

## **A Troubling Snapshot of Classroom-Level Common Core Implementation**

In this Education Trust paper, Sonja Santelises and Joan Dabrowski report on their study of how well classroom assignments in two large urban districts reflect the rigor and content of Common Core State Standards – specifically, text centrality, cognitive challenge, motivation, and engagement. “Our initial analysis raises a number of warning signals for state, district, and school leaders as they move into the next stages of implementation,” say the authors. “[T]here is much work to do” – especially in schools educating students from low-income families.

Why look at classroom assignments? Why not report on the hundreds of hours of Common Core training that principals and teachers have received in recent years? Santelises and Dabrowski believe the day-to-day work that students actually do is far more informative about curriculum implementation because it:

- Provides a clear window into classroom practices;
- Gives insights into school leaders’ and districts’ expectations on what and how to teach;
- Represents what teachers know and understand about curriculum standards;
- Shows how students interact with the curriculum;
- Reflects what teachers believe students can do independently as a result of instruction.

To compile this report, researchers collected classroom assignments in 92 middle-school classrooms (ELA, humanities, social studies, and science) in February and March of 2015. They gathered work products that students did independently, including extended writing or research projects, homework assignments, and exit tickets, all of which provided evidence of what students were given the opportunity to learn and the competencies they were asked to demonstrate. Work that students did during teacher-led practice, and assignments given by substitute teachers, were not included.

Of almost 2,000 assignments gathered, 1,591 were scored by master teachers following these criteria:

- *Alignment with the grade’s Common Core standards* – In ELA, this means regular practice with complex texts and their academic language; reading, writing, and speaking using evidence from texts, both literary and informational; and building knowledge through content information. In addition, did each assignment clearly articulate the task so students fully understood what was expected of them?
- *Centrality of text* – Students have the opportunity to display increasing expertise in interpreting and responding to material and pull out evidence to justify their responses and thinking – e.g., paraphrasing or direct citation to support a position or claim.
- *Cognitive challenge* – The assignment requires high levels of cognitive work (e.g., retelling a story, identifying facts from a text, analyzing a character using textual evidence, and applying knowledge gained from multiple texts to form a new idea) and is linked to the creation of a piece of extended writing (i.e., multiple paragraphs).

- *Motivation and engagement* – The key elements were choice (some degree of autonomy and independence) and relevance (poignant topics, use of real-world materials and experiences, with potential connections to students’ goals, interests, and values).

In addition, Santelises and Dabrowski looked at whether assignments contained a variety of text types of significant length; how much student writing was required (none, note-taking, 1-2 sentences, short responses, one paragraph, multiple paragraphs); how long the assignment took (from 15 minutes to multi-week projects); and the type of thinking students did (recall, basic application of skills and concepts, strategic thinking, and extended thinking).

What did the analysis of assignments reveal? Here are the disheartening statistics from these classrooms:

- Alignment with Common Core – Only 38 percent fully met the criteria.
- Centrality of text – 15 percent
- Cognitive challenge – 4 percent
- Motivation and engagement – 2 percent

Santelises and Dabrowski deduce six themes from these findings, all with direct implications for schools’ work with Common Core standards:

- *Superficial and partial implementation* – Teachers haven’t received enough guidance on how to use the standards, say the authors, and too many educators are adopting materials that aren’t well aligned, or implementing aligned materials in ways that don’t do the job. “The majority of assignments included keywords and phrases found in the Common Core standards,” they say, “fostering a comforting sense that ‘we are aligned.’ Unfortunately, this is not the case – much of this is window dressing... [T]he consequences for students are clear: daily work for students that still falls too far short of our goal. The honest reality is that deeper work around lesson planning and pedagogy is desperately needed.”

