

Strategies

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Equity at the Core

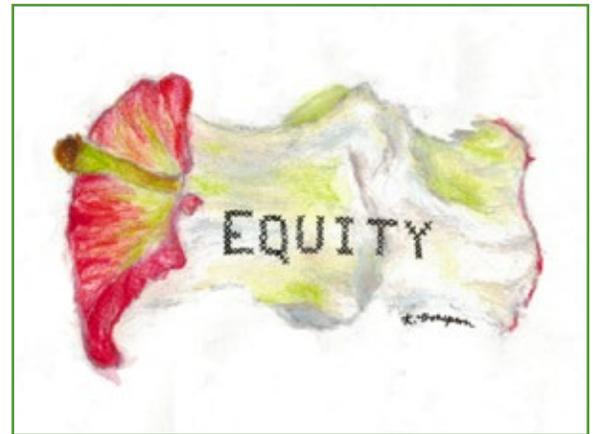
Fifth grade has been a noteworthy year for Kwami. He has realized substantial progress toward reading at grade level, but this progress required some struggle, investment, and commitment on the part of Kwami, his mother, and his teacher. And, for all the progress that has taken place, Kwami is still reading on a 4th grade level.

Kwami's older brother never completed middle school. At a certain point, racking up failures in most classes led to an emotional spiral and to the exit. Barbara, the hard-working single mother of these two boys, was not about to see another of her children drop out of middle school. She and Kwami met with 5th grade teacher Mrs. Irwin at the beginning of the school year, and the three of them vowed to get Kwami as fully ready for middle school as they possibly could.

The question now—as Kwami enters 6th grade at Central Middle School in Jarvis City—is how Kwami will perform on Common Core State Standards (CCSS) assessments, and how well prepared his teachers are to equip Kwami for Common Core success. As the rigor is ramped up in English language arts at the 6th grade level, for example, assessment tasks drawing on higher-order skills such as critical reading and analysis and the comparison and synthesis of ideas within and across texts will be challenging for Kwami and a number of his classmates. Will Kwami and his classmates be engaged with the rigor of content and quality of instruction needed to realize CCSS success? That large, looming question must be answered with a resounding “of course, we will give Kwami what he needs.” Unfortunately, that response has been missing when we examine the history, implementation, and impact of the last five generations of standards-based reforms. Kwami and his brother have had to wait too long for the aggressive interventions that must be in place to accelerate their learning.

The Metlife Survey of the American Teacher indicates how much work needs to be done if CCSS is not to be an extension of their waiting period. According to the survey, principals in urban schools are more likely to say maintaining an adequate supply of effective teachers is very challenging (60 percent versus 43 percent in suburban and 44 percent in rural schools); the same goes for schools where two-thirds or more of students come from low-income households (58 percent versus 37 percent from schools with one-third or less low-income students); and the same goes for schools with two-thirds or more minority students (67 percent versus 37 percent from schools with one-third or less minority students). The response from teachers on these same questions is very similar.

It is clear that “world class” standards without effective teachers and principals providing strong support, interventions, and opportunities to



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learn will be the latest version of the “Emperor’s New Clothes.” What will be required of state, district, and school leaders to prevent CCSS from joining the heap of earlier reform initiatives over the last three decades that have resulted in only incremental changes in pedagogical practices while stranding Kwami and countless other school-dependent learners in educational deserts? What will be different this time around? What happens when a nation’s schools are immersed in meeting mandates that have little connection to supporting capacity development of teachers and other staff who work every day in schools and classrooms? How do we increase the odds for Kwami to have a teacher with the knowledge, skills, and disposition to provide him with whatever he needs to be successful in school?

The answers to these questions are largely known. Steady advances in our understanding of cognition, resiliency, efficacy, pedagogy, and effective integration of digital technologies into classrooms provide a strong foundation upon which to build the needed capacities and make the changes required in classroom practice. Fortunately we are learning about schools and school districts that are working hard to resolve challenges that have placed obstacles in the path of Kwami’s development as a learner and knowledge worker, and this issue of *Strategies* focuses on one of those districts. The urgent questions in the previous paragraph are on the minds of some Americans, but certainly not a majority, as, according to the 45th annual PDK/Gallup Poll, about 62 percent of Americans have never heard of Common Core State Standards, and even among the minority of Americans who have some level of awareness of CCSS, most do not understand or embrace this latest in a series of standards-based reform efforts.

