

Preface

*I can never fear that things will go far wrong
where common sense has fair play.*

—Thomas Jefferson

FROM COMMON SENSE

This book has been rattling around in my head for years. My work as a classroom teacher, practicing principal, professional development consultant, and college instructor has brought me to this point in my thinking about school leadership and the educational transformations that are critical for our students to learn more successfully and our teachers to teach more effectively. The impetus for me to actually pick up a pen and plug in my computer to convey some ideas and thoughts on a page resurfaced when the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) were recently adopted by 46 states and the District of Columbia. Now I feel compelled to write.

After extensive review of the literature about excellence in the schoolhouse, deep discussions with my colleagues at the Leadership and Learning Center, and my successful 40-year career in this profession, I continue to ask myself, if we know so much about what is essential for our students' learning successes and all of the research supports similar conclusions, why isn't this *common sense* translated into *common practice* in America's schools? This question provides me with the renewed motivation to keep on reading, reviewing, and reflecting to offer some suggestions about creating schools that will welcome the Common Core State Standards initiative with an open mind and work diligently to get it right this time.

I agree with Secretary of Education Arne Duncan when he states that the CCSS reform initiative is indeed our "moon shot" in American education. If we do not embrace this opportunity to build upon the courageous and challenging work of the authors of Common Core State Standards,

our momentum and enthusiasm to create meaningful change in how we educate our students will wane just as it did in 1992 and 1997. Both the Republican and Democratic parties, with laudable and best intentions, failed to define our common national learning targets as they had pledged they would do. We cannot afford for that legislative stalemate to occur again in our country. As educators, we must contribute our talent, our energy, and our expertise to this vital educational initiative.

Many deeply caring and invested Americans are engaged in the current debate about the benefit and worth of the recently created and widely adopted Common Core State Standards as a viable education reform. Provocative and reflective questions arise in many of these vibrant and animated conversations.

- Will CCSS cure the unevenness of educational opportunity and quality across our nation?
- Will CCSS dramatically improve the mediocre performance of our students on international assessments?
- Will the new standards provide some consistency in comparing student readiness for college, careers, and citizenship from state to state?
- Are the CCSS more rigorous than what already exist in certain states?
- Is the CCSS initiative an organic process for educational improvement and accountability or just another stand-alone educational reform?

Great questions, right? In order for educators to answer in the affirmative to all five critical inquiries, we must first ensure that we thoughtfully consider five additional strategic implementation issues.

- What are the implications for curriculum, instruction, and assessment decision making in the structure of the new standards?
- What realities and challenges do school leaders face in transitioning their schools and districts to CCSS?
- How will school leaders communicate and promote the message of CCSS so that teachers will work diligently to infuse them into their daily instruction and parents will embrace them as a workable alternative to what they are familiar with?
- Which current teaching and learning practices and leadership policies will remain the same and which will need to be modified or abandoned?
- What types of additional resources and supports are necessary for the successful implementation of this initiative?

Opinions and responses to these preliminary concerns and questions are as diverse as the adults sharing them. Many educators, parents, community leaders, and policy makers are saying it is about time we agree as a nation on what our students need to know and be able to do at each level of a K–12 public school experience. Others contend that this initiative smacks of an attempt to federalize what is constitutionally a state’s right and responsibility to determine, and national standards will limit the innovation and flexibility in local decision making. One of the dissenters in my own state of Colorado likened the approval of CCSS to being as naive as taking out a home mortgage without knowing the terms of the loan.

Whichever argument you accept as truth about the potential power of this historic reform determines your role as a firm supporter or tentative skeptic of CCSS, and I believe both perspectives are necessary to enhance the outreach and quality of the final solution. Your responsibility as a school or teacher leader in the participating 46 states and Washington, D.C., nonetheless, is to ensure that this standards-based dialogue translates to common core accountability in each of your classrooms, which now comprise 85% of our nation’s students.

With its admitted flaws, design challenges, and unresolved issues, CCSS still represents our moral and ethical promise to do better for our children and the pledge that we should work together to keep. Our collective responsibility as educators and policy makers is to ensure that all of our students are prepared and on target for their next level of learning. As of today, many are not. Every citizen must respond to this call for action, and as school leaders and practitioners we must be first in line to propose and promote the right work and the right way to accomplish it.

TO COMMON PRACTICE

I take very seriously what I am attempting to do with this book. Apt and appropriate words can ignite a fire within each reader to move right past what is and go directly to what can be. That is what I want to inspire. It’s a pretty tall order for a rookie writer, but perhaps my passion overshadows my practicality right now. I know from experience we can create standards-based schools that support the success of all students. I agree with Douglas Reeves, my leader and mentor at the Leadership and Learning Center, and many other prominent educators and researchers who believe we already possess the knowledge and ability necessary to answer the difficult questions and solve the challenging problems of CCSS implementation; we just need to make a plan and get busy. In a thoughtful manner, we can move *from common sense to common practice*.