- *Reading interrupted* – The authors saw evidence of some movement toward students doing close reading of a range of texts across content, cultures, and centuries, as called for in the Common Core. But too often, students were reading short chunks of material rather than whole novels or longer works of non-fiction. “The frequent ‘stop and go’ nature of reading assignments,” say the authors, “requiring the whole class to mechanically annotate or take notes, may actually interrupt a more fluid and autonomous process that many young adolescent readers need to develop as they read for longer periods of time and self-monitor their comprehension... When do students have time for sustained, fluent reading of complex texts?” Santelises and Dabrowski were also concerned about annotation – did students know why they were doing it? – and the fact that much of the note-taking wasn’t used in future class work.

- *Writing without composing* – Too much of student writing consisted of taking and organizing notes (16 percent), responding in one or two sentences to text-based questions (17 percent), or providing multiple short responses (27 percent). Only 9 percent of assignments

asked students to bring these discrete tasks together for the heavier lift of composing original writing that expressed their own thinking and analysis in multiple paragraphs.

- *Short assignments and heavy scaffolding* – A little over half of the assignments took 15 minutes or less, say the authors, and the vast majority involved recall, reproduction, and basic application, with very little strategic thinking (14 percent) and extended thinking (less than 1 percent). Teachers were clearly over-scaffolding. “Rarely did we see assignments that allowed early adolescents to construct their own claim statements or work through their thoughts to construct a cohesive flow of ideas,” say Santelises and Dabrowski. “Rather, the teacher kept students ‘with her’ instead of releasing them to wrestle with their ideas or with the ideas of others.” One principal who agreed with the report’s analysis said, “We are spoon-feeding them because we do not believe they can do it.” Administrators wielding observation checklists during classroom visits may inadvertently reinforce this type of pedagogy by commending teachers for short “do nows”, “entry tasks,” and “exit slips.”

- *Few class discussions* – Most assignments did not prompt students to prepare for and engage in the kinds of discussions called for in the Common Core. Rather, they asked students to “Work with your group members to...” or “Talk in your groups about...” instead of preparing text-based notes for a discussion or preparing to present claims and findings aloud. In addition, there was little evidence of developing discussion norms or structures for participation. “In debriefing these results with participating school leaders,” say Santelises and Dabrowski, “many confessed that pockets of staff were actually afraid of providing students with this level of autonomy and independence.”

- *Not enough relevance and choice* – A tiny percent of assignments – only 2 percent – met the study’s standards in these two areas. Students were asked to read and respond to material that didn’t connect with their lives and experiences, while following their teachers’ 1 lock-step structure. Some teachers tried to “hook” students by using examples from pop culture, and students sometimes made posters or displays using colorful enhancements and images. “While the argument might be that students ‘enjoy’ these types of activities,” say Santelises and Dabrowski, “the use of superficial techniques such as these often failed to promote the deeper push needed in the area of cognitive demand. Rather than relying on gimmicks or low-level materials, we can and must engage our young adolescents using challenging content.” There is no shortage of important topics in literature, history, and science, they say. “Characteristics such as perseverance, determination, and ingenuity can be powerful ‘hooks’ for students preparing to study historical figures and events,” say the authors. “And allowing students to read and discuss how science influences our daily lives can open their mind to its importance. Relevancy becomes the pathway from the known to the unknown; from the simple to the complex.”

Santelises and Dabrowski close with a ringing exhortation to district and school leaders to go beyond relying on teacher workshops, mechanical implementation, and keywords and phrases in lessons plans or written on whiteboards. They have two recommendations:

• *Leaders need to ask deeper questions* about tasks, texts, rigor, and engagement in classrooms. Some examples:

- What does true implementation of the standards look like?
- How and when do students read, discuss, and write about texts?
- When and how often do students read without interruptions?
- When and how often do students do extended writing?
- Do we offer opportunities for students to bring their own ideas, experiences, and opinions into the work they do?
- How do we analyze student work to identify and showcase thinking that is rich in content?
- How much cognitive demand are we placing on students?
- How do we help students transition to academic independence?
- How can we ensure that science and social studies assignments reflect the standards?
- How can educators work across grade levels to get students doing extended writing?
- Are teachers being supervised and evaluated in ways that inhibit their ability to fully align with Common Core demands?

