

Helping High Schools Meet Higher Standards

KATHRYN H. AU

“**T**he students know what to expect,” the art teacher declared. “Every time they finish a project, they do a written reflection. That’s just the way I teach now.” Other teachers on this high school leadership team, including those from the math and science departments, shared similar thoughts about embedding writing activities in everyday instruction. The social studies and English teachers described how they had collaborated to create a writing assessment that both departments could use. After five years of concerted effort, the teacher leaders at this suburban Hawaii high school had succeeded in spreading writing across the curriculum, creating a professional learning community that cut across departments.

This high school, where the faculty has pulled together to improve students’ writing, is well positioned to promote students’ literacy achievement under U.S. policies of college and career readiness, including the Common Core State Standards (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). The opening anecdote illustrates three features needed for high schools to succeed in addressing the rigorous goals for college and career readiness set forth in the Common Core.



Kathryn H. Au is a founder and chief executive officer of SchoolRise, LLC; e-mail kathy.au@schoolriseusa.com.

First, this high school has created the infrastructure needed to sustain a multiyear literacy improvement effort. Second, all teachers, not just those in the English department, have been involved in literacy professional development, in this case, aimed at helping students reach the school’s vision of the excellent writer. Third, teachers have a sense of efficacy and feel ownership over literacy improvement efforts.

My purpose in this column is to comment on the U.S. policy environment under college and career readiness and the Common Core, and then to offer recommendations about how high school literacy leaders—principals, curriculum coordinators, department chairs, resource teachers, and others—can help students and teachers alike meet ever-rising standards. I draw on examples from my home state of Hawaii, but the same elements and patterns can be seen throughout the United States as well as in other nations with advanced economies.

Policies of college and career readiness, including the Common Core and related assessment consortia (see www.smarterbalanced.org and www.parcconline.org), are the latest manifestations of the U.S. standards movement, which is in its third decade. I use the label *standards-as-inspiration* to describe the first phase of the movement. For educators, the standards movement initially provided an opportunity to achieve consensus about the goals of public education. To this end, the International Reading Association (IRA) and the National Council of Teachers of English collaborated on standards for the language arts (NCTE & IRA, 1996).

As one of many IRA leaders involved in that effort, I think it is fair to say that these standards constituted a sincere effort, resulting in broadly worded consensus

The department editor welcomes reader comments. Fenice B. Boyd is associate dean for teacher education at the University at Buffalo, State University of New York, USA; e-mail fboyd@buffalo.edu.

statements that had minimal impact on policymakers and practitioners.

By 2001, at the behest of policymakers understandably eager to see results, standards-as-inspiration gave way to what I call *standards-as-compliance to test scores*, ushering in the second phase of the movement. Under No Child Left Behind (NCLB; United States Congress, 2001) all U.S. public schools, including high schools, were categorized according to whether the students had made adequate yearly progress, as measured by test scores. With 37 criteria to meet, all but one of the public high schools in Hawaii fell into restructuring, the lowest NCLB category.

With increasing recognition of the failure of NCLB (Glass, 2008), the third and current phase of the U.S. standards movement began. I call this phase *standards-as-compliance to college and career readiness*. Yes, *compliance* remains the watchword, but policymakers have shown a willingness to look at measures of students' accomplishment that go beyond test scores (National Governors Association, 2012). For high schools, such measures include the percentage of students who graduate in four years, who enroll in college, and who have no need for remedial courses at the college level.

As with previous standards-based reform efforts, college and career readiness policies and the Common Core could turn into yet another missed opportunity to make substantial improvements in the literacy learning of high school students. If a high school has not already seen substantial gains in students' literacy achievement, what steps should its leaders take? I describe three steps I have found particularly effective in positioning high schools to meet the rigorous expectations of college and career readiness and the Common Core. As suggested by the opening anecdote, these center on an effective infrastructure, literacy professional development for all teachers, and teacher ownership of the improvement effort.

Let the Common Core Serve as the Impetus for Building the Infrastructure to Sustain a Multiyear Literacy Improvement Effort

As a literacy educator and researcher, I admit that I much prefer to work on issues of curriculum, instruction, and assessment than on infrastructure. However, my colleagues and I have learned that it is a mistake to proceed directly to professional

development on the Common Core or other standards without first attending to a high school's infrastructure for sustaining a multiyear, schoolwide improvement effort. The typical high school enrolling a high proportion of students of diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds has already experienced a series of failed literacy reform efforts. If an effort based on the Common Core results is yet another failure, teachers' skepticism about and resistance to future reform efforts will only increase.