Clearly, we need to build public awareness of CCSS and public will to wipe out the disadvantages that race, poverty, disability, language proficiency, and national origin play in determining “who” is provided with access and opportunities in all of the nation’s classrooms and beyond. The Common Core Standards and corresponding assessments serve to raise the level of cognitive demand that students will encounter in classrooms. We know from research and documented practice that all students, regardless of zip code and related factors, can rise to meet these demands, but realizing this potential calls for consistently high-quality instructional leadership and high-quality instructional practice and support in every classroom, in every school, every day.

In this issue of *Strategies* we take a close look at the strategic work that Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools in North Carolina has done, and is doing, to build its capacity for success with CCSS for all students in all classrooms. Throughout the article that follows we provide links to examples and resources for those who want to “look under the hood” of a system that is doing especially smart work in leveraging CCSS to advance an agenda of equity and excellence. ◀

—Larry Leverett, Executive Editor
—Scott Thompson, Editor

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The Panasonic Foundation was established in 1984 by the Panasonic Corporation of North America. It works in long-term partnership with a select number of school districts that serve a large proportion of children in poverty to help them develop the system-level policies, practices, and structures necessary to improve achievement for ALL students: All Means All.

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Charlotte-Mecklenburg, NC: The Common Core as Lever for Advancing Equity and Excellence

Will implementation of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools (CMS) intensify inequities that the North Carolina district has been working for years to overcome, or will it provide leverage for advancing equity, as well as excellence, in student outcomes? “The opportunity is tremendous,” says CMS Zone Executive Director Brian Schultz. “It could widen the gap or close it. We will equip the teacher, and that is what it’s going to take to narrow that gap. The rich, rich reading libraries in the classroom will need to be there, and it’s got to be at an interest level for the students.” In Charlotte, many of these students are living in poverty, learning English as a second language, or are students of color. What content is culturally relevant for these children and young people? “At the same time,” Schultz adds, “we need to show them the expectations of the Common Core.” In other words, cultural relevance is part of a larger context that includes rigorous standards for all students.

Early childhood education is “the easiest and best opportunity to eliminate the achievement gap,” according to Deputy Superintendent Ann Clark, because that’s when the gap is narrowest. “Pre-kindergarten programs that position kids to be ready for kindergarten go a long way toward starting kids on the right pathway, addressing that gap. We’ve historically had a very strong pre-kindergarten program, not only in Charlotte but also in the state. Governor James Hunt led that charge decades ago, and it has stood the test of time.” North Carolina was found to have one of the two top programs nationally for state pre-kindergarten quality according to the National Center for Early Education Research. Follow this link to see the news release, which includes a link to the NCEER report: <http://www.ncpublicschools.org/newsroom/news/2009-10/20100504-01>.

Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools comprises more than 141,000 students attending 159 schools. The student population is 42 percent African American, 32 percent white, 18 percent



“[CCSS] could widen the gap or close it.”

Hispanic, 5 percent Asian, and 3 percent American Indian or multiracial. Fifty-four percent of students qualify for free or reduced-price meals. (Additional “fast facts” concerning CMS can be found via this link: <http://www.cms.k12.nc.us/mediaroom/aboutus/Pages/FastFacts.aspx>.) CMS is far larger than most districts in the United States, but it offers lessons and learning on preparing for and implementing CCSS to promote equity and excellence that could be instructive for districts of all sizes.

A good deal of attention has been paid to the literacy and math shifts that CCSS is bringing to classrooms across the United States. (Follow this link to access an array of CCSS resources: <http://www.beyondcommoncore.com/common-core-state-standards.html>.) What educational leaders and practitioners who are deep into this work are learning is that those shifts in the instructional core require shifts in structure, culture, and leadership throughout the school system—at every level and in every corner. Without systemic shifts, the capacity to meet these internationally benchmarked standards and assessments will never be built, much less sustained. There can be no question that a piecemeal response to the Common Core will result in intensified and unacceptable inequities for the children and young people upon whose shoulders our future will rest.

“We’re trying to make sure everyone is clear, from the Board of Education to classroom teachers, from our business community to higher education partners, that the Common Core assessments are going to be different,” says Clark. “I think this will be a significant opportunity for this nation to close achievement gaps. But it won’t come without a cold splash of water in a couple of years. There’s no question that the bar will go up, as it should.”

Common Core Steering Committee

In June of 2011, under Clark’s leadership, the Common Core Steering Committee was born in Charlotte. This organism was designed with limbs reaching into all parts of the system. “You know the saying about the right hand not knowing what the left is doing,” says Westerly Hills Academy principal and Steering Committee member Gwen Shannon. “This committee wanted to make sure it was full-system involvement.” The committee includes principals at all levels, community superintendents, and representatives of all content areas, special education, Limited English Proficiency, accountability, professional development, and communications—close to 30 people in all. It was designed to maximize coherence in an organization that had had its share of silos. As literacy specialist and Steering Committee member Jami Rodgers put it, “We need air traffic control, and for us it’s the Steering Committee.”

