

# What Matters Most



*Teaching is the highest form of understanding.*

—Aristotle

**T**eachers are heroes, and teaching is a heroic act. You would be wasting your time if you tried to convince me otherwise. That might appear to be a rather bold, even brash and certainly biased statement to make, but after spending my entire adult life inside schools looking out at the broader community, I have come to realize that very lucky people get to hang out in schools. They are typically welcoming and happy places, filled with laughter, encouraging words, questions, answers, passion, and the personal power that learning can generate. This unique vantage point has allowed me to view the world from the innocent eyes of students, the trusting eyes of parents, and the compassionate eyes of teachers. Perhaps this perspective is the foundation for my far-reaching optimism and hope that America's future will be vibrant and vigorous once again.

I hold a deep conviction that the collective conversations necessary to strengthen our democratic society should include, as a main topic, what is happening in these special places called schools. For teaching and learning to flourish, educators, parents, community leaders, and policy makers must agree on what needs to be achieved here, what can be solved here, and what could be safely abandoned here. In essence, that is what the Common Core State Standards initiative challenges us to explore. Through careful examination of what educational expectations already exist in states across the nation, the authors of CCSS focus on clearer, fewer, and more rigorous standards in English language arts and

mathematics so that our students have more opportunities available to them for college or career choices than ever before.

Teaching is, after all, the essential profession, the one that helps all other life decisions become a reality for students. More than ever before in our history, education will symbolize the difference between those who prosper in the new economy and those who will be left behind. This significant CCSS discussion can no longer endorse a system and its stakeholders as stewards of the status quo. The exercise of debating what to continue, what to change, and what to cast away will become of paramount importance in guiding these educational reform decisions. That is what CCSS invites us to address with the people who are closest to the problems and to the solutions—the teachers in our nation’s classrooms.

It is obvious that truly incredible teaching and learning accomplishments are evident in thousands of classrooms across the nation, but the context can be subtle, sometimes intangible, and often difficult to describe even for a lifetime practitioner like myself. I keep asking, am I watching an individual with the passion, drive, inspiration, and desire to make a difference in the world; or am I observing a set of specialized, intricate, and learnable behaviors that are the result of thoughtful and thorough planning and preparation for the benefit of her learners? Is it her obvious respect for knowing what her students have, to then understand how to provide for what they need that is so evident in these dynamic and purposeful classrooms? Does great teaching occur as a result of the enduring qualities a teacher possesses within herself, or is it her ability to seamlessly respond to the daily situational influences that occur? These questions are critical to understanding, assessing, and ultimately replicating the complex work of quality teaching, and I will attempt to address some of them in the next few pages.

## **ARE OUTSTANDING TEACHERS BORN OR MADE?**

How do we identify what makes a great teacher? Is it truly an accident of birth that is only linked to genetic qualities or traits that cannot be taught, or can we discover certain common behaviors and required knowledge that are essential for teacher effectiveness? Is this the old nature versus nurture argument resurfacing in our dialogue?

I believe, like most, that there is no such entity as a born teacher who is naturally extraordinary. However, by nature, some individuals possess a combination of authentic personality traits that are conducive to excellence in teaching. Further, these qualities have been enriched by a lifetime of favorable nurturing. Nevertheless, in my opinion, even the

most intuitive novice teacher benefits from a quality teacher education program initially and subsequent professional learning opportunities that hone her craft.

We regularly confuse teacher quality with teaching quality, as if the two were indistinguishable. We label teachers as caring, dedicated, positive, and fair, and these personal characteristics sometimes interfere with our ability to attribute certain principles of effectiveness to the extensive knowledge and skills they possess. Possibly, good teachers have certain dispositions that are more innate and intuitive, but my experience with great teachers and great teaching is that content knowledge, learning theory, instructional strategies, management techniques, assessment practices, and professionalism can be modeled and taught, refined and enhanced (National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, 2012; Council of Chief State School Officers, 2011).

