

Principal[®]

November/December 2012

Preparing Teachers to Meet Common Core

Are teachers getting the kind of professional development they need to implement Common Core Standards?

Toni Hollingsworth, Heather Donnelly, and Lisa Piazzola

Principals face an important challenge in preparing teachers to implement instructional shifts that move students toward rigorous independent thinking and learning under the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). The standards support decades of research on how learning occurs within the human brain, prompting some critical questions:

- Does the professional development provided today adequately prepare teachers to promote the rigorous thinking and learning required of students by the CCSS?
- Does professional development emulate that same level of rigor with our teachers as adult learners?
- If the answers to these questions are “no,” what needs to change?

In the recent book, *Pathways to the Common Core, Accelerating Achievement*, authors Lucy Calkins, Mary Ehrenworth, and Christopher Lehman state that, “In the end, the most important aspect of the Common Core State Standards is the part that has yet to be figured out: the implementation. As challenging as it must have been to write and to finesse the adoption of this document, that work is nothing compared with the work of teaching in ways that bring all students to these ambitious expectations. The Common Core State Standards have been written, but the plan for implementing them has not. The goal is clear. The pathway is not.”

Highly effective professional development is more critical than ever in the months ahead as we move toward the changes in instructional practice that need to occur within classrooms as schools implement CCSS. As the first step in the “pathway” to achieving the goal set by Common Core, educators must design professional development that is meaningful and reflective of the significant research on how the human brain processes, retains, and applies new learning. Effective professional development recognizes teachers as the learners, just as students are the learners within the classroom. We know through years of research on best practice that gradually releasing student learning is a highly effective instructional

approach, so shouldn’t our professional development around the new standards also gradually release teacher learning? Too often the breakdown of successful professional development and teacher learning occurs in the transition from the training room to the classroom. Creating the all-inclusive PowerPoint presentation that addresses Common Core from A to Z and then having teachers sit through hours of professional development that tells them everything they’ve ever wanted to know about the rigors of Common Core will not create the instructional shifts that need to occur. Teachers are expected to move student thinking and learning to higher levels, so this type of informational training is not sufficient. Professional development must address application of learning to change instructional practice.

Analysis and Application

So what should professional development that supports teachers in effective application of the standards look like? A varied approach that balances gradual release with inquiry, followed by opportunities for supported application within the classroom, best supports teachers in analyzing and applying instructional shifts to teaching and student learning required in the Common Core. One of those approaches is the use of teacher collaboration within professional development sessions and within embedded classroom shared visits. Through well-planned and focused professional development that provides teachers with opportunities to collaborate on their understanding and the ability to apply the instructional shifts necessary within Common Core, teachers learn from and with each other. Implementing a collaborative professional development model that gradually releases teachers to take ownership of their own learning makes a significant difference in the successful implementation of the Common Core. This shift in how professional development is delivered requires additional time and effort in planning, but the results are worth it.

Revamping Professional Development

How do you facilitate collaborative professional development to promote a successful implementation of Common Core? Imagine immersing teachers in collaborative sessions that engage them in discussions around rigorous high-level questions. Such questions, which emerge from an understanding of Common Core, include:

- What do you notice about the way the Common Core State Standards are written and organized as they relate to cross grade-level expectations? How are former state standards alike or different from the expectations of the new standards? What major shifts will we need to make to meet these standards?
- What resources do we currently have that address the expectations of the CCSS for rigorous student thinking and learning? Will these resources support differentiated instruction that will accelerate learning for all students?
- How does your current instruction promote student thinking and learning? What instructional shifts will you need to make in order to promote the rigorous thinking required by CCSS? What support will you need to make those shifts?
- Does your planning reflect a clear focus on the process of learning and also promote thinking in your students that can be independently applied to new learning? How effectively are you promoting metacognition within your students?

As teachers engage in collaboration during professional development around these questions, many opportunities will emerge for administrators to formatively assess teacher understanding of how to promote the rigorous thinking and learning outlined within the CCSS. This initial and ongoing assessment of teacher understanding will provide administrators with essential information needed to support their staff.

