

A GLIMMER OF GOOD NEWS ON THE COMMON CORE

Catalyzing Teacher Leadership in Schools

Greg Anrig | April 28, 2015

The rollout of the Common Core State Standards across the country has unfolded about as chaotically as the depiction of the Omaha Beach invasion in *Saving Private Ryan*. Drawing intensive political fire from Tea Partyers hostile to any semblance of national strong-arming of local jurisdictions, combined with a backlash among many progressives and teachers against excessive standardized testing, the Common Core's implementation has bogged down in many states. In some states, most notably New York and New Jersey, substantial numbers of parents have joined the so-called opt-out movement, withdrawing their children from taking the exams intended to measure Common Core skills, while Indiana and Oklahoma have retreated entirely from their original support.

Beyond the noisy political assault, the Common Core's ambition to unify the expectations of students across grade levels in math and English language arts is also encountering a multitude of more predictable behind-the-scenes obstacles. Those challenges include

coordination and communication between different levels of government, curriculum development, professional support to enable principals and teachers to adapt to the standards, creating and administering new tests, and providing adequate funding.

Because states vary widely in how they have gone about implementing the Common Core, including the speed and thoughtfulness with which they have confronted each of those challenges, it is much too soon to judge whether the effort will ultimately succeed. A Brookings Institution analysis comparing fourth-grade reading scores on National Assessment of Educational Progress tests based on the extent to which states have adopted the Common Core found only very modest improvements in those with relatively strong implementation versus those that did not adopt the standards. But with the various attempts to integrate the Common Core only beginning to take hold, it is obvious that more time and study is needed for student test scores to reveal meaningful conclusions.

This brief can be found online with hyperlinks to source materials at: www.tcf.org/blog/detail/a-glimmer-of-good-news-on-the-common-core

While the media's attention has been preoccupied with the myriad political and logistical impediments to the Common Core, some positive developments have received relatively little attention. Perhaps the most significant of those are initiatives in some states and local districts to deeply engage teachers in the process of shaping new curriculums and pedagogical practices. Abundant research has shown that student outcomes improve when teachers actively participate in developing the content presented in class while sharing strategies with each other for best enabling children to learn. In other words, in settings where administrators use the implementation of the Common Core as a catalyst for deepening the involvement of teachers in designing changes in the classroom, the potential for better outcomes is highest.

A 2013 report published by The Aspen Institute and other leading educational organizations (which provided guidance to school-level leaders implementing the Common Core) emphasized the importance of relying on teams that include classroom teachers as well as administrators in developing curriculum and pedagogy. Those teams, the report recommended, should establish common expectations for instructional practices tied to the standards, and create ongoing professional learning, including feedback and coaching systems. Ruthanne Buck, a senior adviser to U.S. secretary of education Arne Duncan, said that Common Core implementation "has been most effective in the places where it has been teacher-driven and teacher-led, collaborative change. And in some places, the structure just hasn't existed to allow that collaborative environment."

The Center for American Progress (CAP) has just released an excellent new report highlighting six diverse districts serving substantial numbers of low-income students that are using teacher leadership and labor-management collaboration to implement the

Common Core. While details about the nature of the collaborative systems vary, they all share similar types of teacher leadership opportunities. Specifically:

Teachers are involved in district- and school-level governance. In the profiled districts, teachers serve on school, district, and union governing bodies as a way to ensure that teachers' perspectives are included in decisions made about the standards and other district priorities.

Some teachers have the opportunity to go on special assignment. Under this type of arrangement, teachers have the option of leaving the classroom to work for the district or union, allowing them to support practicing teachers as well as students.

Some teachers can attain leadership roles while still actively practicing in the classroom. Districts place teachers in leadership positions to help with Common Core transition, while still giving them the chance to teach in the classroom for at least part of the school day.

The faculty is deeply engaged in ongoing professional development. Teachers have had the opportunity to direct their own professional learning and to get approval and assistance from teacher leaders. Teachers identified this practice as an important factor in Common Core implementation.

