



**ADAPT
AND
EVOLVE**

A supportive culture of reflection guides teachers toward effective Common Core implementation.

By Aaron Thiell

Working in K-12 education, whether as an administrator or a teacher, requires a certain ability to adapt to the abrupt changes—to technology, best practices, and standards, for example—that are inherent to our profession. In many cases, these changes can be difficult, but they can also present us with significant opportunities to improve the way we approach teaching and learning.

The adoption and implementation of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) presents us with just such an opportunity, one that gives teachers the framework and impetus to focus on instructional practice, creativity, and expanded professional decision-making. Teachers cannot do this work alone, however, and the opportunities the CCSS afford us can be lost if we do not make concerted efforts to create supportive school cultures and focus on building teacher capacity. Principals play a critical role in recognizing the expertise and talent that teachers bring to school each day, as well as in providing the necessary supports that enable teachers to provide a relevant and equitable education to all students.

Take the Long Road

With any major change to the way we approach education, principals and teachers alike feel the pressure, from all sides, to immediately produce positive results. However, it is important that principals resist the urgency of short-term imperatives (raise those test scores!), refusing to allow them to overwhelm or impede long-term goals.

I feel fortunate to work with a district superintendent and assistant superintendent who recognize that education is a long game. The moment I was offered my current position, the superintendent expressed his confidence in me as a new principal and said that he envisioned improving

student learning and achievement as a project without end. His willingness to remain focused on the long road has allowed me to extend the same thinking to our students and faculty.

Our approach to standardized test scores bears out this approach. According to the most recent state assessments, our school has pockets of achievement to celebrate and others that are ripe for significant improvement. Although we will strive to improve learning and achievement in every way we can, we have to admit that we cannot make every necessary improvement overnight. And we certainly will not be able to raise achievement levels if my role is limited to one of “exhorter-in-chief,” pressuring teachers to raise test scores at the expense of everything else. Instead, I try to keep in mind that by respecting teacher judgment and facilitating teacher reflection and learning, I will be creating the conditions that lead to improved student learning and achievement in the long term.

Trust in Teacher Expertise

Supporting teachers in times of stress and change goes hand in hand with continuing to respect their knowledge, expertise, and judgment. It can be seductive for principals to search for a single solution or right answer to our greatest instructional challenges, but that search is often unnecessary, given how many answers already reside within the walls of the school.

Recently, a first-grade teacher asked me if she could rearrange the math units on the pacing calendar so that the continuum would make more sense to some of our youngest students. I agreed to the change because the teacher had clearly used the implementation of the CCSS as a springboard for reflection on her math instruction. She had conducted research, comparing the standards, optional state curriculum, and

our textbook series to inform and articulate a professional judgment. My job is to support this kind of thinking and reflection, and, in the end, her pacing decision made perfect sense.

When a sixth-grade teacher noticed that too many pages in her students' writer's notebooks were going unfilled as they raced through the approved writing curriculum, I told her to trust her instincts in finding a solution—even if that meant students writing some personal pieces that didn't "go anywhere."

When a third-grade teacher thoughtfully articulated that learning to teach a new math curriculum and new spelling curriculum at the same time left her feeling like she'd teach neither very well, we mutually agreed to put the new spelling curriculum on pause and focus on one major curricular change at a time.

Respecting teacher judgment doesn't mean that principals must grant total autonomy, but it does acknowledge that teacher inquiry and creativity are central to solving problems of practice—including those posed by the CCSS.

Use the Standards to Rethink Parental Involvement

Parents want to—and should—be involved in our schools beyond bake sales and book fairs. Fortunately, the implementation of the CCSS has forced us to think deeply about how we communicate curricular expectations to parents, and to recognize that it's not enough to photocopy online resources and hand them out without explanation or embed a few resource links in an e-newsletter.

Last year, we created brief curriculum expectations booklets for each grade level. We then distributed those booklets, which framed my presentation to parents, at our open house (see Kim Marshall's *Rethinking Teacher Supervision and Evaluation* for a helpful exemplar that we used as an organizational template). Our booklets are slim and include our school mission statement and theory of action, bulleted lists of essential skills in key content areas, and lists of academic vocabulary. This year, we'll add examples of student work and a section on social and emotional skills. By sharing and explaining these documents, we're

inviting family involvement on a different level and trusting parents to join us on the journey of understanding the standards together.

