

# BUILDING COMMON KNOWLEDGE

## WHAT TEACHERS NEED, AND HOW DISTRICTS CAN HELP

By Garth McKinney

To implement the Common Core State Standards, teachers will need a broader knowledge base, a more diverse tool kit for teaching and learning, and greater experience with teaching in a standards-based environment. The growth required over the next three years seems to be large.

I work in a district that has provided an ongoing, continual approach to teaching toward these standards by engaging teacher content teams with standards consultants throughout the school year. Over the last three years, we have collaborated to unpack standards, determine power standards, design essential questions and big ideas, and collaboratively design units that emphasize both prioritization and conformity without removing creativity. After observing and participating in this work for the last year, I believe the following steps are crucial for what teachers should be able to both comprehend and implement.

### UNPACK FIRST

This learning process began three years ago by first “unpacking” standards — dissecting the wording to look for skills and knowledge. We also designated power standards that we all would teach and felt were the most important.

This process must be a primary one, as teachers first look for skills and knowledge necessary for students to attain before beginning to design instruction.

Although teachers didn’t know it, we were following recommendations from Wiggins and McTighe (2001) for translating the standards from the state frameworks to teacher-based terminology for classroom instruction. Wiggins and McTighe believe that unpacking the standards is the third of five big ideas for implementing the Common Core.

### BUILD SHARED UNDERSTANDING

Wiggins and McTighe (2001) suggest starting backwards by keeping the end in mind, rather than designing a series of activities built on one another. This process asks teachers to start to “identify desired results, determine ac-



Garth McKinney celebrates with students and teachers at Merrimack Middle School after being named Teacher of the Year by the New Hampshire Teachers of English.

ceptable evidence, and plan learning experiences” (Wiggins & McTighe, 2001, pp. 9-10).

For us, this first step was a struggle because we were new to the process, the language, theory, and practice. However, three years later, as we talk together, this process has paid off as we all see a common path of learning for students and have a shared understanding to build on.

Furthermore, this process has shifted practice away from independent classroom teacher activities to a common approach that focuses more on the big ideas that are important for students to know and be able to do. These are the skills and knowledge necessary for success (Wiggins & McTighe, 2001, pp. 9-10).

#### DEVELOP STUDENT SELF-ASSESSMENT

Students must grow not only as learners but also as evaluators of their own learning. Last year, we began

designing learning progressions, which were valuable in thinking about student misconceptions before instruction rather than during. However, many teachers viewed this as a rubric for scoring student work — which it is not — so developing this for a number of units was, and still is, a challenge for some.

As we now implement two new common standards-based units, these progressions are more important for students to assess their learning with a tool that ties into a common language about the big ideas for each unit and links to feedback they get from formative assessments.

We have made a commitment to post learning goals and success criteria for students this year, but our next step may be to learn progressions as well so that students can

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## FORGING A PATH TO STUDENT-CENTERED LEARNING

**By Debbie Woelflein**

Ten years ago, our district embraced the New Hampshire vision of professional growth based on reflection, self-assessment, student performance data, and deliberate planning, all documented with a body of evidence.

We began by shifting our emphasis to job-embedded professional learning, helping staff members gain confidence in their ability to plan for and carry out personalized growth plans that included collaboration with their peers.

Working with outside consultants from WestEd Learning Innovations, the district leadership team studied and applied the Concerns-Based Adoption Model and sought training in cognitive coaching to help staff progress through the seven Stages of Concern in accepting change (Holloway, 2003, p. 3).

Our district planned a four-year entry into a new model for professional growth, working slowly and carefully to provide support while challenging each educator to put student learning at the center of his or her plan. We have moved during these 10 years from the “awareness” stage of the Concerns-Based Adoption Model all

the way up to the “refocusing stage,” with two revisions of our district professional development master plan.

This shift in the way that district educators viewed their own learning laid the groundwork for Merrimack Middle School’s work in moving from a teacher-centered, individualistic approach to a student-centered, collaborative way of doing business.

Instructional leaders read Kate Jamentz’ *Isolation Is the Enemy of Improvement* (2002), slowly coming to understand its message as they experienced the energy and excitement that comes with real collaboration, far more significant than the collegiality that they had previously aimed for in meetings that they grudgingly attended.

One veteran teacher’s first reaction to the standards-based shift was, “Just leave me alone. I’m getting ready to retire, and I don’t want to change. I want to be left in peace to do my own thing. I don’t need to talk to anyone about what I do.”

Visitors to our school tell us that they feel the difference in every part of the building. Noting model products on display, evidence of frequent team teaching, standards and objectives posted in classrooms, they see signs

of consistency across teams combined with creativity within each area. They point out the number of educators who serve as facilitators of learning, not only in their classrooms, but also with their colleagues.

The most powerful testimony about teacher learning, however, comes from the educators. That resistant veteran teacher has become an influential instructional leader, an early adopter of technology, an avid reader of research on assessment, and a force who lures other veterans into his classroom to share his enthusiasm about his successes in making learning come alive for students.

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visually see where they are with their learning and where they need to go next.

### MODEL QUALITY INSTRUCTION

Teachers have started to work differently in their classrooms as a result of this work. They have become better facilitators of learning by modeling quality instruction, including important concepts and strategies. Students then practice these concepts and strategies with support through small groups, triads, or partners. While monitoring progress, students are then asked to individually apply their new learning in order to meet the standards.

### DIFFERENTIATE

Language arts lends itself nicely to differentiation by varying

the reading level and challenge of books, scaffolding support with models, and adjusting the writing for students to provide the appropriate level of support and challenge.

Differentiating the process, product, or content should become more the norm, not the exception, as teachers review results from formative assessments to see the paths that students must travel to become proficient for each standard (Tomlinson, 2000, p. 1).

