

## **Setting Priorities for Common Core Implementation in English Language Arts**

You've got little discretionary money; you've got scarcely any time. What can you do immediately to give your school(s) a strong push start into the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for English Language Arts and Literacy?

### **Getting a Handle on the Standards as a Whole**

The first action is to get educators familiar with what the standards say and their major implications.

*Introductory Resources:*

- The Standards themselves. Have faculty engage in a close reading of the Standards. Here are the essentials:
  - Key Design Considerations (CCSS, 4).
  - How to Read this Document (CCSS, 8);
  - Anchor Standards for Reading (CCSS, 10);
  - Anchor Standards for Writing (CCSS, 18);
  - Anchor Standards for Speaking and Listening (CCSS, 22) and for Language (CCSS, 25).

It's especially helpful to ask teachers to read their own specific grade or subject standards after reading the Anchor standards. The goal is to understand the horizontal and vertical alignment of the standards.

- ELA/Literacy Shifts Professional Development Module and Shifts resources: [www.achievethecore.org/stealthesetools](http://www.achievethecore.org/stealthesetools)
- Introductory videos and exercises at Engage NY <http://engageny.org/common-core/teachers-get-started-with-the-common-core>
- "A Treasure Hunt through the Standards" [http://ok.gov/sde/sites/ok.gov.sde/files/C3%20TreasureHunt%20\(2\).pdf](http://ok.gov/sde/sites/ok.gov.sde/files/C3%20TreasureHunt%20(2).pdf)
- For parents: National PTA Parent Guides to the Standards (written by standards authors Susan Pimentel and Jason Zimba) <http://www.pta.org/4996.htm>

### **Text Complexity in Particular**

Understanding the unique role of text complexity expressed in Reading Standard Ten is essential to understanding the why and how of the instructional shifts we need to make. Never before has text complexity itself been a standard.

*Text Complexity Resources:*

- This ASCD webinar is an excellent starting point for understanding text Complexity. It can be found here: <http://www.ascd.org/professional-development/webinars/liben-webinar.aspx>
- The Text Complexity Primer found on [www.achievethecore.org/stealthesetools](http://www.achievethecore.org/stealthesetools)

### **Acquiring Academic Vocabulary**

Academic vocabulary is made up of mostly abstract words that appear in a wide variety of texts. Schools and districts concerned about the transition to the Common Core State Standards have to

understand the importance of vocabulary and institute a systematic, school-wide approach. Below are several suggestions and supports for how to do so.

#### *Vocabulary Resources:*

- Biemiller's book *Words Worth Teaching* contains a CD listing words that proficient readers are likely to know in 3rd and 6<sup>th</sup> grade, and also provides a clear explanation of how to teach vocabulary in the early grades through read aloud.
- Text Project at [www.textproject.org](http://www.textproject.org) contains an abundance of articles addressing what words to teach and how to teach them.
- Academic Word List: <http://www.victoria.ac.nz/lals/resources/academicwordlist>. Though not organized by grade level, this alphabetical list by word family gives a good sense of what constitutes an academic word.
- *Academic Words and Complex Text* explains how to teach academic vocabulary in context while using complex text. The examples all come from Appendix B of the Common Core State Standards. It is available at [www.achievethecore.org/stealthesetools/](http://www.achievethecore.org/stealthesetools/)
- Commercial word study programs: A great deal of research shows that proficient readers not only know the meanings of words but also the parts of words (prefixes, roots, suffixes). This is the content of word study. Every major publisher has a word study program; we recommend looking at and adopting one of these readymade programs.
- Word games from the internet: Children love word play and there are dozens of sites loaded with word games, puzzles, riddles and other fun activities. Use these and activities such as word walls and "word of the day" activities to make words part of the culture of the school.

#### **Syntax**

Complex text contains many different features. But the two features that have been shown to influence student difficulty more than any others are the vocabulary load and syntax (Nelson *et al* 2011). Despite the importance of syntax in understanding complex text, it is rarely taught in school. That will have to change.

#### *Syntax Resources:*

- Lilly Wong Fillmore has developed the "juicy sentence" approach for English language learners. It can be applied just as well to all students. An introduction can be found at <http://leafturned.wordpress.com/2010/03/13/juicy-language>
- Judith Hochman incorporates syntax into her writing program. A sample can be found here: <http://www.teachwritingskills.com/free-worksheets>

#### **Fluency**

The complex text called for by the standards means tougher going for students, especially students who lack fluency. Though fluency does not guarantee comprehension, lack of fluency pretty much guarantees comprehension and stamina problems.

