

Red Flags on the Road to Common Core State Standards Reform

by Ronald Gallimore & James Hiebert – February 28, 2014

Implementation is a challenging phase of education reform. In many locales, the rush is on to quickly implement the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). In some districts, textbooks and curriculum materials were delivered only days before school began. Many offered only minimal professional development to help teachers understand what kind of student learning the new standards aim for, and to develop new forms of instruction to support that learning. Despite these circumstances, teachers were still expected to teach the CCSS, and get students ready for new, more demanding assessments coming soon. In too many cases, there is little appreciation that the final, decisive implementation step is teachers planning, trying out, and revising new lessons. Week by week, in small incremental steps, change comes. Often progress is uneven, slower than anticipated, and runs afoul of “hurry-up” pressures that kill reforms before they are ever fully implemented. Evidence is mounting that incremental improvement is the best way to get lasting results -- in medicine, teaching, and industry. Even with robust support for incremental progress, it will take years of collaboration by teachers and administrators for the full benefits of CCSS to be realized. Red flags are up.

INTRODUCTION

Will the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) change classroom instruction? Yes, proponents say, because implementation details are taken seriously by 40+ states. That’s good news. In the past, reformers often ignored implementation—the difficult, time-consuming details of turning talk about better instruction into classroom reality.

Implementation details are critical to CCSS’s success because they ask for bigger changes than the nation has ever required of classroom teachers, building administrators, curriculum developers, and state and district leaders. Not only must new and more rigorous materials be developed and tested, teachers must fundamentally change the way they interact with students in the classroom—teaching facts and procedures must yield time to in-depth development of students’ thinking and writing about challenging concepts. The burden is not just on teachers to change. If CCSS is to succeed, district and school administrators have to significantly step up implementation support for teachers.

CHALLENGES

Now, some bad news. In too many locales, the rush is on to implement CCSS quickly. In some districts, textbooks and curriculum materials were delivered only days before school began this year. Many districts offered minimal professional development to help teachers understand what kind of student learning the new standards aim for, and to develop new forms of instruction to support that learning. Despite these circumstances, teachers were still expected to teach the CCSS, and get students ready for new, more demanding assessments coming soon.

On short notice and with little support, teachers scrambled to develop lessons based on unfamiliar CCSS-aligned curricula, often one day ahead of teaching them. Even the best curricula are not specific enough to use “as is.” Teachers must convert them into concrete and effective lessons, taking into account ability and achievement levels and what was previously taught. This requires planning new lessons, trying them out, and fixing the ones that don’t work the first time. This largely invisible and under-appreciated work of teachers takes more time than most realize.

Besides too little lead time, there are other serious threats to satisfactory CCSS implementation. CCSS seeks to transform the way teachers and students interact in the classroom. For example, eight CCSS practices define the kind of mathematics teaching needed to help students achieve deeper conceptual understanding and more flexible content application. This kind of teaching is a marked departure from more procedurally oriented instruction common in U.S. classrooms. In fact, the eight practices reflect teaching rarely seen in the U.S. Since public schooling began, most mathematics instruction consisted of teachers demonstrating solution methods and students practicing them on many similar problems. This familiar form of instruction is deemphasized in new CCSS curricula. Instead, teachers focus on key mathematical ideas, pose rigorous problems, and allow students to do some challenging mathematical work. Deeper understanding is assumed to come more from struggling to solve a few rigorous problems than memorizing procedures without knowing why they work. One vehicle for this kind of instruction is extended discussions, in which teachers use students’ ideas and leading questions to move students from partial to deeper understanding. But students also must be acculturated to this new form of classroom interaction because they must play different roles as well.

As appealing as these intended changes seem, they come with a risk. The kind of teaching CCSS seeks to implement has been the aim of many previous reforms, none of which succeeded, even after billions were spent on professional development. Many are convinced that transition to these new forms of teaching depends on providing site-based and administrator-supported time for teachers to work out implementation details and difficulties—those anticipated, and those not. But in too many locales, there is neither sufficient administrator support nor professional development to help teachers learn and perfect the teaching changes the CCSS require. Without this support, teachers are left with yet another reform without the time and resources to implement it well, pulling down morale and driving the best and most conscientious teachers from the profession.

This isn't the end of the story. A looming threat is the all-at-once implementation strategy. As they master the new CCSS materials and learn teaching methods, teachers are required to keep pace with curriculum guides that prepare students for new CCSS-aligned assessments. Fall behind the prescribed pace and students won't reach grade-level standards. Go too fast, and students struggle later from lack of deep mastery. To manage these demands, CCSS calls for freeing time by teaching fewer topics at each grade level. More time spent on fewer topics means less time spent reviewing when students move on to the next grade level. Less review means more time to focus on new content, teach deeper understanding, and keep pace with curriculum guides. That's the theory. But put yourself in the shoes of, say, a seventh-grade teacher, when the CCSS are implemented for the first time. Seventh graders have not had the more in-depth study of earlier pre-requisite topics in previous grades. Are they really expected to master the new seventh grade curriculum as if they have this deeper knowledge? What should seventh-grade teachers do? More review than prescribed? Ignore the pacing guidelines? Cobble together a temporary transition program on their own? What implementation plans did CCSS reformers have in mind to deal with this multiple year transition problem?

CONCLUSION

The history of U.S. education reform shows implementation is always the most challenging phase. Reforms, the CCSS included, that seek fundamental changes in teaching are the most difficult to implement. The final, decisive implementation step is teachers planning, trying out, and revising new lessons. Week by week, in small incremental steps, change comes. Often progress is uneven, slower than anticipated, and runs afoul of "hurry-up" pressures that kill reforms before they are ever fully implemented. Evidence is mounting that incremental improvement is the best way to get lasting results—in medicine, teaching, and industry. Even with robust support for incremental progress, it will take years of collaboration by teachers and administrators for the full benefits of CCSS to be realized. Without building this work by local educators into implementation plans, the lessons from history are clear: the CCSS will fall short of its worthy intentions. Red flags are up.

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