

TOTAL IMMERSION

NORTH CAROLINA DISTRICT PLUNGES INTO COMMON CORE WITH A SYSTEMWIDE LEARNING PLAN

By Valerie von Frank

A few decades ago, kindergarteners may have chanted “one, two, buckle my shoe” as the sum total of their counting skills. With Common Core State Standards, they learn not only to add one plus one, but they have to explain why one plus one equals two.

In Charlotte-Mecklenburg (N.C.) Schools, educators have leapt into the Common Core with both feet, creating an internal website for teachers to share performance tasks and implementing systemwide, school-based professional learning that has put the standards into practice and tested students on them in the 2012-13 school year.

“I came at this with excitement, not, ‘Here’s another initiative rolling out that we have to embrace,’ ” said Ann Clark, deputy superintendent of the district. “Memorizing that one plus one is two and explaining why one plus one

is two are two very different things, and that to me is what is exciting about the Common Core.

“It’s going to push our students at every grade level to think critically, to problem solve, to analyze, to articulate, and to write in ways that they’ve not been expected to before. As a career educator, that is very exciting to me.”

ROLLING OUT THE STANDARDS

The district began to address the switch to the Common Core two years ago by introducing the standards to the school board and to parents in what Clark said parents have dubbed Common Core 101. The standards were broken into grade-level expectations first.

The district created a Common Core steering committee of zone superintendents, the deputy superintendent, curriculum specialists, a teacher in residence, principals from all levels and types of schools, and a staff member from the accountability division to create a professional development plan.



The learning was designed to be school-based, Clark said, because the district had in place professional learning communities that had been functioning for several years already. In addition, with more than 10,000 teachers, it was impractical to try to pull teachers together for large-scale sessions to introduce standards concepts as a whole. Even putting all kindergarten teachers in one room in a district building is not possible.



Ann Clark

Unpacking the standards at the school level made sense, she said, in learning teams where principals and instructional specialists would use learned strategies to dig deep into each new standard and explore how it would look in practice through performance tasks.

To build capacity in the initial year, district leaders met monthly with principals, assistant principals, literacy facilitators, and math facilitators. Two district curricular directors led the curricular instruction teams: the lead literacy person trained literacy facilitators, and the lead math person trained the math facilitators. The directors were trained in the Common Core by the Aspen Institute, a Washington, D.C.-based education and policy studies organization. Chief academic officers from large urban districts gather twice a year to work with the Aspen Institute on key issues of mutual interest, including the Common Core.

Then, in two-hour weekly teacher planning sessions with grade-level or subject-area teams at their schools, the

school-based specialists offered feedback as teacher teams developed lesson and unit plans while thinking through the standards.

While each school is required to have professional learning communities, each has flexibility in its approach to how those look. Some meet for shorter periods twice a week; others meet once for a longer time. Some schools schedule common planning periods while others use student release time.

“Our whole strategy was built on the notion of building capacity for a team in each school to own the training process so it wasn’t solely on the shoulders of each principal,” Clark said. “So it was not just ‘meet for professional development on the Common Core and let’s hope it goes well,’ but really infusing the thinking about these standards.”

Over the summer, teachers in all content areas met under the guidance of a curriculum specialist to write the initial curriculum guides, and principals and assistant principals participated in a weeklong summer leadership conference.

The district planned a weeklong, voluntary teacher institute focused on either literacy or mathematics each summer. These are offered multiple times each summer, and teachers receive “flex” certificates in return that they can use for a day off during the school year in return as compensation. Typically, several hundred attend each session.

Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools

Charlotte, N.C.

Number of schools: **159**

Enrollment: **141,171**

Staff: **9,180** certified teachers

Racial/ethnic mix:

White:	32%
Black:	42%
Hispanic:	18%
Asian/Pacific Islander:	5%
Native American:	3%
Other:	0%

Limited English proficient: **11%**

Languages spoken: **168** countries represented

Free/reduced lunch: **53.4%**

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Meanwhile, throughout the school year, the district steering committee continues to meet for two hours each month to evaluate professional learning and assess gaps, Clark said.

“We always get feedback on our professional development,” she said, “so the agenda changes from month to month. We might be preparing a presentation for the board, a series of trainings, a webinar. We might have gone to an Aspen Institute seminar and come back with new information we want to share. It’s about working a plan and determining what the next steps need to be. This team is, as the name implies, navigating through this process.”

A SHARED WEBSITE

The most significant piece of learning may be the internal shared website to which teachers upload performance tasks they have created linked to the Common Core standards. But first, teachers had to learn to “unpack” or deconstruct a standard to create the performance tasks they would teach.

