. The Common Core also places more emphasis than previous standards on learning through informational texts rather than narrative texts. Many students with particular kinds of learning disabilities tend to do better working with informational texts because of their focus on “real life.”

Putting the Ideas Into Practice

“We need to be smart about how we implement the standards, translating them into a curriculum that is innovative and creative,” says Bertrando.

Teaching approaches should take into account the fact that there are many different kinds of students in every classroom, so teaching should not be limited to a one-size-fits-all approach. To implement the CCSS, educators will need extensive professional development on teaching practices that can reach all students in inclusive settings—general education classrooms that include students with disabilities as well as English learners.

Educators also need to be able to work together, especially given the Common Core's integrated approach, spreading responsibility for literacy across all subject areas. “Districts and schools need to make sure all practitioners have opportunities to collaborate in a systematic way, including



general education, special education, reading specialists, professionals who work with English language learners, and specialists in different subject areas,” notes Bertrando.

In general, Bertrando recommends being “proactive not reactive.” She encourages educators and education leaders to become familiar with the Common Core State Standards and begin making changes throughout the system to be sure the standards are implemented effectively and with a mind to how they impact students who have previously been least well served.

“I’m so excited about what’s happening now,” she says. “The Common Core State Standards are an opportunity for us to really change our practices and philosophy. If we do it with a true understanding of what the implications could be for students, I think this is a wonderful time to be in education.”

For more information about the Common Core State Standards and students with special needs, contact Sharen Bertrando at 916.492.4086 or sbertra@WestEd.org.