



# COMMON CORE MEETS UNCOMMON KIDS

Finding common ground with students on the autism spectrum.

By Barbara Boroson

**I**n 2010, the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) blew in like a tornado to slam shut achievement gaps and whip every student into readiness for college and careers by the end of high school. Now educators are expected to bring all students to a common destination. But at the very same time, unprecedented numbers of students on the autism spectrum are being placed in inclusive classrooms, requiring teachers to differentiate more than ever. So educators are in a bind: Just as standards become increasingly uniform, classrooms become increasingly diverse. It's a twister.

And though the CCSS does not dictate how every teacher must teach, it does dictate, quite specifically, what every learner must learn. Every student is assessed according to his or her progress toward standards of high-level abstract thinking, critical reading of complex literature, thoughtful engagement with informational texts, and analysis of evidence. These are lofty ideals for any student, but especially elusive for our students on the autism spectrum, who remain firmly grounded in concrete.

For students on the spectrum—who struggle to take the perspective of others, who think that “reading between the lines” requires a magnifying glass, and who accept most information at face value—reflective meta-cognition sounds like the stuff of fairytales. And it may well be. The standards are intense, the stakes are high, and some of these students may never fully comprehend the nuance and depth that both enhance and complicate this colorful new frontier. Toto, we are clearly not in Kansas anymore.

But like Dorothy, our students take great comfort in the familiar, supportive elements from home that can help them navigate this challenging new world. So before we can even consider introducing students on the spectrum to the curricular challenges ahead, we need to ensure that their significant functional needs are met with consistency and comfort. We need to reach them before we can teach them.

### Comfort Anchors

When their world feels out of control, which is most of the time, students on the autism spectrum need the comfort of familiarity. For some, com-



fort comes in the form of a small toy squeezed tightly in their hands or in certain socks worn on certain days. For others, comfort is found in the regularity of the lunch menu or the bus route. Students on the spectrum may depend on these anchors to stay grounded.

Inclusive classrooms must provide a transparent and reliable structure to every activity. Visual schedules and other comfort anchors serve as predictable, calming elements in an otherwise blustery environment. Please consider the paramount importance of the teacher as anchor. When the teacher is absent, expect a stormy day with students on the spectrum. Try to ensure the presence of a consistent, attentive substitute who will maintain structure and follow through on as many aspects of the routine as possible.

### Sensory Sense

The sensory systems of students on the spectrum tend to be calibrated differently from others, letting in either too much or too little sensory input at any given time. An overwhelmed or under-stimulated sensory system can lead to extreme and socially unexpected behavioral reactions. We need to help these students modulate their sensory systems by providing simple adaptations that soothe or stimulate, depending on individual needs.

It really is possible to create a classroom space that is warm and inviting to all, while not being overwhelming to any. Support the creation of a cozy sensory space within the classroom or elsewhere in the building where students can retreat and regroup as needed. This space can include cushions, beanbag chairs, a rug, squeeze balls, beads, magazines, music with headphones—whatever soothes.

### Classroom Community

While students on the spectrum have difficulty relating to their typical peers, those typical peers have at least as much trouble relating to them. Truly inclusive environments must be overtly exclusive of bullying, victimization, and ostracism.

Passive supervision is not nearly enough. Peer relationships need to be modeled, taught, and actively facilitated through mentor programs, study buddies, and lunch clubs, for example. Bring in speakers and workshops that explain autism spectrum disorders in language that is meaningful and motivating to kids, inspiring them to band together as a diverse community, united in unconditional acceptance.

### True Collaboration

When working with parents, we need to understand that they have traveled a long, bumpy road littered with high hopes and dashed dreams. They face a lifetime of struggles and pervasive challenges that extend before, after, and beyond school. Parents have learned that, even amid grief, fear, and exhaustion, they must be champions for their children. They have learned by necessity to advocate, interpret, protect, guide, and even speak for their children.

