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COMMENTARY

Teacher Collaboration: The Essential Common-Core Ingredient

By **Vicki Phillips & Robert L. Hughes**

We ask a lot of our teachers and, as a nation, we're about to ask a lot more. With the adoption of the Common Core State Standards in English/language arts and math in almost every state, we are raising the bar on what students must master to be prepared in an increasingly competitive world. Gone are the days when states and districts could lower expectations, hide poor results, or create confusion about what students are capable of achieving.

But the real challenge is for teachers, not policymakers: The new standards emphasize teaching fewer topics, but in greater depth, and focusing more on hands-on learning and dynamic student projects than traditional lectures. If students are to be successful, teachers must also encourage innovative assignments that require students to show their understanding, use their knowledge and skills to solve problems, create written and multimedia presentations, and complete real-world tasks.

The common core means that teachers must shift their practice and teach more advanced materials to their students in more successful ways. How can we accomplish such a substantial change in classroom instruction in thousands of schools and tens of thousands of classrooms, and with millions of students with differing abilities, interests, and life goals? We believe the answer lies in two key strategies: greater teacher collaboration and better instructional materials in the classroom.

In a 2012 Scholastic Inc. [survey of teachers](#), supported by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, teachers indicated they need more professional support and development to implement these standards. In our experience, the best professional development comes from those already in our schools. When engaging in inquiry or lesson study, teachers draw on their shared trust, expertise, and experiences to improve instruction. And when this collaboration focuses on student work, it builds educators' capacity to address students' academic needs immediately.

Yet one of the tragic hallmarks of American education is teacher isolation. Too often, teachers do not have

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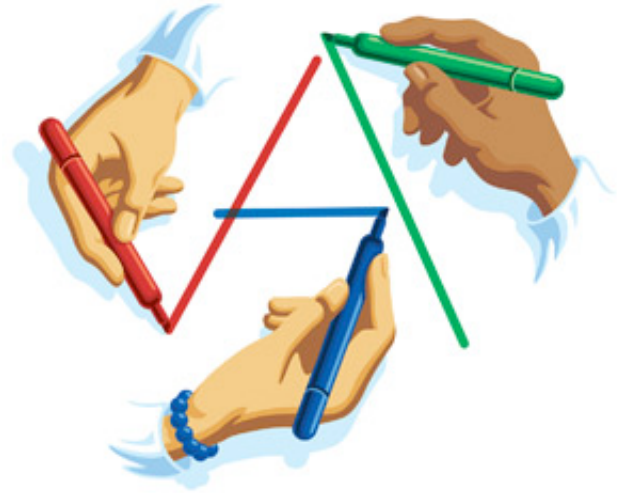
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sufficient opportunities to work together to examine work and structure interventions within their classrooms. As the new standards are implemented, we must ensure that teachers are not left alone to figure out how best to teach to them. The standards are an opportunity for greater collaboration, fresher thinking, and a rearticulation of shared goals for teachers and students. By collaborating with each other and with instructional specialists through cycles of examining student work, creating hypotheses about how to implement common-core-aligned lessons, implementing them, and making adjustments in their practice in real time, teachers can find the best ways to help their students reach these higher expectations while still maintaining individual styles and flexibility.



—Chris Whetzel

But this commitment to deep collaboration also requires new types of materials aligned to the standards, with a focus on real-time assessment and its translation into classroom practice. Two **examples of this kind of collaboration** are the Literacy Design Collaborative (LDC) and the Mathematics Design Collaborative (MDC), through which groups of traditional public school and public charter school teachers, curriculum experts, and other educators are working together to create high-quality, useful lessons and research-based instructional tools incorporating the common-core standards. In addition to developing a free, online library of new lessons and units, these efforts, funded by the Gates Foundation, are pioneering new pathways for how educators can work together to shift teacher practice.

LDC and MDC teams work together to integrate common-core skills into classroom materials and to create performance tasks—structured assignments that provide teachers with rich information on how students understand key concepts.

For example, the common-core standards recognize that, to succeed in college, students need to understand and write about nonfiction texts. But most high school science and social studies teachers, and even some English teachers, have little training in teaching reading and writing. In New York City, the LDC team, guided by instructional experts from New Visions for Public Schools, a New York City-based nonprofit organization, is helping teachers embed standards-based literacy skills into their classrooms.

These skills include locating textual evidence, evaluating arguments, interpreting meaning, and synthesizing information from different sources. Teams use preliminary templates aligned with the standards to develop their own curriculum units that scaffold the writing process and enable teachers to assess student progress. They are producing classroom-tested, common-core-aligned modules that other teachers can adopt or adapt.

"We must ensure that teachers are not left alone to figure out how best to teach to [the standards]."

For example, one module—developed by two teachers at the High School for Service and Learning at Erasmus in Brooklyn—provides a template for teaching argumentative writing.

For a 10th grade global history class, the teachers designed a writing module that prompts students to argue whether the achievements of the British industrial revolution were worth the costs. The teachers compiled a list of relevant sources at different reading levels and created strategies for students' reading,

note-taking, summarizing, and analyzing. They broke the writing process down into a series of coordinated tasks and created worksheets that help students develop a claim, produce an outline and first draft, peer-edit a piece, and incorporate revisions into a final draft. Other teachers can draw on this example as they implement the common core.

Adopting the common core extends the teacher's role as coach, carefully designing activities to build specific skills, providing constructive feedback, and continually modifying lessons based on student understanding. Through professional development, teachers learn how to assess and give meaningful, consistent feedback; to share what works with their peers; and adjust lessons appropriately. Our best schools have always done this work, but the LDC and MDC members capture and scale it.

There is a buzz of enthusiasm in these pilot projects, as teachers embrace the work. Some say working with the collaboratives has been the best professional-development experience of their careers. Teachers tell us that they are covering fewer topics more deeply, and that their students gain a greater understanding of the content. Teachers also say they have found that some of the extra time spent on this approach in the first few modules is recouped later in the year because students can apply the skills learned to future lessons.

It's too early to measure the program's effects, but we're encouraged by the anecdotal evidence to date. One principal noted improved pass rates on a state global-studies regents' exam after using the literacy modules for a year. In an informal survey of 30 New Visions teachers in June, all but five or six respondents (including science and social studies teachers) found the literacy modules very helpful. The remainder said the materials were somewhat helpful. The interesting lessons and student-centered instruction also turned many disengaged students into active learners, and teachers reported seeing students across the board develop college-ready skills. Some already are adapting these methods and performance tasks to the rest of their curriculum.



Providing teachers with real training and templates, not scripts and worksheets, and meaningful opportunities to work together to implement strategies that will improve student learning, are critical components of any strategy to implement the common core. We will fail if we do not do both. These strategies implicitly allow teachers to take ownership of how to best implement the common core in their classrooms and to explore the teaching and learning possibilities opened up by the new standards. But more importantly, they ensure that these standards are constantly re-engineered against the real needs of students. That is as it should be.

Vicki Phillips is the director of education in the College Ready program at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Robert L. Hughes is the president of New Visions for Public Schools, a nonprofit organization focused on educating high-need children in New York City.

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