The Steering Committee is led by Becky Graf, Director of Humanities, and math specialist Amy LeHew, both in the Curriculum and Instruction Department, under the authorization of Ann Clark.

“Becky and Amy quickly got the vision,” Clark says. “It’s a powerful message to the Curriculum and Instruction Department that you are leading it. This is your moment. You create the path, and I will make sure everybody stays on the path.”

A key equity challenge as CMS moves toward full implementation of CCSS is addressing the needs of students with disabilities and students who are learning English as a second language. The inclusion of English as a second language and special education representatives on the Steering Committee has meant that the particular needs of these students have been addressed from the outset. “When decisions are being made on how we are going to do things districtwide,” explains Lindsey Fults, the district’s Limited English Proficiency



(LEP) Committee Coordinator and a member of the Steering Committee, “we already have the ESL perspective or lens.” ESL and special education each have two representatives at the Steering Committee table.

The Steering Committee analyzed and prioritized the Common Core standards and orchestrated the standards rollout and corresponding professional development essential to their successful implementation. And the Steering Committee came together to reflect and debrief after each major professional development event. Clark says that “having principals at the table with the Steering Committee was critical in terms of month to month, how this is landing, what the gaps are, what the questions are from teachers, because we’re not out there. We’re training the trainers.”

The key trainers they are training are school principals.

Principals as Instructional Leaders

“Our most strategic decision was putting principals at the center of leading professional development, which was not without calculated risk,” says Clark. She argues that principals needed to be clear about the Common Core expectations and what to look for in their classrooms. And one of the many shifts that happened in CMS was to have Curriculum and Instruction directors and specialists leading professional development during principal meetings, including having principals unpack standards and look critically at student work.

Near the outset of the 2011–12 school year, the North Carolina Department of Education communicated to CMS and other North Carolina districts that five teaching days were being added to the student calendar. The district sought and received a waiver, which was granted with the stipulation that five days must be devoted to CCSS training. The same applied to the 2012–13 school year as well. In the district, these became known as “waiver days.”

This was a tremendous boon, but in October 2011, the urgent question was “How are we going to train more than 9,000 teachers?” says Steering Committee Co-director Graf. The answer was to work directly with principals and require them to lead the effort in their buildings. The professional development sessions for principals took place at district principal meetings, level principal meetings, zone principal meetings, and Summer Leadership Conferences. During the five waiver days, principals then conducted professional development sessions for teachers in their schools.

“The train-the-trainers approach for principals I thought was wildly successful because we were able to come in and get training on how to train our teachers on what to look for,” says Jennifer Dean, principal of Martin Luther King Jr. Middle School. “It gave credibility to us as instructional leaders.”

The ramped-up expectations for principals to lead this immense shift in practice in their buildings did not come without challenges. At the same time, it’s important to note that principals were not expected to single-handedly carry this load. The idea was to have school-level leadership teams, which, in addition to the principal, include a literacy facilitator, an academic facilitator, or the assistant principal of instruction. Further, zone executive directors were asked to identify principals that they had concerns about, whether due to inexperience or incompetence. They then assigned a member of the Steering Committee or of the Curriculum and Instruction Department to be part of that school-based team and to carry some responsibility in training school staff.

Another key asset that has helped principals lead the transformation in their buildings is that the district had adopted [*professional learning communities*](#) (PLCs) beginning in the



2006–07 school year. According to literacy specialist Rodgers, principals can determine how PLCs are structured in their schools, some by department, some by grade level, and some interdisciplinary. In Jennifer Dean’s zone, principals were asked to identify high-functioning PLCs “so if another principal needed to see it, you knew where those resources were.”

Some schools required customized support. Zone Executive Director Schultz tells of a situation involving a couple of schools within his zone. One was an elementary school with enrollment of about 1,200. A neighboring school’s principal was out on surgery, and the literacy facilitator had a serious illness, which would have left this school, serving about 900 students, with the assistant principal having to conduct large-scale professional development while managing the building. “We ended up teaming the school of 900 students and a school of 1,200 students,” says Schultz. Three topical or planning sessions were held concurrently and were repeated three times so that all staff in both schools could rotate through all three sessions. A challenging situation for two schools was turned into an opportunity for capacity building in both, which was not only an illustration of customized support but also of a culture of collaboration that CMS is developing.

