

## Study Guide for *Pathways to the Common Core: Accelerating Achievement*

This study guide, organized to support the reading and discussion of *Pathways to the Common Core: Accelerating Achievement*, is intended for anyone whose aim is to get to know the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) better—and, more specifically, to understand not just the organization of the document but the key underlying principles and proven instructional moves that can have the greatest impact for school reform and student achievement.

### **How This Study Guide Is Organized**

One thing we firmly believe at the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project is that no professional development is worthwhile unless it is both intellectually uplifting *and* hands-in-the-dirt practical. Through decades of supporting and studying alongside students, teachers, and administrators, we have found that the most meaningful experiences involve a great deal of thoughtful conversation as well as a “make and take” time for creating artifacts that immediately put ideas into practice. To this end, this study guide is organized to support an active study. Each section suggests a way of moving through *Pathways to the Common Core* and includes three sections: an Activity, for engaging with a key idea from the chapter; a Discussion set of questions to engage reflection and debate; and a Planning Session, which suggests items to create or plans to develop to begin implementing the ideas discussed in the book. The best experiences are tailored to the needs of participants, so please feel free to revise this guide to meet your needs.

After Reading Chapter One (21 pages):

## Reacting to the Common Core State Standards

### **An Activity**

As we describe in this chapter, nearly anyone comes to a new initiative with some degree of trepidation. The danger is that we get stuck, only seeing problems and not moving forward to what is possible. One activity is to put up two sheets of chart paper, label one with *curmudgeon* and the other with *gold*. Refer your group back to pages 3–7, our list of commonly heard “curmudgeon” ways of thinking about the CCSS initiative, and ask them to talk in groups for just 1–3 minutes listing their own statements of concern. Move around, listening in, and record some of these on the *curmudgeon* chart. Then, refer your group back to pages 7–13, our list of what feels valuable about the CCSS. Ask participants to talk once again, listing their own positive takes, perhaps restating those from our list they found the most compelling.

### **A Discussion**

*Here are suggested points of conversation, written as if you were talking with colleagues. These are intentionally written in a broad manner to yield the greatest scope of conversation and perhaps even debate. Feel free to revise these to best meet your needs:*

- Beginning on page 13, this chapter provides a wealth of practical steps for implementing the CCSS. One of the most essential is the suggestion to first recognize what a school is already doing well and build from there. We should avoid jumping right into it, adding bucket loads of new “compliance”

initiatives, but instead build from clear strengths. So, the question is, then, What *is* our school (or district) *already doing well*?

- How do we know our school (or district) *is* actually doing this well?
- More importantly, from whose perspective do we appear to be doing this well? What would administrators say about this? Teachers? Now, consider, students? Parents?
- The more we learn about the standards the better we will be able to answer this next question, but as a start: How well aligned do you believe this “thing we do well” is to the grade-level expectations of the CCSS? Refer to pages 16–20 for assistance in thinking about essential work.

### **A Planning Session**

Page 20 suggests that a crucial piece to extending and refining a school’s best practice is to focus on instruction *and* assessment. Support your colleagues in planning a way (or ways) that they will gather evidence of just *how well* the school is doing that “thing we do well.” Help your group consider gathering not just numbers—as in test scores or reading levels—but also student and/or teacher artifacts—such as student writing samples or teacher unit plans. You could propose that the entire group gather the same types of data for the same areas of instruction to have a thin slice of information across many classrooms. Or alternatively, suggest groups gather different types of data so you have a broader view of the workings of the school (or district). The effort, in any case, is to see more of what is actually

taking place, to move conversations out of the abstract and into the tangible and measurable.

After Reading Chapters Two and Three (30 pages):

## Responding to What the Reading Standards Say and Do Not Say

### **An Activity**

These two chapters aim to shine a light on what the CCSS say and do not say about reading instruction, to help you make instructional and curriculum decisions, and to be equipped to listen and respond to the various interpretations of these standards (which as we speak are still coming from all corners—the textbook salesman, the testing company).