The landscape of education is going to change dramatically during the next decade with or without our collective professional energy and expertise. States that adopt CCSS and even those few who decline the invitation to join this reform initiative will influence our primary work for the next 5 to 10 years and beyond. Preparing our teachers to be ready and willing to embrace these new standards, refining our curriculum and instruction to match the rigor of CCSS, creating next-generation assessment systems to measure our effectiveness at reaching the ambitious goals of CCSS, and designing an educational accountability system to connect all of these separate pieces in a logical way is a leader's challenge for years to come.

The nine chapters in this book do not represent any innovative quick fix or shortcut solutions for improving teaching and learning. My experience as an educator says there aren't any. They do, however, encourage necessary conversations about what our obligations are in supporting new levels of achievement and performance from all of America's students and provide some concrete implementation suggestions to help us get there. I believe the adoption of CCSS is a first step in meeting the commitment of providing excellence and equity of opportunity to every student. Perhaps providing new insight on an old issue or offering old insight on a new issue, depending on your perspective, is the intent of the following chapters. New and different is intimidating to many people, but if we can connect the known to the unknown, if we can determine what already works for our students and what needs repair, these necessary changes will become less threatening and more plausible. And isn't that, in fact, the definition of learning for all of us?

CHAPTER 1: WHAT MATTERS MOST

I begin this book deliberately not with the typical description of the CCSS initiative but with the respectful and honest acknowledgment that teachers assume the starring role in any school reform. Classroom teachers have the power to propel or postpone any change initiative that ultimately impacts students. That is why we must consciously ensure that our best teachers have a platform from which to speak on behalf of their potential work with Common Core State Standards. We must blur the lines of traditional leadership so that the voices of these adults who matter most can be heard over the white noise that might distract us from effective implementation of CCSS. Chapter 1 helps us imagine a brighter future for our students by identifying the present realities that classroom teachers face on a daily basis.

CHAPTER 2: LEADING WITH ROOTS AND WINGS

Educational reform initiatives come and go, but the ones with staying power and influence must have the endorsement of the school principal. Any change effort cannot survive a principal's opposition or indifference. Chapter 2 discusses the importance of bold and visionary leadership to initiate and sustain the compelling conversations that encourage and cultivate great teaching in a building. Supporting teachers is neither dramatic nor easy work, but it is imperative if we are to remove the boundaries of scattered pockets of excellence in our schools. Skillful leaders create collaborative structures and a climate of trust to share professional expertise and expand the capacity of every staff member in the building. Both are critical to the successful implementation of CCSS.

CHAPTER 3: THE PROMISES AND POSSIBILITIES OF COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

In response to the confidence crisis in the American public educational system from President Obama on down, the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers released Common Core State Standards for grades K–12 in English language arts and mathematics in June 2010. The state-led initiative to develop these standards grew out of concerns that the current policy of 50 different sets of standards in 50 states is not adequately preparing students with the necessary knowledge and skills to compete globally in our highly mobile society. This chapter delves deeper into the CCSS initiative and discusses what is explicitly stated in the document and what strategic planning is left to the discretion of individual districts and schools.

CHAPTER 4: A RELEVANT AND RIGOROUS COMMON CORE CURRICULUM

Gone are the days when rearranging and revising what has been traditionally taught in schools is appropriate in curriculum design. School systems will have two distinct options to deal with aligning a relevant and rigorous curriculum to CCSS. Perhaps a district has adequate funding to purchase commercially produced curricular programs that demonstrate close “cross walking” to CCSS. Or perhaps a school system elects to customize existing materials and resources to update and redesign curricula

to support the new standards. Either choice mandates that knowledgeable content specialists test their assumptions and attitudes about creating the “what” of learning. Since we will not have the benefit of the high-stakes assessments available prior to the implementation of the standards, we will need to conduct deep discussions and debates about what knowledge is enduring, what knowledge is essential, and what knowledge needs new emphasis to ensure that our students are college and career ready. This is the topic of Chapter 4.

CHAPTER 5: INVITING STUDENTS TO LEARN

Perhaps the most contentious issue about the CCSS document for many educators is the dissension about whether research-based practices in instructional strategies should have been included in the recommendations for implementation. The authors of CCSS have been challenged by their controversial stance that “teachers are thus free to provide students with whatever tools and knowledge their professional judgment and experience identify as most helpful for meeting the goals set out in the Standards” (Common Core State Standards Initiative, n.d.). The standards define what all students are expected to know and be able to do but not how teachers should teach. Discussions in Chapter 5 address both components of effective education—content and process—and add some suggestions for avoiding the potential disruption to the delicate balance between the art and science of teaching.

