

What's NEW

*About the
Common Core
State Standards* ?



Susan Gendron, a policy coordinator at SMARTER Balanced Assessment Consortium, talked with Mel Riddile about the Common Core State Standards and their implications for school leaders.

Mel Riddile: There's a lot of talk across the country about the Common Core State Standards [CCSS], and I've heard a lot of different opinions. Are these the same standards that states are used to? What's different about them?

Sue Gendron: Well, it depends on which state you're looking at. In most cases, what differentiates between current state standards and the newly adopted CCSS is a real shift in the instructional intent. For most states, there will be a much higher level of rigor with the CCSS. In English language arts, for example, the difference is the level of comprehension and the types of texts that students are being asked to be able to read. The standards are, in many cases, one to two years higher than what is currently expected at grade levels.

Students will also be asked to write more frequently with far more depth—for example, being required to cite evidence from the text that they're reading. And there's a heavy emphasis in English language arts on research skills, beginning in kindergarten. The CCSS require developing a comprehensive approach. The English language arts standards really focus on students being college and career ready.

Another difference is the emphasis on speaking and listening. What we're learning from higher education institutions is that the abilities to collaborate, to present one's thinking, and to substantiate one's reasoning are fundamental skills that they don't see.

Riddile: What are the differences that you see in mathematics?

Gendron: In mathematics, the greatest shift is that the standards have narrowed the focus of what students are going to be asked to know and to be able to understand. The curriculum will really develop and define proficiency, or what the standards refer to as "fluency." Students will have a much deeper understanding of smaller amounts of content by grade level. The other big shift is at the high school level: all students will be expected to have a foundation in algebra and geometry and statistical thinking. As I travel across the country, I find that there will be pretty significant shifts in many states.

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Riddile: So the big picture is much higher rigor?

Gendron: Much higher. In the work I'm involved in with the SMARTER Balanced Assessment Consortium, we're actually using a cognitive rigor matrix that was developed in 2009. It uses Bloom's taxonomy and Norman Webb's depth of knowledge to define what students need to be able to demonstrate to show that they've achieved proficiency.

That will create a uniform expectation. In my work with teachers, I have them look at the exemplars in the appendices for English language arts. I don't necessarily tell them what grade level they are looking at, and they're usually off by one to two grades.

Riddile: Is it fair to say that the CCSS have a different target? They've moved from a focus on high school graduation to a focus on college and career readiness; they have much higher expectations in terms of rigor; and as you mentioned, along with text complexity and comprehension, they put a much greater emphasis on writing than we do currently. Students will have to do research, and in math, they will have to have a much deeper conceptual understanding of mathematical concepts beginning in elementary grades. Would that be correct?

Gendron: That's absolutely correct. A key component in mathematics is the focus on the mathematical practices that will create habits of mind that could really be applied to any content area. Here again, it focuses on rigor: problem solving, critical thinking skills, and students' ability to articulate how they are solving problems. In addition, students have to be able to model. We must encourage teachers to teach mathematics in the frame of real-world problems so that students can see how critical mathematical skills and processes are going to be used in everyday life.

Riddile: You just said the phrase "real world," and that concept permeates the standards. Will the whole idea of students applying what they learned to some real-world context be an

important part of the standards?

Gendron: Yes, definitely in mathematics. And you also see it in the shift in English language arts regarding the type of texts that we're asking students to engage in; more informational texts will come from newspapers, journals, research, and digital content where students will have to be able to decipher the information. That's the other real-world component that becomes a much greater focus: what types of information are students going to be processing, validating, and raising key questions about in real life? At the elementary level, 50% of the reading materials that students engage in should be informational. As we move to the high school, 70% should be informational texts.


Riddile: What implications do the things you just pointed out have for classroom instruction? NASSP serves school leaders—principals, assistant principals, teacher leaders, coaches, and instructional coordinators in central and district offices. What should they start looking for? What has to happen in classrooms that's not happening now?

Gendron: First, all of the leaders that you just mentioned have to start to think about professional development for teachers in the classroom so that, for example, teachers have a common tool to look at text complexity or an agreement about how to make instructional decisions. So often when I ask teachers how they've chosen a particular text, they tell me it's something that they've known from years of experience and it fits the curriculum. But I ask them to look at the qualitative measures: what's the knowledge, vocabulary, and purpose of the text? Can they take it apart to really get at the difficulty and the level of understanding that we want of students? Can they use a quantitative tool whereby they will identify the structure, the sentence structure, and the vocabulary to look at difficulty?

Another element with text complexity is the reader. Teachers have to know and under-



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stand what motivates students. What tools can they use day-to-day to know students' cognitive levels? What skill sets are students bringing to the table? It's really important to engage teachers in professional learning that helps them do that deep analysis, which then raises their level of understanding of the classroom. Schools that can really develop a deep understanding of literacy among their staff members will see significant gains in student achievement.

