

Leading Schools

A new report from the Wallace Foundation identifies five practices that will help schools implement the Common Core State Standards.



Changing even the smallest things in schools is hard—just ask any principal who has overseen a rescheduling of bus routes. So imagine the difficulty of getting a school to move its curriculum and instruction from familiar learning requirements to brand-new nationwide standards.

Yet this is exactly the sort of change public schools in 45 states and the District of Columbia have embarked upon: jettisoning existing standards in favor of the Common Core State Standards.

Many educators approve of the Common Core; the standards have won the backing of 75% of the nation's teachers, according to a recent poll by the American Federation of Teachers (2013). Still, many fear the road to get there. The same poll also found that 72% of teachers believe that they lack the resources necessary to prepare for the change.

What does this mean for principals, who, as research confirms, are central to improving schools? Strong leadership ranks second only to classroom instruction among all school-related influences on student learning (Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). How are principals to tackle as big an undertaking as rolling out the Common Core in their schools?

One answer may be found in the Wallace Foundation's January 2013 report, *The School Principal as Leader: Guiding Schools to Better Teaching and Learning*, which identifies five practices that are key to

Through Major Change

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effective school leadership. Summarizing a decade of commissioned research and field experience by the Wallace Foundation, the report finds that effective principals:

- Shape a vision for academic success
- Create a climate hospitable to education
- Cultivate leadership in others
- Improve instruction
- Manage people, data, and processes.

Principals working in school districts with Wallace Foundation-supported work under way say that they are bringing those practices into play as they steer their schools through the complexities of the Common Core.

SHAPING A VISION FOR ACADEMIC SUCCESS

Effective principals establish a schoolwide vision of commitment to high standards and the success of all students, according to a variety of studies that have sought to define the characteristics of strong school leadership. According to researchers from Vanderbilt University and the University of Pennsylvania,

The research literature over the last quarter century has consistently supported the notion that having high expecta-

tions for all, including clear and public standards, is one key to closing the achievement gap between advantaged and less advantaged students and for raising the overall achievement of all students. (Porter et al., 2008, p. 13)

The Common Core is one effort to make high expectations a reality in the nation's classrooms. If principals are to ask their teachers to do the heavy lifting necessary to switch to the Common Core, they could begin with an explanation of why those who favor it believe that the effort is worth it. Just ask Van Ayres, the principal of Thomas Jefferson High School in Hillsborough County, FL. "You have to understand what the Common Core is and why we need it, as a school, as a district, as a nation," he said. "Once you explain what it is and why we're doing it—to increase rigor and to ensure every student receives the same high-quality education that will make them college and career ready—it gets easier. Every teacher just wants what's best for the students."

Erica Zigelman, the principal of the Renaissance Leadership Academy, a middle school in New York City, has found that explaining the virtues of such changes as the Common Core requires more than a speech from on high. "You can't just ram these things down

someone's throat," she said. "It takes a lot of time, it takes a lot of conversations, it takes a lot of collaboration."

Principals could also consider helping parents make sense of the Common Core. As new exams come through and grade requirements change, many families are unclear about how the standards will affect their children. Ayres hosts town-hall-style PTA meetings four times a year to share his vision; recently, the Common Core has featured heavily in those sessions. "We must communicate with parents what we expect from their students as we prepare them for college and careers," he said. "It can be hard for us as educators to keep things straight. It's even harder for parents."

CREATING A CLIMATE HOSPITABLE TO EDUCATION

Effective principals ensure that the climate in their schools is one in which education can be nurtured. That means establishing such basics as safety and orderliness, as well as ensuring that less tangible qualities—such as a supportive attitude toward students and a sense that teachers are part of a community of professionals—are part of the school atmosphere (Wallace Foundation, 2013). Curriculum changes and new assessments that are based on those changes can create a lot of pressure on teachers and students alike.

Some principals are refocusing



“The best we can do is provide our kids with the strongest instruction we can, every minute of every day.”

staff members’ attention away from the anxieties of testing and toward the elements the school can control, such as professional development. At the end of the 2012–13 school year, Phil Carr, the principal of Spoto High School in Hillsborough County, FL, was preparing his faculty to attend district-sponsored summer training sessions designed to unpack the Common Core and help teachers understand what the standards mean for their classrooms. “I’ve said to my teachers that right or wrong, short term or long term, this is how we’re going to do business from now on,” he said. “We just have to prepare ourselves and do what’s best for our students.”

At the same time, Carr acknowledges that there are a lot of unknowns. “Information is pouring in from everywhere,” he said. “There is still discussion about how the assessment will be used as part of the school grade and how student success will be measured.”

