

Teacher Roundtable: Teachers speak out in support of the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks

Common Core in our Classrooms

To the Massachusetts Legislature:

As classroom teachers from public schools in Massachusetts, we are writing to strongly urge you to stand with us as we support the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks and the PARCC assessments that measure students' mastery of them. We are Teaching Policy Fellows and Fellow alums with Teach Plus, a non-profit organization dedicated to creating opportunities for teachers to become leaders in their field. As policy fellows and current teachers, we work towards affecting change at the policy level.



In the spring and early summer of 2013, Teach Plus and the Massachusetts Teachers Association administered a survey in order to elicit teachers' perspectives on the Common Core and new Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks. Almost 3,000 teachers participated. The results indicate both optimism about the standards and a sense of urgency about what is required to implement the new standards effectively. It is our hope that district and state policymakers can use this important transitional moment to build off of that optimism and provide the supports that teachers need.

The results of the survey indicate what a remarkable difference formal training makes in teachers' level of support for the Common Core. Fifty-five percent of teachers indicated that they had received training on the Common Core standards. Teachers who have participated in training also report that they are more likely to agree that implementation of the Common Core standards will help them become better teachers and that the Common Core will benefit their students. Clearly, more training increases teacher buy-in during this critical transition.

As educators who are truly committed to our students, we support the Massachusetts Frameworks because they place particular emphasis on using higher order thinking skills and encourage ingenuity in solving real-world problems. The Frameworks will better prepare our students for college, future careers, and most importantly, will elevate our national position for global competitiveness. Because the Frameworks are based on the Common Core State Standards, teachers nation-wide will be working towards the same high standards. This will afford students all across the country a more equitable education. We look forward to having

conversations with teachers across the nation around effective teaching and setting high expectations for all students.

The PARCC exams being administered to measure students' mastery of the Frameworks will allow teachers to use multiple data points to drive our instruction and further student learning.

We hope that you will join us in support of the Massachusetts Frameworks and encourage you to examine the following opinion editorials for accounts from Teach Plus Policy Fellows about their achievement-lifting and equity-boosting experiences with the Frameworks. We welcome you to reach out to us for additional perspectives. Now is a pivotal moment. We ask that you use your position to support the transition to Massachusetts Frameworks. Without the Frameworks, we risk being left out of the conversation, and risk children being left behind.

Sincerely,

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Common Core standards: A path to success for all students

By Brittany Morse

Originally published in the Huffington Post

I began my teaching career in a rural town in New Mexico on the border of a Navajo reservation and then went on to teach at two different charter schools in Boston. While my third graders in New Mexico were expected to read, write, and solve math problems on a relatively low level, my Massachusetts third graders were pushed to challenge themselves as learners. The disparity in expectations was striking. What message are we, as educators, sending to children and parents if we say that kids in Massachusetts can do more than kids in rural New Mexico?



When I first heard about the Common Core standards, I felt inspired and encouraged. As a nation, we are starting to figure out how to provide a quality education for every student, regardless of geography or socioeconomic status. This means pushing students beyond memorization by instilling an understanding of concepts. For example, instead of having students memorize a formula to find the perimeter, we teach them what perimeter means, so that they can figure out how to find it with any polygon. However, I was concerned about how I would actually change my day-to-day teaching in response to the new standards. While - according to a 2013 survey of Massachusetts teachers conducted by Teach Plus - most educators in my state agree that the Common Core will benefit students, many share the doubts that I had about how effectively they and their schools were prepared to implement the standards.

Since then, I've taken part in professional development opportunities such as Massachusetts Teachers' Association Core Collaborative run by Teach Plus, where teacher leaders guide other educators in effectively implementing the Common Core. I am increasingly aware of big and small changes that are within my power

The more teachers know about the
Common Core
the more they support it.

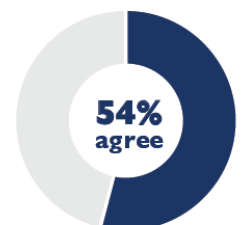
“ Learning the Common Core will help my students succeed. ”

Data Source: From the August 2013 "Common Core/Mass Frameworks Survey" of nearly 3,000 Massachusetts teachers administered in partnership with the MTA.

Teachers who have received common core training:



Teachers who have not received common core training:



and can have a profound effect on the quality of my students' learning. For example, I consistently ask my students to articulate why a procedure worked whenever they explain their thought process in solving a math problem. I am convinced that if I maintain a sense of openness, flexibility, and humility, others with more experience and knowledge will help me to guide my students toward success.