Riddile: So if I'm an English teacher and I'm teaching Hemingway as I have for years, using *The Old Man and the Sea*, you're saying that I have to decide whether the topic is appropriate for the maturity level of my students. Is the text's complexity appropriate and is it the right level of rigor? And is it something that interests students on the basis of the diversity of my class and those types of things?

Gendron: Absolutely. And as you look at the common core English language art standards, you will see opportunities to take *The Old Man and the Sea* and other texts and help students relate them to current day. I want to leave teachers with the message that we should be linking students' knowledge and helping them talk about applying what they learn to their lives and how different perspectives develop.

Riddile: How does that apply to mathematics?

Gendron: In mathematics, I encourage school leaders to create a safe environment, in particular at the elementary levels, where teachers can begin to identify gaps in their training, comfort level, and knowledge base. We're finding that to teach the mathematics standards, elementary teachers need a firm foundation in algebra. They have to understand fractions very deeply in grades 3 through 5 so that students will be able to leave the fifth grade really understanding fractions. And at the middle school, a deeper focus on geometry and ratios and proportional thinking is indicated.

The operations of algebraic thinking have to permeate the K–8 program. Teachers are going to require some support. School leaders should be gathering information from their teachers to see where they need to focus. It's also crucial that teachers are able to observe the thinking processes and to determine what a student's data reveals about the his or her thinking and about his or her level of understanding and mastery. That is also going to require some comprehensive professional development, but with it, schools will see some significant shifts in the classroom.

Riddile: I'm interpreting what you said as being a significant retraining of our current teaching corps? Is that accurate?

Gendron: I think it is a deepening of teaching and absolutely a retraining of teachers. Because if we look objectively at our data and do the analysis, we're not hitting the targets. So we have to help our teachers. I also believe we have to think about some different support mechanisms. For example, English language arts teachers must have training in using peer editing and other different types of feedback mechanisms so that it's not just the teacher but others giving feedback so that students can really develop their self-monitoring skills.

In mathematics, we also have to really think differently about the resources. So often I hear teachers say that they're dependent on the textbook; what are the resources they will need to go deeper? So it's a retooling for some and for others an expansion of the teaching that is already happening but that may not have the depth or the cognitive rigor.

Riddile: Would you agree that the level of student engagement is going to have to increase dramatically, particularly at the higher grade levels?

Gendron: I totally agree with that. I've had some teachers say that having students dynamically engaged in learning is perceived negatively as the students challenging the



teachers. If we really want students to be able to look for that deep analytical evidence—reading, citing evidence to support their interpretation—we have to give them the forum to be able to put that to their classmates to defend their positions. In some school cultures that is not the norm, but it needs to become the norm. The level of engagement has to change dramatically, and we have to help teachers recognize and value how important that's going to be for students to be effective 21st century workers and consumers.

Riddile: How are the assessments that are being developed by SMARTER Balanced Assessment Consortium and the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness of College and Careers (PARCC) to measure the CCSS going to differ from the multiple choice, fill-in-the-blank types of assessments that most states use simply because they're lower cost and easier to score and get the results to students faster?

Gendron: There are some pretty significant changes for teachers and students to look forward to in 2014–15. Both assessment consortia are committed to changing the level and type of questions. The developers really want to focus on innovative questions. You will continue to see some multiple choice questions, but the type of question will change to engage students' critical thinking and increase the depth of knowledge that they will have to apply to multiple choice questions. Constructive response questions will become far more prominent. Assessments will include questions that will require students to demonstrate problem solving. Students will apply their critical thinking skills, and educators will be able to see the processes that they went through to solve a particular problem or to compare two pieces of text and respond.

And what we at the SMARTER Balanced Assessment Consortium are calling “technology enhanced items” reflect another shift in the common core: to integrate digital content

throughout English language arts and mathematics. Students will have the opportunity to demonstrate how they use technological tools as a resource.

The inclusion of performance assessments is a big shift. We will see how well a student is achieving the common core state standards because he or she will complete short research projects that are anywhere from 90 to 120 minutes long. The assessments will engage students over several periods of time, and students will have to be able to react to certain evidence or research that's presented and to compare and contrast that.

Finding a way to capture the speaking and listening standards is a work in progress. We're learning from higher education that they really want to see that type of data. How do we use the technology to be able to capture that? So that gives you the types of questions that we're focusing on. It really will be dramatically different for most students.

Both assessment consortia will deliver these new assessments using technology, and that will enhance our ability to provide accommodations for students with disabilities and students who are English language learners. Technology will provide a richness of assessments as well. Both assessment consortia recognize that you can't just have a single assessment at the end of the school year. So both the SMARTER Balanced Assessment Consortium and PARCC are designing systems that will give states the option to provide interim formative and summative assessments. As we develop these new items, we're keeping in mind that we want to measure not only student achievement but also student growth. **PL**

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