Time for collaboration. Teachers have more control over how best to use the time afforded to them by the district for collaboration around the needs of the Common Core. In several districts, teachers determine how to spend collaborative time, and teacher leaders assist in the planning of how the time will be used.

Writing, developing, and choosing instructional materials. Teachers are involved in the production and selection process of instructional materials aligned to the Common Core.

The findings in the CAP report do not stand in isolation. Sophisticated studies by the Consortium on Chicago School Research, the National Center for Educational Achievement, and McKinsey & Co. have found that those practices are essential—albeit not entirely sufficient—ingredients in schools that consistently outperform their counterparts. In examining what makes effective schools tick, those studies find that high degrees of relational trust among all the stakeholders in schools—especially between administrators and teachers, but also including parents and local community groups—is the most significant commonality. Because trust among school stakeholders does not arise without conscious effort on the part of school leaders to create and sustain it, there is little basis for skepticism about cause and effect—though the creation of trust and social capital without question promotes virtuous cycles in schools and other institutions.

The results of these studies help explain why momentum is building behind a research-supported approach to school management that is essentially the inverse of the traditional top-down, hierarchical systems that have dominated American public education for more than a century. Instead of leaving every teacher to sink or swim, isolated in his or her own classroom with negligible support, innovative districts are professionalizing teaching by creating mechanisms akin to those found in high-performing health care and for-profit companies that enable ongoing training and learning for frontline workers.

Unlike the myriad other ideas for improving American

education, which proved to be faddish after failing, the movement toward strengthening teacher-management collaboration is catching on because of real-world results in the districts that have pursued it for an extended period.

Successful Collaboration— Even in Urban Districts

Urban districts are considered perhaps the toughest challenge for educators seeking performance improvements. Extremely diverse student populations, high concentrations of poverty, and frequent district funding issues create a particularly challenging landscape for holding student achievement steady, let alone advancing it. But the good news is that some urban districts actually have been widely recognized for achieving performance gains while deeply engaging teachers in decision-making and ongoing professional development over an extended period.

Some of the most notable examples:

Cincinnati, Ohio. Cincinnati’s test scores went from being on a par with those of other struggling urban school districts early in the last decade to breaking away from the pack, in some areas approaching levels in wealthier suburban districts. In 2009–10, Cincinnati became the first city to receive “effective” ratings on the Ohio District Report Card. For the five school years from 2009 to 2014, even as poverty rates increased in the city, Cincinnati remained the state’s highest-ranked urban school district.

Hillsborough County, Florida. The eighth-largest school district in the United States, encompassing the cities of Tampa, St. Petersburg, and Clearwater in western Florida, Hillsborough County serves a diverse student body with about 57 percent who are eligible

for free and reduced-price lunch. Nonetheless, Hillsborough has outperformed many wealthier districts in Florida. From 2008 to 2010, Hillsborough County had the largest annual increase in advanced placement exam passing grades of any district in the United States. On the 2012 Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test, Hillsborough's fourth graders posted the second-highest average writing scores of any district in the state. Tenth grade averages also were second highest, and eighth grade scores were third highest.

Meriden, Connecticut. With more than 70 percent of its students on free- and reduced-price lunch, Meriden had long produced desultory results until building a strong labor-management relationship. In recent years, on most metrics evaluated on the state mastery test, Meriden's test scores have improved significantly in relation to other comparable districts. For example, the share of students who scored at or above proficiency rose from 75 percent in 2007 to 87 percent in 2013. The district's performance prompted *Education Week* to feature Meriden School Superintendent Mark D. Benigni as one of its 2015 "Leaders to Learn From."

ABC School District, California. Located twenty-five miles southeast of Los Angeles, with about 21,000 students—25 percent of whom are English language learners and nearly half on free or reduced price lunch—the ABC district's recent history of labor management collaboration was featured in another recent Center for American Progress report. The study by Saul A. Rubenstein and John E. McCarthy went beyond highlighting the district's overall impressive performance and found that the

schools within ABC that had the strongest ties among administrators and teachers also produced the most significant improvements in student test scores.