As with most debates, the conjunction *and* is a better choice of words than the alternative, *either/or*. Great teaching is knowledge *and* wisdom; art *and* science; skills *and* dispositions; processes *and* products; content *and* pedagogy; and last, a journey *and* a destination. I believe that reestablishing these common understandings and agreements will remove many of the impediments to renewing and reframing the discussion about achieving equity and excellence in our public education system that CCSS encourages us to reinitiate. We want to get better at teaching and learning, and we can with focused attention and effort on the right work of reform.

## THE HEART OF THE MATTER

What does this all mean for beginning the daunting task of digging deep inside the Common Core State Standards to discover our next steps in educational reform? Hope for improving the future for America's students depends upon the degree to which passionate educators with a sense of moral purpose and a willingness to examine current practice have an opportunity to discuss realistic change with their colleagues. Teachers are indeed at the heart of the matter.

Teaching is difficult and sophisticated work, both intellectually and emotionally. What matters most for America's future is the acknowledgment that teacher excellence and teaching excellence are inseparable. Our compelling issues remain how to recognize who our exceptional teachers are, how to define the extraordinary things they do, and finally, how to replicate that effort in every classroom in America. Do you agree that this is no small task? I believe the impetus of the Common Core State Standards initiative offers the ideal starting point for these investigations

#### 4 • Leading the Common Core State Standards

and important dialogues to occur. The potential for this educational reform to push our thinking, propel us forward, and access our best ideas to apply to the lessons of research and experience is powerful. It represents a comprehensive and crucial response to the current educational issues we face as a nation.

I am not a Pollyanna who believes everything is perfect in paradise. I would not identify myself as a change agent if I thought no change is necessary. Now more than at any other time in our history, educators are asked to confront challenges that our current system is not designed or equipped to meet. Some parts are so badly broken that only radically new and potentially disruptive ideas will make a positive difference. These problems are not just dents in the system; they represent gaping holes. For example, the achievement gap between majority and minority populations, changing family structures, blatant poverty, reduced school budgets and resources, shortages of qualified teachers, and diversity issues such as access to quality English Language Learner and Special Education programs, just to name the short list, all require new attitudes and ventures that replace the ineffective and obsolete. Again, from my perspective, I see planning and preparing for implementing Common Core State Standards to be the heart of these discussions, helping to meet our collective goal of improving the quality of the learning experience for all of our students in all of our schools.

### **THIS ISN'T KANSAS ANYMORE, TOTO**

Everyone has an opinion about what is right with America's current educational system and what is wrong with it. Just ask, and citizens will eagerly espouse their personal tales of celebration or criticism, depending upon their individual experiences with teaching and learning. In one school you will hear parent complaints that there is too much homework and too little discipline, and that same school community will respond to a different set of parents who feel just the opposite; that there are not enough enrichment activities and the student conduct code is too strict and rigid. The big problem with this type of subjective assessment of quality is that it is grounded in private perception rather than public reality. In light of this realization, a valid question might be, aren't many of our current measurements of educational success or failure fact-free debates based upon an individual's unique response to an idea or belief?

It is our responsibility to offer accurate and researched information for the public and colleagues to consider. For example, if society accepts one

prevalent belief that we all come into the world preset for success or failure with a permanent and limited capacity for growth and development, no amount of sustained work with common standards, common curricula, or common assessments currently proposed by CCSS advocates will change our results.

But think about this: Beliefs do matter. Why would we as educators work so hard in our schools to inspire, motivate, and encourage all adults and children to apply focused effort to learn new knowledge and skills if it is not possible for many to do so? Why would we structure opportunities for everyone to experience a challenging and rigorous curriculum if some students were not capable of engaging with complex concepts? And finally and most important, why would teachers and school leaders willingly accept responsibility for the disappointing outcomes on high-stakes assessments that we are currently witnessing with some groups of students, if they did not believe it is within their control to change those results? If we truly believe that no amount of hard work on causes will change the effects, why do we attempt with such passion to rewrite a positive ending to the achievement story for our youngsters who are struggling academically? Perhaps one answer is in understanding the importance of mindsets.