In the first year, in 2011-12, the district focused on a process for unpacking one standard that would be new to all teachers: the first writing standard focused on argumentative writing at each level in kindergarten through 12th grade.

The standard was at once familiar and not since it involved writing but with a different approach than most were used to, said Becky Graf, the district’s director of humanities, who oversees the database effort. The state had tested writing at just two grades, and many teachers hadn’t worked on writing skills with students much at all. It seemed like a good fit.

“It gave us a chance to talk about the shifts in literacy,” she said. “In their professional development, we were able to show them, ‘Here are the kinds of things that the next generation assessments are going to be asking for.’ Our state has done a lot more with constructed response, and everybody is used to filling in bubbles and figuring out (how to teach) test-taking skills that way. That wasn’t going to give us the shift we needed.”

The teachers were given four objectives. They had to learn how to unpack the standard, how to design lessons aligned to the standard, how to analyze student work, and they had to complete performance tasks for their grade level. They were held accountable by submitting the performance tasks to a shared internal database.

The first year, rather than every teacher submitting a performance task, every professional learning community uploaded the task the team constructed, the rubric the

team used to score the task, and three samples of student work: one that approached the standard, one that met the standard,

and one that exceeded the standard. District leaders recognized that the work might not align with the standard and teachers might have missteps. But the process built on earlier work, Graf said.

“We’d already initiated a process where we were very focused on the quality of the student work product and we were raising that bar, so (the Common Core work) really synced nicely with the district effort,” she said.

ENHANCING THE EFFORT

In 2012-13, the efforts expanded to every standard, and teacher teams began uploading performance tasks and student work products by grade level and course or content area in a new format that is searchable to any teacher within the district. Colleagues can see their peers’ tasks, rubrics, and student work to know what others are doing. A drop-down menu allows the teacher to select under which standard to place the task. Teachers also can get the email address of the submitting teacher to contact for more information or handouts.

“We gave initial professional development on what is a performance task and the design of a performance task,” Graf said. “Now teachers can actually use the samples that they know teachers created, that they know their peers created, to better their own practice.”

District-level teacher teams in every content area reviewed uploaded performance tasks and vetted them. In addition, some school leaders used sample online tasks for professional learning, asking teachers to use the tasks as examples for discussion and comparison in professional learning team meetings.

As teachers added to the overall performance tasks across the standards, the district worked to calibrate the initial Writing 1 standard that had been the first-year focus.

Using the online data, curriculum specialists were able to see how teachers were scoring the performance tasks and the quality of the student work products, whether that was by school, a particular grade level, or a particular subject.

“It provided a view of where the gaps are and helped us know where we needed to go next in our training,” Graf said. “That’s a big piece we used to plan the next phase of the work.”

Graf said reviewing is as constant as change, and both she and Clark know the work will not cease.

“We have much work to continue to do,” Clark said, “but certainly our strategy is working.

“The teachers are not in their individual classrooms trying to figure this out alone,” she continued. “They’re sitting in their professional learning communities and have a facilitator in the room with them, and there have been lots of supports put in place for them.”



Becky Graf

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Graf said she expects the work in the online database to turn over rather than be archived as the quality improves and teachers continue to vet the tasks. Eventually, she said, the performance tasks will be screened and vetted, will have been reviewed by a curriculum committee, and will have experienced success in multiple classrooms in more than one building. Eventually, teachers may log in to the site and see an Amazon-style rating system that could help them determine which task might best suit their needs.

But for now, what has the database shown?

“One aha we have been grappling with is that teachers are used to frontloading so much,” Graf said. “When they talk about the shift (to the Common Core), they talk about reading and approaching text, but the same thing applies to writing and problem solving. Teachers give all the steps and never lay the problem out and let the students grapple with it and come to their own solutions. We need to help teachers be OK in letting go and giving kids a more inquiry-based approach. They can’t just frontload it and turn it all into factual recall. And that was

happening in a lot of buildings. The kinds of tasks they submitted show a lot of structure.”

Graf said the task samples tied to the Common Core created a shift in thinking, showing the gap between what teachers understand and the level of understanding needed to accomplish the goal. She said teachers looked at the database tasks and said their students would not be able to do the task — or they tried a task and were surprised that the children could do more than they expected.

“It’s almost like we’re doing at a district level what we want teachers doing at a classroom level,” Graf said. “We did some teaching. We collected a lot of student work. We’re analyzing the student work to make changes in our instruction at a district level to make changes — and that’s what we’re asking our teachers to do.”

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