

Common Core State Standards: Where do we begin?

by Joanne Picone-Zocchia



Depending on your role in the school system and the local and/or state expectations, the question, “Where do we begin?” tends to be accompanied by more or less of a sense of urgency. It can be tempting to quickly lay out a series of activities that could provide a road map for working with the Common Core State Standards, especially when this question is delivered breathlessly and followed by several exclamation points. Without a few pieces of information, however, that course of action may not be very productive. As with any change initiative, the keys to where you begin lie in defining the ultimate expectations for where all of this will lead, in an understanding of where you are now relative to where you intend to go, in the identification of key players to be involved, and a timeframe for the journey from here to there. Once these pieces are addressed, the response to the question, “Where do we begin?” becomes far more approachable.

Defining the ultimate expectations for where the planned work with the Common Core State standards will ultimately take you is the organizational development equivalent to “backwards design.” What do we want our [school, district, teachers, students] to know and be able to do as a result of our work with the CCSS? This question is coupled with, “How will we know that we have achieved this? or “What will success look like?” School A’s definition of success grounded in all educators having a deep understanding of the Common Core State Standards that allows them to be used to identify learning targets and consider potential changes needed in teaching and learning practices will clearly require a different set of steps and activities than School B’s success that is defined by a system-wide integration of CCSS into tools, processes and structures that support teaching and learning. Where School A would benefit from activities focused on developing individuals’ capacity to understand and use the CCSS in their own classroom context, School B not only requires a focus on each individual classroom, but also explicit attention to the infrastructure of the system itself, in terms of how it supports the integration of the CCSS into classroom teaching and learning. While seemingly at opposite ends of a spectrum, each end result could be valid and important.

Having a good sense of where schools are relative to where they want to be provides a starting point for the work. Developing deep awareness in a school or district that does not yet recognize the Common Core State Standards as a relevant factor in education is far different from developing awareness in a school where educators are



already talking about the existence of the standards and the need for change. Different yet again would be the starting point for a school where the focus is already on CCSS in classroom curriculum because they have heard that these standards will ground the structure of local or state assessments. The degree to which the school or district has engaged in previous standards-based work, and the experiences individuals have had with standards-based design is also a strong measure of where they are in terms of the work ahead.

Figure 1 provides a sample framework for CCSS work that is organized around long-term goals and focus areas informed by the needs presented from an analysis of the present state. They are offered here, not as prescribed pathways, but as examples of thinking and models of possibility. Each column sketches activities that move the work toward a different long-term goal, through several possible focus areas. Viewed this way, multiple needs and/or audiences can be addressed while working toward the same goal. Rows, reading left to right, provide a glimpse of how a single focus area might look contextualized inside different long-term goals. Because of the sequence of the long-term goals, rows can also be viewed as a continuum, in which case, the activities sketched can support differentiation of CCSS work within a common focus area.

Knowing where existing expertise related to standards or curriculum or facilitation of adult learners lies can help to determine the designers, launchers and implementers. Some of the questions that can ground purposeful and strategic work around the Common Core State Standards include:

- Who will spearhead this work?
- Who can conceptualize and design the pieces inside the big picture?
- Who will be responsible for launching the work?
- Who is best suited to implementing and monitoring the effects of the activities and events?
- Who will participate?
- Who will benefit?

Each of these questions gets at the various players involved in the work around the Common Core State Standards. Attention to coordination of efforts, as well as keeping track of overburdening individuals with responsibility or experiences, are important considerations for long term planning.



The pressure, or persuasion, provided by a timeline is another key element in where to begin. Does your school have a year...a month...a two-hour session... to develop awareness? Are you expected to achieve complete system-wide integration within two years? In places where there is the sense of time to explore, get to know and respond to the organizational, teaching and learning challenges presented by the advent of the Common Core State Standards, then beginning with activities that support unpacking and deep examination of the standards and association between what the standards require and what is currently in place could provide a compelling and interesting series that would indeed culminate in deep awareness. In places where the timeline is not quite as generous, having a clear sense of where you are and targeting activities to address key understandings and needs can help to move the process along. The shorter the timeline, the more important consistent and clear communication and feedback loops become. Time can easily be lost to misunderstandings, application errors and resistance. Engaging mixed role groups in careful planning, implementation and monitoring of the CCSS processes and activities as well as in responding to the needs and reactions of those involved can be helpful in maintaining forward momentum.

In the end, the response to, “Where do we begin our work with the Common Core State Standards?” lies inside the very place asking the question. It is defined by the ultimate hopes and goals for the effect of the work; grounded in the present state of curriculum, instruction and assessment beliefs and practices; informed by the thinking and expertise of those who will be key players in the process; and moved by the time available, whether perceived or real.