Our research shows that a strong infrastructure is based on three pillars: a supportive principal, a key curriculum leader, and a liaison team. The principal, the first pillar, stands before the faculty at every significant event and endorses the literacy improvement effort as the direction of the school, for the good of the students. The principal provides adequate funding for the change effort over a period of 3–5 years and adjusts the schedule and demands to make certain that teachers have adequate time to work with the Common Core and the changes it entails in curriculum, instruction, and assessment.

The key curriculum leader, the second pillar, serves as the principal's right hand by looking after all the details of literacy improvement that the principal is generally too busy to address. For example, the curriculum leader attends department meetings, makes sure that departments post their meeting notes to the school's wiki, and follows up to see that departments submit required products (such as drafts of rubrics) on time.

The liaison team, the third pillar, consists of teacher leaders representing every key constituency in the school, including all departments, pathways, academies, or similar structures. The downfall of most attempts at schoolwide improvement in the high school is uneven progress across departments. As soon as one department falls behind and drops out, a whole-school literacy improvement effort can no longer be undertaken.

Liaison team members assist the key curriculum leader in guiding the improvement effort, making sure that each department keeps pace with the rest of the school. Team members attend professional development sessions to build their background in literacy instruction and assessment, in following a roadmap for a whole-school literacy improvement effort (Raphael, Au, & Goldman, 2009), and in facilitation skills. Team members generate a list of the difficult questions they expect to encounter (such as "Isn't literacy the job of the English department?")

and rehearse answers they can provide. Liaison team members are not expected to move their departments forward on their own, but they are charged with requesting the help of their department needs to keep pace with the rest of the school. It can take a month to a year to put the three pillars in place at a high school and prepare these key players to lead literacy improvement efforts.

Approach New Standards as an Opportunity for Teachers in All Departments to Update Their Knowledge of Literacy Instruction and Raise Expectations

With its infrastructure for sustained improvement in place, the high school is ready to tackle the next obstacle: overcoming teachers' skepticism about the Common Core or other new set of standards. Teachers in all states have seen standards come and go in cycles of about five years. For example, there have been three versions of the Hawaii Content and Performance Standards, known as HCPS I, II, and III. Soon after the introduction of these standards, teachers began referring to them as the hiccups.

My colleagues and I have found that it makes sense to have teachers approach the Common Core as the latest in a series of standards documents. Teachers already know that the Common Core is not the final word on standards in the United States. We promote the view that each new standards document provides a high school faculty with the opportunity to gain new information about international, national, state, or district expectations for student learning. Teachers are asked to explore the latest document for ideas they can use to upgrade expectations for their students' literacy learning.

Teachers sometimes have the impression that each new standards document requires a total overhaul of their existing curriculum, when in actuality, standards documents are much more likely to reflect incremental improvements than major shifts. For this reason, my colleagues and I avoid language suggesting that teachers must adopt or comply with the Common Core. Instead, we have teachers identify points of departure between the new standards and their existing curriculum and ask that they pursue alignment in instances where expectations for student learning need to be raised or new content needs to be addressed.

When working with teachers on a new set of standards, I find that an effective strategy is to introduce information about related assessments as soon as it becomes available. For the Common Core, related assessments are those being developed by two federally funded assessment consortia. Hawaii is one of 25 states in the SMARTER Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC), and another 22 states and the District of Columbia are members of the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC).

I conducted a session with high school teachers who worked in pairs to examine the grade 11 sample SBAC language arts performance task entitled "Nuclear Power: Friend or Foe?" (Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium, 2012). The teachers noted that most of their students would be able to comprehend the online texts used as reading material in this task. However, they knew their students would need considerable help preparing a synopsis of the arguments and presenting a compelling case, in writing, for or against the building of a nuclear power plant. They discussed how they would need to spend much more time teaching students not just to comprehend text but also to apply text ideas in developing strong written arguments.

As this example illustrates, examining the sample language arts performance task gave these high school teachers clarity about what their students would need to know and do. Teachers arrived at specific ideas for improving instruction and designing their own formative assessments. Furthermore, teachers appreciated receiving warning about the nature of the state's new high-stakes assessment. In Hawaii, an assessment bridging the new SBAC assessments and existing state tests is being administered in spring 2014, with full implementation of the SBAC assessments to occur in spring 2015.

I think it makes sense to involve each and every teacher, not just those in the English department, in literacy professional-development sessions, such as those involving examination of the SBAC performance task. By high school, many students of diverse backgrounds are reading and writing far below grade-level expectations. These students need

It makes sense to involve each and every teacher in literacy professional-development sessions.

the boost provided when all teachers emphasize the importance of literacy and teach accordingly. I have already described an art teacher's enthusiasm for writing. Another example that comes to mind is of a high school physical education teacher whose students wrote precise accounts of their progress in weight lifting, including the names of the muscles involved in different exercises.