Unpacking Standards Across the K–12 Trajectory

Working with 159 principals rather than 9,200—some teachers made things more manageable for the Curriculum and Instruction Department, but the question remained: Where to begin? Because the Steering Committee understood they couldn’t do everything simultaneously, they made a strategic decision to focus initially on Anchor Standard for Writing 1 (W1): “Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.”

“Argumentation was a new topic for virtually everybody,” according to Steering Committee Co-director Graf, “and even for those who thought they knew it, we were ramping up the rigor.” And as Rodgers points out, W1 is a power standard that crosses all grade levels and subject areas: “Not only were we transitioning to Common Core in math and English language arts, but other content areas were transitioning to new state standards. Argumentation crossed all of those lines; it intersects with math in a way that is very specific; it worked with our teacher evaluation tool. Every teacher in the district has an investment in teaching this particular standard.”

The first module for principals focused on how to “read” the standard: What is the nomenclature? How do you look at the kindergarten through 12th grade trajectory? The module is a packet including PowerPoint presentations, links to videos, activities, and annotated notes. Principals ordered the number of modules needed for the size of their faculties.

Another aspect of the professional development that was provided to teachers by their principals with support from the Curriculum and Instruction Department was looking at Standard W1 in terms of the [K–12 trajectory](#). Teachers were asked to consider what this standard would look like for a kindergartner and what it would look like for a 12th grader. Teachers were divided into grade-level groups and asked to write on chart paper the skills needed at that grade level to show mastery of the standard. The chart paper was then hung on the walls of classrooms from kindergarten through 12th grade.

According to Rodgers, this was an eye-opener. Teachers began to see that if they looked only at their own grade level they would miss important nuances. “From 6th grade to 7th grade, if you miss the word ‘counterclaim,’ that’s huge,” Rodgers points out. “To provide a counterclaim is a whole different skill than just blurting out what your argument is.”

The most powerful part of the activity, reports Rodgers, is when a [facilitator](#) posing as a 3rd grade teacher says, “I don’t really understand a lot about argument because I like teaching narrative,” and goes over and rips down the sheets for that grade level. Next a faux 7th grade teacher says, “I think that counterargument is a hard skill to learn” and rips down the 7th grade poster. “The teachers begin to look at you,” he says, “and see if every teacher



“Teachers began to see that if they looked only at their own grade level they would miss important nuances.”

Common Lesson on a Power Standard

The Steering Committee created a [common lesson](#) that every teacher would experience, “and retrospectively that’s one of the best things we could have done,” says Rodgers. The [common lesson included](#) a painting of a soldier during World War II, dubbed the “2,000-Yard Stare”; an article by Ernie Pyle, “The Death of Captain Waskow”; a statistical chart detailing military and civilian deaths suffered during World War II by more than two dozen nations; Randall Jarrell’s World War II poem “The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner”; and the song and lyrics of “Sentimental Journey,” which was popular in the United States during the Second World War.

Rodgers explains how the lesson was designed to speak to all subject area educators: “If I’m an art teacher, this painting appeals to me; if I’m a math teacher, the statistical chart appeals to me; if I teach music, the song and lyrics appeal to me. That was intentional. We talked about the definition of text. A text could be a dramatic performance or painting; a text is song lyrics, a text is a data table. That’s a huge point, because teachers from the range of content areas see themselves in the lesson.”

According to Rodgers, the training of teachers using the World War II module around Standard W1 also exemplified an instructional shift that comes with CCSS: “Do I have to read an argumentative text to assert an argument? Many teachers thought yes, you do. No, you don’t. I can use the five texts from this module and begin to assert my own argument about World War II.”

After the training in this model, teachers met in grade-level or content-based PLCs to create and then teach an argumentative task. Teachers then posted 1,600 tasks—both [elementary](#) and [secondary](#)—that they generated to the district’s shared website. They also posted some student work with names blurred. That was in the first year of the district’s CCSS rollout. The item bank has since grown to more than 5,000 entries. ◀

doesn’t do their part in teaching the standards, you’re not going to have this child being college and career ready by the time he or she leaves 12th grade.”

Promoting Equity

The district’s focus on equity is long-standing. Beginning in the early 1970s, CMS confronted chronic disparities between white and African American students through the employment of busing to desegregate schools. In the early 1990s, under Superintendent John Murphy’s leadership, the district began replacing busing with magnet schools. The magnet schools used a race-based formula designed to maintain school desegregation. This formula was successfully challenged in court in 1997, which brought an end to the 33-year project of school desegregation.