One activity that helps put this conversation in context is asking educators to step in the shoes of a student who is reading below grade level. To prepare for this, select an excerpt of a short text—one of perhaps 100–150 words. Make three copies of this text and prepare each one differently: on the first, black out 15% of the words leaving 85% visible (in each iteration of this, black out words that struggling students would more likely have trouble with, such as multisyllabic words or more complex nouns, adjectives, and verbs); on the second black out 5%; on the final black out nothing.

Begin with the 85% accurate reading, pair teachers up, and ask one partner to read aloud quietly to the other, pausing briefly at each blacked-out word and then

continue reading. Switch roles through each new reading, moving to higher “accuracy” percentages each time.

After each reading, ask participants to describe their experience reading. Then, ask them to imagine this experience from a student’s perspective, of one reading below grade level but being handed a text they cannot accurately read, and how this experience might compound over days (or weeks, or even months) of schooling. Consider implications for instruction.

## **A Discussion**

*Here are suggested points of conversation, written as if you were talking with colleagues. These are intentionally written in a broad manner to yield the **greatest scope of conversation and perhaps even debate**. Feel free to revise these to best meet your needs:*

- Chapter 2, beginning on page 22, aims to not just describe how to read the CCSS document, but more to highlight the intellectual underpinnings of these standards. What ideas were most striking to you about this discussion?
  - The CCSS choice to highlight analytical reading “within the four corners of a text,” over reading as an interaction between text and experience?
  - The standards’ focus on reading across content areas, dividing literary and informational reading across the school day?
- Chapter 3, beginning on page 32, talks in depth about reading standards 1 and 10, referring to a common description of these as being the crucial struts

of a ladder. How are these standards currently enacted within our school (or district)?

- In what ways are our older students demonstrating literal comprehension as compared to our younger students? Does the teaching, as it stands now, require more sophisticated thinking across years—or are we only requiring very similar thinking (such as simply asking everyone to “provide evidence”)? Refer back to the section beginning on page 39.
- These two chapters present several points of view on the measure, the role, and instructional uses of “text complexity.” One main point of tension is around approaches for students who are reading below their grade level. What different views on how best to support students who are reading below “grade level complexity” are raised in these chapters? Are there others you have heard or read recently?
  - If the CCSS document states that the standards “define what all students are expected to know and be able to do, not how teachers should teach” (6), then how will our school (or district) decide to support students reading below grade level complexity?
  - What about those students already reading above grade level, such as kindergartners who enter already reading? Or sixth graders reading far above benchmark?

## **A Planning Session**

The Implications for Instruction section beginning on page 42 has four concrete actions schools can take to align themselves to what the CCSS view as the two most critical reading standards, 1 and 10. Invite your colleagues to prioritize these (or instead, select an area for them that matches a school or district goal). Then, reread the action and begin planning next steps. Be sure to organize not just a long-term-someday-we-will-get-there plan, but also decide on what we can start doing right this minute and what we can do tomorrow. For instance, from point 2, “Accelerate students’ progress up the ladder of text difficulty,” teachers might start constructing sample “calendar plans” for reading goals, while others might develop lists of possible small-group instruction topics such as those on pages 46–47.

After Reading Chapters Four and Five (50 pages):

## Developing a Deep Understanding of the Expectations of the Reading Standards

### **An Activity**

We suggest you enact the activities described within each chapter—especially if participants have already read these pages. These need not take long, perhaps 5–10 minutes of a bit of reading, thinking, and then talking, to get a sense of these standards. You could choose to look at literature during one study session and informational reading during another, or look at both within one session to see the clear repetition between the reading standards. For Chapter Four on the literature reading standards, you could use the *Charlotte’s Web* activity beginning on page 55

and then interspersed throughout the chapter (though of course you could substitute any literature text). For Chapter Five on the informational reading standards, you could use the “Shoot-Out” *New Yorker* activity beginning on page 77 (again, you could substitute another informational text).