To me, embracing the Common Core standards means pushing students to think more deeply, and preparing them to meet the demands of a rapidly changing world. It also means acknowledging the fact that we, as educators, are figuring this out together as we push all students, regardless of geographical location or socioeconomic status, toward the same high bar for success. The transition to the Common Core will not be instantaneous and it will not always be smooth, but it will be worth it for our kids.

Lane: Using the Common Core to inspire students

By Erin Lane

Originally published in the Metro West Daily News

I recently watched a Facebook video of a parent "taking down" the Common Core. In a shaking voice, she described the horrors of what the standards are "doing" to our children. But it is teachers, not policies, who are ultimately responsible for providing our students with a quality education, and in one challenging class, it was the Common Core that helped me engage my students.



This was a middle school English class and I was struggling with a pervasive lack of student motivation. Stephen (the name has been changed to protect his privacy), in particular, often came to class exhausted, turned in minimal work, and once slithered into class like a snake. While I made gains with several other students, I still struggled to reach him.

In addition to motivating my students, I needed to make sure they achieve Common Core standards. These standards and next year's switch to PARCC assessments have been a major topic of conversation among my colleagues: There's fear and anxiety, but also, contrary to many newspaper headlines, a lot of enthusiasm. I can't speak to other content areas, but in ELA at the middle-school level, I'm thrilled about the Common Core.

Here's why: Seven years ago, when I started teaching, I leafed through a massive, disorganized document that outlined the Massachusetts State Standards. I saw little resemblance between those standards and what I know is expected of students in college and the workplace. The Common Core is the opposite: it's organized logically and clearly asks students to advance their skills from year to year.

The Common Core has also increased the minimum level of text complexity at which students should be able to read in each grade level. In other words, a text that used to be considered a ninth-grade text might now be presented in seventh or eighth grade. Adjustment will be difficult, but is necessary for our students to succeed

in college, especially considering universities have been reporting that record numbers of students need remedial reading and writing courses.

In order to meet these standards in my classroom, I have implemented an independent reading component. This enables me to provide students with high-interest books that fit their reading level, have students write about what they're reading, and slowly advance them to more complex texts.

This is not a brand-new idea, but it is aligned with the Common Core and helps me engage my students. In the past, I might have been nervous to implement this instructional practice because I didn't see the clear connection between it and the former state standards. But if I hadn't, I could have lost Stephen for good.

I've now discovered that Stephen has a passion for dystopian novels and is an insightful abstract thinker. He was disengaged when we read a required text about segregation, but he became interested when he saw connections between the world of the South and the dystopian society in Lois Lowry's novel, "Gathering Blue." And he articulated these connections in his reading journal. Now he's reading "Fahrenheit 451," a book at least two grade-levels above Gathering Blue, and carries it to every class.

The Common Core does not make me feel restricted. In fact, the authenticity and clarity of the standards are empowering. And while the Common Core wasn't the only tool I used to engage Stephen, it was one essential piece in the daily effort I made with him and countless other students. Now, what I need most is for the war against the Common Core to end so that I, and teachers like me, can continue to feel empowered to engage and support every student.

SITTING IN Common Core a path to deeper learning

By Nick Lippman

Originally published in the Malden Observer

When I was a student, I learned how to "play the game" of school. I was no stranger to memorizing what I needed to know for a test the night before, only to forget half of it as I walked out of the classroom. Eventually – with outstanding teachers – I matured and grew to really love learning. It was my high school math and science teachers who inspired me to pursue a career teaching math. But I think that many young people go through their educational careers as I did early on – and I think the new Common Core learning standards can help to fix this problem.



I've heard education in U.S. schools criticized as being "a mile wide and an inch deep," making it easy for students to memorize and forget. Too many topics are taught at too superficial a level, with the result that too many young people never develop a deep understanding of the ideas that they study and too few find a true passion for what they've learned. It is my hope as a teacher that the new literacy and math Common Core standards being adopted by 45 states, including Massachusetts, will help us to make progress in addressing

this issue. As educators, we would benefit from standards and assessments that, as President Obama said in his State of the Union speech, "measure how well our kids think, not how well they can fill in a bubble on a test".

The new Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks, which are based on the Common Core State Standards, have been designed to promote a higher level of readiness in high school graduates as they enter into colleges or careers. But what does this mean? Ideally, it means that students enter the world better able to apply their knowledge to solving real-life problems, rather than simply memorizing rote facts.

So how will the new standards achieve this? By focusing on a smaller number of topics, and encouraging students to form connections between ideas, because this is what leads to deep understanding. And by encouraging students to develop their own strategies for solving problems so that they can take ownership of their solutions rather than striving to memorize the "right" solution. It may be true that some questions only have one correct answer, but there are almost always many ways to get to these answers. Students gain confidence when they're given a license to explore different routes rather than seeing their ideas stifled.

