

Is the Honeymoon Over for Common Core?

Now that educators are working to align with the new state standards, some imperfections are starting to arise. Will this marriage last?

Implementation of the Common Core State Standards is starting to get real, and the honeymoon is showing signs of being over.

Some headlines provide hints:

“Common Core standards drive wedge in education circles”—*USA Today*, May 1, 2012

“Common Core nonfiction reading standards mark the end of literature,

English teachers say”—*Huffington Post*, Dec. 10, 2012

It doesn't seem like so long ago that national and state policymakers from both sides of the aisle were singing the praises of the Common Core. In just two years following their finalization, Common Core became the official standards in 46 states and Washington, D.C. The Obama administration encour-

aged—although did not require—adopting the standards in its *Race to the Top* competition as an indicator that the state was serious about graduating “college- and career-ready” students.

The conservative Fordham Foundation awarded the Common Core math standards an A- and the English language arts standards a B+. It called both sets of standards “solidly in the honors range” and “very, very strong,” adding that they are “clearer and more rigorous than the standards currently used by the vast majority of states.”

Educators across the country are now getting down to the work of aligning their practices to the new standards. It probably was inevitable that closer examination would reveal some previously unnoticed imperfections. But for school boards and their communities, it's hard to know whether the good in Common Core standards is greater than their perceived flaws—or if it's time for morning-after regrets.

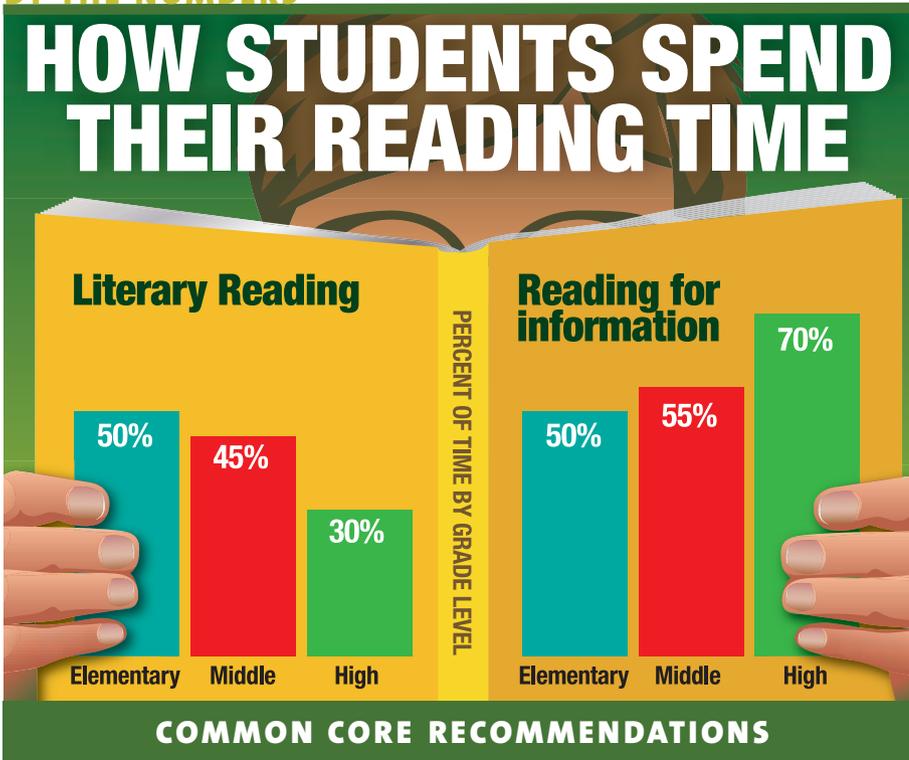
English and language arts standards

In the January 2013 Research column, I addressed some of the criticisms of the math standards. This month, I will discuss what the critics say about the English and language arts standards, particularly the reading strand.

Probably the most widespread source of Common Core reading complaints is the emphasis on nonfiction reading. Moreover, as the headline cited earlier suggests, English teachers have led the charge.