Springfield, Massachusetts. In 2004, Springfield, the third-largest city in Massachusetts, hit rock bottom. A declining economy, corruption, and reduced state aid led to the city being declared insolvent. The state appointed a five-member board to take over all aspects of Springfield's government, including the public schools. Over the next few years, conditions continued to worsen. The local teachers union passed a vote of no confidence in the superintendent, while student test scores and graduation rates languished among the worst in the state. From that nadir, the local teachers union and district administrators decided they had to radically transform their relationships and embarked on a prolonged process of trust-building, which included giving teachers a much more active role in decision-making. In contrast to the district's abysmal performance just a decade ago, Springfield schools made larger composite performance index gains on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System tests in 2012–13 than both the state as a whole and the average for the twenty-five largest urban districts, with truancy rates dropping by one-third over the previous three years. An editorial in the local paper said, "There's a new sense of optimism, possibility, pride, and purpose permeating Springfield schools this year, where the hard work of education reform is beginning to pay off."

These districts have demonstrated that blaming teachers and their unions for the shortcomings of

schools is exactly the wrong way to produce better outcomes for students. As more districts consider pursuing similar transformations, there are some reasons for optimism about this important new direction for American education.

Common Core as a Catalyst for Transforming Outdated School Practices

While most of the districts in the CAP report had already been pursuing teacher-management collaboration before the implementation of the Common Core, in one particular case the new standards set in motion a process for teachers to become much more actively involved in designing how schools would incorporate them. That example, Washoe County, Nevada (the state's second-largest school district, which includes Lake Tahoe and Reno), could serve as a model for other districts now struggling to adapt to the new system. For that reason, it is worth delving beyond CAP's overview to describe the evolution there.¹

When Washoe County school administrators first informed teachers about what the new Common Core would mean for them, they did not like what they heard. At a spring 2011 presentation of the "rollout plan" to Reno High School teachers, district officials described "curriculum maps" and a "crosswalk document" that would explain what teachers would have to do. They said that moving from the old state standards to the Common Core would merely entail adding a few content items and shifting the presentation of material to different time frames. Angela Orr, a high school history teacher who had just started as a social studies program coordinator, told *American RadioWorks*, "That initial meeting was a catastrophe." Because no one was

talking about why the standards were changing or what they actually said, the presentation had "nothing to do with what teachers care about, which is students and how they learn," Orr said.

Aaron Grossman, who had recently taken a job as a teacher-trainer for the Washoe County Schools, took to the Internet to learn more about the Common Core and came across a video featuring David Coleman, a principal architect of the standards and now the president of the College Board. Grossman discovered that Coleman was not introducing purported minor adjustments but actually describing fundamental changes compared to the standards that previously existed in Nevada. Along with his colleague Torrey Palmer, a literacy coordinator, Grossman asked his boss if they could convene a group of teachers to simply listen to the same Coleman presentation and then discuss it. While the eighteen teachers who attended the meeting had mixed reactions, they agreed to try a sample lesson tied to the Common Core with their students. They later reconvened to discuss with each other how their students responded and shared ideas for how to build on what seemed to work best.

This small exercise was the genesis for what has become the Washoe Core Task Project, in which Grossman and his team help more than 1,000 teachers in 25 of the district's 63 schools carry out the Common Core in their classrooms. Their process entails finding and providing teachers with instructional resources, most of which are available for free on websites aimed at advancing the Common Core, and then gathering and synthesizing teacher feedback as they try out the new lessons and curricular materials. Those half-day meetings occur once a month. Even many teachers who were initially resistant to change have become open to the Common Core in Washoe County, according to Palmer, mainly because the effort is led by teachers. "This is not something that's being done to them. They

¹ This section draws from Emily Hanford, "Teachers Embrace the Common Core," *American RadioWorks*, August 31, 2014; Alyssa Morones, "Teachers Lead the Way in Nevada Leader's Common-Core Project," *Education Week*, March 5, 2014; and Stephanie Echeveste, "Teachers Lead on Common Core," October 23, 2014, TNTP Blog.

want to do this.” Jodie Westmount, a special education teacher, told *Education Week*: “Aaron pushes teachers to take on a leadership role. So many times, it’s just administrators given these roles. He’s provided those opportunities to teachers.”