## **MINDSETS**

Mindsets constitute an uncomplicated yet profound idea that will help us address some of the important questions raised in the previous section. Stanford University psychologist Carol Dweck (2008), after decades of research on achievement and motivation, identifies two mindsets that play important roles in people's success. In one, the fixed mindset, people believe that their talents and abilities are fixed traits. They inherit a certain amount of intelligence, and nothing can be done to change their allotted quota. Many years of research have now shown that when people adopt the fixed mindset, it can significantly limit their perception of who they are as learners and what they can accomplish. They become overly concerned with publicly proving their talents and abilities and hiding their deficiencies and setbacks. Struggle and mistakes imply a predetermined lack of talent or ability. People with this mindset will actually pass up important opportunities to learn and grow if there is a risk of unmasking weaknesses.

In the other mindset, the growth mindset, people believe that their talents and abilities can be developed through passion, education, and persistence. For them, it is not about looking smart or grooming their

image of intelligence. It is a commitment to getting better at something, to applying effective and focused effort, to taking informed risks, and to learning from honest feedback to improve the results. In a growth mindset, people create a love of learning and a resilience that is essential for great accomplishments. Virtually all successful people possess the growth mindset because it instills motivation, honors hard work, and rewards a positive attitude.

Dweck (2008) concludes that we need to foster in any learner, adult or student, a mindset of accomplishment that is attached to effective effort, not ability. We should encourage learners to stretch their potential and not limit natural eagerness or curiosity for discovery to preconceived notions of intelligence. My experience with learners and learning certainly confirms this conclusion.

The implications for fostering the growth mindset in our schools are dramatic for both students and adults. Some of our brightest students and most talented teachers avoid challenge, are uncomfortable with showing that effort is necessary to accomplish a goal, and wilt in the face of adversity because they are afraid of failing in front of their peers. In contrast, I have known resilient go-getters, who persist and achieve far more than anticipated when they work hard, request feedback, try again, and face obstacles head-on with a “can do” attitude. If we establish and nurture a learning community and culture that promotes risk-taking, supports inquiry, and rewards perseverance in learners, old and young, we are ready to confront the challenge of implementing Common Core State Standards in each of our schools. Learning how to learn and learning how to teach require the same diligence and focus, the same attitudes of bravery and efficacy; without a growth mindset, we will not move very far down the road toward educational reform.

## **TEACHER LEADERSHIP**

To be poised for success and benefit from the rich possibilities that the Common Core State Standards initiative brings to the work of transforming our system, we must consider what teaching as a profession requires to sustain itself, and most important, what supports our teachers’ need to respond to these new performance demands. Reform needs pragmatism, humility, optimism, resourcefulness, persistence, cooperation, patience, and focus to garner results. It mandates an attitude from everyone involved that is committed to meeting difficult challenges with efficacy, energy, and expertise.

I know many extraordinary teachers. They are reflective about their work. They care deeply about their practice and their profession, and they explore provocative ideas thoughtfully and openly. They seek evidence-based solutions. They approach each day with a sense of urgency and moral purpose. They are authentic, innovative, and realistic. They thrive on challenge. They are catalysts for change and are resilient rather than resentful. Don't these qualities sound a lot like the characteristics of people who adopt a growth mindset? Isn't this the reason we should invite our best teachers to become the stars of the CCSS reform movement? This critical mass of practitioners who hold the same high standards for their students as they do for themselves, who have an extensive understanding of curriculum, instruction, and assessment, and who work hard for relevancy in their profession have the necessary qualifications to successfully launch this reform and create momentum to sustain it. Their invitation to join this effort and make productive contributions to it should already be printed and in the mail.

Sadly, in the face of increased public scrutiny, lack of resources, expanded demands to serve all students well, and unparalleled consequences for poor results, a few of our colleagues are confused, frustrated, and demoralized by the lack of trust and support we receive from some of our communities and stakeholders. The tendency for some teachers to become a bit resentful and defensive is a natural response to their perceptions of isolation and helplessness. To ensure the success of CCSS, we cannot ignore or forget about these disenfranchised and discouraged teachers. They must become the critical friends of this initiative so they begin to regain and renew their sense of hope for the future of education. Their feelings of significance and competence as they contribute to sustained and continuous improvement will apply the positive pressure that in fact elevates behavior to beliefs. Their invitation is ready and waiting as well.

