

# Five Common Mistakes in Implementing the Common Core – and Action Steps to Get Your School on the Right Track

By Kathryn Au and Taffy Raphael

## Mistake #1: Overselling the Common Core State Standards

Many states have joined the national movement to replace or revise their existing state educational standards with the Common Core State Standards (CCSS; Common Core). Some policymakers are promoting the Common Core as the cure-all for what ails our schools. Unfortunately, this thinking reduces the complex issues surrounding educational improvement to a simple, one-size-fits-all solution.

Don't misunderstand us. We see many strengths in the Common Core. Among them are clear, high expectations and an orientation toward higher-level thinking. But we shouldn't make CCSS – a set of documents addressing English language arts and mathematics – into something that it is not. It's as much a policy tool as a curriculum document. It reinforces a shift from an emphasis on basic skills to college and career readiness.

We think the overall approach in the Common Core makes sense. However, it's important to recognize that the standards have not been empirically tested. Let's say that Group A consists of students of teachers who followed the Common Core to the letter. Let's say that Group B consists of students of teachers who made various adjustments to the Common Core. They might, for example, have moved some math content to an earlier or later grade.

We have no empirical evidence that Group A will outperform Group B in literate and mathematical thinking at any point, from kindergarten through college or beyond. That's why we think it is fair to say that the Common Core contains many good ideas but its benefits should not be oversold.

## Recommended Action Step #1: Put the Common Core State Standards in proper perspective for the teachers at your school.

Review with teachers the iterations of standards that appeared in your state or district over the past 20 years or so. You'll likely notice a pattern showing that a new set of standards is introduced about every five years. In some cases, they are an improvement. In other cases, they are a setback for teachers and students. Help teachers see that the Common Core is not the first or the last word in standards in your state. Something new will be coming along in about five years.

## Mistake #2: Underestimating teacher skepticism

We've walked into schools to present Common Core workshops only to be greeted by teachers leaning back in their chairs, rolling their eyes, preparing to hear about "one more mandate coming down from on high."

We think teacher skepticism can be a healthy sign. All experienced teachers have seen one initiative after another come through their schools, with most efforts fading away after a year or two due to a lack of leadership, commitment, or resources. Teachers feel abandoned when support evaporates. It is not surprising that many teachers see the Common Core and related school improvement efforts as "one more thing" that will come and go. Unless teachers' skepticism can be overcome, the Common Core will not proceed to the point of contributing to improvement in student learning.

## Recommended Action Step #2: Build the Common Core and related improvement efforts into your school's year-long and multi-year plans.

Involve teacher leaders in the development of these plans. Make sure that adequate resources, such as relevant professional development and time for teacher collaboration, are provided. If possible, obtain commitments for three years of support, including funding. Share this information with teachers so they know that support will not disappear in a year or so. If you are a principal, reiterate these commitments and repeat the school's multiyear directions at every faculty meeting.



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### **Mistake #3: Promoting what is new versus what is effective**

Many states have taken what looks like a logical step by creating “crosswalk” documents showing standards that are: (a) covered in the Common Core and also included in existing state standards; (b) covered in the Common Core but not in existing state standards; and (c) covered in existing state standards but not addressed in the Common Core. Experience shows us that it’s a mistake for schools to use these crosswalk documents as the basis for Common Core professional development because they tend to promote a mechanistic, unreflective, and reactive approach to standards.



*Have teachers in each grade level or department work on their particular step in the staircase leading to the vision of the excellent student.*

Consider the following observation from a school where students’ performance on the state math test had risen dramatically. As grade levels were conferring about their math formative assessment results, a kindergarten teacher said to her colleagues, “I see that time isn’t emphasized at our grade level in the Common Core. My students have been responding well to instruction on that topic, but I guess I won’t teach it any more.”

Because of the state’s emphasis on the crosswalk approach, this teacher had been led to believe that she should make adjustments to her teaching in line with the Common Core. In fact, her students were performing well in math and following the Common Core would have led her to lower expectations for their learning. Of course, we took steps to reverse this thinking.

### **Recommended Action Step #3: Instead of a crosswalk approach, have teachers participate in small-group and partner activities designed to acquaint them with the Common Core in literacy and math.**

Teachers naturally tend to focus on their own grade level or courses and may be only vaguely aware of curriculum and instruction content outside of their immediate concerns. This is the reason it’s important to start Common Core professional development by emphasizing the cross-grade or horizontal flow of the standards. It allows teachers to get the big

picture of expectations for students’ growth in literate thinking and mathematical thinking across the grades. With this big picture, they can adjust their expectations better to connect to the work of teachers at earlier grades and courses, as well as to the work of teachers at later grades and courses. In doing so, teachers build schoolwide coherence in curriculum and instruction.

### **Mistake #4 – Leaping forward to buy new programs**

Over the past decade, many schools have not emphasized using programs and materials to promote students’ higher level thinking in either the language arts or math. Instead, the trend favored scripted, teacher-proof programs aimed at building lower level skills, often for the purpose of raising test scores. This trend was particularly strong in schools serving a high proportion of students of diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

Not surprisingly, with the advent of the Common Core, many schools want to play catch up. Knowing that changes must be made, they rush to purchase new programs and materials that are advertised as reinforcing the kind of student thinking advocated by the Common Core.