Give Teachers Ownership of the Change Effort

Teacher ownership of any change effort is the key to sustained improvement. At the schoolwide launch of a literacy improvement effort, I usually see no teacher ownership of the effort at all. Often, I hear teachers of other subjects protesting that teaching reading and writing is the job of the English department.

To correct this misconception and increase ownership, I find an effective strategy is to tap into teachers' passion for their content areas. For example, during a science department coaching session, I posed the question of how being a good writer might help students become better scientists. Upon reflection, the science teachers found that they already had their students engage in many forms of writing, from labeled diagrams to lab reports to science fiction. Their knowledge of science and the conventions of scientific writing allowed them to teach the specialized forms of writing in their discipline.

Educators in high schools already have the understanding that their students need to reach higher levels of achievement under the Common Core than under previous iterations of standards. What they generally do not have is an effective approach for pulling together as a faculty to boost student performance. For example, high schools in Hawaii and elsewhere often have structures they call professional learning communities. However, my colleagues and I have collected interview evidence showing that teachers did not know the purpose of these small-group meetings apart from becoming acquainted with faculty from other departments. Clearly, it is not enough to create groups and arrange meeting times. Specific tasks and timelines related to literacy improvement need to be established.

This is easier said than done. The challenge in high schools is to honor the various content areas and departments while bringing the faculty together as a schoolwide professional learning community.

To meet these challenges and make higher student achievement possible, my colleagues and I guide teachers to collaborate on building a staircase curriculum (Au & Raphael, 2011). In a staircase curriculum, learning goals for each grade build on those from the grade below and lead up to those at the grade above.

The school's leaders must first identify the groups that will be most effective in developing and implementing the staircase curriculum. Usually these groups are departments, such as English, math, science, and so on. However, at one high school, teacher leaders told me that the departments were too set in their ways to undertake the task of collaborating to build a staircase curriculum. Instead, they recommended having faculty members work within the newly formed career pathways (in healthcare, engineering, arts and communication, and so on) to develop the staircase.

Once the proper groups are identified—a department, career pathway, or other structure—my colleagues and I begin guiding each group through the steps required to construct a staircase curriculum. High schools in Hawaii incorporate grades 9 through 12, so the staircase must have a step for each of these grades. Teachers start constructing their group's staircase by identifying the strands or domains they want to emphasize with students across the grades. For example, where the English department might choose literature as a strand, the math department might choose reasoning and proof. Each department chooses its own strands but commits to including a strand that ties its staircase curriculum to the schoolwide literacy improvement effort, so if the schoolwide focus is reading comprehension, each department must include a reading comprehension strand.

Once the strands are identified, teachers collaborate with others in their department to write end-of-year goals for student learning for each grade, strand by strand. At specified points in the process, teachers engage in alignment activities that allow them to coordinate and calibrate their student learning goals with relevant external standards, such as the Common Core. Teachers collaborate as well to develop an evidence system for each grade, including common formative assessments and rubrics. In Hawaii high schools, I have teachers calibrate their formative assessments and rubrics with SBAC samples. Eventually, teachers are able to use assessment results to design instructional improvements.

This approach to literacy curriculum improvement in high schools has proved effective because teachers are able to focus on their disciplinary content while simultaneously contributing to the schoolwide effort. Teachers take ownership of literacy improvement efforts because they have constructed their own curriculum, assessment, and instruction.

Conclusion

Policymakers in the United States have turned the spotlight on high schools. The good news is that policies are now aimed at broader, more worthwhile goals of college and career readiness, a welcome change from an overemphasis on raising test scores. The bad news is that policymakers continue to endorse standards-as-compliance, albeit to a more worthy set of outcomes.

As in the previous iteration of standards-as-compliance, policymakers have focused more on raising the bar with new standards and assessments than on providing funding for professional development (Glass, 2008). High schools are being asked to bring their students to higher levels of literacy achievement than ever before, often on a short timeline and with little or no additional funding.

For high schools to succeed in doing more with less, I believe that literacy leaders must guide their schools through the kind of disciplined, focused approach recommended here. They must build the infrastructure to support a multiyear literacy improvement effort. They must teach teachers to view a new standards document as an opportunity to examine and, when necessary, raise their expectations for students' literacy learning. They must let teachers

take ownership of literacy improvement efforts through building their own staircase curricula. In my experience, high schools do not succeed in improving students' literacy achievement by ordering teachers to adopt or comply with a new set of standards, such as the Common Core. Rather, high schools experience success when teachers engage in a thoughtful, ongoing process of using new standards to strengthen their own staircase curricula.