The district then shifted from a strategy of reducing racial isolation by moving students across town to one that involved reallocating resources so that the neediest of segregated neighborhood schools had the support needed to increase equitable student outcomes. The district instituted incentives for high-quality principals and teachers to serve in the lowest-performing schools. The district is striving to have all its schools led by effective principals and to have an effective teacher in every classroom, Clark explains. “Until that aim is fully achieved, we put our best talent where it’s needed most, whether that means our best principal in our lowest-performing school or making sure within a school that the kids who need it most get the best instruction. That is our answer to the equity issue.” While this has been a long-term strategy, Clark contends that “we are very close in terms of the principals. We’ve had over 134 changes in school leadership in the last six years.”

Efforts to advance equity in CMS are being realized in terms of [narrowing achievement gaps](#) (from 2007 through 2012) between black and white students, between Hispanic and white students, and between students who are or are not economically disadvantaged. This is true for math in grades 3 through 8, for reading in grades 3 through 8, for science in grades 5 and 8, for Algebra 1, and for English 1. The [four-year cohort high school graduation rate](#) has risen in the district from 66.1 percent in 2008–09 to 75.1 percent in 2011–12. When

disaggregated, the graduation rate has risen for all groups (male, female, American Indian, Asian, black, Hispanic, multiracial, white, economically disadvantaged, and students with disabilities), with the one exception being students learning English as a second language.

As the district adopts the Common Core, special attention is given to the needs of English language learners and students with disabilities. As noted above, having ELL and special education representatives on the Steering Committee has meant that the needs of these students and the teachers who work with them have been seamlessly addressed throughout the CCSS rollout process. Training for ELL teachers has included how to take Common Core standards and adjust or differentiate according to student need. For example, the support for newcomers might include use of the student's first language or use of pictures. As the student progresses in English proficiency, reliance on these supports will gradually decrease. "You'd always be working on a progression toward Common Core standards at grade level," according to Limited English Proficiency Committee Coordinator Lindsey Fults. When teachers in the district were developing performance tasks on Standard W1, ELL teachers created performance tasks with modifications—not of content, but of instructional approaches—for ELL students.

Several years before CCSS came on the scene, CMS made a commitment to holding the same expectations for what the district refers to as "exceptional children" (EC) as for the general student population. The district uses a collaborative model, involving co-teachers—a regular education teacher paired with an EC teacher—who plan and teach together in classrooms that include typical children and children with disabilities.

"I am very excited about the potential Common Core has for supporting our EC teachers and students, because of the way it's designed and the sequential nature of it," says Laura Hamby, Director of Educational Services and a Steering Committee member. "One of the things that EC teachers do best is task analysis, a key requirement for CCSS. One thing that we are doing is using the strength that EC teachers already have."

As with ELL, accommodations are a key focus for EC teachers as well. And as with ELLs, the EC accommodations involve modifications in presentation and assessment, not in content. There is one exception to that: Less than 1 percent of the CMS population comprises students with significant cognitive disabilities. These students have a curriculum that differs from that offered to other students.

Accommodations for EC students without significant cognitive disabilities could include large print, giving 10 problems instead of 20 on an assessment, the use of picture symbols to convey math concepts, providing texts in Braille for visually impaired students, sitting at the front of the classroom, or having test items read aloud.

Another major focus around EC and ELL students is increasing the on-time graduation rate, which, among other things, involves making sure that students are taking the classes required to stay on the graduation pathway.

As in many districts, African American male students in CMS are currently overrepresented in special education. CMS is working to tackle this challenge through a multifaceted approach that includes prevention, intervention, and supports for all struggling students, as well as strategies that pinpoint the needs of African American male students. The district's Response to Intervention (RTI) system aims to proactively address the academic, emotional, and social challenges and opportunities of all students, including students who are struggling with academic or behavioral challenges.



Piloting a Model for Teaching the Common Core to ELLs

In February and March 2013, two Charlotte-Mecklenburg middle schools, along with middle schools in two other districts, piloted a Common Core State Standards (CCSS) curriculum unit designed for students who are English language learners (ELLs). The unit, called *Persuasion Across Time and Space*, was developed at Stanford University with support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the Carnegie Corporation of New York. (Follow this link to an *Education Week* article on this pilot in CMS and two other districts: http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2013/01/16/17ellstanford_ep.h32.html?qs=Persuasion+Across+Time+and+Space.)