CHAPTER 6: POWERFUL PROFESSIONAL LEARNING FOR ADULTS

Since research shows educator quality to be the most important school influence on student achievement, it seems logical that teachers will require ongoing, sustained opportunities to enhance their knowledge and skills to teach all children more effectively in their classrooms. The dilemma is agreeing on how to effectively accomplish this task. Low-quality and unfocused trainings have left some teachers with limited faith that staff development activities can actually help them in their daily interaction with students. Professional development that is most effective in improving educator practice is results oriented, data driven, constructivist in nature, and job embedded. Chapter 6 explores methods and models to structure meaningful and worthwhile professional learning opportunities to support the implementation of CCSS.

CHAPTER 7: NEXT-GENERATION ASSESSMENT SYSTEMS

There is a shared anonymous adage among educators that states: “What is inspected is expected and what is expected should be inspected.” Two consortia of states have a historic opportunity to use Race to the Top funds to create next-generation assessment systems that can better fulfill the many purposes we have for testing: providing rich formative data that can inform decision making while also inspiring high-quality instruction in classrooms, allowing comparisons of student proficiency from state to state, and creating more rigorous and relevant performance tasks to measure authentic and ongoing student learning. Chapter 7 addresses how the next generation of state assessments can make the CCSS concrete and meaningful to educators, students, and parents and provide a critical vehicle for ensuring that all students master essential knowledge and skills and educators can be accountable for the results.

CHAPTER 8: POWERFUL LEARNING THROUGH POWERFUL TECHNOLOGY

Advanced technology, which is pervasive in every aspect of our personal and professional lives, dictates that we interact and work differently. Leveraging the power of media literacy to instruct and assess learning will be a vital consideration to enhance the learning opportunities for all of our students. There is prolific electronic content and digital interactivity everywhere but in most of our schools. Many students believe that more learning takes places outside of the brick-and-mortar institutions: They suspend their expectations of learning something valuable and meaningful until the final bell rings at the end of their formal school day when they are once again allowed to turn on all of their mobile electronic devices. Harnessing the potential of technology as a tool to change our entire educational system from the classroom to the state offices is a must and the subject of Chapter 8.

CHAPTER 9: ACCOUNTABILITY FOR EXCELLENCE AND EQUITY

Educational accountability, to me, simply represents any effort to document progress toward the goal of improved student learning and academic success. Sadly, most people’s experience with the word is reduced to critically viewing numbers on a page that list test scores on a required high-stakes exam. Just as a portfolio is a better indicator of student

progress over time, so is a multidimensional accountability system more valid as a record of results in teaching, learning, and leadership. The report should include not only how well the students are doing, but also how the adults' actions support their growth. Chapter 9 demonstrates how teachers and school leaders can take control of the accountability mandates to ensure that they are meaningful and relevant to the real work of schools. Excellent teachers do not resist responsibility for student success—they welcome and celebrate it—and are constantly investigating more effective ways of engaging everyone in the accountability process.

So that's the book. As you can see, it is not a training manual, not a treatise on the history of educational standards. It is a practitioner's thoughts on the tremendous potential that Common Core State Standards offers our struggling educational system. Hopefully, as a result of reading these pages for authenticity, thinking deeply about the contents, and discussing the book passionately and purposefully with colleagues, CCSS will become a valuable and viable education reform reality. We can finally fulfill a promise to our youth to guarantee that if they work hard and we do our part, America can commemorate the first generation of students in our nation's history that is fully prepared to meet the challenges of the future and best positioned to compete successfully as global citizens.

You might be asking yourself these questions as you evaluate this book's relevance and potential contribution to inform your CCSS work:

- Is this manuscript intended to generate ideas and discussion topics to inform the potential work of implementing CCSS?
- Does this book contain both the bias and the benefit of an experienced and successful educator?
- Is this book written with the passion and pride of someone hopeful for the future of American education?
- Will the book inspire school leaders who are invested in the potential of our students to reach higher levels of achievement and performance?

The answers to your queries are yes; probably; you bet; and hopefully so. With incredibly difficult and deliberate work ahead that requires huge displays of efficacy, I optimistically believe we can achieve those positive differences in teaching, learning, and leadership that drive our passion to change the world for our students. The following chapters and subsequent discussions will hopefully focus our effort and energy on the critical issues

and intelligently inform the decisions that result. This book certainly does not represent an all-inclusive list of considerations for implementing CCSS, but it does represent my attempt to launch some of the compelling conversations that need to be hosted by school leaders. You, as the reader, can take what you need, what makes sense to you, and what fits with your values, beliefs, and experiences.

Let's roll up our sleeves, lean in, and push forward together.