

# Q&A: WestEd Experts Offer Common Core Guidance

As educators, administrators, and policymakers throughout the nation prepare to implement the Common Core State Standards, WestEd staff have worked hard to provide the support needed to meet the challenges of this process. In April 2013, **CommonCore.WestEd.org** was launched to offer research-based resources and services for schools, districts, and states. Among the site's features are interviews with WestEd experts who share insights based on their respective areas of expertise, which include early childhood education, English language learners, response to intervention, and science and math.

The interviewees represent a wealth of research knowledge and practice-based experience—each having worked in education for 20 years or more. Their backgrounds include classroom teachers, an early childhood education program director, researchers, a principal, an assistant principal, university-level teachers, and curriculum specialists. Following are excerpts from their interviews.

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## Developing Curriculum and Assessments for the Common Core

**Bob Rosenfeld, Senior Program Associate, Comprehensive School Assistance Program**

**Steve Hamilton, Director, District and School Services, Learning Innovations**

**Q:** What advice would you give to schools and teachers working to implement the Common Core standards?

**A:** Although the Common Core makes it easier to agree on “essential learnings,” we still need to have deep discussions around the specific content and skills that we teach students, and how we can measure their learning. Certainly we can tap into the many wonderful resources that now exist to support implementation, but to simply copy or purchase a curriculum would only provide the “what” or the “how” behind our teaching. The ultimate goal is to understand the “why.”

**Q:** What are some best practices you have seen for aligning curriculum and assessments?

**A:** The work is best when it is conducted by *teams* of classroom teachers and district instructional leaders. Administrators also need to educate themselves on the standards and the process for designing curricular units—so they can be true instructional leaders in this monumental effort to shift teaching and learning.

**Q:** How do we make sure we address the needs of all students, including English language learners, in implementing and meeting the new standards?

**A:** To address the needs of all students, we have to make sure to address the needs of all teachers. Teachers need the training, support, and time to meet regularly to discuss instruction and learning, discuss student data, and implement a system of interventions and enrichment.

## **Meeting the Common Core's English Language Arts Standards and Content Literacy Demands**

**Cynthia Greenleaf, Co-Director, Strategic Literacy Initiative**

**Q:** What major changes do you see coming from the Common Core standards?

**A:** Literacy must become more integrated into the teaching of all subjects. Many teachers of the academic subject areas have thought of literacy as a separate subject to be taught in English language arts alone. But complex texts like science models, diagrams, and data tables are not something a teacher of language arts or literature is best prepared to teach. Yet not being able to engage subject-specific texts—in science and all other subject areas—hampers academic success and independence for many students.

**Q:** What are some key features of the Common Core literacy standards?

**A:** In my view, the literacy standards make four important contributions:

- Recognition that specific literacy practices and texts are central to every academic discipline and thus reading and writing of disciplinary texts is a vital part of subject area teaching
- A focus on close, attentive reading to clarify and interpret text meaning as a means for learning in the subject areas
- A focus on grade-level, academic texts and text complexity to raise the challenge level for all students
- Evidence-based argumentation to demonstrate reading comprehension and learning

**Q:** Do you have any concerns as implementation moves forward?

**A:** The standards are reaching for a level of literacy proficiency that has never been broadly attained in our nation. Once we have a new assessment system linked to these much higher standards, test scores are going to drop in many communities because we are holding a higher standard for students' achievement. We need to be prepared for this eventuality and start working to help parents and business and community leaders understand the new standards, the promise the standards hold, and the instructional support which that promise requires.

We know from experience that teachers in all subject areas and students with diverse educational experiences can reach these goals. But teachers will need support to learn to teach in what for many will be fundamentally new ways.

## **Supporting Students With Disabilities**

**Sharen Bertrando, Special Education Development Program Specialist**

**Q:** How will the Common Core State Standards impact students with disabilities?

**A:** Many features of the Common Core are particularly helpful to students with disabilities:

- The standards explicitly address students working in collaborative groups with multiple opportunities to share, discuss, and problem solve. This allows teachers to intentionally structure groups of students according to strengths and learning needs in order to provide opportunities for peer-assisted learning based on desired outcomes of the lesson.
- The emphasis on speaking in addition to listening provides opportunities for teachers to have students practice social discourse in many settings and for different purposes and audiences. Being able to appropriately interact with others is essential for all students to succeed in postsecondary life.
- The standards state that it is the teachers' responsibility to accommodate learning for all students to allow access and mastery to the standards. Teachers can accomplish this by scaffolding the delivery of content and differentiating instruction to accommodate the interests, strengths, and needs of students.
- The literacy standards include an equal balance of nonfictional texts that are often more engaging to students. This is particularly the case for students with autism because they typically have difficulty grasping concepts such as figurative language.
- Students have opportunities to learn and demonstrate literacy strengths in a variety of content areas. A student struggling to comprehend fictional text might be masterful in interpreting charts, diagrams, and tables in nonfictional text.
- The integration of technology into the design of the curriculum to address the standards can motivate struggling students. It also allows for multiple ways to access literacy and demonstrate mastery of skills.

**Q:** How do we make sure we address the needs of students with disabilities in implementing the new standards?

**A:** Special educators must work collaboratively with general educators and English language specialists. This will ensure equitable access and opportunity for students with disabilities to master the standards. Special educators need to be prepared to participate in the planning and implementation of the Common Core by understanding its design, structure, and alignment to Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles to ensure curricula are conscientiously designed to be barrier-free for our diversified classrooms. This includes applying technology supports such as digital text and software applications for multimodality accessibility.


## **Supporting English Language Learners**

**Aída Walqui, Director, Teacher Professional Development Program**

**Leslie Hamburger, Associate Director, Quality Teaching for English Learners (QTEL)**

**Q:** How will the Common Core impact English language learners?

**A:** The new standards, including the Common Core State Standards, give national urgency to the notion that quality learning opportunities for English language learners should engage students in the reading, discussion, and production of complex, multimodal texts.



For too long in American education, expectations and supports for second language students have been lowered and simplified. But for over a decade, WestEd's QTEL initiative has maintained that *amplification*, or the elaborations teachers use as they engage in academic practices with their students, is what our students need. Our work in New York City, San Diego, Chicago, Austin, and Fort Worth demonstrates that.

However, just having more ambitious and amplified standards will not change the status quo. Educator capacity needs to be developed to catch up to what contemporary societal conditions require.

**Q:** How do we ensure that the needs of English language learners are addressed as we implement these new standards?

**A:** One major change is to move away from a focus on atomistic pieces of language or ideas (vocabulary items, isolated sentences) to a focus on the practice students are being asked to engage in. For example, writing an expository essay will require learners to first have a clear sense of the essay's purpose (Why am I writing it?), then address the text to a specific audience (Who is my reader? What do I know about my reader?), and pay attention to the text's macro-organization (What are key ideas I want to explore in the essay? Which ideas should I write first, next, after that, and last?). In this case, language functions and forms are woven in discourse, in action; they are not discrete pieces that students learn in isolation and have to assemble later.

In terms of pedagogical changes, teachers will need to move from being consumers of strategies to becoming deliberate, intentional designers of the right scaffolds that will mature their students' potential. This shift requires deep knowledge, observation, and the ability to continuously "read" students to support them contingently.

A related shift will be to focus on whether the student understands and communicates ideas in their appropriate relationships, and to accept language that is not perfect. Learning to do this, and to decide when to focus on language, will be a sustained effort of reflective and collegial practice.

All these changes are substantial but indispensable to help our students become autonomous learners and participants in society.