• *Look over students' shoulders at the assignments they're working on.* "Leaders need to track what their students are being asked to do on a daily basis in their classrooms," say Santelises and Dabrowski. This is where the curriculum actually happens, and looking at assignments "prompts us to question whether the status quo structures and approaches support or inhibit the true spirit of college and career readiness... This is the data we need in order to support teachers as they make their way through this complex transition and ensure greater and more sustained student learning outcomes."

"Checking In: Do Classroom Assignments Reflect Today's Higher Standards?" by Sonja Santelises and Joan Dabrowski in an Education Trust report, September 2, 2015, available at <http://edtrust.org/resource/classroomassignments>; the authors can be reached at [ssantelises@edtrust.org](mailto:ssantelises@edtrust.org) and [joandabrowski@gmail.com](mailto:joandabrowski@gmail.com).

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## DIALECTICAL JOURNALS

The term "Dialectic" means "the art or practice of arriving at the truth by using conversation involving question and answer." Think of your dialectical journal as a series of conversations with the texts we read during this course. The process is meant to help you develop a better understanding of the texts we read. Use your journal to incorporate your personal responses to the texts, your ideas about the themes we cover and our class discussions. You will find that it is a useful way to process what you're reading, prepare yourself for group discussion, and gather textual evidence for your Literary Analysis assignments.

### PROCEDURE:

- o As you read, choose passages that stand out to you and record them in the left-hand column the chart (*ALWAYS include page numbers*).
- o In the right column, write your response to the text (ideas/insights, questions, reflections, and comments on each passage)
- o You **must** label your responses using the following codes:
  - o (Q) Question – ask about something in the passage that is unclear
  - o (C) Connect – make a connection to your life, the world, or another text
  - o (P) Predict – anticipate what will occur based on what's in the passage
  - o (CL) Clarify – answer earlier questions or confirm/disaffirm a prediction
  - o (R) Reflect – think deeply about what the passage means in a broad sense – not just to the characters in the story/author of the article. What conclusions can you draw about the world, about human nature, or just the way things work?
  - o (E) Evaluate - make a judgment about what the author is trying to say

### Sample Dialectical Journal entry: Beyond the Yellow Highlighter

Passages from the text-- Must quote at least 10 per reading assigned. Make sure to number them.	Pg#/¶	EACH Passage you Quote must relate to one of the following codes above. Make sure to use a variety. Using the same codes for most or all of your entries will result in a lower score.
1. "The yellow marks in my college textbooks...did not help me very much."	82/1	(C) I can relate since I often used to highlight what I thought was important and then end up with most of the page highlighted.
2. "Annotations do make me read a lot slower and I wish I didn't have to do them. It is so much harder to fake read if you have to annotate like we have to do now. So now I actually read, because it's too hard to fake annotate"	87/2	(C) It is harder to fake annotate--it almost takes more time. (R) People are prone to find the easy way to do something. Since there's really no easy way to annotate--fake or real--it makes sense to really read and think about the texts. (Q) Is it really harder to fake read if you have to annotate? Or does it just take longer?

# 1. Richard DuFour on Effective Professional Learning Communities

(Originally titled "How PLCs Do Data Right")

In this article in *Educational Leadership*, PLC guru Richard DuFour looks back ruefully on his rookie teaching years in the 1970s. He remembers giving unit tests on Friday, marking them over the weekend, and giving them back to students on Monday. "I had a sense of smug self-satisfaction," he says, "because I believed that my challenging assessments, my willingness to devote hours to grading papers, and my commitment to returning tests promptly was proof positive that I was a great teacher."

As students looked over their papers, DuFour would go over problem areas. He then gathered up the tests, clearly signaling that the unit was over, grades were final, and he was moving on. "It never even occurred to me to review the results with colleagues, to use this evidence of student learning to inform and improve my teaching, or to provide students with additional time and support to master the content." The bell-shaped curve of grades was what it was. Students who performed well were a testament to his terrific teaching, and students who didn't do well either lacked ability or hadn't worked hard enough.

