

# TEACHERS CONNECT *with* TECHNOLOGY

## ONLINE TOOLS BUILD NEW PATHWAYS TO COLLABORATION

By Vicki L. Phillips and Lynn Olson

**T**he Common Core State Standards promise to raise expectations for all students by establishing consistent college- and career-ready learning goals across the country. The standards build on the best of the current state standards informed by the experiences of top-performing countries. Most importantly, they focus on what is most essential at each grade level, bringing coherence and focus, rather than asking students and teachers to learn less and less about more and more.

Implementation of the Common Core provides an opportunity for states and districts not only to raise expectations, but also to rethink how they support teachers with instructional materials and professional learning. The Common Core will require teachers to shift their instructional practice in significant ways. To build long-term un-

derstanding and ownership, training and support should take advantage of teachers' own expertise and the power of teacher-to-teacher networks.

### PROFESSIONAL LEARNING NEEDS

Teachers have expressed a strong desire for Common Core-aligned resources and support. In a 2012 Scholastic survey of teachers, supported by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, teachers indicated they need more professional support and development to implement these standards. About six in 10 teachers requested professional learning focused on the standards and how to teach them, along with new English and math curricula and learning tools (Scholastic & Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2012).

Yet traditional approaches for supporting educators following the introduction of new content standards will



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likely prove inadequate. As Learning Forward noted in *Meet the Promise of Content Standards: Investing in Professional Learning*, “Resorting to comfortable and familiar approaches to professional learning such as short-term awareness-building information sessions on what the new standards are and how they compare to previous ones will fall short of the intense, practical, content-focused professional learning needed to realize the promise of all students college- and career-ready at the end of high school” (Killion & Hirsh, 2012). Effective professional learning encourages collaboration among teachers over a sustained period to tackle the challenge of Common Core implementation.

### A NEW APPROACH

At the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, we believe teachers need to be involved as critical partners in developing tools and resources to support Common Core implementation.

**State and district leaders can bring educators together to develop and adapt instructional materials aligned to the Common Core in a variety of settings — and the good news is they don’t have to start from scratch.**

When working together, 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.

The foundation supports two examples of this kind of collaboration: the Literacy Design Collaborative ([www.literacydesigncollaborative.org](http://www.literacydesigncollaborative.org)) and the Mathematics Design Collaborative ([www.mygroupgenius.org/mathematics](http://www.mygroupgenius.org/mathematics)), through which groups of teachers, curriculum experts, and other educators work together to create high-quality, useful lessons and research-based instructional tools incorporating the Common Core State Standards. More than developing a free, online library of new lessons and units, these efforts are pioneering

new pathways for how educators can work together to shift teacher practice.

For example, the Common Core State 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, instructional experts from New Visions for Public Schools, a New York City-based nonprofit organization, are using the framework and tools developed by the Literacy Design Collaborative to help teachers across content areas embed standards-based literacy skills into their classrooms.

These skills include locating textual evidence, evaluating arguments, interpreting meaning, and synthesizing information from different sources. Teachers use templates aligned to the standards to develop their own curriculum modules that scaffold

the writing process and enable teachers to assess student progress. These teachers are producing classroom-tested, Common Core-aligned modules that other teachers can adopt or adapt. And because all of the lessons are built off of a common set of templates, teachers are talking the same language, which makes sharing their work easier.

In mathematics, the standards ask teachers to weave together content knowledge and application. The Mathematics Design Collaborative addresses this by supporting teachers in enacting high-quality formative assessment through the use of lessons called classroom challenges. These two-day lessons help teachers understand where students are in their mastery of a topic, create learning experiences for students to develop rich understanding of a given topic, and give students opportunities to apply their learning in meaningful ways.

New Visions supports teachers in the math collaborative by facilitating grade-level team meetings to identify students’ misunderstandings based on a preassessment. Teachers jointly design probing questions that will help address those misconceptions as students work collaboratively on challenging math tasks. Then teachers collectively review students’ understandings once the task is completed to see if their instruction has been effective.