Great teachers have always found ways of working these skills into their lessons, but it is refreshing to see this approach spelled out formally in the standards. I have found that the new standards have changed my approach to teaching by encouraging me to focus more of my students' time on solving multi-layered problems that emphasize discussion, analysis and justification of the methods used rather than just the final result. I now make a more concerted effort to give assignments which require students to explain their reasoning, not just give an answer.

The new frameworks will be assessed using new types of tests. The new tests are intended to emphasize deep connections between ideas and applications to real-life problems. Rather than bubble sheets, these tests are intended to measure how well students are drawing connections between ideas and can apply them to solving real-life problems.

So why does this matter? We all have a stake in how well prepared our young people are as they enter higher education and the workforce – whether we are a parent, an employer, or a community member. The Common Core was born out of a concern that U.S. workers were falling behind other industrialized nations in terms of how well equipped our young workers are to solve the problems of the future and today. The new standards are designed to narrow and reverse this gap, not by mimicking what is done in these other countries, but by finding a solution that fits the needs of our students.

It's too early to know for certain that this will work. But historically, Massachusetts has led the way in educational reforms and our students' success relative to many other states has validated our approach. I'm optimistic that this current shift will achieve similar results.

The Common Core in My Classroom: A Teacher's View

By Catherine Tighe

Originally published in the *Huffington Post*

As we leave our morning meeting, my kindergarten students decide which learning center they will go to. Some mumble a quick outline of their plan: "I'll go to the Lego area to finish making the tower I started yesterday," Jasmin says, while Michael considers going to the writing center to see who is in the daily story problem. They approach the centers with excitement and vigor; they have work to do, and they want to get started right away.



I overhear a conversation from the block area. Leo exclaims that he wants to make a huge football stadium. Ani latches onto the enthusiasm and suggests that they make all the seats, and the people, and all the lines on the field. Two others join in the conversation with suggestions of how to make it. They decide they need a huge foundation, so they should start with the biggest blocks and then use the smaller ones to make it taller.

They seamlessly divide and conquer: two students start the foundation, another goes to a book to look at some ideas of football stadiums, and another goes to the writing center to collect tools for making signs and labels for the construction. As they are all at work, they use words like bigger, smaller, taller, wider, more, and fewer, and they estimate the number of blocks they will need. They talk about which teams will be playing, and determine the sounds in the team names to make the score board.

There is then a discussion about the score. They are determined to have their beloved Patriots in the lead, and they agree on a final score of 31-7. The student writing the score looks to the number chart to write the 7 and then writes a "13" for "31." Another student chimes in and says the three should come before the one because that means three groups of ten and one single, and "13" means that there is only one group of ten and three ones. The others join the discussion and there is a consensus that yes, it should be "31" because that is a much bigger number.

This is the Common Core in action. It's not about preparing for a test. It's not about sitting down and doing rote paper and pencil exercises for the entire day. It's about students taking the understanding of well-crafted lessons into their daily life and play through authentic learning experiences. There is evidence of all of my students learning and integrating math, literacy, and interpersonal skills through tools and conversation that they will continue to discuss for the entire day. These are the 21st Century skills that the Common Core is asking teachers to teach to across the country.

The Common Core establishes high expectations for all students. It can be daunting to think about how this shifts our practice as educators. However, we have plenty of experts—teachers—in classrooms right now who are doing it right, and we have much to learn from one another. As educators, we are best positioned to lead

the rollout of the Common Core. We are experienced practitioners who know our students well. Educators hold the knowledge of how to deliver well crafted and purposeful lessons and weave the content into intriguing, developmentally appropriate materials and classroom environments. The conversation and construction I witnessed at the block area are a reflection of a number of lessons delivered in math and literacy. The students integrated the information in ways that are authentic to their lives and experiences.

I have been part of leading professional development for my district, in which we have been aligning our lessons with the Common Core, since the shift began in 2011. We dedicated time and effort to work on grade-level teams as well as cross-level teams to ensure that we created lessons and units that effectively integrate all the standards in a meaningful and purposeful layout. Teachers, the experts, created the curricula that align to the standards. And it's working really well.

Teachers like me, who have experience and training with implementing the Common Core, should now be leading our colleagues in professional development across the country. This fall, I've had the opportunity to do just that through the Core Collaborative, a teacher-led professional development program that gives teachers the opportunity to learn from other teachers who are more experienced with the Common Core.

Teaching and learning should be based on authentic, developmentally appropriate experiences. The Common Core establishes what we should be teaching, but we, as teachers and experts, are the ones who determine how we teach them. The Common Core is an opportunity to let our creativity and expertise as teachers shine. Teachers who need support should have pathways to learn from other teachers, and then, most importantly, to share their new found learning with others. Our students deserve it. They are the engineers that will design the stadiums of the future. If my students are any indication, those stadiums are going to be pretty awesome.