This spring, Nevada students for the first time will be taking new tests aligned with Common Core developed by the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium, which will also be taken in sixteen other states. Because those exams are widely recognized to be substantially more difficult than previous standardized tests used in the state, the expectation is that the results will seem to be substantially worse. That, in turn, has the potential to undercut the enthusiasm generated so far in Washoe County. Palmer told *American RadioWorks*, “Honestly, I’m a little frightened. Once those assessments come out and the scores come out, then systems do crazy things to respond and react to them. If that leads us to go back to just focusing on specific skills or how to take a test, that’s not teaching and learning, and that’s not going to help our kids.”

Leaders of other school districts whose teachers and parents are rebelling over Common Core may want to think about following the Washoe County model and incorporating teachers into the decision-making processes involved in adapting to the standards.

Collaboration Subverts Partisanship

In the United States, debates over school reform for many decades have been so fevered that they have been labeled as “wars.” One of the most exciting aspects of the recognition that collaborative organizational practices improve student outcomes is that such under-the-radar, non-ideological changes do not inflame passions. In contrast to past and current school-centered controversies over racial integration, vouchers for private tuition, mandated school closings, linking teacher pay to student test scores, and the Common

Core itself, reconfiguring roles and responsibilities within schools does not press sensitive buttons for most Americans. The media has taken little interest in the growing number of districts pursuing collaborative practices precisely because those initiatives reduce rather than exacerbate conflict—the lifeblood of any news story.

In Meriden, Connecticut—one of the districts that firmly established a highly collaborative culture between administrators and teachers over the past decade—there has been nary a peep of the “opt-out” movement over the Common Core raging elsewhere in the state and the Northeast. Erin Benham, president of the Meriden Education Association and newly chosen for the state’s Board of Education, said: “I’m not aware of any pushback in Meriden at all against the Common Core.” It is also notable that some of the districts that have pursued collaborative practices the longest, particularly Cincinnati, Ohio, and Hillsborough County, Florida, are in states whose governors have toggled between Democratic and Republican.

Transforming Culture Is Hard, But Not Hugely Expensive

Without question, additional financial resources are essential to facilitating the work required to fundamentally reorganize how schools operate. The most significant costs relate to compensating personnel for the additional time they spend meeting about organizational changes, improving classroom practices, and tracking the progress of individual students. Supplementing the pay of teachers who take on new responsibilities to help train novices or otherwise support their peers is another significant cost. In addition, most districts undertaking such transformations find value in hiring outside consultants and other professionals with experience in helping other school systems go through similar processes.

Many districts that have pursued collaboration were able to access federal Race to the Top funds and School Improvement Grants to direct toward such costs. (A short documentary video conveys how Peoria High School in Illinois dedicated a School Improvement Grant toward creating more time for teachers to improve their instructional practices, which already has helped improve outcomes.) In addition, a number of major national philanthropies have supported related activities, and some local institutions have espoused collaborative practices as an important cause in their communities.

In that context, it is important to note that the most collaborative urban school districts in the country, which have also produced the strongest improvements in student outcomes, do not spend more per pupil than their state counterparts—and often spend less. For example, Cincinnati, with its firmly established collaborative approach and strong results, spends substantially less per pupil than Cleveland, which has much worse outcomes and is only beginning the process of exploring collaboration. Local nonprofits and foundations also have contributed substantial resources toward enabling collaborative work in the school system.