There is a buzz of enthusiasm in these schools as teachers embrace the work. Some say working with the collaboratives has been the best professional learning of their careers. Teachers report that they are covering fewer topics more deeply, that their expectations for student writing have increased, and that their students are more engaged and producing higher-quality work. Teachers also say that some of the extra time initially spent on these new instructional approaches is recouped later in the year because students can apply the skills learned to future lessons. Some teachers already are adapting these methods and performance tasks to the rest of their curriculum.

The collaboratives demonstrate that teachers are eager for meaningful opportunities to work together to create tools and resources that will improve student learning. And when teachers are engaged in developing instructional resources, they share them with each other, helping best practices spread faster than the common cold.

### WHAT EDUCATION LEADERS CAN DO

The collaboratives are just one model for engaging educators in Common Core implementation. State and district leaders can bring educators together to develop and adapt instructional materials aligned to the Common Core in a variety of settings — and the good news is they don’t have to start from scratch. Teachers can find tools from the literacy and math design collaboratives at ASCD’s EduCore (<http://educore.ascd.org>). In addition, organizations across the country are putting together collections of free, high-quality curriculum and instructional resources that can be adapted by local educators as part of a

sustained program of professional learning.

For example, LearnZillion (<http://learnzillion.com>) offers short video lessons developed by teachers that illustrate key concepts in mathematics and English language arts for students in grades 3-12. In 2012, Learn Zillion convened more than 100 teachers in Atlanta to create more than 2,000 lessons — with accompanying videos — aligned to the Common Core State Standards. Students can search the videos by content area, grade level, or topic to review material out of class, and teachers can access additional resources to plan lessons, engage parents, and monitor student progress.

Similarly, Better Lesson (<http://betterlesson.com>) provides free access to lesson plans, materials, and instructional resources created by successful teachers. Better Lesson was founded by a group of teachers from Boston and Atlanta who wanted to spread best practices to new and developing teachers. The organization is now working with high-performing mathematics and English language arts teachers to create Common Core-aligned courses and share strategies for effective instruction.

Technology allows teachers to access professional development resources when and how they want to, expanding the reach of summer workshops and professional learning days. Increasingly, innovative groups are tapping into the ability to provide tools and resources online. Student Achievement Partners ([www.achievethecore.org](http://www.achievethecore.org)) provides resources and professional development modules to help teachers understand the instructional shifts Common Core requires. The organization is working with the two national teachers unions to develop Common Core-aligned tools by teachers for teachers.

Teacher leaders who are part of the fellowship program at America Achieves (<http://commoncore.americaachieves.org>) have created lessons grounded in the Common Core, which other teachers can use or adapt, as well as videos of themselves teaching the lessons. The Teaching Channel ([www.teachingchannel.org](http://www.teachingchannel.org)) also allows educators to search for lesson ideas that are linked to the Common Core and then watch videos of teachers giving those lessons in real classrooms. Instead of inventing new techniques out of whole cloth, the Teaching Channel helps connect teachers with tactics, strategies, and methods that have been shown to work.

## REACHING TEACHERS

These resources can only be effective if teachers know about them. Too often, we hear from teachers that they are in great need of resources but don't know what is available. Some states are addressing this by creating dedicated websites with information and links to materials. For example, the Tennessee Department of Education launched TNCore (<http://tncore.org>), which includes background on the standards and the instructional shifts they require, state-developed online training modules, and links to external resources.

District intranets and learning management systems also

offer ways to connect teachers to high-quality online resources and to each other. Districts in Colorado, Illinois, and New York are now piloting new cloud-based services that connect content from a wide variety of publishers to information about student learning needs, giving teachers greater access to curriculum and assessment resources and the ability to personalize learning so that students get what they need, when they need it, in a format that works best for them.

## THE POWER OF COLLABORATION

From online lessons to streaming video of master teachers in the classroom, technology can be a powerful tool to help teachers explore and share best practices to implement the Common Core. Yet technology is best positioned to support, not drive, effective Common Core implementation.

The most important ingredient is the opportunity for teachers to collaborate and reflect together. To get Common Core implementation right, school and district leaders must take the time to ensure teachers have adequate resources and support to collaborate on the enormous shifts in instruction they are being asked to make on behalf of students.

Standards alone won't teach students how to closely read great literature or choose the appropriate mathematical strategy to solve a problem. For that, there is no substitute for great teaching. With the right supports, teachers are poised 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.

## REFERENCES

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