No need to fear Common Core All kids have grit, teacher says

By Colleen Considine

Originally published in CommonWealth Magazine

GRIT IS A term we should be using a lot in education, especially when discussing the adoption of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). I am completing my ninth year of teaching; next year I will again be in a first grade classroom. I have previously taught second and fifth grades but I'm excited to continue my work with first graders. I have found that, with Common Core, I am able to develop even the youngest students into critical thinkers who will find success in the face of adversity along whatever path they choose. My students have shown plenty of grit at every grade level I have taught. It is critical that we educators do the same.



In her now famous [TED Talk](#), Angela Lee Duckworth says that the most successful students tackle academic challenges with resolve and do it repeatedly despite possible failure. She says that

From my experience, the Common Core standards raised the level of discussion in my classroom. The standards forced me to plan more rigorous lessons and my students to think at a higher level. By the end of the year, they were able to form opinions about texts and use evidence to support those opinions. Instead of just identifying an author's choice, they started to form opinions about it. They have a long way to go, but they are already learning a better way to think.

- Meaghan Durgin, 4th grade teacher.

we as educators have to be willing to join in this process. "In other words, we need to be gritty about getting our kids grittier." When it comes to the rigor of the CCSS and the standards' implementation, I couldn't agree more.

A union in New York (among others) recently challenged the implementation of the Common Core standards in the state. And yet, when I looked to the Engage NY curriculum to help me teach math in my classroom, I found it incredibly well designed for instruction and rigor of the new standards. My students

have been successful with it despite their initial protests of the curriculum being too hard. The emphasis on deeper understanding and critical thinking within concepts can indeed be frightening for students and educators alike. But if educators dig in, students will rise to the challenge.

I began using the Common Core standards three years ago in my second grade classroom for all of my instruction. The standards hadn't been fully implemented and I was scared. Among other challenging concepts, the standards ask second graders to understand and use the US algorithm strategy of adding and subtracting three digit numbers – a highly conceptual piece of learning that I had previously introduced at a fifth grade level. In fact, my students were so successful with this curriculum that half of this inner-city class earned a coveted spot in the Boston Public Schools' Advanced Work Class program. My students showed amazing grit and taught me what it really means to have resolve.

Every time I read about another state reversing support for the CCSS, I think about that gritty second grade class and how all kids inherently have grit. If I go out at recess and ask my students if they would like to race, I invariably have a line-up. In my classroom, when I say that I am about to give a challenging assignment from the grade level above, my students give me an ear-to-ear smile and run back to their seats to conquer that task. They do this while dealing with a host of other issues ranging from homelessness and removal from a parent's care to lack of glasses for severe cataracts.

Can you imagine what these students will accomplish if we teach them now to solve issues critical to their lives and our nation's future? By supporting the transition and implementation of CCSS, we are also teaching them to succeed in a highly competitive global economy. These students will dig in and show the grit necessary to create positive change in their world and ours.

And this means that we as educators have to have the same resolve. Rising to a higher standard is the right thing for kids and therefore the right thing for teachers. If we don't, where is our grit? What kind of example are we setting for our students? Children love a challenge when supported successfully — whether it's running the fastest lap around the playground or solving a math problem beyond their level. That's grit. Let's take a lesson from our kids and show some.



Promising Practices: Teacher-Led Professional Development on the Common Core

Opportunities for teacher leadership in Common Core implementation are already underway, and state and district officials should work to ensure that more are available. Last fall, Teach Plus, the Massachusetts Teachers Association, and University of Massachusetts Boston held a Common Core conference titled **Core in the Classroom: From Standards to Practice**. The conference was attended by almost 500 teachers from 103 districts eager to spend a Saturday learning best practices from their teacher peers. Teachers experienced with the Common Core State Standards led high-quality trainings that ranged from close reading to using data trackers to ensure all students master the Common Core standards.

Other programs offer teachers more opportunities to learn from each other and become teacher leaders themselves. Last year, in partnership with the Massachusetts Teachers Association, Teach Plus launched the **Core Collaborative**. This is a high-quality ongoing professional development course led by teacher leaders with expertise in the Common Core. The program trained 11 teacher leaders who provided PD for over 130 teachers. This year, we will continue this work with University of Massachusetts Boston. The Core Collaborative engages teacher leaders to facilitate semester-long courses in specific elements of the Common Core State Standards. The teacher leaders, as well as Core Collaborative participants, will become experts in their schools who can help move the implementation of the standards forward.