## **A Discussion**

*Here are suggested points of conversation, written as if you were talking with colleagues. These are intentionally written in a broad manner to yield the greatest scope of conversation and perhaps even debate. Feel free to revise these to best meet your needs:*

- Both chapters describe the three categories of the Common Core reading standards: key ideas and details, craft and structure, and integration of knowledge and ideas. Which of these standards feels like new work for our school (or district)? What do we already aim to do in our curriculum?
  - Most importantly, what evidence do we have for how well our students can enact these standards independently, as independence is the expectation of the standards (see reading standard 10)?
- The section Current Challenges to Implementing the Reading Standards for informational Texts (beginning on page 88) describes pressing challenges for schools to tackle to fully implement the expectations of these standards. What rings true to you from the experiences in our classrooms?
  - How can we begin to overcome these challenges (refer to the section beginning on page 91 for suggestions)?

## **A Planning Session**

Once again, the Implementation sections can be an excellent jumping-off point (beginning on page 65 for literature and 88 for informational texts). You could ask your colleagues to again prioritize and then begin a plan of right-now action.

Another excellent use of this session is to plan instruction that will lead to student independence. As these chapters described, a way to do this is to practice doing the work as adults that the standards are asking our students to do, and then analyzing our own thinking process so it can be turned into teaching. You could invite colleagues to bring additional texts—literature or informational—then select one of the three categories of the reading standards to enact. Then, just as in the activities from Chapters Four and Five, ask them to read with a focus on “doing standards work.” Finally, and most crucially, ask them to work with partners to put into words just what mental processes took place. How, for example, did you “determine central ideas” from a text—both those explicitly stated and implied? The key here is not just saying *what* those ideas were, but *how* one goes about figuring them out: “When reading a passage like this you will typically first . . . and then . . . and finally. . . .”

After Reading Chapters Six, Seven, Eight, and Nine (60 pages):

Developing a Deep Understanding of the Expectations of the  
Writing Standards

**An Activity**

As we describe in these chapters, the writing standards expect that students will quickly become quite sophisticated in the organization, elaboration, and voice of all three types of writing. One activity to help your colleagues internalize this rapid increase in skill across grade levels, as well as help them see how their grade fits into a student's larger development journey, is to ask them to try out increasingly more sophisticated narrative writing. Begin on page 116, where a bulleted list of kindergarten expectations and an example of what that work could look like is provided. Ask your participants to think of a true, single experience they have had, one they remember clearly, and have them make a *one frame* example similar to the annotated drawing on that page. For them to do this well, you should also make your own, showing them how you find a single event and draw and label it—how you narrate the event and provide a reaction, just as the standards state.

Then move quickly through each of the grade level standards we highlight—2, 4, 8, 11–12—each time showing how you read the standards (provided in condensed bulleted lists) and write a newer version of that same single event. Then, be sure that participants have time to actually write each new version, to get the experience (and most surely the challenge) of constructing more sophisticated narratives.

At the conclusion, discuss implications for instruction as well as cross-grade and cross-school planning and information sharing.

## **A Discussion**

*Here are suggested points of conversation, written as if you were talking with colleagues. These are intentionally written in a broad manner to yield the greatest*

*scope of conversation and perhaps even debate. Feel free to revise these to best meet your needs:*

- These chapters describe the CCSS' focus on writing, a big shift from writing's near nonexistence in the previous NCLB reforms. Schools have often approached writing instruction in a number of ways; for example, some provide about an hour every day for process writing instruction, others turn narrative writing into "creative writing" that only some students take as an elective. How does our school (or different grade levels in our district) currently approach writing instruction? How do these align with or conflict with what may be necessary for students to meet CCSS expectations?
  - In what ways will we need to rethink time, curriculum, and professional development?
  - What does writing across the curriculum look like currently in our school (or district)?
- These chapters look in depth at the three types of writing described in the writing standards. What are your reflections on each type?
  - Because the standards are written to mirror the same learning progressions, in what ways can our instruction draw these connections for our students and help them apply strengths from one writing type to another?
- Page 134 in Chapter Eight describes writing standard 9 as an essential tool to further understand the ways in which the three writing types should develop

in complexity. In what ways will this standard affect the way we teach writing *and* reading, and the connections between them?