City Schools Can Emulate Wealthy Suburban Ones

In glossy advertisements published in national education journals, consultants with impressive track records in helping mostly affluent schools and districts improve student outcomes announce upcoming regional “Personal Learning Communities at Work” institutes for educators. Typically lasting three days, and costing upwards of \$700 per person on top of travel and lodging, the conferences hammer home the overarching message that better results only arise after building the trust and engagement of all a school’s stakeholders. The consulting group’s website,

www.allthingsplc.info, includes a list of more than 150 schools across the United States and Canada that have followed the prescriptions advocated by the consultants, posting data about their test-score performance that is uniformly impressive. One of the effort’s leaders is Richard DuFour, a former superintendent of the Lincolnshire, Illinois, school district, who emphasizes the importance of organizing teachers into collaborative teams in which they and other educators work interdependently to achieve common goals for which members are mutually accountable.

Obviously, the kinds of districts with the resources to hire consultants like DuFour have many additional advantages over their urban counterparts serving large populations of students from low-income families. But there is no reason why poorer school systems cannot follow the same prescriptions that have proven to be so effective, and are sought at high financial cost, by wealthier schools. As DuFour says: “Nothing changes the mind like the hard cold world hitting it in the face with actual real-life data.”

Collaboration Transforms Data from Bludgeons to Guideposts

The so-called opt-out movement argues that the standardized tests connected to the Common Core are too hard, too consequential, and counterproductive to developing a positive learning culture. While opting out might not be the most productive method of protest, the concerns held by those in the movement are legitimate, and should be taken seriously by anyone who seeks to promote uniform expectations of students in math and English language arts. The question is, then, how to obtain good data and use it to improve student performance without intruding too much into the learning environment?

One of the main lessons in the research examining successful urban schools is that attentiveness to

testing data is a critical element to their success. That applies not only to once- or twice-a-year standardized tests, but also to regular district- and school-level assessments that have ideally been developed with substantial teacher input. What makes that data valuable is its usefulness in identifying what students are learning and what they are not, so that remedial responses can be put in motion. Breaking down test results can indicate where individual children appear to be struggling in a particular area, or a curriculum unit that few students mastered have across the grade, or a teacher whose students fared much worse than those in other classes on the same material. In each case, identification of the test score discrepancies in effective schools prompts corrective action in the form of additional support aimed at improving student learning. Unfortunately, test scores in far too many settings either lead to some sort of punitive response or, only slightly less worse, no response at all. The best way to defuse the opt-out movement is to emulate the approaches in the collaborative districts highlighted in the CAP report, which enable teams of teachers to work with administrators in designing assessments and developing their own strategies for responding to the results.

Engaging Teachers Is Sustainable

One of the reasons why so many of the educational reforms of the past proved to be ineffective and short-lived is that America's highly decentralized school system leaves control of education largely in the hands of local superintendents, whose tenure in cities averages only about three years. Moreover, the highly politicized nature of education with its sundry "wars" over the years has exacerbated its instability. Changes in the presidency, Congress, state houses, and judgeships have filtered down as well to have big impacts at the local school level.

So why should collaborative organizational practices be more stable than any of the education ideas that have come and gone over time? It is too soon to be certain, but the experience of the past decade or so in districts that have pursued collaboration is encouraging because they have persisted even after multiple changeovers in superintendents. Perhaps the most important factor is that collective bargaining agreements in those settings have included specific provisions related to teacher participation, virtually ensuring that they will remain in place. For example, Cincinnati's most recent three-year collective bargaining agreement, which took effect on July 1, 2014, sustains a multitude of elements ensuring that teachers have a strong voice in decision-making processes. Those structures range from districtwide committees that focus on budgets, employee benefits, school performance oversight, peer review, and disciplinary issues, to school-based teams. Each school is governed by a local decision-making committee comprising three teachers, three parents, and three community members, along with the principal. The contract also continues requiring instructional leadership teams, which include elected leaders of teacher groups who work together on a daily basis, as well as parents, leaders of community service providers, and the principal.

Combined with the virtue of not arousing political passions, teacher-management collaboration's potential to be enshrined in more collective bargaining agreements suggests that it might at long last be the reform that will both persevere and improve student outcomes in a sustainable way.

Greg Anrig is a senior fellow at The Century Foundation and the author of *Beyond the Education Wars: Evidence That Collaboration Builds Effective Schools*.