DuFour believes that over the last 40 years, we've made significant strides, shifting "from an era in which what was taught, how learning was assessed, what instructional materials were used, and how grades were assigned were all determined by the individual teacher to whom a student was randomly assigned. Now we're asking teachers to work in collaborative teams to achieve common goals for which they are mutually accountable." At the heart of the PLC process is teams analyzing the results of common interim assessments and asking themselves four questions:

- *Which students were unable to demonstrate proficiency on this assessment?* The team identifies these students by name and need and gets them into a "system of intervention" that is timely (immediately after the assessment), directive (students don't have a choice), diagnostic (e.g., unable to subtract two-digit integers), and systematic (the school has a plan for additional time and help until all students reach proficiency).

- *Which students are highly proficient and would benefit from extended or accelerated learning?* Research has shown that these opportunities (as opposed to tracking) greatly improve learning. During the intervention/enrichment block in one school in Illinois, 3-5 additional teachers flood into the grade level to provide additional support and keep group sizes small.

- *What can I learn from colleagues who got excellent results in an area where my students struggled?*

Transparency and candor are important at this point, making it possible for teachers to admit instructional failures and ask for help. The transfer of successful practices can take place through meetings, viewing videos, sharing lesson plans, or observing classes.

- *What are we going to do about areas where none of us achieved the results we expected?* Effective teams take a hard look at the data, reach out for ideas, set goals, and check back with subsequent assessments to see what's working best.

DuFour is encouraged by the way PLCs are taking hold, but he's concerned about one missing element. Many schools agree on appropriate curriculum goals, give common assessments, and give students additional time and support. "What they fail to do, however, is to use the evidence of student learning to improve instruction," he says. "They are more prone to attribute students' difficulties to the students themselves" – they need to study harder, do a better job on homework, or ask for help. "Rather than listing what students need to do to correct the problem," says DuFour, "educators need to address what *they* can do better collectively."

"How PLCs Do Data Right" by Richard DuFour in *Educational Leadership*, November 2015 (Vol. 73, #3, p. 22-26), available for purchase at <http://bit.ly/1MttlYw>; DuFour can be reached at [rdufour923@gmail.com](mailto:rdufour923@gmail.com).

# Major Steps to Design an Integrated Curriculum Unit

- 1 **Connect With Industry and Postsecondary Partners**  
Plan to consult with industry and postsecondary partners for help with identifying authentic connections, providing specialized instruction and mentoring, and evaluating student work.
- 2 **Creating and Sharing Curriculum and Performance Maps**  
Examine the existing scope and sequence of concurrent academic and CTE classes, then map out and share the performance measures for each class.
- 3 **Decide on the Topic of the Integrated Unit**  
*Look across the performance measures to find connections between classes and then choose a topic of interest to students that allows for authentic integration of multiple subject areas.*
- 4 **Craft the Essential Question**  
Set up a need-to-know learning opportunity for students by framing the unit and driving the instruction with an essential question.
- 5 **Identify Key Questions**  
Break down the overall concept of the essential question into smaller parts, often directly related to individual academic or CTE subjects.
- 6 **Allocate Responsibilities**  
Identify and assign the roles and responsibilities for each team member, particularly the team leader, to ensure that development and enactment of the integrated unit moves forward.
- 7 **Review and Revise the Instructional Sequence**  
Once the unit theme and general content has been chosen, revisit the curriculum map to identify potential sequence adjustments that might bring relevant topics closer together in the school year.
- 8 **Set the Learning Scenario**  
*Plan to engage student interest by introducing the unit with an interesting example of the unit theme in a real-world setting, ideally with relevance to students' lives.*
- 9 **Establish Student Assessments**  
Determine appropriate formative and summative student assessments, including the culminating project. Ideally, the culminating project would allow students to demonstrate multidisciplinary content knowledge mastery.
- 10 **Write Lesson Plans**  
After initial overall unit planning is complete, individual subject lesson plans and instructional materials should be written and/or assembled for enactment and future reference.
- 11 **Evaluate the Unit**  
Once the various pieces are finished, step back and re-evaluate the unit as a whole.