This English language arts (ELA) unit is designed for 7th and 8th graders with at least an intermediate level of English proficiency, and in CMS it was piloted in classrooms that included a mix of students learning English as a second language and those whose first language is English. The unit comprises the following five lessons:

1. Advertising in the Contemporary World: An Introduction to Persuasive Texts (*Can You Live With Dirty Water?*—Canadian Television Spot)
2. Persuasion in Historical Context (*Gettysburg Address*, Abraham Lincoln)
3. Ethos, Logos, & Pathos in Civil Rights Movement Speeches (*I Have a Dream*, Martin Luther King Jr.; *On the Death of Martin Luther King*, Robert Kennedy; *The Civil Rights Movement: Fraud, Sham, and Hoax*, George Wallace)
4. Persuasion as Text: Organizational, Grammatical, and Lexical Moves (*All Together Now*, Barbara Jordan)
5. Putting It Together: Analyzing and Producing Persuasive Text (*The Girl Who Silenced the World for Five Minutes*, Sevem Suzuki)

The district had an opportunity to review the unit about a year in advance of the pilot, and two days of professional development were provided for participating teachers. Participation in the pilot was a “fabulous experience,” according to Lindsey Fults, coordinator of the district’s Limited English Proficiency Committee. Most of the supports for ELLs involved strategies for engaging students with different grouping, speaking, and listening activities.

Although the unit, which is taught entirely in English, is designed for ELLs with at least moderate proficiency in English and the district had planned to use it in classrooms with no newcomers, a few newcomers did partake in the pilot due to the nature of scheduling. When Stanford University researchers came to videotape classes and interview teachers and students, Fults found it encouraging to hear from peers and from newcomer students themselves how much newcomers had learned.

After doing the unit, teachers were “looking at us and saying, ‘We want more units like that,’” says Fults, “and the work with Understanding Language and piloting the unit has continued.” Fults brought a team of ELL and ELA teachers and curriculum writers together during the summer of 2013 to write curriculum modeled on the unit. This work included a Skype session with Lydia Stack, from Stanford’s Understanding Language initiative, who will be reviewing it and providing feedback. Fults also set up a Google docs space for sharing resources and seeing results from other classrooms. The next step will be to provide professional development and support for full implementation of the unit to all 9th grade ELA teachers working with students who scored poorly in 8th grade reading. ◀

In terms of student behavior, RTI in CMS takes a tiered approach, involving the “green zone,” or prevention strategies for all students; the “yellow zone,” or interventions for students at moderate risk of academic failure; and the “red zone,” or high-level intervention strategies for students at high risk of academic failure. Among the green-zone strategies is reinforcement of positive behaviors. The district implements RTI-Behavior, which is based on the same tiered model as PBIS, or Positive Behavior Intervention and Support. CMS uses the term “RTI-Behavior” to further emphasize the need to integrate the academic and behavior support processes. Each school has an RTI Leadership Team including school administrators, counselors, and social workers. These teams received four days of training addressing both the academic and behavioral side of struggling students, and this hands-on training is followed by coaching and other technical supports.

During the 2010–11 school year, the district took a close look at issues of disproportionality, including the disproportionate representation of African American males in special education classes. One key outcome of that investigation was the development of a semester-long course for RTI coaches focused on struggling male students, with particular attention devoted to the needs of African American males. This course evolved into a one-day course for teachers. There’s also a two-day version of the teacher course available during summers.

The course on supporting struggling [male students](#) begins with a look at the status of the problem in terms of historical context and national, state, and district trends. It then delves into the science of learning and cultural differences, including brain-based learning, the African American male experience, and the role of teacher perception in academic achievement. The final segment highlights solution models:

1. **Engage**—learn your students’ interests and let them get to know you; build a trusting, positive teacher-student relationship; provide informational feedback that guides student reflection and problem solving; maintain a positive praise ratio of 4:1 (*minimum*).
2. **Ignite**—help students identify their interests and life goals; build vivid bridges between curriculum content, community challenges, and daily life experiences; use active learning principles to develop mediums for the transference of knowledge.
3. **Empower**—develop a learning environment in which it is safe to make mistakes; allow for graduated practice of expected skills under real-world conditions; transition from externalized rewards to internalized reinforcement; use explicit instruction with multiple opportunities for teacher guidance.

The course serves to raise teacher awareness of issues and opportunities relating to struggling males, including some African American male students. The RTI coaches, who have received far more intensive training in this area, visit classrooms to provide targeted support and assistance.

Culture Shift—“Busting Silos”

Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools Superintendent Heath Morrison stresses the need for “busting the silos,” so that there’s collaboration across central office departments and between those departments and the schools they are meant to support. The district’s efforts to tackle systemically the challenges of CCSS have contributed to a cultural change that has included reducing organizational barriers.

“I think Common Core State Standards have really been a lever in helping the cultural shift of CMS,” says middle school principal Dean. “It has created dynamics and conditions to bust those silos. I’m talking to the Communications Department, and I’m talking to Curriculum and Instruction not just when I have a teacher who is not performing.”

