

# CORNERSTONES OF

## An educator's challenge is knowing what to teach and how to teach it

By Tracy Crow

A key finding in the first report from Learning Forward's ongoing research project on the status of professional learning in the U.S. states: "Effective professional development is intensive, ongoing, and connected to practice; **focuses on the teaching and learning of specific academic content**; is connected to other school initiatives; and builds strong working relationships among teachers. However, most teachers in the United States do not have access to professional development that uniformly meets all these criteria" (Darling-Hammond, Wei, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009).

As is clear from this finding and dozens of research studies, content knowledge is essential. Joellen Killion, Learning Forward's deputy executive director, illustrates this point beautifully in a story in one of her columns for the *Teachers Teaching Teachers* newsletter. In writing about the Quality Teaching standard, Killion explains the need for skillful teachers to integrate teacher content knowledge, instruction, and assessment. As she gives examples to support her point, she remembers attending a mathematics educators conference, where a general session facilitator asked attendees to comment on a videotaped teaching lesson. Killion at first held back and, when no one else spoke, shared her opinions about all of the things the teacher did right in the lesson: how she engaged the students, how she talked about the concept in concrete ways, and so on. Others in the session chimed in. Killion writes, "Shortly into the participants' comments, a distinguished gentleman (I learned later that it was Hyman Bass, world-renowned mathematics educator and researcher) rose from the dais, approached the microphone, and stated, 'Yes, you are correct. Because she taught so well, it is now unlikely that these students will unlearn the incorrect concept she taught them in this lesson. Just because she can teach well does not mean she can teach the content accurately'" (Killion, 2010, p. 9).

Killion continues, "My experience in being too quick to look

at the practice of teaching through a purely pedagogical lens has helped me look more carefully at teaching as a nexus of the content, teaching, learning, and assessment."

As Killion stresses, content is essential, but it isn't the only consideration. Lee Shulman (1986) coined the term "pedagogical content knowledge" to represent the intersection of knowing a subject matter well and knowing also how to teach that subject. Pedagogical content knowledge includes knowing how to make key aspects of a subject comprehensible to students and understanding what topics are easier or harder to learn. Shulman argued that teachers need a wide range of strategies for teaching their content area, strategies they gain through research and practice. Deborah Ball (2000) recognizes the ongoing tension (since the time of Dewey) between subject matter pedagogical knowledge in teacher education and notes also what some see as another competing priority — attending to a diverse student body equitably. Yet, as she states, a deep understanding of a content area serves all students well: "Knowing content is ... crucial to being inventive in creating worthwhile opportunities for learning that takes learners' experiences, interests, and needs into account" (p. 242). The challenge, Ball notes, is that teacher learning is fragmented, and teachers are left on their own to integrate subject matter, pedagogy, and myriad other concerns.

### REFERENCES

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# QUALITY TEACHING

## Implementing common standards requires a real commitment to learning

By Hayes Mizell

In this era of dissatisfaction with public education, there are many big ideas for reform. Some are intriguing but impractical; others are promising but fail to gain a constituency. And even worthy proposals that education leaders support may not survive the rigors of implementation.

It will be unfortunate if this is the fate of Common Core State Standards. Led by the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers, 49 states and territories are participating in the initiative. The goal is to have a common set of standards that states can adopt voluntarily. A state may choose to include standards beyond the common core, as long as the common core represents at least 85% of the state's standards in English language arts and mathematics.

The sponsoring organizations published the standards earlier this year, which “define the knowledge and skills students should have within their K-12 education careers so that they will graduate high school able to succeed in entry-level, credit-bearing academic college courses and in workforce training programs.”

This is the next logical step in the standards movement. The Common Core State Standards refine states' previous efforts by reducing the number of standards and increasing their depth and sophistication. Equally important, the new standards can replace the patchwork of current standards, whose quality varies widely among the states. The developers hope the standards will “help ensure students are receiving a high-quality education consistently, from school to school and state to state.”

The Common Core State Standards are not self-implementing. States will have to adopt them. School systems will need to develop or adopt curricula that align instruction and

student learning with the new standards. Teachers and administrators must understand the new standards and curricula as well as how to use them to shape instruction.

For the Common Core State Standards to have significant impact, implementation cannot be left to chance and will require careful planning and educators' intentional and sustained learning. The role of professional development will be critical. Given the budgetary pressures under which many state education agencies and school systems are operating, they will be tempted to shortchange the professional learning educators need to implement the standards. One can envision, for example, states convening large statewide or regional gatherings of educators, or conducting webinars, for what will basically be information sessions about the new standards.

It is important for frontline practitioners to know about the standards, but sessions consisting mostly of describing and explaining are not enough. Teachers and administrators need to think about the standards and critically consider how to change their instruction so students learn what is necessary to perform at standard.

The new standards will only achieve what their creators intend if states and school systems thoughtfully structure professional development so educators have the time and facilitation to probe the standards' implications for teaching and learning. The most effective strategy will include teachers working in small teams, plotting how to move effectively from studying specific standards to learning

and using standards-based curriculum and instruction. This seems logical and tidy, but implementation will be difficult, requiring team members to revisit, reflect on, and refine their practice throughout a school year.

As laudable as the Common Core State Standards are, their development, dissemination, and adoption are only the first steps to raise levels of student performance. Everything depends on the effectiveness of implementation at the classroom level, and that, in turn, depends on the quality, intensity, and frequency of appropriate professional learning.

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### Standards at the fore

A critical aspect of the content knowledge teachers need is the recently introduced Common Core State Standards Initiative. Learn more about common core standards at [www.corestandards.org](http://www.corestandards.org). Also, see Stephanie Hirsh's column on p. 72 for her perspective on supporting educators in such an effort.