We need passionate and bold teacher leaders to come forward, who live and work in the participating 46 states and Washington, D.C. where the CCSS have been adopted. Their guidance and unrelenting commitment to offer high-yield yet realistic solutions to the current problems that plague our educational system will move CCSS from idea to action faster than any other factor in improvement planning. In exchange for their bravery and initiative, they deserve everyone's support and respect, because without these visible and concrete assurances, we will reach an implementation impasse very quickly.

Douglas Reeves (2008) recognizes the potential power of teachers as leaders in any effort to transform our nation's schools. He offers some very

insightful advice to publicly acknowledge the validity and significance of their contributions. He suggests

- Recognizing their excellence in accomplishing academic goals
- Emphasizing their freedom to use judgment, discretion, and authority
- Listening to and acting on their ideas
- Encouraging their innovation
- Providing feedback and coaching for their professional growth and development
- Valuing them as individuals
- Providing a sense of inclusion in their work
- Appreciating their diverse perspectives, ideas, and work styles
- Encouraging their full expression of ideas without fear of reprisal
- Listening to and fairly handling their complaints and concerns with dignity and respect

The commitment to the challenge of change must go deep into the hearts and minds of our best teachers for any substantive and sustained improvement to occur in our classrooms and schools. Accepting the role of change agent and understanding the content of change is a priority for all educators ready to champion the cause of CCSS. We must avoid at all costs the temptation to treat this initiative as another one-way mandate or another stand-alone education reform. Instead it should be viewed as an organic process; one that is complex, complicated, and multidimensional but also meaningful and doable with focused effort and a sense of efficacy. Because of its complexity, it must be viewed with a growth mindset. Implementation work must migrate from knowing to doing so that the potential impact and influence in school improvement begins and ends in the classroom with teachers assuming the headlining role as educational reformers.

## **CHANGE IS SOMETIMES MESSY AND UNCOMFORTABLE**

Typical and conventional educational change involves acquiring new materials and exploring new behaviors, practices, and policies that culminate in discovering and embracing new beliefs and understandings about our work. It implies continuous learning about and reevaluation of what we do and why we do it a certain way, and a realistic appraisal of how effective we are. It involves connecting peers to collaboratively view change as improvement, not just as behaviors that are different from the norm. It requires transparent data to inform the effort, capacity building to guide the effort, and shared leadership to direct, implement,

and monitor the effort. The CCSS initiative requires the same careful and significant attention to following these principles of change.

Michael Fullan and colleagues (2005) contend that teacher leaders can be the drivers of reforms that create effective and enduring change and certain specific considerations that support success. They have identified eight forces for change leaders:

1. Engaging people’s moral purposes about improving society through learning
2. Building capacity to increase people’s collective power to move a system forward
3. Understanding the change process
4. Developing cultures for collaborative learning
5. Developing cultures of evaluation to sort out ideas that are promising from those that are not so promising
6. Focusing on shared leadership throughout the organization
7. Fostering coherence-making that involves alignment, connections, and clarity about the big picture
8. Cultivating tri-level development at the school and community, district, and state levels

The messiness and stress of change enters the work at a personal level when the potential loss of control and identity increases the lack of balance between the risk and the reward of any innovation. If we view ideas differently as a result of new learning, we consider how we can contribute in a different way as well. This fresh perspective sometimes requires us to shape and then reshape our actions to match the new understandings. If the pressure to take aim and hit ambitious targets prevails over our perceived ability to develop the new competencies necessary for success, inertia and even resistance sets in.

Any reform effort requires the overuse of a certain prefix. “Re” words have a tendency to creep into any conversation about how we move from tinkering with an existing system to transforming it to a new way of thinking. Consider, for example, the following brief list of 10 “re” words:

- |         |             |
|---------|-------------|
| Reform  | Reframe     |
| Rethink | Revisit     |
| Renew   | Retrain     |
| Regain  | Reinvent    |
| Refocus | Reestablish |

These verbs should guide our initial conversations about the current state of our educational system, but they should not inhibit our ability to think beyond what already exists to the desired state of what public education can become. This is what the dynamics of change and CCSS demand of us.

