



Executive Director Editorial

CCSS will force curriculum changes: Are you ready?

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As CABE has grown and added services, programs and other activities over the years, we often ask ourselves, “what can we eliminate or downsize?”

This is a much tougher issue than one might expect. For example, we are loathe to eliminate a service that even just a handful of our districts find helpful. The National School Boards Association, has had to face similar choices.

School boards face this issue every year in their budget discussions and it often means laying off personnel, since around 70 percent of their budgets are salaries and benefits. We know of at least one district that had worked hard to add full-day kindergarten, only to eliminate it in the last two years because of fiscal issues.

Now, however, there’s another issue facing school boards, superintendents and the district staff which will require similar tough decisionmaking: Common Core State Standards (CCSR).

CABE, the Connecticut Council for Educational Reform (CCER) and the State Department of Education (SDE) sponsor-ed an April 2nd program on the Standards and what they mean for boards, superintendents and the business community [see page 1]. The new Standards call for more in-depth, focused instruction and assessment on math and literacy (more subjects will be introduced later).

What Can Be Eliminated?

One of the questions that a board member posed was what could be dropped from what is currently being taught (and tested) to make the necessary time to do the deeper, richer dive into other topics which are the hallmarks of the new Standards. This is a particularly difficult issue as some teachers have taught subjects in which they understand at a very deep level and enjoy teaching.

I asked *Dianna Roberge-Wentzell*, SDE’s Chief Academic Officer, how boards can help their staff with these changes. Here are some of her thoughts on this matter, along with others I have heard:

Dianna told me that the best way to approach the issue is by strategic planning. Districts should carefully consider the new standards and determine what they must concentrate on, before determining what to scale back or eliminate.

It is a question, to a good extent, of prioritization.

Teachers must know exactly what they have to teach in the new curriculum. Through professional development, they, working together with principals and superintendents, should begin to understand the changes that must be made in their teaching styles and content.

She mentioned studies that show that teachers are often trying very hard to have their subjects be relevant and engage students. For example some may overuse movies to help teach a subject, but that can make it harder to really get to the learning aspects of the material.

It is important to watch out for distractions. While taking some time to do work on other subjects, it’s critical that the priority be the material in which students need to be competent.

We need to build up both the competencies and confidence of our educators. Some of this will take some time, since many may have to give up areas they have long taught, for other areas about which they know less. They may find teaching the subject for the first time to be daunting.

Time also needs to be better managed. For example, testing under the new standards will be computerized. Cutting three days from the current six, will open up some new days. Are there subjects to be taught that could likewise be done by computer teaching? Such a system, even for one or two subjects, would also permit the personalized learning that CAPSS has encouraged with its *NextEd* project.

Professional development is key to making CCSR a successful initiative. As with the new evaluation standards, professional development and help for teachers, such as collaboration time, will help move the system.

So, What’s A Board to Do?

Boards have an important role in this new initiative. While their role is not to get too involved in curriculum development, they need a true understanding of what CCSS means for their professional staff and students. Without this basic understanding, boards will be at a loss as to how to help staff and explain to the public what is occurring.

As we have heard countless times, change is difficult. Your staff will need the resources and the time to carry out

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this process. At a time of great stress on our districts, providing this help will not be easy.

School boards and superintendents also need to be discussing the new Standards and what they will mean as they're implemented with not only the school community, but with their town or city councils. This will not be an easy discussion. If topics are eliminated or get less attention, there may very well be members of the community who react negatively. Your job is to explain why this is necessary if our students are to be work- or college-ready when they graduate.

The Connecticut business community, through CBIA and CCER, has supported the new standards, but once we start testing students on them, it is expected that test

scores will decrease. With so much riding on testing in our schools, this could lead to concerns in many districts. SDE is aware of the issue and is working on helping districts with this issue.

Board members should understand that the new generation of state assessment will focus on growth, rather than just a fixed number.

One can argue about whether all kids are "proficient" or at "goal", etc... but it should be the board's expectation that every child will advance in their learning.

Much more information on the CCSS can be found on the SDE website.

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