Math specialist and Steering Committee Co-Director LeHew says that the Curriculum and Instruction Department had previously been in content silos, “but the Common Core



“During the 2010–11 school year, the district took a close look at issues of disproportionality, including the disproportionate representation of African American males in special education classes.”

work really broke down a lot of walls and opened this door of communication. This specialist for physical education came to me and said, ‘I’m thinking about this project, and I think we can put some math in it. What do you think about this?’ Working with other curriculum specialists has been really exciting. This benefits our teachers so that if they call one of us, we can give them stronger support.”

Communications

District leaders in CMS recognized that the degree of alignment and ownership that CCSS calls for could never be achieved without effectively communicating with the full array of stakeholders within the system and beyond. One key audience for district administrators has been the school board, which has the prime governance role within the system, and school board members also serve as key communicators with the broader community. As board chair Mary McCray observes, “Board members are beholden to their constituents; you have to be able to talk about the work and generate interest.”

Top CMS administrators conducted two CCSS training sessions with their school board during the 2011–12 school year and three during the 2012–13 school year. All of these sessions included an assessment activity, because, according to Clark, “we wanted them to feel the change. We used 4th grade assessments to make the point. No longer are you doing the perimeter of a rectangle. You’re designing a grocery store and being asked to assess based on data points you were given; that’s very different. I try to help them see the difference between how they learned and how students are going to be expected to learn.”

The key strategy for internal communications has been the use of the Steering Committee and principals as building-level instructional leaders to deliver a common focus, using common language around common activities. The way the process worked was to first test out ideas and possible training with the Steering Committee to determine what would be most helpful to principals. From there, principals would be trained, and then “we train everybody in Curriculum and Instruction in monthly meetings so that all content area specialists and district coaches are hearing the same message,” explains Rodgers. “Then it filters down from there to other key stakeholders in the building, such as assistant principals or instructional coaches. You get multiple players in the building who have heard the same message.”

The district’s Common Core Comprehensive Communications and Engagement Plan involves four overarching approaches to reaching the wider community:

1. **Parents**—prepare and empower parents to support their child’s success. One key strategy for preparing and empowering parents is [Parent University](#). After conducting a national search six or seven years ago to identify exemplary practices in parent engagement, district leaders narrowed in on Miami-Dade’s use of Parent University. For five years, Parent University has offered courses to parents in such subjects as *Becoming Your Child’s Best and Most Effective Advocate*, and *From Beginning to Middle—Helping Your Child Make a Smooth Transition to Middle School*. Parent University now also offers courses such as *The Common Core 101—Getting to Know the New Standards*.
2. **Principals and Teachers**—prepare and support principals and teachers as front-line “ambassadors” or key communicators with parents and community members. Public opinion research has repeatedly shown that in terms of school districts, no one is more trusted by parents than the teachers and principals in the school their child attends. To prepare and support principals and teachers in assuming the role of ambassador, CMS has developed a comprehensive Common Core toolkit, which includes three main components: (1) a letter from the principal to parents summarizing the “what, why, and how” of CCSS; (2) materials for principals and teachers to facilitate a brief seminar for parents, delving into CCSS and the concomitant shifts; (3) a set of guiding questions and relevant news articles for principals to use



“No longer are you doing the perimeter of a rectangle. You’re designing a grocery store and being asked to assess based on data points you were given.”

to engage teachers, parents, and community members in dialogue around the CCSS shifts.

- 3. Community Partners**—prepare and support individuals and organizations in the community as additional communications ambassadors. “As we travel this journey,” says Chief Communications Officer Kathryn Block, “we recognize that there are many, many stakeholders in the community who can positively influence the outcomes for students and parents.” This work has included strategic partner engagement sessions involving public libraries, PTAs, the YMCA, Charlotte Chamber, and faith communities.
- 4. Media Partners**—prepare and inform individuals and organizations in the media. This approach has included a media briefing; a Common Core website, <http://www.cms.k12.nc.us/parents/commoncore/Pages/default.aspx> (useful for parents and community partners as well); and “Teacher Bright Spots,” which are opportunities for media to observe the Common Core implementation in particular classrooms.



Stepping into the Future

For all the systemic shifts that CCSS requires from board rooms to classrooms, for Ann Clark it finally all comes down to students and their future: “Our focus has been on the incredible shift that has to happen for classroom teachers first and foremost in terms of how they think about defining a college- and career-ready student. For us the focus is not just on our graduation cohort. It’s what those kids are prepared to do as they get a diploma and walk off the stage and down the steps into their future.” ◀

—Scott Thompson

Introducing the Systemwide Equity Framework and Assessment Tool (SEFAT)

The Panasonic Foundation pursues its work through long-term partnerships with selected public K–12 school districts and their communities around the mission of **“breaking the links between race, poverty, and educational outcomes by improving the academic and social success of ALL students: ALL MEANS ALL!”** The purpose of the Systemwide Equity Framework and Assessment Tool (SEFAT) is to substantially advance this mission work.

