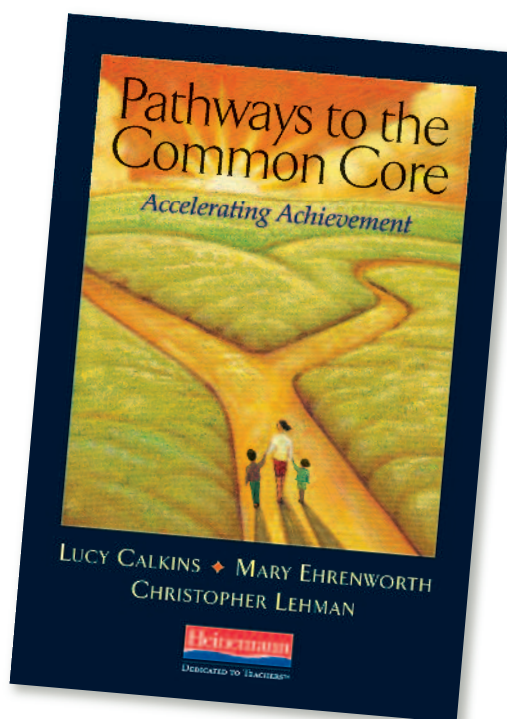# Explore the Common Core

By Lucy Calkins

A special advance excerpt from *Pathways to the Common Core: Accelerating Achievement*

The Common Core is written, but the plan for implementing the Common Core is not. Lucy Calkins and her colleagues at the Reading and Writing Project have helped thousands of educators design their own pathways to the Common Core. Now, with *Pathways to the Common Core*, they are ready to help you find your way.

Photograph by Peter Cunningham

"As challenging as it must have been to write and finesse the adoption of the Common Core State Standards, that accomplishment is nothing compared to the work of teaching in ways that bring all students to these ambitious expectations. The goal is clear. The pathway is not." –Lucy Calkins

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) are a big deal. Adopted by forty-five states so far, the standards represent the most sweeping reform of the K–12 curriculum that has ever occurred in this country. It is safe to say that across the entire history of American education, no single document will have played a more influential role over what is taught in our schools. The standards are already shaping what is published, mandated, and tested in schools—and also what is marginalized and neglected. Any educator who wants to play a role in shaping what happens in schools, therefore, needs a deep understanding of these standards. That understanding is necessary for any educator wanting to be a co-constructor of the future of instruction and curriculum, and indeed, of public education across America.

In the end, the most important aspect of the Common Core State Standards is the part that has yet to be figured out. The Common Core has been written, but the plan for implementing the Common Core has not. As challenging as it must have been to write this document and to finesse its adoption, that work is nothing compared to the work of teaching in ways that bring all students to these ambitious expectations.

The first thing we want to stress to anyone who is interested in standards-based reform is that the Common Core is, above all, a call for accelerating students' literacy development. The most important message centers around lifting the level of student achievement, not around course coverage and compliance. The most important reforms that a school system can make will be those that involve creating systems that support continuous improvement of instruction and increased personal and shared accountability for raising levels of student achievement. It won't be possible to tackle this work across the board, all at one time, so you will need to decide the best place to start.

First, look at your current literacy initiatives and set goals for how to improve them.

After decades of work studying school reform, Michael Fullan has written, "The main problem in public education is not resistance to change, but the presence of too many innovations mandated or adopted uncritically and superficially on an ad hoc, fragmented basis"

(*Change Forces: Probing the Depths of Educational Reform* 1993). And after studying two thousand schools in order to understand the extent to which innovations actually affect student achievement, Doug Reeves, the founder of The Leadership and Learning Center, concludes that low and medium levels of implementation do not affect student achievement, while high levels do. Most schools that he examined are swamped with innovations. Only 0.57 percent—one half of one percent— had a high degree of focus, with six or fewer instructional initiatives. Most schools, instead, are drowning in major initiatives, each implemented at a low level of fidelity, and therefore leading to no effect on student achievement (*Finding Your Leadership Focus: What Matters Most for Student Results* 2010).

