Experts: Common Core can be a force in closing gaps

Efforts to close achievement gaps while transitioning to rigorous course content designed to support the Common Core State Standards have found educators using training and development programs and new teaching methods to improve all students' academic achievement. A recent Alliance for Excellent Education webinar addressed policy and practice changes supporting struggling learners during Common Core implementation.

Traditionally, "We always made assumptions that children of color, students with disabilities could not learn at the same level as other students," said Henry Johnson, Maryland assistant state superintendent for curriculum, assessment, and accountability.

But the Common Core is "forcing teachers to include those students, [target them], and meet those students where they are," Johnson said. The standards will not be "a panacea" but will provide "equitable opportunities for all students to push them . . . give them the rigor that they need in order to be successful beyond high school."

Moreover, students will "not be so dependent upon the stigma that's attached to their situation in life, whether they have a disability, are a minority student, or are economically disadvantaged," Johnson added. "We as educators don't want to use those excuses" for lack of student success.

The experts agreed that educator professional development is critical to implementing the standards and related curricular changes, especially when working with "students on the other side of the opportunity gap," as described by Dewey Hensley, chief academic officer of Jefferson County (Kentucky) Public Schools.

"I simply won't tolerate the notion that because the standards got higher, somehow minority and poor students could never reach that standard, but other kids could," Hensley said.

Accordingly, the Common Core has "brought a level of coherence that is guiding our professional learning" in Jefferson County, said Hensley. The mandates for deeper learning with clear goals for teachers "helped us to put kids back at the center of our universe."

The district is trying to "redefine the gap," moving away from comparing subgroups to one another and instead "compare each student and each student group to the proficiency line. We name and claim each student" to help them "cross the proficiency line."

All Jefferson County student groups have made gains for two years in a row, according to Hensley. The district saw "the needle pointing upward" when teachers recognized implementation support would be available.

Hensley added that the district shifted from a "resource model of teachers" and used resource personnel as "goal clarity coaches" working with educator professional learning communities. The shift "has really paid off for us."

In Ohio, Cleveland's New Tech West High School has also focused on professional development for CCSS implementation for the last year and a half, according to Principal Erin Frew.

The school also involves students in tracking their progress toward mastery. Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers testing is a graduation requirement, and the monitoring helps students understand their academic responsibilities. It has been "really helpful for the students; we've seen really large gains."

The average ninth-grader enters New Tech West at about the fifth or sixth grade level, Frew said. The CCSS "forced us" to think about how students are exposed to classroom topics and what supports or interventions might be needed. For example, New Tech West used a graphic-novel format to assist ELLs and "limited readers" in their study of *Oliver Twist*. "They loved it," Frew added. "They were very excited to read it."

The Common Core means a shift from "covering massive amounts of content" to being thoughtful about choosing texts for study and then examining them in depth, Frew said.

The alternative reading format and "pre-teaching" vocabulary from *Oliver Twist* are examples of supports teachers use to "scaffold up" students in as both parties transition from focusing on breadth of coverage to depth of knowledge, Frew said. "For a lot of secondary teachers that's a big shift."

Indeed, collaborative and problem-based learning are more often found in elementary classrooms, Johnson said. Maryland "is finding tremendous success with the elementary level" because those teachers are accustomed to the approach. The state's professional development programs "provide an opportunity for teachers to learn how to teach the standards in a different way than they are accustomed" to doing in high school.

"Groups of teachers together are the key," Hensley said. The collaboration helps educators "really focus on learning instead of teaching." According to Johnson, Maryland is working with other SEAs on reviewing and providing CCSS-aligned resources, and Maryland LEAs are collaborating on an online repository of such resources.

--Jean Gossman covers education research and secondary school reform for LRP Publications.

January 23, 2015

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