Yes, the Common Core does call for schools to place a greater emphasis on students’ higher level thinking in literacy and math, as well as all core subjects. But research shows us that simply purchasing new programs has little measurable effect in promoting students’ higher-level thinking.

The reason? Having all teachers in a school use the same program does not automatically lead to curriculum coherence. Research reveals that different interpretations of a program easily arise, both within and across grade levels. Teachers may choose to emphasize different parts of the program or teach some parts but not others. Adopting a program does not necessarily lead to curriculum coherence and may actually backfire by providing a false sense of security about the degree of coherence present in the school.

### **Recommended Action Step #4: Have teachers work together to outline your school’s staircase curriculum, in either language arts or mathematics.**

Begin by working with teachers to clarify the vision of the student who graduates from your school. Then develop a vision of the excellent language arts or math student as a subset of the overall vision of the graduate. Have teachers in each grade level or department work on their particular step in the staircase leading to the vision of the excellent student.

For example, in a K-8 school, the staircase has nine steps, one for each grade level. Through a process of discussion within and across grade levels or departments, have teachers collaborate to build the staircase, by determining the outcomes for students' learning to be achieved at each step. Encourage teachers to customize the staircase curriculum to meet the needs of the students at your school. At the same time, provide them with background in the Common Core and in current research.

When the outline of the staircase curriculum is clear, your school will be ready to identify language arts or math programs that are appropriate to the specific needs of your students and teachers.



At this point, teachers understand that, like Common Core, the program is simply a resource or tool for helping move their students through the staircase curriculum. Your school's own

staircase curriculum is what drives the instruction, not a program created by outsiders.

### **Mistake #5: Relying on a “trainer of trainers” model of teachers’ professional development**

You know the trainer-of-trainers model as well as we do. This is where representatives from a number of schools, often teacher leaders, attend a workshop, are provided with a copy of the PowerPoint presentation and handouts from the sessions, and are expected to return to their schools to provide their fellow teachers with similar or identical sessions covering the same content.

The trainer-of-trainers model has been a popular one for Common Core sessions. In this era of budget constraints, it could also be a cost-saving approach to professional development, except for one major problem. It doesn't work.

This model assumes that all schools are in the same place with respect to improvement efforts. Thus, the workshops take a “one size fits all” approach. As a result, the content covered may be overwhelming for School A but already familiar to School B.

Furthermore, teacher leaders rarely receive coaching about how the content can fit with ongoing improvement efforts at their schools. The failure to customize content to individual schools and to provide coaching for teacher leaders at the school level generally prevents the trainer-of-trainers model from promoting systemic change.

### **Recommended Action Step #5: Customize professional development on the Common Core to meet the needs of your school.**

The professional development your teachers receive on the Common Core should be customized to your school. The Common Core is not entering a vacuum. Instead, teachers' interactions with the Common Core must be designed to enhance ongoing school improvement efforts that will move your school ahead.

Do the teachers at your school keep up with recent research in language arts and math education? Or do they rely on a packaged program for guidance? For the research savvy, preparing teachers to address the Common Core takes little background building. For others, extensive building will be required.

Does your school intend to make the Common Core central to a multi-year school improvement effort? If so, professional development on the Common Core may extend across a year or more. Options should be considered so that professional development in the Common Core has depth as well as breadth.

For example, coaching sessions for grade levels or departments could focus on applying the Common Core standards when working with students on different content and at different achievement levels.



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### **Concluding Comment**

In conclusion, we now know enough about the Common Core and the patterns of standards-based education to understand the common pitfalls leading to unsuccessful attempts at reform. You can avoid making these mistakes at your school by following the above Action Steps. Wise decisions today will let your school work effectively with the Common Core, upgrading expectations for student learning and taking improvement efforts to the next level.

For further information on Common Core workshops and consultation consistent with the Action Steps, please send an email message to:

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## About SchoolRise

SchoolRise, LLC was established by Kathryn H. Au, Ph.D. and Taffy E. Raphael, Ph.D., award-winning literacy researchers and members of the Reading Hall of Fame.



*Drs. Au and Raphael have helped schools nationwide develop staircase curricula and professional development approaches leading to sustained increases in student achievement.*

Dr. Au's pioneering approach in Hawai'i for improving academic achievement became School Rise's Standards-Based Change Process. Based on significant gains, the innovative SBC Process was adopted by schools throughout the state. Subsequent research documented that children in schools that used the SBC Process achieved higher grade 5 reading scores than those not using the process.

Dr. Raphael, a professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago, faced the challenge of improving literacy in under-performing public K-8 schools in Chicago. Aware of the success of the SBC Process in Hawai'i, she introduced it in Chicago and saw similar increases in student achievement.

In addition to increased achievement in reading, Drs. Au and Raphael see evidence in SchoolRise schools of impact on other academic learning. SchoolRise consultants work with districts and schools across the country to guide teachers in developing coherent staircase curricula in all core subjects. We also provide evaluation services to districts, schools, and educational agencies.



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