

# the Common CORE

Everything you need to know to succeed

By Samantha Cleaver



When Jenny Felts, a first-grade teacher at Eastside Elementary in Rogers, Arkansas, thought about implementing the new Common Core English language arts standards in her classroom, she was apprehensive. In May 2010, Felts started a unit comparing Cinderella stories

from around the world. The stories—James Marshall’s *Cinderella*, Yen Shen: *A Cinderella Story From China*, Mufaro’s *Beautiful Daughters*, and others—were more rigorous, with more advanced vocabulary, than the basal readers she’d been using.

Felts quickly found that her first graders were eagerly

engaged in learning about different countries, listening to the stories, and comparing them. Instead of using a Venn diagram, Felts created a large-scale visual chart and color-coded stories to encourage students to compare each new tale they read. The colorful chart helped students simultaneously make connec-

tions among many cultures and versions of the tale.

Now, Felts is excited about implementing the new standards, which have already been adopted by 43 states and Washington, D.C. For teachers, she says, “I think it’s going to be a really good thing.”

**The Need for Commonality**

In 2008, the Council for Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) and the National Governors Association started

*“As I looked at the standards, I realized I needed to take my lessons even deeper.” —Shelly Knutt*

discussing the possibility of moving away from separate state standards. State education leaders were concerned that existing state standards weren’t rigorous enough. In 2007, the U.S. Department of Education reported that 31 states had set “proficiency” scores for fourth-grade reading lower than the “basic level of performance” on federal tests. Governors voiced worries about students’ college and career readiness. In 2010, only 24 percent of high school graduates tested “college ready” on ACT tests in reading, English, math, and science. Finally, says Carrie Phillips, CCSSO program director of Common Core standards implementation, teachers complained that state standards were “a mile wide and an inch deep.”

So, in 2009, 48 states signed on to develop the Common Core State Standards, and in June 2010, the standards were finalized. Now, each state that has adopted the standards is working on its own timeline toward full implementation by 2014–2015. From start to finish, stresses Phillips, “this was [an initiative] led by the states, not the U.S. Department of Education.”

The overarching goal of the Common Core standards is to improve the academic achievement of American students. In 2006, according to the Programme for International Student

Assessment, American students ranked 35th among 40 countries in math and 29th in science. There was also a much larger achievement gap among American students compared to other developed countries. The Common Core standards, says Timothy Shanahan, University of Illinois professor of education, aim to increase educational opportunity and equality, something that’s impossible if every state is working independently.

**How It Affects You**

As your state implements the Common Core standards, the amount of change you’ll see in your classroom depends on your current standards. Overall, in reading, the rigor will increase, as will the depth of instruction. “If you’re used to teaching 15 topics,” says Phillips, “now there will only be two or three.” The standards also set more comprehensive expectations. For example, instead of teaching to individual standards about identifying plot, setting, and characters, students will be expected to describe, retell, analyze, and compare stories using their understanding of story elements.

In math, the Common Core standards are focused on key math concepts. Math instruction, says Bill McCallum, a math professor at the University of Arizona who helped write the math standards, has been too spread out, and teachers haven’t been spending enough time on any one concept. As a result, instead of working on all areas of math starting in kindergarten, the Common Core math standards are focused on building number and operation skills in kindergarten through fifth grade. Algebra, data, and statistics are introduced in the middle grades. The goal, says McCallum, is “to help teachers see the structure of math, and try to help students progress from one part to another.”

Now that the standards are written, the next challenge is to create assessments. Common Core assessments will likely be more performance-based, says Roberta Alley, Arizona associate superintendent of standards and assessment. For example, in language arts, students may have to read and respond to questions that require higher-order thinking. In math, students may be asked to explain how they solved problems.

“My hope,” says McCallum, “is that those assessments won’t be the dry and low-level multiple-choice tests but instead test students’ skill and understanding in a different way.”

**Refocusing Your Instruction**

Regardless of how your state is preparing for the Common Core, here’s how to refocus your instruction around higher standards.

**► Delve Deeper in Discussions**

After reading *How the Camel Got Its Hump* to her second-grade students, Shelly Knutt, a teacher in Asheville, North Carolina, led them through a discussion of the characters, setting, plot, and moral. “I thought I’d done a great job and that was it,” remembers Knutt. “But then as I sat down and looked at the Common Core standards, I realized that I hadn’t taken it nearly as deep as I should have.”