Principals are well-positioned to model effective collaboration and to serve as liaisons: on one hand, helping to engage parents and caregivers openly and nondefensively, honoring the coping strategies they have developed in response to the extreme challenges of spectrum parenting; on the other hand, helping explain to parents that the inclusive classroom presents a different set of necessary challenges and coping strategies. Guide teachers to honor the chronic, practical, and emotional struggles faced by parents, while explaining to parents that the inclusive classroom presents a very different set of necessary academic challenges.

### Who's In?

Confronting this array of challenges requires certain kinds of teachers and a certain kind of principal. Some educators are eager to re-imagine their skill sets to coax these remote learners out from a seemingly black and white existence into a technicolor landscape. Other teachers feel safer back on the farm. Choose inclusion teachers mindfully, or let them choose themselves. Spectrum education takes confidence, humility, clarity, creativity, consistency, empathy, and patience. It's not for everyone.

Moreover, a successful inclusion program must be inclusive through and through—not only in certain select classrooms, but in the lunchroom, on the playground, in the halls, in the nurse's office, in the art room, in the gym, on the bus, and in the main office. Bring in autism education not only for classroom teachers, but also for classroom paraprofessionals, the therapeutic team, special-area teachers, and all building staff, too.

### Finding the Hook

Preoccupations often lead students on the spectrum to wander far off the curricular course. These students tend to avoid new and unfamiliar situations that require improvisation or flexible thinking. Everything we teach is new to them—





**Teachers report that the No. 1 challenge in working with students on the spectrum is ... parents! Mediate this crucial relationship by validating both the acute academic stressors of school and the chronic practical and emotional challenges of home.**

that's why we teach it. So as soon as we introduce a new topic, they retreat. They go toward what they know, toward what feels familiar and safe: state capitals, presidential life spans, dinosaur trivia, or train schedules.

To break through, we need to "find a hook," *i.e.* make something new feel familiar by linking it to topics that are already of high interest. Any special-interest topic can be hooked to any subject using a little creative thinking. Then, once our students are hooked, we can bridge and expand from there.

### Information In

Many students on the spectrum struggle with auditory processing, information organization, retention, retrieval, and generalization. For this reason, we need to present information in ways that are highly organized to maximize not only comprehension, but also assimilation and retrieval.

Students on the spectrum often learn in very discrete, immutable chunks. These isolated bits of information do not spontaneously merge with previously acquired knowledge; they float untethered and unfixed in the brain—nearly impossible to retrieve when called on. To that end, we must make categories, contexts, and connections apparent, and guide students as to where to mentally file information and how to generalize it.

Guide contextual learning using timelines, sequencing activities, cluster maps, concept webs, Venn diagrams, cause/effect charts, classification charts, and text-connection exercises. The game 20 Questions is great practice for promoting thinking in flexible categories, at any level.

### Information Out

Keep in mind that no matter how clearly and contextually information is presented, repeated exposure may be required to make it stick. Give students varied, multiple opportunities to demonstrate new information and reinforce its assimilation into a body of cohesive knowledge. Let them speak it, write it, type it, act it, sing it, dance it, paint it, videotape it, collage it, montage it, podcast it, or PowerPoint it.

It falls to administrators, teachers, and parents to walk in lockstep together, guiding these unconventional students toward success in this era of conformity. We need to collaborate with confidence, humility, and humanity. And as our students struggle from standard to standard along this slippery yellow brick road, we need to help them keep their feet securely on the ground while encouraging them to reach for the sky.

Even with all of these strategies, CCSS and autism spectrum disorders are, at best, fair-weather friends. Without doubt, there will be unexpected squalls. There will be times when our students get overwhelmed, and when we lose our footing. But as leaders, we need to believe not only in our students, but in their families, in our teachers, and in ourselves, too. It takes patience; it takes collaboration; and it takes imagination. And it may require clicking our heels together a few times, too. 

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### TRY THIS

Play around with "finding the hook." Can you link concepts in math, English, social studies, and science to, say, dinosaurs? To airplane engines? How about to Taylor Swift?