References

- Au, K., & Raphael, T. (2011). The staircase curriculum: Whole-school collaboration to improve literacy achievement. *New England Reading Association Journal*, 46(2), 1–8.
- Common Core State Standards Initiative. (2010). *Common Core State Standards for English language arts and literacy in history/social studies, science, and technical subjects*. Washington, DC: Common Core State Standards Initiative.
- Glass, G. (2008). *Fertilizers, pills, and magnetic strips: The fate of public education in America*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age.
- National Council of Teachers of English, & International Reading Association. (1996). *Standards for the English language arts*. Urbana, IL; Newark, DE: Authors.
- National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers. (2010). *Common Core State Standards for English language arts and literacy in history/social studies, science, and technical subjects*. Washington, DC: Authors.
- Raphael, T., Au, K., & Goldman, S. (2009). *Whole school instructional improvement through the Standards-Based Change Process: A developmental model*. In J. Hoffman & Y. Goodman (Eds.), *Changing literacies for changing times* (pp. 198–229). New York: Routledge/Taylor Francis Group.
- Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium. (2012). Nuclear power: Friend or foe? Retrieved January 3, 2013, from www.smarterbalanced.org
- United States Congress. (2001). *No Child Left Behind*. Washington, DC: NCLB.

Naming Names: Creating Works That Are at Once Ordinary and Unforgettable

Jonathan Sanchez, Write of Summer and Blue Bicycle Books,
Charleston, South Carolina, USA



I have a few rules when writing poems with young people. I ask them not to worry about spelling or grammar. I ask them not to erase. I prefer they draw one line through a redacted phrase or sentence. Often the things we're hesitant about including are the most worthy.

I also ban rhyming. Rhyming limits the amount of words kids can use. I want their poems to be full of strange and specific words. I don't want to see *life* and *wonderful* and *beautiful*. I want to see words like *Chattanooga* and *malaria* and *sonata*. (No, they don't all have to end in *a*, but you get the idea.)

I stray from using terms like *creative* and *imagination*, because they tend to lead kids down Disney-paved paths. I prefer to say *stuff words* rather than *details* or *specifics*. (At a glance, just the look of good "stuff words" on a page makes a poem look different from one full of empty generalities.)

Encouraging kids to "name names," along with using action verbs, is 90% of my coaching. As William Carlos Williams said, "No ideas but in things." Almost all good writing is driven by names of things, from the finches' wings in Gerard Manley Hopkins's poem "Pied

Beauty" to the "Reeboks with the straps" in Flo Rida's rap song "Low."

Young writers often feel they need to generalize to sound more "adult" and profound and to convey emotion to a wide audience, but the opposite is true. One text that I find infects high schoolers with a combination of pattern, precision, and emotion is Ezra Pound's translation of "The River Merchant's Wife" by Rihaku.

Emotion is fairly easy to conjure. Ask 10 teenagers to write about love and you may get 10 nice poems about betrayal and heartache but not one specific, no Arcade Fire song they shared, no live oak they carved their initials in.

Each stanza of Rihaku's poem starts with a different time stamp: "When my hair was cut straight across my forehead," "At fourteen," "At fifteen." It's fairly easy for students to emulate the pattern and write their own poem of love and loss punctuated by time periods.

The best aspect of Rihaku's poem, for teaching, is the use of obscure place names like Chokan, the river Kiang, and Cho-fu-Sa. I ask students to use real place names they know in their own

poems. There are great names in Charleston—Hanahan, Pon Pon, Wadmaw—but the point is not to sound exotic, rather to imbue emotion into familiar places. The place names in Rihaku's poem are like carefully placed pushpins on which the story hangs. When we hear "Ku-to-Yen," we are made to feel there's a deeper, hidden resonance for the young wife in that name.

Readers identify with the wife even though they have no idea just how far out Cho-fu-Sa is or just how one plays with blue plums. I love teenagers and think they should express themselves, but life is too short to prompt weepy, emotional verse without a hint of particularity.

I can't take credit for the Rihaku exercise. I heard a poet share his reworking of it at a reading, and I stole the idea and wrote my own. It's one of dozens of texts and prompts I use: Chinese menus, a Cole Porter song, a Rachmaninoff concerto. Whatever it takes, the goal is for kids to write poems that are strange, ordinary, specific, and, most of all, something that only they could have written.