Meeting Standard 10 of the Common Core State Standards:

How Principals Can Support Students’ Reading of Complex Text

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Most principals know about the Common Core State Standards (CCSS; CCSS Initiative, 2010) but may not be aware of how different these standards are from previous standards in one essential way—their emphasis on students’ capacity with complex text. Standard 10, the text complexity standard, represents an unprecedented focus on text that will fundamentally change assessments, textbooks, and teaching at the secondary level. Previous state text standards described strategies that students should perform with “grade-level” text without explicitly defining grade-level. The CCSS take a very different tack. A staircase matches grade levels to specific text levels using readability from second grade through high school and students’ movement up this staircase is the focus of a separate standard—Standard 10.

Why the focus on text? Over the past 50 years, there has been a steady decrease in the difficulty of texts given to students in middle and high schools. The CCSS reverses this trend. More complex text, especially at middle- and high-school levels is at the core of the CCSS. One impetus for this focus was the ACT’s 2006 report, Reading Between the Lines, which showed that only 51% of high school graduates were ready to read the complex texts of college. Another impetus for the CCSS was the gap between the difficulty of texts in high school and those of college and the workplace (Williamson, 2008). In this article, we describe what Standard 10 means for secondary schools and how principals can take two actions to move towards meeting the goal of Standard 10—reading more complex text.

**What Standard 10 Means For Secondary Schools**

Guidelines accompanying the CCSS are likely to result in textbooks that are written at higher difficulty levels in grades 6-12. Figure 1 shows the previous levels of texts and compares
them to those in the CCSS (levels that have been raised even more in a revised document (CCSS Initiative, 2012). Note that the difficulties are significantly increased in all grades, sometimes by more than two grade levels. For example, at grades 9-10 student materials will be written at reading levels previously designated as texts for students in grades 1012.

As CCSS-compliant textbooks hit the market, principals can expect their teachers to quickly detect increases in complexity and to ask how to support their students who struggle with the texts. In all but the most advanced classes teachers may opt to avoid asking students to read materials and may provide access to complex text through other means (e.g. teacher read-alouds, audios). Of course, this would defeat the purposes of Standard 10. For Standard-10 goals to be met, the result should be more—not less—reading at the secondary level. A forward thinking principal will initiate a school-wide plan to accelerate the reading levels of weaker students and provide professional development to teachers for supporting students in more difficult texts.

Not only does the CCSS change the difficulty of materials that students must read but it also changes what they must do with text—the complexity of the task. Standard 10 calls for reading that is both wider (more reading of varied texts) and deeper (more examination of features and assumptions of texts). The CCSS will push students beyond superficial readings of text and personal opinions that are not anchored in the text. The CCSS urges close reading and rereading of text and emphasizes text-based questions for which answers require textual support. In fact, publishers are directed to ensure that 80-90% of questions in their materials are text-based (Coleman & Pimenthal, 2012).

The CCSS will also result in wider reading by focusing on literacy in the content areas such as science and social science. The tasks of secondary school have often been out of sync
with those of college, careers, and citizenry. In college and careers, people read articles (i.e., magazines, trade journals, newspapers, on-line sources). Full-length texts remain important but the school curriculum has often stayed with a textbook when articles are also critical.

**Actions Principals Can Take to Increase Students’ Capacity with Complex Text**

Issues of text complexity are, in a word, *complex*. A single article such as this one cannot convey all that is needed to ensure students’ movement up the staircase of text complexity. But we can describe two steps which principals can take to increase attention to complex text and, in so doing, establish momentum for taking even bigger steps: (a) increasing reading through providing articles and (b) increasing vocabulary knowledge.

**Increasing Wide and Deep Reading**

All but a very small portion of an American grade cohort can read, if reading is defined as the recognition of words. For up to 40% of an age cohort, however, this recognition is slow (Daane, Campbell, Grigg, Goodman, & Oranje, 2005). When word recognition takes up substantial cognitive resources, students’ comprehension is compromised and engagement plummets. Students need to read more during English classes but they also need to read more during science, social science, and math classes. Students need to read magazines, newspapers, and primary sources, all of which provide opportunities to negotiate texts that are dense with information and that have varying perspectives.

Principals can’t prescribe the texts for content-area classes but, through modeling and providing resources, they can support the goals of increased reading. One form of modeling is to provide a short professional article (or the url for one) as the focus of a faculty meeting.

Second, principals can “curate” websites. A commitment by principals to ten minutes a day of searching websites can result in at least one strong weekly recommendation. The websites
The knowledge gained from this process of curating websites can support a third action—an article which all students read in either classes or homeroom periods. The Word Generation project (Snow, Lawrence, & White, 2009) illustrates the use of articles with interdisciplinary connections across content areas. Similarly, a principal might select an interdisciplinary article that becomes the basis for discussion across the school over a week.