## **WHAT HAPPENS NEXT WITH CCSS REFORM?**

If we agree that teachers are the key players in ensuring that any change initiative enters the classroom, how do we create the conditions necessary for them to share their enthusiasm and concerns for how CCSS will impact their work with students? How do we encourage open and honest dialogue about the challenges and the opportunities of viewing CCSS as the starting point for educational reform? Consider the following recommendations:

- Be proactive and take ownership for the process of designing a focused CCSS transition plan and a comprehensive implementation plan that address the scope of the work, realistic timelines, key deliverables, and ongoing quality measurements to monitor both plans.
- Make CCSS the focus of any future discussions about curriculum, instruction, and assessment decisions.
- Build awareness and understanding of the tenets of CCSS to identify which instructional practices will remain the same and which will need modification.
- Create a gap analysis process that compares existing standards, curriculum, and assessments with CCSS.
- Take inventory of what professional learning will be necessary to build the instructional capacity of teachers to meet the challenges of CCSS.
- Evaluate the targets of “fewer, clearer, and higher” standards in your current context.
- Discuss the CCSS benefits of efficiency of scale, equity, and uniformity.
- Begin to look at resources and materials that align with cross-disciplinary and project-based learning.
- Develop authentic performance tasks that engage learners with the new standards.
- Emphasize informational writing as a thinking tool in all content areas.
- Create common formative assessments to provide ongoing monitoring of student progress in English language arts and mathematics at each level.

- Acknowledge CCSS as an opportunity to renew professionalism and regain respect for teaching and learning.

## **FROM COMMON SENSE TO COMMON PRACTICE IN TEACHER LEADERSHIP**

If “knowing how” were enough to motivate us to make positive change in our practices, then we would all be rich and thin, right? For example, everyone “knows” that it is unhealthy to be overweight, and yet 64% of Americans are, and an amazing 30% are technically obese according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (<http://www.cdc.org>). Ask any group of savvy adults for suggestions on how to lose a few pounds and they will respond with some insightful and obvious dieting advice like “Eat less and exercise more.” Typically, sound ideas are not profound or complicated. They always represent common sense, but they do not necessarily invoke common practice. If it were common practice to eat less and exercise more, then we would not be dealing with the health risks and costs associated with an overweight society.

Notice that the last statement contains an “if . . . then” relationship or hypothesis, which is a prediction about what you might expect to see happen as a result of a decision, a behavior, or a belief. With colleagues at the Leadership and Learning Center, the heart of many of our conversations involves a powerful concept called antecedents of excellence. It is an educational “if . . . then” exercise to explain the success of school improvement and systemic reform efforts. Douglas Reeves proposes in part that antecedents are structures and conditions that precede, anticipate, or predict excellence in performance. They are precursors to high student achievement, success in implementing a new program or strategy, or completing authentic tasks with focus and precision. They are predictors of positive results that associate a cause with an effect (Reeves, 2006).

Why don’t we, as educators, consistently do what we know makes good sense? If we identify our goal and understand through knowledge and experience how to reach the goal, why do we sometimes waver in our pursuit of it? Oftentimes, the challenge is difficult, like dieting, and requires participants to modify their behavior through the hard work of changing habits. Sometimes the idea is controversial and untested and requires new thinking about the way we currently behave. Other times the decision is politically divisive and polarizes people’s belief about the larger issues. Common Core State Standards is a commonsense reform initiative, but without focused energy and diligent effort on the part of educators, parents, community leaders, and policy makers, its potential to become common practice is in constant jeopardy.

As a summary to this chapter about teaching quality, teacher leadership, and school reform efforts, I submit for your consideration some “if . . . then” statements that might generate some logical and commonsense conversations that will indeed translate into common practices in our classrooms and schools.

- If America’s social and economic future depends upon our students receiving a world-class education, then teacher and school leaders must offer their energy and expertise to suggest how to close the achievement gap for all students.
- If the educational status quo is no longer adequate to ensure our nation’s global competitiveness, then the achievement bar must be raised for all students.
- If teacher leadership is at the heart of any reform, then we must encourage our extraordinary teachers to become involved and substantively contribute to the successful implementation of CCSS.
- If reality in a classroom is sometimes misrepresented, then we must share accurate data with our stakeholders to debunk the myths of our work.
- If the components of an educational system are aligned, focused, and consistent, then common agreements about curriculum, instruction, and assessment are easier to reach.
- If CCSS comprehensively states what students need to know and be able to do for college and career readiness, then we need to conduct a gap analysis to ascertain what already exists that is useful to the effort and what needs to change, be created, or be eliminated.
- If we believe that any change or reform effort is challenging, then we must be thoughtful about what is necessary to support the people involved who are the agents of the change.

