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Establishing Common Ground

Common core state standards will fix education's no man's land problem

Q&A by Megan Schmidt, editor, with Joe Crawford, consultant at [Partners4Results](#)

Most parents assume that educators have a common, professional understanding of what kids should learn and when. But education researchers have found that a student's educational experience is more or less decided by a roll of the dice. What and when a student learns depends on where he or she lives, his or her socioeconomic background, the effectiveness of the educator and other factors.¹

Joe Crawford, a Milken Distinguished Educator, a former principal and former assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction, said that not having common standards across the U.S. education system is nothing short of educational malpractice. That's why he believes that the common core state standards (CCSS) are a step in the right direction—even if the CCSS aren't fully mature.

Crawford is an education consultant with [Partners4Results](#) in Mukwonago, WI, and author of [Using Power Standards to Build an Aligned Curriculum](#) and [Aligning Your Curriculum to the Common Core State Standards](#) (both from Corwin, 2011). Recently, Crawford spoke with the *Primary and Secondary Education Brief* about his views on the role of national standards in education and their effect on teaching and learning.



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Primary Education Brief (PSEB): What are your thoughts on national standards in education?

Joe Crawford (JC): National standards are great. Most of the flap occurring across the country is because people, especially politicians, confuse standards with curriculum. Standards represent academic performance standards, which all students are expected to meet. The setting of national academic standards represents an important step in any country trying to compete on the international level in the 21st century. What specific skills and performance should students demonstrate, and at what point in their educational experience should they learn specific knowledge? That is a fundamental question we must answer.

Curriculum, on the other hand, includes the content, instruction and resources that professional educators use to teach those standards. Curriculum materials are barely addressed, if at all, in the CCSS. We are all familiar with the various exit level standards and college readiness assessments. But how should teachers prepare students to meet those challenges? What does algebraic reasoning look like in first grade? The CCSS try to define that.

We must implement the CCSS and run a continuous improvement cycle on the CCSS for several years to refine and perfect them. Only then can we honestly question their merit. Instead, many educators and politicians choose to whine about how awful the standards are, which contributes to creating general hysteria about “government takeover” of curriculum.

PSEB: Is there any evidence that really stands out to you that show better standards will raise student achievement?



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JC: There is none that I am aware of, but please remember that the first and foremost purpose of any set of standards isn't improvement. Standards are just that—standards that will reach across the system and define success. National academic standards are trying to define the skills and performance all children in American schools must have—not some of the students, not the ones with great teachers or the ones attending great schools, but all students. This important measure will level the field and help ensure all students are given the opportunity to learn according to a national set of standards.

Simply making standards more rigorous really accomplishes nothing. For example, the Army could raise the standard for graduation from boot camp to 1,000 push-ups. Will that improve performance or decrease graduation? That is the same question we must struggle with in implementing and improving CCSS. What does a realistic set of standards look like? That is the question we should ask and answer through this initiative. By focusing on implementing CCSS and applying the continuous improvement cycle to those standards, we'll get answers.

PSEB: Do you think the implementation of CCSS will help close the achievement gap?

JC: CCSS has great potential for closing the achievement gap. But in its current state of implementation, there is little hope. Research by educators, including Doug Reeves, Larry Lezotte, Mike Schmoker and Ron Edmonds clearly shows that a guaranteed (taught in every classroom), viable (aligned to the assessment system) curriculum improves student performance by 20 to 40%.² Will that hold true for the CCSS? There is no reason to believe it won't, but the deployment of the CCSS has been an abysmal failure almost everywhere. There



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are pockets of exceptions, but generally, public educators and politicians seem more committed to changing, dropping or ignoring the CCSS rather than earnestly trying to implement and improve them.

CCSS span more than 400 pages. How much time have districts spent with teachers coming to consensus on how CCSS will be implemented and interpreted? I am not referring to half-day or full-day lectures from consultants introducing the CCSS are. I mean real and honest conversations and plans to implement the CCSS in a systematic and comprehensive way. It's not enough for the state legislature, the school board or the principal to simply mandate adoption of the CCSS or any other program. To faithfully implement something as complex as CCSS, it requires time, support, a process and resources. I'm not seeing very much of these out there.

PSEB: How do CCSS standards affect teaching?

JC: Standards-based instruction is fundamentally different from traditional instruction. As a high school English teacher, I taught *Hamlet* for years. We read it, discussed it, took a test on it and moved on. The skills or standards I taught (such as vocabulary, drawing inference from text, identifying literary devices and others) were completely my choice as the teacher. Often, determining the specific skills to stress was the result of student composition or how class discussions went.

In a standards-based environment, teachers use what is frequently called a backward design of the lesson. The very first question teachers ask in a standards-based environment is, "What standard will I teach?" The lesson is designed to teach that identified standard. In



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standards-based learning, content is a means to a performance end. Students can learn to draw inference from text using *Hamlet*, the *Holy Bible*, or whatever content is chosen as appropriate to teach the standard.