Research suggests, then, that it will not be a good thing if the presence of the Common Core escalates schools' tendencies to add more to the curriculum, to increase the numbers of poorly implemented initiatives. Our first suggestion, then, is that schools refrain from the kneejerk tendency to respond to the Common Core by adding yet more and more and more initiatives, each implemented to low or medium degrees of fidelity, and that instead, each school begin by noticing an area in which an existing implementation in the school aligns to the emphasis of the Common Core. Then, within that one area, the school can identify goals and set to work. If you and a group of colleagues do a school-wide walkthrough to look at current initiatives that align with the Common Core Standards, chances are good that you'll see opportunities for growth. For example, you'll see instances when the promising initiative has not been implemented with fidelity. You'll see instances when people are implementing the initiative in a rote, mechanical fashion, without any real personal commitment to these methods. You'll see instances when teachers continue to teach and teach and teach, without noticing that the student work is not improving as it should, without stopping to let students' work function as feedback for instruction. You'll see instances when expectations are far too low. Addressing these underdeveloped initiatives is one of the most important things you can do to implement the Common Core, and to raise levels of student achievement.

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Photograph by Peter Cunningham

Next, look at gaps in your curriculum and develop one or two long-term plans for reform.

Having said that we do not think the best thing for a school to do is to rush around adding this or that to the school day in order to be "Common Core compliant," we do think that a school needs to reflect on the gaps that exist between what the school is already doing and what the Common Core requires, looking especially at the biggest and most fundamental mandates of the Common Core. Then the school needs to begin to plan and engage in at least one and perhaps more than one new area of long-term, systemic, and deep school improvement work. We now offer two possibilities for large-scale reforms, followed by suggestions for supporting higher levels of reading and writing work.

Possibilities for large-scale reforms
Implement a spiraled, cross-curricular K–12 writing workshop curriculum.

Certainly for many school districts, one possibility we recommend is a district-wide effort to improve writing instruction. There are many advantages to making writing instruction a priority. First, it's inexpensive. A school needn't purchase costly supplies for every student. The only expense is that of providing teachers with the professional development and the teaching resources they need to become knowledgeable in this area—both of which are important as this is an area where few teachers have received any instruction.

Another advantage of instituting a district-wide writing initiative is that the way forward in the teaching of writing is very clear. The CCSS are exactly aligned to the work that experts in the teaching of writing have been doing for years, namely a process approach to the teaching of writing. We suggest, then, that a district implement a K–12 spiral curriculum, allowing students to spend considerable time working within informational, opinion, and narrative writing units of study, producing work that matches the work of the Common Core.

Move students up levels of text complexity by providing them with lots of just-right, high-interest texts and the time to read them.

Then, too, for many districts another possibility we recommend is an emphasis on moving students up the levels of text difficulty in reading. The Common Core Reading standards place special emphasis on this. Research and experience, both, have shown that when students struggle to compare and contrast or to synthesize or to be critical consumers of complex texts, the challenge is often not that they do not have skills enough to compare and contrast, for example, but that they can't handle the texts in the first place. We recommend, then, that teachers across a K–5 school—and across some middle schools as well—be asked to conduct running records of students' work with texts at a gradient of text levels, ascertaining the level of text complexity that the student can handle, and that students' progress up the ladder of text complexity be tracked. Of course, in order for students to make the necessary progress, they need at least forty-five minutes in school and more time at home reading books that they can read with 96 percent accuracy, fluency, and comprehension.

Assuming that one or both of these initiatives are already in place and that you have already invested considerable energy in lifting the level of teaching and learning within these areas, then a school will probably want to consider how to support higher levels of reading and writing. Here are three suggestions to support this work.

Possibilities for supporting higher levels of reading and writing
Prioritize argument and informational writing.

You may decide that your school has a strong approach to writing but that you need to prioritize argument or informational writing. To start with this work, you need to recognize that writers generally refer to these kinds of writing differently. Instead of saying he or she is writing "an argument," a writer is apt to say he or she is writing a review, persuasive letter, op ed column, editorial, or essay. Instead of saying he or she is writing an "informational text," a writer is apt to label the work with terms such as an "all-about book," an article (or feature article), or literary nonfiction.

Focus on higher-order comprehension instruction.