- Look back to the reading standards for your grade level. What do these suggest for writing? What should we expect to see in our students' independent writing samples? How will we get them there?

### **A Planning Session**

Once, again, the Implementation sections can be an excellent jumping-off point (beginning on page 121 for narrative, 136 for argument, and 154 for informational writing). You could ask your colleagues to again prioritize and then begin a plan of right-now action.

Another excellent way to plan is to develop a system of ongoing assessment, one that yields not just information on student artifacts but helps define clear next steps. Refer to page 122 and the discussion of using the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project's *K-8 Continuum for Assessing Narrative Writing* (which is fully aligned to the CCSS). You'll also find separate continua for Assessing Opinion/Argument Writing and Informational Writing on the TCRWP website. You might ask teachers to do step 1 before joining you at this study session—or you could do this yourself with one class and bring the resulting class set of work for participants to interact with. Follow the steps, providing some time during step 2 for your colleagues to get to know the continuum.

As an extension, many schools have studied and used this continuum for several years during our initial pilot and research phases. While the current version has been revised to align to the CCSS, schools may wish to develop their own

versions of this document, such as the teachers from Seattle public schools who developed their own continuum for assessing argument writing, which we refer to on page 140. You may decide with your colleagues to perhaps add in your own district-specific student work samples, to develop next-step quick references to use within instructional time, or other useful offshoots.

After Reading Chapter Ten (18 pages):

## Developing a Deep Understanding of the Expectations of the Speaking and Listening and of the Language Standards

### **An Activity**

The speaking and listening and language standards highlight the cohesive nature of the CCSS, where what students learn in regards to one set of expectations can reciprocally support and draw on the others. One activity is to ask your colleagues to choose one grade level and turn to standard 1 in the speaking and listening standards and standard 3 in the language standards. Then, have them work with a partner and reread the writing or reading standards for that grade and consider the connections between the teaching of these four strands of the ELA standards. For example, you can show them how you read the fourth-grade standards and imagine that if students are learning to choose words and phrases to convey ideas precisely (4.L.3a; 29), they should aim to be precise when posing and responding to *specific* questions in a discussion (4.SL.1c; 24). You can also show them how you would hold this focus up against each of the reading standards, noticing that focusing on specific

details from the text supports this same work, and so on. After this, discuss implications for instruction.

## **A Discussion**

*Here are suggested points of conversation, written as if you were talking with colleagues. These are intentionally written in a broad manner to yield the greatest scope of conversation and perhaps even debate. Feel free to revise these to best meet your needs:*

- Within the speaking and listening section of this chapter, the role of multimedia in the standards is raised. More specifically, how students should be accustomed not just to using technology, but using it for clear purposes, as described on page 167. How do most teachers currently teach students to use technology to present information in our school (or district)? Are there any teachers or other staff that others could study and plan alongside to maximize best practices?
- The language standards stress that students should learn to *use* grammar and conventions over needing to *define* them, and that students should learn to *choose flexibly from a range of strategies* for determining the meaning of unknown words over memorizing vocabulary lists. This is a shift for many schools. How is the teaching of language enacted in our school (or district)?
  - What beliefs do you and your colleagues hold about this kind of teaching? How will the expectations of the standards challenge or agree with these expectations? Consider the findings of the Carnegie Corporation Report, described on page 174.

