

SETTING THE BAR FOR

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Because the Common Core State Standards are benchmarks for all students, they are by definition insufficient for high-ability students.

To meet the needs of high-ability students, teachers need professional development that includes strategies to differentiate instruction, modify assessments, and adjust the pace of learning.

Secondary school principals face no shortage of issues and challenges when it comes to ensuring that their teachers and students are ready for the Common Core State Standards. With so many issues competing for scarce time and resources, it's understandable that for many school leaders, the needs of high-ability and high-potential students are not front and center in the college-and-career-ready discussion. Further compounding the challenge are some misperceptions, chiefly that the Common Core is rigorous enough to substitute for gifted education services.

The gifted education community, by and large, views the Common Core as being reasonably rigorous and a major step forward to upping the game of US schools. But even with rigorous standards, the very nature of common standards—benchmarks for all students at each grade level—means that they will be insufficient on their own for the most advanced students.

Given this reality, it is important for principals to foster environments in which teachers are able to work within the standards to provide learning opportunities for high-achieving and high-ability students. This will require school leaders to commit to gifted students—a cohort estimated to account for about 10% of the total student population in the United States—and those high-ability

learners who may not yet have reached high levels of achievement.

The Common Core and Gifted Education

Before exploring the leadership role of the principal, it's important to first understand the intersection between the Common Core and gifted education. Although the Common Core contains a level of rigor and higher-level thinking not present in most of the standards they are replacing, it falls short in two major areas when it comes to gifted students:

- The Common Core was designed and constructed within the confines of grade-level expectations
- Assessments to measure student progress and success are similarly oriented and limited to grade-level expectations.

The developers of the Common Core recognized that the standards do not meet the needs of learners on both ends of the achievement spectrum. They said that the Common Core set grade-specific standards but “[did] not define the intervention methods or materials necessary to support students who are well below or well above grade-level expectations” (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). The absence of Common Core engagement in those areas places the onus on districts and schools to find ways to train

HIGH-ABILITY STUDENTS



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teachers and modify the curriculum to meet the needs of high and low performers.

Gifted and talented students—as well as other advanced students—are typically achieving above their present grade levels in one or more subject areas. Appropriately challenging those learners means offering an accelerated curriculum and instruction that goes beyond grade-level concepts. At the secondary level, that might mean allowing advanced students to take upper-level and AP courses earlier than is typical or to enroll in college courses in school, at a local college campus, or in approved online courses. For example, students who receive gifted services in Fulton County,

GA, are also able to enroll in individual “directed study” courses during which they work with a teacher to design the program of study, along with the assessment or product results, for a semester or a full year. Independent projects outside of scheduled class time, but overseen by a teacher, can also provide mind-broadening study.

Other popular options for gifted learners in Fulton County are semester-long professional, unpaid internships that provide real-world exposure to professions of interest. Those experiences help students with career readiness and college selection. The key takeaway is that principals must ensure that all possible



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opportunities for growth beyond the Common Core are available to students and that those opportunities are clearly explained to students and families.

Although the Common Core does not offer comprehensive solutions to address the needs of gifted learners, it does identify some areas in which to build advanced critical- and creative-thinking skills. For example, the skills of argument (English language arts) and patterning and problem solving (mathematics) are topics ripe for such work. Students performing at advanced levels in those subjects might hone their skills by leading a Socratic seminar. Teachers also can provide more stimulating and challenging content, such as assigning a complex, real-world problem for students to tackle.

The issue of assessment tools that can accurately measure student mastery of above-grade level standards is a concern, not only for instructional decisions but also because some high-stakes decisions hinge on student learning growth. Although the state tests being piloted by the two state assessment consortia are pegged at grade-level standards, both groups have stated that their tests gather formative information that can measure students' command of the standards concepts above grade level. There is more to learn about how that will work, but it's a promising development.

The Common Core and the Principal

Perhaps the single most important way principals can help their teachers apply the Common Core to support high-ability students is by providing access to high-quality professional development that specifically includes strategies to differentiate instruction, the pace of learning, and assessment for advanced students. Even at the Indiana Academy for Science, Mathematics, and Humanities, a residential public high school focused solely



on gifted students in grades 11 and 12 from across the state, teachers benefited from regular opportunities to learn about the academic and social-emotional needs of top students.

A principal's commitment to professional development is particularly important because many school budgets are strained. Principals can ensure that teachers have the financial resources and time they need to participate in quality, systematic professional development to adapt or modify Common Core-focused content to meet the needs of each student in the classroom. Teachers need opportunities to engage with content experts who support them in working with their most advanced students.

Even when professional development funds are limited or nonexistent, a school leader can reach out to system-level gifted or advanced studies personnel and request professional learning support for differentiation strategies. Subject-matter experts can provide valuable counsel as well. Need some guidance on how to infuse literacy across the curriculum? Check with the English department. Is the increased focus on nonfiction reading posing a problem? Perhaps the career technology teachers have some ideas. The fine arts and physical education teachers are masters of differentiation, and their formative assessment strategies could be teased out for all teachers in the school.

Once principals have put the pieces in place in their own buildings, they can and must replicate their successes throughout their school districts. For example, principals can work to ensure that their districts have the least restrictive policies when it comes to allowing advanced students to pursue college-level work and to receive credit for such courses. Principals can also champion the use of multiple curriculum options that can support high-quality, high-level learning.

And although the focus for secondary prin-

cipals is on the later grades, they can encourage their districts to be advanced-learner friendly at all stages by permitting early entrance to kindergarten for qualified students, by supporting efforts to identify high-ability and high-potential students as early as possible, and by encouraging policies and practices that allow advanced middle grade students to take high school courses for graduation credit.

In many districts, those suggestions would connect well to the goals and emphases of the 21st Century Skills movement. Its attention to higher-order thinking, effective communication, technology strategies, and critical reasoning and problem-solving skills dovetails with the strategies of gifted education, making gifted educators a natural resource for guidance and support in those initiatives.

Resources to Support Principals

Principals can't do this work without some supportive resources. More than two dozen school and district administrators from across the United States worked on a task force initiated by the National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) to locate and evaluate the most effective resources that illustrate, among other things, how well services for gifted and advanced learners fit smoothly into the rollouts of the Common Core and the 21st century schools movements. Those resources are perfect for principals who want to know how best to provide for advanced learners or who want to advocate for such learners with their system-level leaders. The resources are free and easily accessible on the NAGC website (www.nagc.org/administratortoolbox.aspx) and include reference lists, videos, research articles, and links to other trusted sources. This list of resources will be updated as the Common Core is implemented. Armed with those resources, a school leader can prepare to be the gifted education leader in his or her school or a knowledgeable advocate ready to meet with system leaders.

In addition to the toolbox, NAGC has other resources, including webinars, books, and online materials that provide examples of supportive school policies and of what differentiated instruction targeted toward gifted and advanced learners under the Common Core looks like. A number of states have developed curriculum modules under the Common Core that can be of value; principals can contact their state education departments to obtain such resources. If they have not been developed, urge your state to do so.

Conclusion

The implementation of the Common Core is a major—and long overdue—step forward for the United States as educators strive to better prepare their students for an increasingly competitive world. But the Common Core will not meet the needs of the most advanced students without modifications in the curriculum and assessments of student learning that flow from the standards.

Principals can help deliver the tools and resources—cost-effective ones—that will enable teachers to meet the needs of the top students to propel them forward to selective universities and high-level careers in every field. **PL**

REFERENCE

■ National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers. (2010). *English language arts. Key design considerations: What is not covered by the standards*. Retrieved from www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/introduction/key-design-consideration

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