When it's time for the assessment part of the learning cycle, the assessment may or may not even include the same content from the learning cycle. That's because the standard is what is to be learned, not the content. Content is used as a vehicle to deliver the skill.

This is a huge opportunity for educators to tie performance standards to a diverse range of cultural-specific materials to engage all students. When students see themselves in the literature, they more readily engage with the content. CCSS set academic standards for performance, and enable educators to select relevant and engaging content, curriculum and instruction to meet the specific needs of their learners. The same holds true in math. Teachers select standards to be taught, arrange those standards in a sequence that best reflects how children will learn and then design the curriculum, instruction and assessment around the standards, not chapters in a book.

PSEB: What are the essential elements to successful CCSS implementation?

JC: The most critical essential elements are a plan and a process to do this very complex work. Please remember, the CCSS span more than 400 pages of complex skills and learnings. The plan must help teachers deploy CCSS as a group and to reach professional consensus on the meaning, intent and arrangement of the standards to improve learning for all students in an aligned and articulated environment.



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Teachers must first understand the CCSS themselves. The critical first step is achieving consensus on what CCSS requirements mean and how they will be implemented in every classroom, not just the classrooms of the progressive or driven teachers. This implementation must be uniform and agreed upon. A process must be followed to ensure there is a common understanding of the role of CCSS among teachers, parents and students.

The process I advocate for begins with staff identifying and agreeing on what Larry Ainsworth calls priority standards—end-of-year learning standards.³ These are a learnable amount of standards that are considered the most critical and should be learned by all students by the end of the school year. Then, it is imperative that the district leads teachers through a learning progressions process to scaffold curriculum and instruction throughout the year to answer the question, “What must students learn first quarter, second quarter and so on?” This sets the pace of learning. By clearly outlining those common learning expectations, districts can build an aligned system of curriculum, instruction and assessments in which everyone knows what standards to emphasize and when to teach them. Then, the stage is set for the development of common, formative assessments.

Without common learning standards and formative assessments to measure progress, there can be no system or systems thinking. You could argue that failure to define, articulate and enforce a common set of standards in every classroom is nothing short of educational malpractice.

PSEB: What role does staff buy-in and leadership support play?



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JC: Staff buy-in is critical, which follows leadership buy-in. In my work as an education consultant, the teachers are ready, willing and able to be involved in the process of developing the curriculum under CCSS. That is the heart and soul of what teachers do. They become frustrated by a lack of clarity about what gets learned and when.

Think about any teacher who receives a new group of students in August and does not know what the students were expected to learn last year. In today's unaligned education system, what students learn is often left to chance. It's a culmination issues such as their previous teachers, the former classes and their academic label. The current state is like an academic "no man's land." It is incredibly frustrating for teachers to be held accountable for student learning, but have to no control or input into what that learning ought to be this year, next year and so on.

If it is frustrating for teachers, think about the students—they are unsure of what's expected of them. Depending on many uncontrolled variables, those students may not be academically prepared for a given level of learning. Since the district hasn't even defined expected learning, how can teachers or the students know?

Teachers are tired of "flavor of the month" initiatives. Priorities must be identified, planned for and followed through on. Leadership must support initiatives with finances and resources and build a system to ensure it is faithfully implemented and continuously improved.

PSEB: What are some resources for educators that you would recommend?



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JC: Resources must support teacher learning and system building. Resources that improve only a specific group of teachers and their abilities to work with the CCSS will not change the system. System change is exactly what we need. Each resource must support building a system that is based on national research. A system that is built, understood, implemented and continuously improved by local staff.

Most resources currently used are designed, built and deployed by large corporations without usable, common or realistic learning expectations. Employing a lesson or unit aligned to the CCSS produced by a large for-profit organization accomplishes nothing, unless that lesson or unit is actually embraced by teachers. Teachers tend to hate programs that stifle their own creativity and deny their professional competence. They resist them, and they should.

Because of my first-hand experiences of improving student performance in numerous districts, I recommend the implementation process I previously discussed. I've spent my entire career developing software to support that process, and it is available through

www.partners4results.com.

References

1. Karin Chenoweth, "Wait, Tell Me Again What Common Core Is?" *Huffington Post*, Sept. 3, 2014, www.huffingtonpost.com/Karin-Chenoweth/wait---tell-me-again-what_b_5758846.html.



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2. Joe Crawford, "Local Assessments Prepare For and Predict Performance," *SEEN Southeast Education Expert*, April 11, 2014, <http://seenmagazine.us/articles/article-detail/articleid/3809/ccss-formative-assessment.aspx>.
3. Larry Ainsworth, *Prioritizing the Common Core: Identifying Specific Standards to Emphasize the Most*, Lead + Learn Press, 2013.