

COMMENTARY

Helping Educators Overcome 'Initiative Fatigue'

By **Charlotte Danielson**

I hear it everywhere I go: "initiative fatigue." The common-core standards are being implemented in **more than 40 states**, requiring significant shifts in instructional practice. At the same time, major teacher-evaluation reforms are taking hold. Too often, educators experience these changes as discordant at best, contradictory and confusing at worst.

I wanted to do something about that—and I wanted to do it *with* teachers, not *to* them. I wanted to hear directly from practitioners: What are they struggling with in their adoption of and alignment to the common core in terms of their instruction and understanding of the standards?

To answer this and other questions, I worked with a team of independent educational researchers to engage more than 500 educators, including teachers and principals, from March 2013 to June 2014. The participants came from four distinct school districts: Bethel, Conn.; Indian Prairie, Ill.; New York City; and Washoe County, Nev. These districts range from small suburban communities to a city with more than a million students, each with diverse socioeconomic levels, ethnic and racial populations, standardized-test scores, and common-core experiences.

To conduct the research, my organization, the Danielson Group, which sponsors training to support the widely used **"Framework for Teaching"**—a research-based and validated tool for teacher preparation, professional development, and teacher evaluation—partnered with Student Achievement Partners, which develops and shares open-source tools to aid teachers in their instruction of the standards. We received support from the Helmsley Charitable Trust, a significant funder of K-12 education and common-core-alignment initiatives.

What we discovered was that practitioners from across the country are deeply engaged with the question of how to successfully implement the common core. Their feedback revealed a strong commitment to ensuring that elements of

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instruction, teacher observation, and professional development are structured around the rigorous student learning prescribed by the standards.

The feedback also revealed several challenges about tackling the new standards.

In a nutshell, it's *hard*. Teaching to the higher standards involves using instructional practices that are new and challenging for many practitioners and administrators. Participants in our study highlighted the need for strong content knowledge on the part of both teachers and observers, and they expressed doubts about the extent to which current practice either captures or develops this essential dimension. For the common-core math standards, teachers and administrators reported a clear need for more specific guidance on implementation at all levels.

Another clear take-away was that it takes time to develop deep familiarity with and confidence in new standards and to establish practices for diverse educational environments. Teachers, in particular, commented on the critical need for time to devote to reflection and professional conversation. They recognized that successful common-core teaching is not simply a matter of adopting some new—or different—instructional practices; it's bigger than that and includes, in addition to deep content knowledge, changes in teachers' understanding of student learning.

Both teachers and administrators also believed that observation and evaluation, including by peers, should be a central element of professional development. This dual nature of observation is not, however, the norm. Fundamentally, teachers expressed a desire to have agency and feel supported in developing their practice. Participants agreed that the instruments used for evaluation should be aligned to the common standards, and that when the focus is on ratings, the culture for professional learning suffers.

While it is widely recognized that teacher-evaluation and -development systems need to support practitioners both in the understanding of the new higher learning standards and in the improvement of their content knowledge, we know this is no easy task. Indeed, aligning models of teacher evaluation and development with the new learning standards, and finding the funds to do so, have been identified as the challenges faced by states and districts.

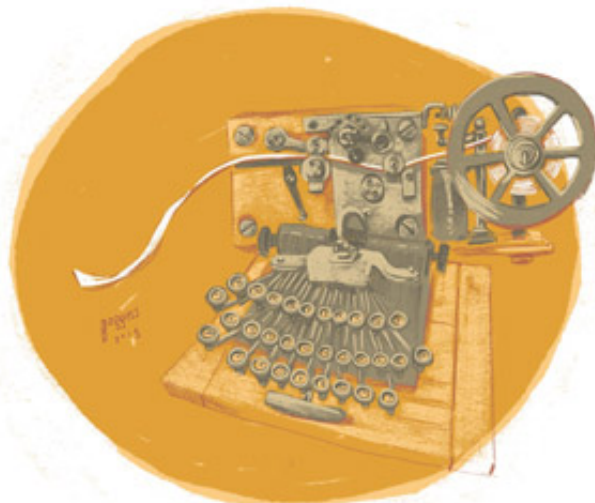
The suggestions, concerns, and desires captured in our research

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COMMON CORE in the CLASSROOM

Education Week Commentary and Education Week Teacher asked five leading educators to assess the state of common-standards implementation from their perspectives, as those who are closest to it.

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“There is

underscore the primary challenges facing teachers today and highlight the ways in which we can modify and strengthen supportive tools to draw more explicit connections to the new common core.

Our organization is working to make the criteria in the Framework for Teaching more streamlined and responsive to the instructional implications of the new standards. And as a result of our work, a collection of videos on standards-aligned classroom lessons, professional-development modules on common-core instruction, and other resources, all of which are free, are available on the **Teaching the Core** website.

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When it comes to the big questions of how practitioners respond to the common core, the sense of both challenges and potential is clear. There is significant recognition that new adjustments will require perseverance and even struggle, but that the demands of the standards present students with new ways of learning and thinking. It may take time, but it is time worth taking.

Charlotte Danielson is the author of a number of books, including the Framework for Teaching, which was originally published in 1996. She has consulted with state departments of education across the United States, as well as ministries of education abroad.