Figure 1. Common Core State Standards Activities Matrix

FOCUS AREA	PRIMARY GOAL			
	Develop a deep awareness of the CCSS among educators	Develop the skills of educators in connecting the CCSS to discrete learning opportunities or tasks	Enable educators to use the CCSS in the design of classroom curriculum	Integrate the CCSS into processes and structures that support curriculum, instruction and assessment
Understanding the Common Core State Standards	Read and unpack the CCSS in terms of demands on students and implications for educator practice	Read and unpack the CCSS in terms of demands on students, implications for educator practice, and lesson or activity design Engage in a crosswalk between CCSS and existing local, state or national standards, noticing commonalities and differences	Engage in a crosswalk between grade level specific CCSS and existing local, state or national standards, making connections to existing curriculum, educator practice, learner needs and current curriculum	Examine student work for evidence of grade level specific CCSS, and revise curriculum, instruction and assessment to better ensure both the presence of the standards and student success in achieving them
Documenting the connections between the CCSS and classroom curriculum	Gap analysis - use of a protocol to examine distance between current taught and assessed curriculum and the CCSS Use data to inform conversations about curriculum needs and strategic planning for revisions Use CCSS to help identify or confirm grade level learning targets	Gap analysis - use of a protocol to examine distance between current taught and assessed curriculum and the CCSS Use data to inform conversations about teacher practice, strategic planning and revisions to assessment tasks Use CCSS as a tool to help document key grade level learning targets	Gap analysis - use of a protocol to examine distance between current taught and assessed curriculum and the CCSS Use data to inform conversations about teacher practice, strategic planning and classroom curriculum revision or design Use CCSS to establish grade level learning targets to support needed curriculum revisions	Gap analysis - use of a protocol to examine distance between the CCSS and the current state, including taught, assessed and learned curriculum, as well as educator practices and technology use Use data to inform organizational level discussions and strategic action planning re: professional development, technology access and use, interplay between and among classroom, school, district and state assessment systems and expectations, revisions to teaching and learning systems and procedures, etc.

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<p>Connecting components of quality, standards based curriculum and the CCSS</p>	<p>Introduce or review assessment moments, types, stakes and examples</p> <p>Examination of the CCSS through the lens of diagnostic, formative and summative assessment, annotating specific connections</p>	<p>Identify assessment moments, types, stakes and examples in lessons and activities and connect to grade level specific CCSS</p> <p>Introduce or review engagement, relevance and meaningfulness in classroom curriculum</p> <p>Examination of the CCSS through the lens of engagement, relevance and meaningfulness, annotating specific connections that could influence revision of assessment tasks</p>	<p>Analysis of the grade level specific CCSS to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • find support for classroom assessment moments (diagnostic, formative, summative) • identify opportunities for engaging, relevant and meaningful CCSS-based classroom curriculum <p>Assess existing classroom lessons and activities for engagement relevance and meaningfulness and connect to above CCSS analysis</p> <p>Introduce or review processes for communicating explicit criteria in the form of rubrics and checklists, with a specific focus on integrating CCSS into these tools and incorporating them into formative classroom assessment moments</p>	<p>System-wide analysis of assessment, looking for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • integration of CCSS • technology application • balance and coherence among assessment moments (diagnostic, formative and summative) and types (recall, performance, product, meta-cognitive) • engagement, relevance and meaningfulness <p>Assess classroom rubrics and checklists, using quality criteria and CCSS</p> <p>Introduce or review authentic assessment and reflection/metacognition as part of a balanced classroom assessment system</p>



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Developing skills in the design of quality, standards based curriculum	Identify or revise lessons or activities to address one or more instructional or assessment gaps, or to improve alignment with a grade level specific CCSS learning target	Design and/or revise extended lesson sets and related assessments to address one or more instructional or assessment gaps and to improve or create alignment with a grade level specific CCSS learning target	Design and/or revise units to maximize the opportunities for formative assessment and ensure the integration of explicit, CCSS-based criteria into active student and teacher practice.	Refine CCSS-based rubrics and checklists, and focus on incorporating them into formative classroom assessments with explicit student and educator reflection and goal setting opportunities attached Design and/or revise units to integrate CCSS, include authentic assessment and ongoing student and educator reflection.
Support for leading and monitoring professional practice related to the CCSS	Adopt and implement pre-designed observation tools to support educator awareness and professional discussions of the CCSS, and their implications for teaching and learning	Adapt and implement existing observation tools to support educator application of the CCSS to specific lessons or assessment tasks	Customize or design and implement observation tools to support the integration of CCSS in: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • units • standards-based rubrics and checklists • classroom formative assessment routines and processes • teacher and student practice 	Design and implement observation tools that explicitly assess teaching and learning practices and structures, and integrate supports for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • integration of CCSS • technology application • balance and coherence among assessment moments (diagnostic, formative and summative) and types (recall, performance, product, meta-cognitive) • engagement, relevance and meaningfulness • strategic use of authentic assessment



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Inquiry connections	<p>Use protocols for analyzing student work resulting from CCSS-focused revisions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • identify specific teacher practices and learning strategies that support student acquisition of CCSS • build successful strategies into subsequent learning opportunities • gather additional data on their success with different types of learners 	<p>Use protocols for analyzing student work resulting from CCSS focused revisions or design:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • identify specific teacher practices and learning strategies that support student acquisition of CCSS • build successful strategies into subsequent learning opportunities • gather additional data on their success with different types of learners 	<p>Use protocols for analyzing student work resulting from the revision or design of units to integrate CCSS-based rubrics and checklists into formative classroom assessment moments:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • to identify specific practices and strategies that support student acquisition of CCSS • build successful strategies into subsequent teaching and learning • gather additional data on their success with different types of learners 	<p>Use protocols for analyzing student work resulting from revised units, specifically focusing on the impact of CCSS work on teaching practices and student learning, in order to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • identify specific organizational structures, practices and strategies that support student acquisition of CCSS • strengthen and add to successful structures, practices and strategies • gather additional system-wide data on their success