At its core, SEFAT is two things. First, it’s an assessment, a survey, where all voices count! Everyone in the district is invited to take the SEFAT survey—from the board room to the lunchroom, from the superintendent to the part-time nurse. SEFAT is designed so that every perspective counts. This online assessment utilizes a jargon-free rubric that allows each respondent to assess his or her district anonymously and honestly. Second, SEFAT is a framework, a way of modeling the kind of thinking and inquiry required of high-performing schools. In this way, our goal is to provide an individual and collective learning experience for the district and those within it; and this learning experience is designed to inform strategic actions that will ensure high outcomes for ALL kids.

SEFAT includes essential questions, indicators, and a rubric. Accompanying the framework and tool are succinct guidelines for conducting a systemwide assessment, including guidance on organizing a steering team; communications; and gathering, analyzing, and reporting results. SEFAT is a 60-minute online assessment that asks EVERYONE in the district to assess their district on 60 indicators across 12 questions. We do not argue that this list is exhaustive; however, we believe that utilization of sound data to critically assess district policies, practices, culture, and structures, along with strategic actions aligned with corresponding indicators, contributes powerfully to the successful education of all children served; ALL MEANS ALL.

As a tool to both gather data and model system and self-reflection, we believe these 12 questions provide a transformative learning experience for each user, leaving him or her more knowledgeable about, and more committed to, creating an equitable system that educates ALL students:

1. At its core, does this district maintain a highly visible and focused approach to meeting the needs and ensuring the success of all students?
2. Does the school system, from the school board to students, demonstrate a sense of urgency to do “whatever it takes” for every student to achieve success in school?
3. To what extent is the improvement of the instructional core “everybody’s business”—no alibis, no excuses, no exceptions?
4. What is the culture and climate of this district? Does it feel like a place where all faculty and staff are productive, collaborative, and willing to “go the extra mile” in service of improving outcomes for all students?

5. Does the school board show good stewardship over the school district—demonstrating the leadership, courage, and will to govern on behalf of the entire community?
6. Are all adults held accountable for the improvement of student outcomes?
7. Is the district intently focused on results, thoughtfully using data to continually assess, report, and improve the performance of all adults and the students they serve?
8. Is there a comprehensive student support system that quickly identifies barriers to the academic, social, and emotional success of all students, and provides the timely assistance struggling students need?
9. Are fiscal resources distributed so that the students with the greatest academic, social, and emotional needs receive the highest-quality support?
10. To what extent is every child provided with high-quality teachers and enrolled in a school led by an effective instructional leader?
11. To what extent does this district invest time and money in recruiting, promoting, retaining, and developing leaders who are able to lead in strategic, ethical, and emotionally intelligent ways and are held accountable for continuous improvement of the instructional core?
12. Does this district strategically engage local partners in taking shared responsibility around agreed-upon measures and benchmarks to monitor progress along the “Birth–College/Age 20” continuum to ensure all students are college and career ready when they graduate?

SEFAT Scoring

The rubric utilizes the same scoring scale across all questions:



1. **Unaligned:** The actions of this district go against what we know to be effective practices in educating students, and may in some cases “cause harm” to the students. Operations at this level will strengthen the links between race, poverty, and educational outcomes.
2. **Emerging:** While performance at this level “does no harm,” it also does little to disturb the status quo. Districts at this level demonstrate some understanding of the theory or logic behind a particular indicator but may lack the ability or willingness to fully implement systems change. Operations at this level will do little to break the links between race, poverty, and educational outcomes.
3. **Established:** This level is a bridge between emerging and sustained. At this level, early implementation of systemwide strategies is seen. There is increasing ownership for an equity agenda at both the school and district levels, and expectations of adults and students are aligned with this vision and clearly communicated. A growing awareness of the need to disturb the status quo is almost palpable throughout the district.
4. **Sustained:** At this level, a district has institutionalized and solidified the actions required to break the links between race, poverty, and educational outcomes!

When Will SEFAT Be Available for Use in Your District?

SEFAT has been piloted in one Panasonic Foundation partner district: Racine Unified School District in Wisconsin; and it will be rolled out to other Panasonic Foundation partner districts during the 2013–14 school year. The Foundation then plans to make it widely available at no financial cost to school districts with a serious commitment to the systemic promotion of equity and excellence for all students. ◀

—Kaili Baucum