

Book Review

*A Review of Pathways to
the Common Core:
Accelerating Achievement.*

Much like a pile of mixed puzzle pieces that need to be sorted to be useful, the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) have arrived for teachers and school districts in 46 states. In their book *Pathways to the Common Core: Accelerating Achievement* (2012), Lucy Calkins, Mary Ehrenworth, and Christopher Lehman present a thoughtful approach to a seemingly daunting task: implementing the Common Core State Standards. This book has what is needed to successfully put together the pieces of the CCSS in a way that is based on research and supports best teaching practices.

As the book opens, the authors candidly address critiques of the CCSS. There are a number of concerns about the standards. Are the expectations developmentally appropriate? Are they attainable by students of varying socio-economic statuses? Will there be enough financial support for the standards to be properly implemented? While Calkins, Ehrenworth, and Lehman address these questions, they continually remind the reader that quality professional development, collaboration, and a thoughtful approach to curriculum are possible and will make the implementation of the CCSS a success. In my opinion, this is a key point to the book. In doing this, they provide a valuable service for teaching reading and writing in a manner supported by the research behind the CCSS.

The book is organized by the three key

pillars of the CCSS: reading, writing, and listening and speaking. For clarity, I will address each of these in turn.

Reading

The key purpose of the CCSS in regard to reading is to promote a high level of reading and comprehension in both fiction and non-fiction texts. This is authentic reading similar to that done by adults. Chapters two through five make an effort to discriminate between the traditional method for teaching reading and a more real-world approach. This includes providing quality texts in content-area classes, planning timelines with students for how you (and they) anticipate increasing text difficulty, altering curricula to include more complex texts on topics already being taught, and teaching a variety of approaches to text for strong comprehension. As a result, literal and complex comprehension strategies will be used in all reading work. This approach is supported by a considerable body of research, (Calkins, 2010; Gallagher, 2009; Harvey and Goudvis, 2007; Keene and Zimmerman, 2007; Miller, 2002). The actions presented by Calkins, Ehrenworth, and Lehman are doable for schools and teachers, and these chapters provide clear guidance for how to allocate time in the day for this. Professional development and teachers studying best practices from one another are necessary, and the resulting higher quality of work will help our

students meet their CCSS goals.

One of the values of the Common Core Standards is to provide students with a framework for engaging in authentic, not ad hoc, reading. Too often, students are provided basal anthologies and teacher-created work that does not prepare them for real-world application. In Calkins' other work (Calkins, 2001; Calkins, 2010), she stresses the importance of providing quality texts that are at an independent or instructional level. Using these, students are better able to put forth their own analysis and understanding of the text. Other research (Allington, 2001; Fountas and Pinnell, 2009; Harvey and Goudvis, 2007; Keene and Zimmerman, 2007; Miller, 2002) indicates the importance of using independent level texts and a variety of literature to encourage flexible and purposeful comprehension and complex thinking skills at all reading levels. The CCSS emphasize complex thinking with both fiction and non-fiction in every classroom. The authors of *Pathways to the Common Core* are cognizant of the research and provide a cohesive plan for authentic and purposeful reading to happen.

Writing

The Common Core State Standards are equally rigorous for writing, which the authors discuss in chapters six through nine. Students are expected to spend equal time writing narrative, argument, and informational pieces. In most schools, this requires that the amount of time devoted to writing must increase. The CCSS require that students at each grade level write at a much higher competency than most currently do. The authors of *Pathways to the Common Core* recommend studying the standards linearly and noticing how they build upon each other from one grade to the next (p. 116). Understanding what comes before and what comes after a grade level makes the standards more clear and guides decisions in how to teach children to write detailed, complex pieces.

With the new standards, one of the challenges will be to teach writing, rather than

just to assign it. This is a bold statement to make, but many teachers are uncomfortable breaking writing instruction into individualized pieces and teaching explicit skills. Calkins, Ehrenworth, and Lehman tout the importance of understanding the "elegant series of steps" (p. 119) in the Common Core Standards and adjusting curriculum so each step is attainable.

To achieve the goals of the standards, the authors recommend using the writing process and workshop models for each type of writing. Supported by research, these models of teaching allow students to receive individual and explicit feedback about their work, to ask more questions, and to have regular assessments of their progress (Anderson, 2009; Calkins, 1994). Students are continually engaged in writing individual pieces rather than moving from piece to piece on a timeline. When used across disciplines, this approach supports the CCSS in having a fluid writing experience as students craft pieces for a variety of purposes- narrative, expository, descriptive and persuasive- and using a variety of formats- short notes, email, formal writing, and letters. In this way, writing becomes an effective communication tool that will benefit the students throughout their lives.

Speaking and Listening

As with the reading and writing standards, the speaking and listening section of the CCSS raise uncertainties. Calkins, Ehrenworth, and Lehman note that unlike reading and writing, the speaking and listening standards offer instructional suggestions rather than guidelines. The CCSS suggest that teachers assign students to roles in debate-style discussions, that students learn to evaluate a speaker's point of view, and that oral presentations in the older grades be solely argumentative format. Calkins, Ehrenworth, and Lehman argue that these suggestions assume a narrow view of how teachers can support speaking and listening skills. They propose that discussion should extend beyond formal debate and that students should engage in natural discussions that cover a

range of topics. This is a compelling argument, and it would make the speaking and listening skills align better with the multifaceted approach of the reading and writing standards.

Having detailed the standards and given suggestions for implementation, Calkins, Ehrenworth, and Lehman discuss the logistical challenges to implementing the Common Core State Standards at both district and national levels. In such diverse environments, it is almost impossible to achieve uniformity; however, the authors show that successful implementation and achievement of the CCSS are, indeed, attainable. While daunting, the standards are an impetus for reform that will heighten teaching practices and enhance learning. To successfully make the transition to following the CCSS, Calkins, Ehrenworth, and Lehman give this advice:

- Accept the reality of assessments and use them to inform our teaching - learn what is and is not working for our students.
- Be wary of implementing too many new programs and instead rely on research, experience, and common sense to adapt teaching practices and content.
- Allow teachers to observe one another and learn from collegial expertise.
- Implement reforms with high degrees of fidelity so they are well thought out and create long-term success.

Altogether, Calkins, Ehrenworth, and Lehman make useful recommendations for implementing the Common Core State Standards. They hold true to the goals and research that underlie the CCSS. *Pathways to the Common Core* is a valuable resource for teachers and districts as we adapt to new expectations and develop methods to align with these standards.

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- Magee is a 3rd grade teacher at Arboretum Elementary School in the Waunakee School District, and a National Board Certified Teacher; email jmagee@waunakee.k12.wi.us.*

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