The Common Core recommends a balance of fiction and nonfiction texts. Elementary school students should spend 50 percent of their time reading literature and 50 percent of their time

BY THE NUMBERS



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reading for information. It recommends that middle school students spend 45 percent of their time reading fiction and 55 percent reading for information. For high school students, it's 30 percent for fiction and 70 percent for nonfiction.

English teachers are concerned that this emphasis on informational reading, particularly at the high school level, will crowd out literature. An Arkansas eighth-grade teacher put it this way in the *Huffington Post*: "With informational text, there isn't that human connection that you get with literature, and the kids are shutting down. They're getting bored." In an *Education Week* article, a California teacher bemoaned cutting Hamlet from his high school English courses in order to accommodate more nonfiction.

Chief critics

Sandra Stotsky is a former senior associate commissioner at the Massachusetts Department of Education, a member of the Common Core State Standards Initiative validation committee, and perhaps the English and language arts standards highest-profile critic.

She views the emphasis on nonfiction as "misplaced." Writing in a Heritage Foundation brief, she further states, "There is absolutely no empirical research to suggest that college readiness is promoted by informational or nonfiction reading in high school English classes (or in mathematics and science classes)."

English teachers would be right to be concerned *if* they were expected to take full responsibility for the reading standards. However, the Common Core principal authors say they always expected reading and writing to be taught across the curriculum. Indeed, one of the distinctions of the new standards is that they articulate specific reading and writing standards for social studies, science, and technical subjects for grades six to 12.

Far from being boring to kids, the field of discipline-based nonfiction includes a rich array of biographies, science writing,

and primary historical sources. The implied assumption was that teachers of other subjects would incorporate these texts into their courses.

Unfortunately, the role of other teachers was not stated so clearly in the standards, leading to the present confusion, and stories are emerging that English teachers are taking on the full load themselves.

Another issue is that secondary teachers in other subject areas have not typically been trained in teaching reading and writing in their disciplines. School leaders need to address both concerns: making sure nonfiction reading is explicitly taught across the curriculum, and providing professional development to help all teachers incorporate reading into their lessons.

Critics aren't just concerned about the impact on English classrooms, however. Stotsky further argued that the English and language arts standards are a watered-down version of what students need to succeed in college.

Stotsky is right to focus on text complexity, but wrong to single out literature as its sole source. A study from ACT, the college admissions test publisher, underscores the importance of complex texts to college readiness, but also finds that these texts occur across disciplines.

In 2006, ACT researchers analyzed how reading relates to college readiness and found that "performance on complex texts is the clearest differentiator in reading between students who are more likely to be ready for college and those who are less likely to be ready."

Significantly, the texts in the study were from the ACT's reading exam, which uses samples from literature, social science, natural science, and the humanities. ACT recommended: "All courses in high school, not just English and social studies, but mathematics and science as well, must challenge students

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to read and understand complex texts."

College readiness is just one purpose for the standards, of course.

They also are intended to prepare students for careers in a global marketplace. Reading literature, in fact, is one area where U.S. students shine in international comparisons. Our fourth-graders are second only to Finland on reading for "literary experience." Our ranking falls to fifth, however, when they are asked to read to "acquire and use information" (The Progress in International Reading Literacy Study 2011).

Their high school classmates likewise do well in reading to "reflect and evaluate": Our 15-year-olds are out-ranked by just five countries in this literary skill. However, they fall behind their peers in 14 other countries when reading to "access and retrieve" information (Program for International Student Assessment, 2009).

Strengthening our students' performance in reading for information and analyzing complex nonfiction texts will not just prepare our graduates for the rigors of college—it will also make them more competitive in the workplace. The degree to which the Common Core will drive this change remains to be seen. The first assessments won't be administered until 2014, and it likely will be a couple of years after that before we understand their impact.

But school boards can hedge their bets by making sure all of their teachers have the support they need to implement the new standards. They also can reach out to colleges and businesses to determine how well the new standards align to their needs. The honeymoon may be ending. Now we need to begin the hard work to see if this marriage will last. ■

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