Finally, principals can ensure that teachers have access to magazines and newspapers for classroom use, whether in digital or print form. The internet may be overflowing with information but identifying articles appropriate for students can be challenging. Readily available magazines and newspapers can ensure that the material is available for classroom use.

**Increasing Vocabulary Knowledge**

A second action by principals is to support a school-wide interest in vocabulary. A systematic and principled vocabulary program that weaves throughout the school day is essential for students’ increased capacity with complex text. Vocabulary is a consistent and strong indicator of how well students comprehend (Just & Carpenter, 1987). The reason is that vocabulary is the means for refining known concepts and acquiring new concepts. When Jane Austen describes Elizabeth’s views of Bingley’s sisters as supercilious, students are refining their idea of “stuck-up” or conceited. When a science text describes the difference between protists and bacteria, students are acquiring a new concept.

The words systematic and principled are italicized in the sentence above to emphasize that “just any words won’t do.” Giving students lists of words (even those tabbed as college-preparatory) to learn is not the solution to developing strong, robust vocabularies. English has an
enormous number of words. All cannot be taught. What students (and their teachers) need to understand is that a small number of words account for the majority of words in texts and a huge group of words occurs infrequently. The latter group, while infrequent, is critical in differentiating narrative and informational texts. To acquire new words independently, students need to understand how words are connected.

First, words share morphemes--the smallest unit of meaning. Base morphemes (e.g., help) have meaning on their own, while bound morphemes (e.g., s in helps) need to be attached to a base morpheme. Complex and rare words are often members of morphological families with several members (e.g., locate, location, relocation, allocation).

Second, infrequent, rare vocabulary in narrative and informational text takes different forms. In narrative texts, rare words usually represent new ways of expressing known concepts (e.g., supercilious for stuck-up). In informational texts, unique words typically represent conceptually complex concepts that draw on a related system of concepts (e.g., electrochemical energy involves conversion, electric energy, and chemical energy).

**How principals can support the principles of vocabulary.** Principals can’t be responsible for teaching vocabulary lessons but they can provide a school-wide focus on vocabulary. First, they can use daily announcements and websites to “advertise” words. As an example, a week’s 30-second advertisements might be devoted to words that have entered the dictionary in 2012 (e.g., earworm: a repetitive tune heard by an individual even when it is not being played).

Vocabulary can be the focus of a school’s professional development or of several faculty meetings. The Internet includes free webinars and PowerPoint presentations on the topic (see list in Resource 2) for principals or lead teachers to use. This professional development could result
in a school-wide effort where teachers commit to spending two five-minute overviews weekly on the connections across vocabulary in their content areas.

**Conclusion**

We believe that the CCSS offers an incredible opening in American schools for increasing attention of teachers and students to *knowledge*. The “haves” of the digital-global age are the ones who have funds of information. Reading extensively and also extending vocabulary are means for increasing students’ funds of information. We have proposed a first-phase action plan for principals to support increased reading and vocabulary learning in their schools. A journey, as Lao Tzu is quoted as saying, begins with a single step. The opportunities offered by the CCSS are massive. These first steps by principals can ensure that students’ movement up the staircase of text complexity is facilitated.
References


Figure 1. Comparison of Recommendations for Lexile Levels in Common Core with Previous Lexile Levels

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Text Complexity Grade Band in the Standards</th>
<th>Old Lexile Ranges</th>
<th>Lexile Ranges Aligned to CCR Expectations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>K–1</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2–3</td>
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<td>725</td>
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<tr>
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<td>790</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>4–5</td>
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<td>770</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>845</td>
<td>980</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6–8</td>
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<td>955</td>
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<tr>
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<td>1220</td>
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Resource 1. High-quality websites with informational articles*

Sciencenewsforkids.org: This website is a companion to *Science News* magazine which was founded in 1921. Articles are typically 1500 words (or more) and have difficulty levels within the middle to high-school range.

Readworks.org: Approximately 200 articles on topics in middle-school social studies and science curricula are available. Articles are in the range of 500-900 words and difficulty levels are appropriate for middle-school students.

*As of October 2012, these websites were stable (i.e., articles are available in a database or archive). Further, articles are available *without* subscription or fees.
Resource 2. (Free) Webinars and Powerpoints on Vocabulary

Webinars:

- What's happening in vocabulary research
  http://www.schoolsmovingup.net/cs/smu/view/e/1401
- Word lists: choices and uses
  http://www.schoolsmovingup.net/cs/smu/view/e/1786
- Critical science vocabulary
  http://www.schoolsmovingup.net/cs/smu/view/e/2628
- A county immersed in vocabulary
  http://www.schoolsmovingup.net/cs/smu/view/e/2708
- A school immersed in vocabulary
  http://www.schoolsmovingup.net/cs/smu/view/e/2692

Powerpoints:

*Vocabulary instruction that supports capacity for increasingly complex texts and tasks:*

*Vocabulary filters: A framework for choosing which words to teach in stories:*