It was important for us to embrace the notion that before we communicated the expectations set forth by the CCSS to parents, we had to fully understand them ourselves. Each section in the booklet represents hours of professional conversation, reflection, and action. Teachers had to whittle the curriculum down to what is most essential, reach agreement around instructional consistency across classrooms, and draft each section at a faculty meeting or weekly collaboration period.

Reclaim and Repurpose Faculty Meetings

Principals will never be able to create a 25th hour in the day for teacher learning, but we can reclaim and think differently about the limited time already available to us. Like many schools, we've practically eliminated traditional faculty meetings in favor of professional work sessions. We've moved away from topics such as the upcoming fire inspection. Instead, we use the time for devising informal writing assessments together, looking at student work, and identifying which standards at each grade level are most powerful.

Teachers often work in small groups or grade-level teams and it's my hope that they do most of the talking. The list of faculty invitees for each meeting varies depending on the type of work we're doing that morning. With only two 30-minute meetings per month, this work is full of fits, starts, and frustrations. We're definitely not proceeding in a straight line, but we're dedicating ourselves to spending the precious time we have together to learning and improvement.

Cultivate a Reflective Mindset in Teachers

The sense of urgency that goes along with trying to provide a meaningful education to all children brings with it a lot of noise. New standards, curriculum, and assessments crash together on teachers' timetables, leaving many of them with little time to think deeply about what they're doing. As principals, we face the twin challenges of maximizing learning time for our students, while also providing teachers time to reflect. Often we have to grab this time wherever we can get it.



TECH TOOLS

Want to implement the ideas in this article? Try these innovative tools.

- **TinyLetter**
Communicate with parents with this straightforward email newsletter tool.
- **Edmodo**
A popular tool for teacher collaboration and resource sharing.
- **Doodle**
This scheduling tool simplifies finding a meeting time that works for everyone.
- **Google Docs**
Collaboratively work on tasks and submit for feedback.

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At my school, we periodically begin our faculty meetings with “Five Quiet Minutes,” which is a space to write to a prompt that leads into a broader professional conversation. Our prompts have spanned intervention and student-centered pedagogy (“Write about a student who is on your mind this morning”), reorienting our building schedule (“Begin to tell the story of a student who is challenged by our current schedule”), and reflection on our mission statement (“Write about a time you fought for a particular instructional philosophy or practice on behalf of your students”).

These conversations don’t lead to quick resolutions of thorny problems, but teachers have told me that they often persist in hallways and classrooms after the meeting has ended, expanding the time and space for professional reflection.

Ensure Principal Learning and Renewal

It’s almost impossible for principals to support the learning of teachers if they are not learning themselves. For principals, creating room to learn can often mean working in spaces outside of traditional meeting structures because learning and managing are two different things. Principals aren’t really learning when they’re drafting assessment calendars, deciding what to include in the summer mailing to parents, or figuring out how to get the traffic pattern in the parking lot just right.

Creating space to learn takes intention and action—no matter how small and simple. Two of my colleagues and I, all of us principals, have created such a space by holding periodic meetings at a local coffee shop. We need to get off campus, avoid distractions, and place our learning squarely in the middle of the school day to ensure it remains a priority. We don’t meet as

often as we’d like, but the protected space allows us to share ideas around teaching, learning, and the unique initiatives taking place in each of our buildings. We’ve shared drafts of curriculum guides for parents, supported each other’s thinking around how to look at student writing with our faculties, and have continued to ask each other, “What does that look like in your building?” And while we don’t always succeed, we try to avoid the drier administrative conversations we sought to escape in the first place.

Sustain and Enhance Support

The field of K-12 education will never be free of challenges, nor will it ever be handed a set of universal techniques, practices, or strategies that permanently resolve these challenges. Principals must recognize that the context of their work will shift over time, and that one set of supports that helps teachers address any given challenge may not help them address the next.

Standards, curriculum, and assessment will continue to evolve, and the support we provide to teachers must evolve alongside them. By adopting a stance that rewards reflection and experimentation, principals can make building a supportive culture a central part of their work to improve teaching and learning. 

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This article is sponsored by the Learning First Alliance (LFA), a partnership of education organizations representing more than 10 million members dedicated to improving student learning in America’s public schools. To help those committed to the standards ensure proper implementation, LFA is spotlighting communities that are working hard to get Common Core implementation right.
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