With the growing needs of students and the expanding capacity of teachers, we have moved to flexible groupings that allow students options and choices to complete standards-based activities rather than being confined by a structure.

This opportunity motivates students, provides them with choices, and reduces compliance and behavior issues in the classroom.

## GATHER FORMATIVE ASSESSMENTS

Gathering data and information through formative assessments should be more commonplace as teachers should be tracking where each student is in his or her progression toward mastery. This does not mean not giving summative assessments, but rather allowing ample time for modeling, practice, and support.

Formative assessments check for understanding and are designed to inform teaching and learning, not a summative or final exam grade (Fisher & Frey, 2007, p. 2). In addition, formative assessments may be designed and administered collaboratively to create common formative assessments, which give more information to teachers and allow for reflection, discussion, and innovation.

One of our school's favorite resources is *25 Quick Formative Assessments for a Differentiated Classroom* (Dodge, 2009), which has short, creative assessments that can be used for a variety of subject areas. Some examples that we use include using dry erase boards, sheet protectors, 3-2-1 summarizers, quick write/quick draw, and top 10 lists. These templates work well as we ask students to show what they know. These assessments are not part of the grade book, but rather part of a conversation among educators about what each student has learned and still needs to learn.

## WORK SMARTER, NOT HARDER

In a standards-based classroom, teachers should be working smarter, not harder, by looking to students to complete more work than teachers. Teachers should be looking at the big picture of learning and guiding students down a path of achievement while also managing a classroom day to day.

This requires both attention to detail and broader thinking, which is a shift for many teachers from the narrow focus of daily activities for students. For example, we have now shifted toward more product-based assessments that go beyond the literary essay and require student engagement by completing what Amy Benjamin calls a “nontraditional task requiring imagination and creative thinking” (Benjamin, 2008, p. 134). Our favorite resource for this is *Formative Assessment for English Language Arts: A Guide for Middle and High School Teachers* (Benjamin, 2008).

## EXPAND TEACHING RESOURCES

Teachers need access to more resources in order to meet the needs of all students. This is a challenge for teachers. Many struggle to find appropriate materials while also ensuring that students with diverse needs meet a standard or learning goal within a certain period of time.

Time is critical, and there is never enough of it, so teachers must find quick and appropriate ways to use class time wisely. For example, our 8th-grade teachers are looking for more short story selections at a variety of reading levels so that readers of all abilities can access the text and then demonstrate their abili-

ties to identify story elements, such as irony or flashbacks. If students are successful at this step, then we move them into novels at their reading level.

## SEEK CREATIVE SOLUTIONS

It is becoming more rare to teach a novel to a whole class. Both students and teachers need a greater variety of book options. The range of abilities in a middle school classroom continues to grow, so having more books that are interesting to students as well as challenging for the more advanced students has increased in importance.

The challenge for school systems is to provide funds for purchases, cross-check book usage between schools, and read and review novels to screen for mature or possible challenged content.

A resource that we have turned to is *Creative Book Reports: Fun Projects with Rubrics for Fiction and Nonfiction* (Feber, 2004), which we have used to create smaller nonfiction research projects for students to complete before some of our novel units on weather and the Civil War. I've also used this resource to create a final assessment on story elements for a coming-of-age novel study.

## ALIGN ASSESSMENT

Assessment is the most challenging area because many teachers may resist rubrics and standards-based grading, preferring to stay with scoring guides or traditional grading, which can be subjective.

Many middle and high schools still have conventional letter and/or numeric grades, while some have designed hybrids that combine all three: numbers, letters, and standards. Many elementary schools have long since converted to standards-based reporting, but the shift at the middle and high school levels has taken more time.

We have worked to assess in a balanced way, using rubrics and numeric grades throughout the year. More importantly, our assessment is more open and transparent for students. Students know what the learning goals and success criteria are for each unit because they are posted in each classroom.

Some teachers have gone one step further by asking for student self-reflections before, during, and after instruction. Students indicate whether they have the skill yet or if they need more assistance. This is helpful both for student growth and for the teacher to design differentiated lessons.

## SUPPORT FROM ADMINISTRATORS

Many of these initiatives could not happen without the planning, dedication, and support of administrators. After observing and participating in the work for the last year, I believe the following items are crucial for what administrators should know and be able to do.

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Building common knowledge

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**Develop a school culture that supports innovation and excellence.** Change means loss for so many teachers. Their reactions tend to fall into two categories: “This new initiative will never last” or “what I am going to do with the seven years of materials I developed?”

After three years of coaching, supporting, listening, and calming teachers, we now have a school that supports standards-based work. We have designated leaders in each department area who lead and support teachers.

These leaders modeled for teachers how formative assessments could be used effectively in each subject area. Leaders meet with the principal and assistant principal each month and report our progress to the school board at the end of year. Developing a school culture that supports innovation and excellence is not easy, but with patience, commitment, and the help of teacher leadership, it can be done.

**Invest in professional learning.** Our principal and assistant principal have repeatedly said over the last two years that it is all about support and challenge for teachers and students. For teachers, it has been a challenge to make this instructional shift in thinking and practice and to design the necessary materials to support the work. We have had the support of time and resources for professional learning, including books, articles, and an outside consultant from WestEd Learning Innovations.

Support at the school level could not happen without assistance from central office, where both the superintendent and assistant superintendent monitor and support the process. Without this, we couldn't have accomplished all that we did.

**Build in time, time, and more time.** Over the past three

years, the time commitment has been consistent and expansive, including after-school department meeting time, summer institutes, professional learning days, and release days from the classroom with substitute teacher coverage.

Now we have time during the school day to meet, collaborate, review common formative assessments, and/or share effective practices. Staying the course by providing the time and structure for teacher teams to collaborate and complete the work has been essential.

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