For now, he concentrates on answering the questions he can, while acknowledging to teachers that some information falls into the “to be determined” category. “Most of the angst has to do with the fear of the unknown,” Carr said. “Teachers like things that are concrete. They want evidence. They want hands-on examples. But we don’t have those yet.”

CULTIVATING LEADERSHIP IN OTHERS

A major study of school leadership by researchers at the universities of Minnesota and Toronto has found that effective leadership from a variety of people—not only principals but also teachers, staff members, and others—is associated with better student performance on math and reading tests. This suggests that principals should encourage leadership across the school. They also needn’t feel that spreading leadership around undermines their authority: principals “do not lose influence as others gain influence,” the study found (Seashore Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010, p. 19).

Principals are taking pains to include instructional leadership teams in training and professional development. For example, Carr will attend district-sponsored training sessions with his entire leadership team of 18. Assistant principals provide essential input for his year-end teacher evaluations, and he stressed the importance of making them aware of the standards on which the school will be judged. “We take very seriously what the APs see in the classrooms,” he said. “What I see should be the same as what they see. It’s very important for all of us to sit together as those nebulous ideas become clearer.”

Zigelman is counting on leadership from others too. “The most important part was getting my assistant principals on board,” she said. “If they weren’t on board, it wasn’t going to work.”

IMPROVING INSTRUCTION

Effective principals work hard to improve the quality of instruction in their schools, through steps includ-

ing observing teachers at work in the classroom (or seeing to it that someone who is qualified does), giving them detailed feedback, and providing them with the right professional development (Wallace Foundation, 2013). In the case of the Common Core, the imperative to improve instruction means that principals must understand the standards themselves, they must work with department heads to align the curriculum with the standards, and they must marshal school resources to meet those standards. For Carr and others, that begins with becoming deeply familiar with the standards and then determining “how to concretize them.”

Ayres spoke highly of a monthly meeting of Hillsborough County principals that is dedicated to Common Core standards. “It was an hour every month where we received instruction on math and ELA [English language arts],” he said. “The Common Core standards can be complicated. We all need help making sense of them.”

Zigelman and her staff members have sought to figure out how such seemingly unrelated subjects as science and social studies can help reinforce achievement in Common Core-mandated subjects, such as ELA. “The original mind-set was that ELA is a standalone subject and [that] science and social studies are standalone subjects,” she said. “Even in science you have to read, interpret data and be able to write a lab report. Teachers and administrators had to see the strong connections between science, social studies, and ELA. It’s been a huge mind-set change for my staff.”

Zigelman has also adapted the ways in which she gives teachers the instructional leadership they need.

Her classroom observation is now heavily informed by the Common Core, as is her interpretation of the Danielson framework, an extensive guide for teacher evaluation. “You have to change the way you’re looking at instruction,” she said. “You have to look to see if the work is aligned to the Common Core, and the whole Danielson rubric has come into play. Those two things together are changing everything about teaching, learning, observation, and feedback.”

MANAGING PEOPLE, DATA, AND PROCESSES

Effective school leaders are good managers, making the best use of their staff members and resources. Researchers at the University of Washington found that effective principals nurture and support teachers and others to meet standards—and are willing to make tough decisions when they don’t (Portin et al., 2009).

Strong principals also employ data to good effect, trying to draw the most from statistics and other evidence.

Zigelman said she will rely in part on a data manager who monitors test scores and uses them to identify the school’s strengths and weaknesses. “My data manager, David Keck, is the most valuable person on my instructional and administrative team,” she said. “You have to know who your kids are and where they need the most support to succeed. It’s not all about numbers, of course, but it’s where we begin.”

The Role of the District

Ayres, Carr, and Zigelman are well aware of the difficulty of reform as expansive as the adoption of the Common Core. And although they acknowledge the responsibility that

rests on their shoulders, they also said district support is indispensable. Another Wallace Foundation publication, *Districts Matter*, describes the major ways in which districts can nurture school leadership. A number of the tasks take on special importance as districts roll out the Common Core: giving school leaders timely, useful data and training on how to use it; giving them sufficient time to improve instruction; and giving them the right professional development (Mitgang, Cummins, & Gill, 2013).

All three principals say the support they have received so far fits the bill. “The district is doing a great deal this summer,” said Carr. “A great deal of staff development, a great deal of communication.”

Keeping what matters most in mind is helping Zigelman as she steers her schools through change. “The best we can do,” she said, “is provide our kids with the strongest instruction we can, every minute of every day.” **PL**

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Author’s note: All quotes from principals were obtained through phone interviews in May 2013.