### *Fluency Resources:*

- Tim Rasisnki's website (<http://www.timrasinski.com>) contains a treasure chest of activities to develop fluency in any grade and any subject.
- An excellent overview of fluency assessment can be found at [http://www.prel.org/products/re\\_/assessing-fluency.htm](http://www.prel.org/products/re_/assessing-fluency.htm)
- A guide to available fluency assessments including a number of free online resources can be found at [http://www.prel.org/products/re\\_/assessing-fluency.htm](http://www.prel.org/products/re_/assessing-fluency.htm)
- For high school fluency, consult the free resources of the Ohio Literary Alliance: <http://www.ohioliteracyalliance.org/fluency/fluency.htm>
- Readers' Theater is designed to build fluency through vibrant activities students love. There are numerous free resources available for implementing Readers' Theater.

### **Reading Aloud**

How much, how thoughtfully, and the nature of what teachers read aloud to their students are essential considerations for schools and districts to ponder in the era of the Common Core State Standards. Especially before students can read complex text for themselves, reading such text aloud will be the dominant vehicle for delivery to students. Nothing levels the reading playing field more than all students getting to build comprehension through listening to high quality text read aloud to them. Nothing rivals reading aloud for cultivating a love of reading and a deep understanding of its rewards.

### *Resources for Reading Aloud:*

- There is not an abundance of resources for Common Core era reading aloud, but there are lots of good reading lists and read aloud supports available on the Internet.
- Appendix B of the ELA standards documents offers suggestions for text selections deemed sufficiently complex and worthy of careful attention. The early grades have explicit selections for reading aloud, but teachers can also look two or three grades above their own for titles that would be excellent choices. The basic rule of thumb is that teachers should not spend time reading to students what students can read for themselves.

### **Volume of Reading**

The standards call for students to be able to read complex text and a range of text types (Standard Ten). This does not mean that everything students read needs to be at grade or band levels of complexity. Students need to read a lot to gain the volume needed to grow their vocabulary, to develop stamina, to increase background knowledge, and to support fluency.

### *Volume of Reading Resources:*

- [www.textproject.org](http://www.textproject.org). In addition to vocabulary resources, this site offers free, high quality, downloadable informational books designed for summer reading programs or independent use.
- [www.readworks.org](http://www.readworks.org) is a free website containing hundreds of informational texts per grade with questions included.
- Your public library or school/district media specialist will be able to provide information about how to best find interesting articles online. Many districts subscribe to national databases to

download articles. In many cases, these databases also include a lexile giving a complexity score by grade level.

- *Reading A-Z* is a commercial but inexpensive program with a wide variety of K-8 informational texts.

### **Three Resources that Bring All these Elements Together**

There are several projects that have made available valuable resources for schools and districts to use right now during the transition to the Common Core State Standards. The ones listed here have taken into account many of the elements of reading touched on earlier.

#### **1. *The Basal Alignment Project (BAP) Sponsored by the Council of the Great City Schools***

This has been an ongoing cooperative effort between school districts and state education offices, the Council of the Great City Schools, and Student Achievement Partners. Districts have sent volunteer writing groups to be trained in how to write replacement questions that demand use of evidence (“text based questions”) and culminating writing tasks that return students to a careful examination of the text being considered. These teams return home and work together to revise the questions and culminating tasks in the current generation of Reading Series so that they can still use the existing materials, but now in a manner that is aligned with the Common Core. Registration link is available through the Council of Great City Schools.

The training materials and current crop of revisions are available:

On Edmodo: use code <etuyrm> to gain membership to the group once you have signed up for an Edmodo account.

[www.edmodo.com](http://www.edmodo.com): Basal Alignment Project. Entry code: **etuyrm**

#### **2. *The Core Task Project***

Links to videos, ongoing information about the Core Task Project, and explanatory materials are located here: <http://coretaskproject.wordpress.com/tag/core-task-project>

Links to the Close Reading Exemplar lessons used in the Core Task Project can be found at [www.achievethecore.org/stealthesetools](http://www.achievethecore.org/stealthesetools)

#### **3. *America Achieves Sample Lessons Video Library***

America Achieves is a group dedicated to bringing educators together for improving educational outcomes for all of America’s children. They have assembled a set of high quality videos of educators teaching common core aligned lessons. Matching lesson plans and student work samples accompany each video. This collection will be expanded periodically.

The video collection and teaching resources can be accessed here after a brief sign-up process. <http://commoncore.americaachieves.org/>

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