So those are my thoughts on the importance of engaging invested teachers in the conversation about CCSS implementation considerations, and it ends my cheerleading for the home team. The reality is that 46 states and Washington, D.C., are already in the “big” game and need our full attention and support to avoid the potential fits and starts of any change or reform effort.

Three constant features are included at the end of each chapter in this book to foster further professional conversations. The first is a leadership strategy that helps define a logical plan to sequence and prioritize some ideas for action. Do this now, do this next, and do this later is similar to the tried and true protocol of examining what to keep, what to amend, and what to abandon when “weeding the garden” of too many conflicting

initiatives that vie for time, resources, and focus. The second summary section lists key ideas mentioned in the chapter that could serve as discussion points in a professional learning community meeting or other forum. The final inclusion identifies some focused and provocative questions to frame a book study or perhaps some other type of critical inquiry to move this reform forward.

## **DO THIS NOW, DO THIS NEXT, AND DO THIS LATER**

### **Now . . .**

Communicate, communicate, and communicate some more about the direct implications CCSS will have for districts, schools, and classrooms.

Focus on the direct benefits and goals of CCSS to strengthen the broad-based educator support for the initiative.

Invite a motivated, creative, and knowledgeable team who will take ownership for building the CCSS vision and for proactively designing a transition plan in your system from the current state of education to the desired state.

### **Next . . .**

Make quality online resources accessible to investigate what other early adopting states have discovered about CCSS implementation. Recommendations are New York; Indiana; Utah; Ohio; Massachusetts; California; Washington, D.C.; Delaware; and Illinois.

Begin the cross-walking task of conducting a gap and overlap analysis of existing standards, curriculum, and assessments, comparing them with the new CCSS to determine what changes in practice are necessary and what will remain unchanged in current policy.

Determine an entry point for CCSS to be introduced into your system. Most recommend beginning with a foundational primary grade level, such as kindergarten through second grade. Check out the exemplary Cleveland Metro plan for ideas.

### **Later . . .**

Get into the details about how the transition to CCSS will look, how it will be accomplished, and how CCSS will work within the current system.

Begin a collaborative analysis of student work samples to compare with the exemplars contained in the CCSS appendices as another experience with the range of rigor that currently exists.

Create partnerships with professional organizations and state groups that have knowledge of the transition plans available in your state to share and distribute information, resources, and experience.

## KEY IDEAS FOR CHAPTER 1

- Schools are dynamic places because teaching and learning is an active and engaging process.
- Hope for improving the future for America's students depends upon the degree to which educators with a sense of moral purpose and a willingness to examine current practice have an opportunity to discuss realistic change with their colleagues.
- Teaching is very complex intellectual and emotional work, and identifying who our excellent teachers are and our ability to describe precisely and consistently what they do is at the heart of school reform.
- We must embrace the concept of a growth mindset for adults and students to persevere in meeting the challenge of learning more at deeper and more complex levels of understanding.
- If systemic reform does not positively impact the students in the classroom, then clearly there is no reform.
- Change is a challenging process that requires energy, ideas, commitment, and ownership from everyone in the organization.

## QUESTIONS TO CONTINUE THIS DISCUSSION

- How do we formalize the process of identifying and celebrating the work of great teachers and great teaching that translates into significant learning for our students?
- How do we present the concept of a growth mindset to teachers and students to cultivate the attitude that sustained and focused effort is the key to learning challenging new material and testing new ideas?
- How do we communicate the required sense of urgency so that our best teacher leaders are exploring and evaluating the potential

implications of CCSS in the context of real classrooms and real schools to guide the initiative forward?

- ☑ What will success look like once CCSS is initially embedded into every educational reform conversation and finally into every classroom in America?
- ☑ How can we collectively rewrite the ending to the achievement success story for all of our students?