Knutt refocused her lesson, reread the story with her students, and led a discussion that surprised her. Instead of the surface morals that her students had suggested the first time around (e.g., Be nice), this time they came up with more complex morals: Do what people ask of you. Do things the first time you’re asked.

Knutt realized how much material she’d skimmed over in order to check performance objectives off her list. Listening to her students’ discussion helped Knutt realize which of them needed more time to process the lesson. “I have many ELL students in my class,” says Knutt. “[I saw] that I needed to slow down to let them discuss.”

As you discuss literature, it’s vital to teach your students how to slow down, think, and respond to everyone’s ideas. If you need to, revisit

books and discussions to help students reflect and delve deeper into a topic.

**► Work on Problem Solving**

The math standards, says McCallum, describe what mathematicians do. They teach students to make sense of problems, persevere to solve them, and critique how others solve problems. As you work in each subject, talk about what mathematicians, readers, scientists, and historians do every day. Create multistep problems that require a strategy, says McCallum, then encourage students to work through them. Have students explain their thinking using the language of math, history, or science.

**► Close the Textbook**

Instead of following a scripted set of textbook questions, have students review multiple sources (a science article, a primary source, and a documentary, for example). Then, have students use all three sources and connect and synthesize information in response to questions that can’t be answered from just one source.

**► Reduce Scaffolding**

American teachers are great at scaffolding learning for students. The problem, says Alley, is that “we’re not as good at taking away the scaffold,” and students are often surprised at

how little support they get in college-level books.

Show your students how to work independently and model how to power through frustration. In the middle of the year, analyze which scaffolds and supports you’ve put in place, and plan to remove them so students work more and more independently.

**► Read Through Appendix B**

Part of the Common Core standards is a focus on reading quality literature. Appendix B (available at [corestandards.org](http://corestandards.org)) lists specific examples of appropriate leveled literature for each grade. Take time this school year to become familiar with the examples of literature for your grade, and start expanding the materials in your school and classroom library.

**► Include Informational Texts**

For each Cinderella story, Felts’s first-grade students studied the country and culture beforehand. As they looked through informational texts about China, Africa, and Korea, they built background knowledge and vocabulary that helped them understand and discuss the stories. You too should use informational texts to build context for literature and to develop students’ background knowledge. The Common Core standards for informational text

are quite detailed and can help you determine appropriate curricular goals.

**► Celebrate Vocabulary**

As you use new literature, identify the vocabulary and celebrate it. Do a class cheer or add a pom-pom to a class party bucket when someone uses a new word, or fill a word wall with interesting words and notes saying who has used them. Ban overused words such as *very* and *nice*, and encourage students to employ more interesting synonyms in their place.

**► Critique New Materials**

As the standards come into schools, new materials will be developed. “My concern,” says Lynne Munson, president of Common Core, an organization that has designed curriculum maps aligned with the new standards, “is that curricula are going to be created that claim to be faithful but don’t move the bar up at all.” Each time you evaluate a new program, consider your ultimate goal for your students and how the materials will support it.

As the standards are rolled out from state to state, you can expect changes—and opportunities for innovation. The Common Core standards, says Munson, “enable teachers to be creative in a way that they maybe haven’t been able to be in recent years.” □

PHOTO: ISTOCK



## WHERE TO LEARN MORE

Here are four great sites where you can find the standards and start connecting with teachers to discuss and share ideas.

- 1

**commoncore.org**  
This site can help you implement the standards in your classroom. Consider using a map—a curriculum planning tool focused around the standards that breaks the school year into six-week units.
- 2

**corestandards.org**  
The Common Core State Standards initiative includes information on what each state is doing, as well as links to the English language arts standards, math standards, and more resources.
- 3

**illustrativemathematics.org**  
Join the conversation at the Illustrative Mathematics Project, a site managed by the University of Arizona. Here, a network of teachers is working with Common Core standards to share ideas and activities.
- 4

**nctm.org**  
The National Council of Teachers of Mathematics has suggestions for each grade level on how to incorporate the Common Core standards, as well as PowerPoint presentations to share with your colleagues.