Meaningful professional development begins with purposeful planning for teacher learning. As national and international instructional coaches working in K-12 classrooms throughout the U.S., we have identified three critical areas that guide successful implementation—focus, thinking, and learning. When planning professional development, the following questions based on these three critical areas will guide principals through the process to ensure meaningful discussion, active engagement, reflection, and understanding for teachers to apply learning that changes teacher practice.

- **Focus:** *Is the professional development focused on the process of learning?* The focus of learning around Common Core must be on how teachers will implement the standards effectively to promote rigorous thinking and

learning in their students. This focus is the foundation of professional development that guides the planning for the use of inquiry and gradual release of learning.

- **Thinking:** *Who will be doing the thinking in the professional development sessions, the facilitator or the teachers?* Meaningful professional development actively engages teachers in their own learning, and through purposeful modeling and questioning can push teacher thinking toward the necessary instructional shifts.
- **Learning:** *Does the professional development allow all teachers at all grade levels, content areas, and special areas to have access to the learning required to successfully implement CCSS?* Successfully implementing the rigor of the CCSS requires a schoolwide commitment and focus, making it necessary for everyone to have a depth of understanding.

Support for Teachers

To be highly effective, professional development must also have a support component for teachers as they return to their classrooms to apply their learning. Through a collaborative professional development model, teachers are supported in planning and delivering effective instruction that promotes thinking and learning. This model engages teachers of varying experiences, grade levels, and content areas in meaningful discussions that promote increased teacher reflection and refinement in practice. Teachers are grouped in collaborative instructional teams that participate in several instructional rounds of observing, sharing, and reflecting on their practice. This collaboration focuses on the process of thinking and learning among teachers, creates a common thread that brings staff together, and values the teacher as the instructional decision-maker within the classroom, resulting in significant improvement in teacher practice and an increased desire to continue to grow professionally. These changes impact the school culture in moving toward an environment that continually promotes thinking and learning, especially when the principal is also involved in the collaboration as a learner.

The same three critical areas used to guide effective professional development that supports teachers in applying their learning can also be used to help administrators identify good instruction in order to gain a deeper understanding of the instructional effectiveness within their buildings.

Administrative walkthroughs provide a way to formatively assess teacher application of effective practice that promotes rigorous thinking and learning, as well as identify areas of schoolwide growth. Identifying specific and critical instructional practices during short walkthroughs can be challenging for any administrator. Seeking answers to questions around the critical areas of focus, thinking, and learning allows administrators to organize what they see in such a way to have a greater impact.

- **Focus:** *Is the lesson focused on what students are learning and is it focused on the process of learning?*
- **Thinking:** *Who is doing most of the thinking in the classroom—the teacher or the students? How is the teacher promoting thinking within the classroom and to what depth?*
- **Learning:** *Do all students have access to the learning and can they apply it on their own?*

Once an administrator identifies the area (focus, thinking, learning) requiring change, he or she can then develop a collaborative plan with the teacher to address specific best practices that increase effectiveness.

Rethinking needs to occur in the way we deliver professional development to create meaningful change in teacher practice. Among the factors that need to be addressed in order to meet the rigor outlined in the CCSS are:

- More collaboration in a variety of forms,
- Increased focus on incorporating gradual release and inquiry,
- Alignment to the research on how the brain processes information from the perspective of the teacher as the learner, and
- Higher expectations with meaningful support from administrators in improving teacher practice to promote thinking and learning.

Emphasizing teacher learning and application brings meaning and rigor to professional development and facilitates sustainable change in instructional practice that benefits student learning.

Toni Hollingsworth is president and CEO of Lead To Learn LLC, based in Chapin, South Carolina. **Heather Donnelly** and **Lisa Piazzola** are both national instructional coaches at Lead To Learn.

Principal is published five times a year by the National Association of Elementary School Principals.

To learn more about NAESP, visit www.naesp.org.