Division of Educational Opportunity and Access  
 Classroom Observation Debriefing Form

The purpose of this document is to strategically debrief on specific look-fors post classroom observations at school sites

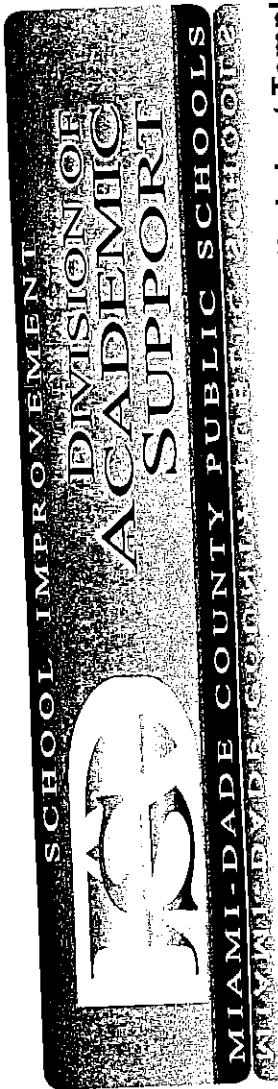
Tips for Instructional Review:

- Simplifying of strategies to make them more appropriate for schools you serve.
- When identifying barriers look out for a lot of: the students can't do this or the students can't do that...refer them back to the goal--to "improve instruction" for student achievement.
- When action planning and the priority barrier identified you'll identify resources. Look at the way resources are being utilized--are they being maximized to highest potential? Are there creative ways to employ them?? In other words, help them creatively refine the use of already existing resources. And let them tell you!
- A good ESSENTIAL Question when conducting the walkthroughs is that before entering any classroom ask them to "look for" specific practices that will prepare kids for FSA/Fcat/college/career ready...and which could be improved upon.. Rather than ask---what's missing? .

Areas

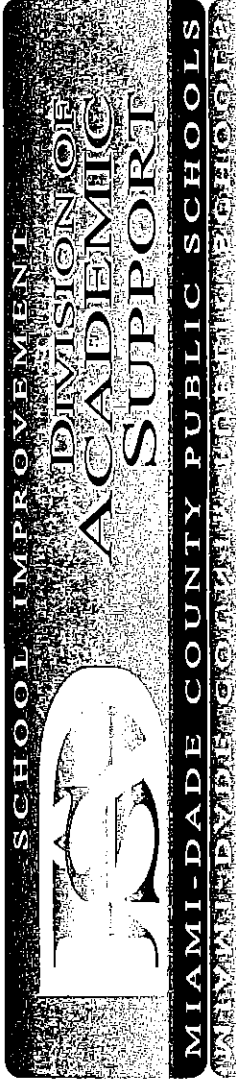
1. Common Board Configuration .....
2. Student Work Folders .....
3. Student Work/Writing Displayed .....
4. Lesson Plans .....
5. Instructional Routines: (Gradual Release of Responsibility) .....
6. Use of Data .....
7. Differentiated Instruction .....
8. Levels of Questioning (Webb's Depth of Knowledge)
9. Student Engagement .....
10. Appropriate curricular program usage(pacing guide)
11. Classroom Environment .....





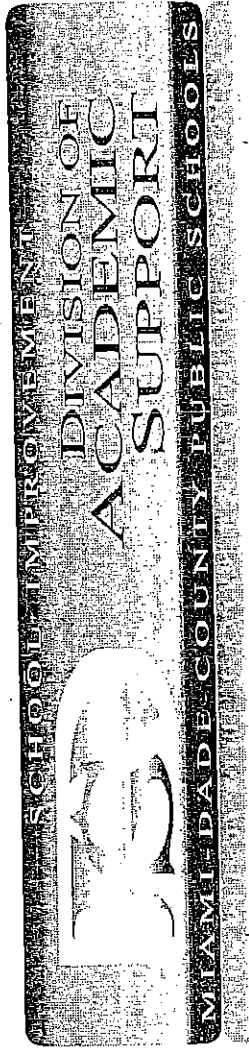
2015-2016 School Improvement Plan (SIP) Development Worksheet Template