You may think that if you have students moving up levels of text difficulty, you already have in place the higher-order comprehension

instruction that is one of the hallmarks of the Common Core. You may. But it's also possible that your readers are mostly reading for plot, grasping the gist of what they read, moving rapidly across books, but not really working on their reading. And it may be that the work that second-grade readers are doing is not all that different from the work that sixth graders are doing. You and your colleagues might do a shared walkthrough, noticing, for example, the way second graders and sixth graders grow theories about characters. If seven-year-olds are writing on sticky notes, "Poppleton is a good friend because . . ." and sixth graders are writing, "Abe Lincoln is humble because . . ." then you and your colleagues may decide that it would be helpful to detail the intellectual work that students are doing at different grade levels in order to make sure that the same strategies are not being recycled year after year. This shouldn't be the case in a school that takes Common Core expectations for comprehension seriously.

Increase cross-curricular, analytical nonfiction reading.

For many schools, the Common Core Standards are a wakeup call, reminding people that students need to read more nonfiction texts across the curriculum as well as to receive focused ELA instruction in nonfiction reading. It is a mistake, however, to interpret the CCSS as simply a call for more nonfiction reading. The standards also call for students to move away from simply reading for information, toward reading with a much more analytical stance. The Common Core Standards suggest that at very young ages, readers be taught to compare authors' perspectives and points of view, and to notice that the way an author writes is shaped by the ideas the author aims to emphasize. This work is best done when readers read from a variety of sources. Therefore, if the sum total of discipline-based reading that occurs within your school is reading from a single textbook, you will want to consider bringing more trade books, primary source materials, and digital texts into at least some of your content area units.

We offer these guidelines based on principles that have emerged from our work helping hundreds of principals and teacher-leaders design pathways to the Common Core. We find these principles to be broadly applicable across many different settings. Having said this, it is important that recommendations for implementing the Standards follow after a deep and close study of the standards and of the needs of your particular school or district. You will need to consider the initiatives that are already underway in your school; the resources and assets you will (and will not) be able to draw upon; the most pressing pressures that your students, teachers, and parents want addressed; the nature of your student body and of your existing curriculum; and of course, the knowledge base and the beliefs of the professionals who will be involved. That is, you and the others who know your school well will, in the end, need to be the ones to determine your particular pathway to implementing the Common Core.

—Excerpted from the author's forthcoming Heinemann book with **Mary Ehrenworth** and **Christopher Lehman**, *Pathways to the Common Core: Accelerating Achievement*

To continue to engage on this topic go to www.heinemann.com/pd/journal.

We offer these guidelines based on principles that have emerged from our work helping hundreds of principals and teacher-leaders design pathways to the Common Core.

Coauthors of *Pathways to the Common Core: Accelerating Achievement*

Lucy Calkins is the founding director of the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project (TCRWP) and the Richard Robinson Professor of Children's Literature at Teachers College, Columbia University. As the leader of the world-renowned TCRWP organization, Lucy works closely with superintendents, district leaders, school principals, and teachers to re-imagine what is possible when school leadership is closely aligned with professional development. Lucy presents Heinemann Professional Development workshops throughout the year. Lucy has authored a long list of best-selling PD titles including Heinemann's popular *first*hand classroom materials *Units of Study for Primary Writing* and *Units of Study for Teaching Writing, Grades 3–5*. Her newest title *Pathways to the Common Core: Accelerating Achievement*, coauthored with Mary Ehrenworth and Chris Lehman, will be released in 2012. Lucy presents Heinemann Professional Development workshops throughout the year.

Mary Ehrenworth serves as Deputy Director of TCRWP. In addition to coauthoring with Lucy and Chris Lehman the forthcoming professional book *Pathways to the Common Core*, Mary has authored *Looking to Write* and most recently *A Quick Guide to Teaching Reading Through Fantasy Novels, 5-8*, part of the *Workshop Help Desk* series edited by Lucy. Mary presents Heinemann Professional Development workshops throughout the year.

Christopher Lehman is a former middle school and high school teacher and literacy coach in New York City. He is currently a staff developer and has been deeply involved in developing new teaching practices in Jordan, in partnership with the TCRWP, the Consortium for Policy Research in Education, and the Queen Rania Teacher Academy. In addition to coauthoring *Pathways to the Common Core*, Chris recently published *A Quick Guide to Reviving Disengaged Writers*, a new addition to the *Workshop Help Desk* series edited by Lucy.