- The knowledge of language category, made up of only standard 3, brings the study of language over to that of writing craft. That is, as students learn to use proper grammar and conventions they should also learn to apply it within context, for effect. This seems to imply that grammar needs to be taught within or very closely aligned to authentic writing. Are these connections clear and purposeful in our current curriculum? If they feel separate, what steps can align them more fully?

### **A Planning Session**

Once, again, the Implementation sections can be an excellent jumping-off point (beginning on page 168 for the speaking and listening standards and page 176 for the language standards). You could ask your colleagues to again prioritize and then begin a plan of right-now action.

Another way to plan is to consider that for students to become independent in the expectations of the CCSS they will need plenty of time for repeated practice. On page 178 we suggest laying out grammar instruction strategically across a writing process. You could suggest that your colleagues work in partners or groups, alongside a monthlong unit plan or a yearlong scope and sequence and plan for predictable points to return to skills outlined in the speaking and listening and language standards. For instance, if students are moving along a writing process you might plan three or four points in the study to return to language instruction, such as when students are collecting ideas, again when they begin to draft, and once more

before they publish. Similarly, you might plan to support students in having conversations with their peers to strengthen their writing.

After Reading Chapter Eleven (18 pages):

## Assessments and Whole-School Reform

### **An Activity**

Presumably, you and your colleagues have come to this chapter last, at the end of your study of *Pathways to the Common Core*. To begin this study session, you might start by synthesizing your ideas from across the book by returning to your first discussions from Chapter One. Once again, pose these questions:

- Just as discussed in the first chapter, this final chapter returns to the idea of recognizing what a school is already doing well and build from there, choosing one of two areas to build upon—highlighting a few best practices within classrooms—and fighting the urge to throw in more and more initiatives. So the question we return to after our study is, What *is* our school (or district) *already* doing well?
  - How do we know our school (or district) *is* actually doing this well?
  - And from studying the expectations of the standards and implications for instruction, how well aligned do you believe this “thing we do well” is to the grade-level expectations of the CCSS?

### **A Discussion**

*Here are suggested points of conversation, written as if you were talking with colleagues. These are intentionally written in a broad manner to yield the greatest scope of conversation and perhaps even debate. Feel free to revise these to best meet your needs:*

- This chapter discusses missteps from historical reform efforts and provides various research views on potential causes as well as solutions. In what ways has our school (or district) fallen into similar reform missteps in the past? In what ways has our school (or district) successfully implemented reforms in the past?
  - What have we learned from these experiences that we should keep in mind when implementing the CCSS?
- This chapter presents the idea of assessment-based instruction as a key component of successful school reform, beginning on page 193. This is tempered with the real-world notion that formative assessments can be forces for good—but often aren't. What lessons can we take from this discussion to ensure that as a school (or district) community we use assessments in the best ways possible?

### **A Planning Session**

It goes without saying that as you end studying this book, you're clearly at the beginning of studying your school's or district's own pathway to the expectations of the CCSS. To that end, use this last session not so much as a final sendoff but instead to make plans for future studies. The section on developing assessments for whole-

school reform, beginning on page 193, provides some suggestions for one such future-looking study to try.

You might instead (or additionally) take up the charge of doing a few things really well and help your colleagues take the “thing we do well” that they discussed at the start of this session, turn back to the appropriate chapter(s) of this book and the corresponding CCSS pages, and continue developing teaching materials.

## Achievement Is Accelerated When We Learn Together, Not Shut Our Doors

In the final chapter we quote Michael Fullan and Rufus Jones on the importance of learning within communities—both those inside of our schools and outside of them. As you study, we suggest you resist the urge to keep your strengths your own and to hide your flaws—though certainly the current high-pressure environment would lend itself to do so. Instead, with bravery, reach out to the districts that neighbor you as well as schools from across the country. The CCSS are intended to give public education in the United States a common target, so take this common language and speak it with others. We also invite you to reach out and share your highs and lows with us, as we join this study along with you. The Common Core is written. The goal is clear. The pathway for your school is waiting to be discovered.