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The Common Core Is Not Ready

By **Mike Schmoker**

In the early 20th century, medical scientists created an experimental drug with immense potential for preventing terminal illnesses. But before the drug was tested in trial runs, it was manufactured, distributed, and sold nationally in its raw form. Some might refer to this process as a "pilot." But it wasn't a pilot at all; in other words, it was not a small-scale, carefully studied trial. Thousands died, and countless others became ill. The drug was finally pulled from the market and properly tested. Once scientists refined it, the drug saved millions of lives.

I made that up. Forgive me. But replace "drug" with the common core, and we might have a good analogy for its botched and increasingly troubled launch, but also the opportunity to salvage it.

I don't believe we should abandon the Common Core State Standards. Despite the imperfections of the initiative, many have broadly celebrated its essential vision and its best features with good reason, including the core's compelling introductory materials and appendices.

But it is time to insist that those who are leading the initiative do what should have been done up front: Conduct actual small-scale pilot testing of the grade-by-grade standards themselves for at least a year.

Instead, the standards have been launched on a near-national scale before even a single district or school could pilot them. School personnel did not have adequate time to see if the standards were clear and concise enough to achieve their primary purpose: facilitating the creation of appropriate and coherent curricula for English/language arts and math, by grade level, that make sense within the constraints of a nine-month school year.

Before we go one step further, states, unions, and the major education organizations should demand such pilots. The recent call by Vicki Phillips of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation for a two-year "moratorium" on tying teacher evaluations or student promotion to the standards assessments is encouraging, but it misses the point. Teachers merely need "time to develop lessons, receive more training, and get used to the new tests," wrote Ms. Phillips.

No they don't. Nothing could be more futile than doubling down on training, testing, and lesson



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planning based on the still-bloated, misconceived lists of standards.

In math, we're seeing the confusion wrought by the verbose, ambiguously worded, committee-generated paragraphs that constitute the eight "Standards for Mathematical Practice." Elements of these are essential, but math teachers tell me that no one really understands all of them. Worse yet, no one knows which "practices" should be implemented with what standards, in what grade level, and for what duration.

Clarity is paramount here: Marina Ratner, a professor emerita of math at the University of California, Berkeley, recently wrote in The Wall Street Journal about the indiscriminate and excessive "model-drawing mania"

"Nothing could be more futile than doubling down on training, testing, and lesson planning based on the still-bloated, misconceived lists of standards."

In English/language arts, even the former president of the Modern Language Association, Gerald Graff, finds most of the standards unnecessary and nonsensical. For curriculum expert Robert Shepherd, they are "just another set of blithering, poorly thought-out abstractions." Teachers still don't know if they should teach to the hundreds of individual English/language arts standards one-by-one (which is a terrible idea) or merely to the "three instructional shifts" (which are clear and concise instructional guidelines for teaching texts). I know from visiting schools across the country that confusion about this is rampant.

Pity the 8th grade teacher who is asked to implement such murky, indecipherable standards as this one, which I guarantee no teacher will ever assess:

Analyze how the points of view of the characters and audience or reader (e.g. created through the use of dramatic irony) create effects like suspense or humor.

There is much to appreciate in the general vision and direction of the common core. But my sources at the highest levels of the common-core initiative admit to a serious failure of both clarity and concision in the standards documents.

A lot of the current public confusion and acrimony could have been avoided had we piloted the standards in a small-scale, publicly transparent fashion. They should have been piloted for clarity, economy, and alignment with the assessments with which they are now appallingly misaligned. Instead, the standards were launched, like an untested prescription drug, even as they were being used as the basis for expensive new textbooks, tests, and countless misconceived training sessions in dozens of states.

So please, let's not waste the moratorium on more training or lesson planning based on such plainly problematic standards. States, unions, and national education groups should demand that they be piloted right now in these critical respects:

- For clarity, by testing them on ordinary school personnel to ensure that their language is crystal clear to teachers, trainers, and curriculum directors, just as Microsoft does with its installation manuals.
- For economy, by having pilot teams create rough or prototype course curricula in both common-core subject areas, under typical conditions, and mindful of the need for the standards to fit within a nine-month schedule with reasonable room left for local curricular decisions.
- By having pilot teams actually teach standards-appropriate curricula for even a single semester or year to approximate the time needed to teach them.

It's all about the curriculum. According to a comprehensive meta-analysis by Robert Marzano, in his book *What Works in Schools: Translating Research Into Action*, our ability to actually deliver a coherently organized, literacy-rich whole-year curriculum is determinative. It has more impact on student achievement than any other in-school factor.

For Linda Darling-Hammond, a clear, common schedule of what to teach, and when, in every course is the critical precondition to effective teaching. Clear, concise standards are the substance of coherent curriculum. But, as E.D. Hirsch Jr. points out, U.S. schools haven't had such curricula for more than a half-century. Instead, we have had curricular chaos.

A single year of such pilot testing could radically enhance our ability to provide students and teachers with clear, coherent curricula with the potential for historic benefits. In the interim, schools could focus their efforts on teaching and testing what they deem to be the most essential content and texts, while employing the much clearer and more helpful three instructional shifts recently developed for both math and English/language arts.

We could do this. But it won't happen unless states, districts, and national education organizations collectively demand a reset.

If there's a moratorium, let's use it to conduct transparent, empirically based pilot projects that will render, at long last, a clear, useful foundation for high-quality curricula. And that will make all the difference.

Mike Schmoker is a writer and a former teacher and school administrator. He is the 2014 recipient of the Distinguished Service Award from the National Association of Secondary School Principals. His most recent book is FOCUS: Elevating the Essentials to Radically Improve Student Learning (ASCD, 2011).

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