<b>Step 1: Goal</b>	
Goal: To increase student achievement by improving core instruction in all content areas.	
<b>Step 2: Barriers and Resources</b>	
Barriers: Brainstorm barriers that could hinder achieving the goal and list all possible barriers.	
ELA:	
Math:	
Science:	
Social Science:	
Technology:	
<b>Step 3: Priority Barrier</b>	
Select one priority barrier from the identified barriers in Step 2.	
<b>Priority Barrier:</b>	
<b>Step 4: Strategy and Rationale</b>	
<b>Strategy:</b> Select a strategy that can be used to help eliminate or reduce the priority barrier.	<b>Rationale:</b> Include the rationale for the strategy



2015-2016 School Improvement Plan (SIP) Development Worksheet Template

Step 5: Action Steps			
Action Step (Repeat as Necessary)			
<b>What:</b> What will be done to implement the strategy?			
<b>Who:</b> Who is the person responsible for collecting/using the evidence to show completion of the activity?			
<b>When:</b> How frequently and for how long this step will be implemented?	<b>Start Date:</b>	<b>Interval:</b>	<b>End Date:</b>
<b>Evidence:</b> What evidence will be collected to demonstrate completion of the activity? <b>Complete the section below if a professional development opportunity or technical assistance opportunity is being provided. Otherwise, leave this section blank.</b>			
<b>PD Opportunity or TA Opportunity</b> Is the action step a professional development opportunity or technical assistance opportunity?	Check the appropriate box if applicable: <input type="checkbox"/> Professional Development Opportunity <input type="checkbox"/> Technical Assistance Opportunity		
<b>Facilitator/Developer:</b> Who is responsible for providing the PD or TA opportunity?	Facilitator/Developer:		
<b>Participants/Audience:</b> Who are the participants/audience the PD or TA opportunity is intended for?	Participants/Audience:		
<b>Complete the section below if the action step is a budget item. Otherwise, leave this section blank.</b>			
<b>Budget:</b> If the action step is a budget item, complete this information.	<b>Budget Focus:</b>	<b>Funding Source:</b>	<b>Amount:</b>



Appendix B: 2015-2016 School Improvement Plan (SIP) Development Worksheet Example

Action Step 2	
<b>What:</b> What will be done to implement the strategy?	<b>What:</b> Teachers across all content areas will implement the Gradual Release Responsibility Model during classroom instruction.
<b>Who:</b> Who is the person responsible for collecting/using the evidence to show completion of the activity?	<b>Who:</b> Doe, Jane (janedoe@dadeschools.net)
<b>When:</b> How frequently and for how long this step will be implemented?	<b>Start Date:</b> 9/24/2015 <b>Interval:</b> Daily <b>End Date:</b> 11/02/2015
<b>Evidence:</b> What evidence will be collected to demonstrate completion of the activity?	<b>Evidence:</b> Classroom visitation logs, Lesson plans, Student data, Data chats
<b>Complete the section below if a professional development opportunity or technical assistance opportunity is being provided. Otherwise, leave this section blank.</b>	
<b>PD Opportunity or TA Opportunity</b> Is the action step a professional development opportunity or technical assistance opportunity?	Check the appropriate box if applicable: <input type="checkbox"/> Professional Development Opportunity <input type="checkbox"/> Technical Assistance Opportunity
<b>Facilitator/Developer:</b> Who is responsible for providing the PD or TA opportunity?	<b>Facilitator/Developer:</b>
<b>Participants/Audience:</b> Who are the participants/audience the PD or TA opportunity is intended for?	<b>Participants/Audience:</b>
<b>Complete the section below if the action step is a budget item. Otherwise, leave this section blank.</b>	
<b>Budget:</b> If the action step is a budget item, complete this information.	<b>Budget Focus:</b> <b>Funding Source:</b> <b>Amount:</b>