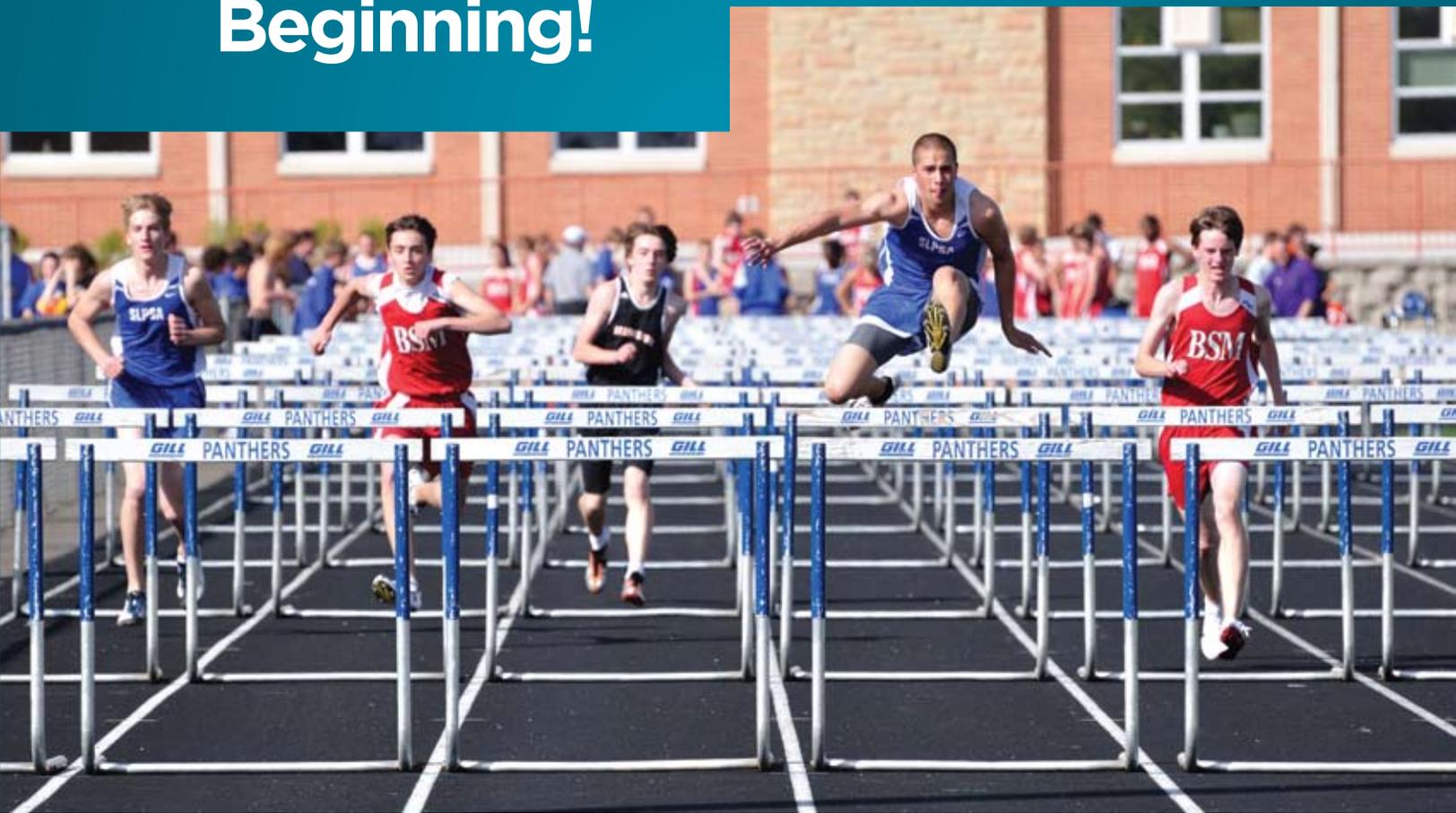


Common Core State Standards... Only the Beginning!



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At the heart of the new Common Core State Standards is a focus on higher expectations. One of the major reasons for a push for the standards was the lack of rigor in many schools today, and the need to better prepare students for college and the workforce. Developed in a climate of conflicting definitions and perceptions of rigor, the Standards succeeded in providing a well-defined set of expectations for each grade level in the areas of English/Language Arts and Math. According to the Fordham Institute's newest study, *The State of State Standards* (July 2010), the Common Core State Standards "are clearer and more rigorous than today's ELA standards in 37 states and today's math standards in 39 states."

The Common Core Standards provide three key benefits:

- The Common Core State Standards Initiative, coordinated by the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices (NGA Center) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), was able to develop learning standards informed by the most rigorous and successful models from states across the country as well as countries around the world.
- By providing a clear and consistent set of expectations for each grade level, teachers and parents are able to fully understand what students should know and be able to do at every grade level, K-12. With common outcomes in place, next steps, including the designing of curriculum and assessments, can benefit from the collaborative efforts of educators across the country. Additionally, parents and students will know the learning expectations, even if they move to a new school or state.
- These raised standards are aligned with college and 21st century work expectations. The intent is to ensure that American students will possess competencies that make them successful in the global marketplace.

The standards set rigorous benchmarks; however, their impact on student learning depends upon their implementation. True rigor encompasses high expectations for student learning, increased support so students can learn at higher levels, and the ultimate result of rigor—increased learning demonstrated by each student. As defined in *Rigor is NOT a Four-Letter Word*:

Rigor is creating an environment in which each student is expected to learn at high levels, each student is supported so he or she can learn at high levels, and each student demonstrates learning at high levels (Blackburn, 2008).

We cannot assume that simply adopting the standards provides a rigorous environment for students. Rigor is more than what you teach, it's how you teach and how students show you they understand. The CCSS are an excellent foundation for increasing rigor in your classroom; however, there are other integral aspects of rigor to consider.

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High Expectations

Reaching the raised expectations set by the new Standards will be challenging for students. We must consider how we let our students know that we truly believe they can meet the expectations identified in the new standards. For example, the language we use when teaching the standards can reflect high expectations or low ones.

High Expectation Language	Low Expectation Language
“The new standards may seem different, but you can do this.”	“I know the new standards are hard but the state says we have to do them anyway.”
“You already know this. You’ll just be applying what you know in a new way.”	“I know you don’t understand _____. It is because of these new standards.”
“The standards may seem harder because they are new, but with my help you will be successful.”	“Of course you don’t understand _____. The new standards assume you learned something last year that you did not learn.”

One of the ways in which the standards raise the bar is by focusing on the application of knowledge through higher-order thinking skills. Simply asking higher-order questions is not enough. We must be mindful of how we respond to students’ answers to our questions. For example, do we accept a low-level answer from a student? Or if they don’t know the answer, do we move on or answer the question ourselves? Each of those responses reflects a lack of high expectations for the students, and therefore is not rigorous. As such, we can teach toward rigorous standards in an environment that is not truly rigorous.

Support

Another critical aspect of rigor is the increased support for student learning. There are a variety of ways to support students during the transition to new learning. First, make expectations clear to your students. Frequently, students don’t learn because they did not understand the goal. Teachers can reframe the standards as questions for students to answer. Questions shift the perspective to the learner, as opposed to the teacher, and they tap into the investigative nature of learning. For a student, the question becomes, “what do I need to figure out?” vs. “what is the teacher talking about today.”

Second, understand that scaffolding strategies will continue to be an integral part of your instruction. The exact strategy and tools you will need for your students will depend on your individual situation (and on the individual learners), but they are still needed. If anything, the higher standards will demand an increased focus on using chunking, graphic organizers, metacognitive strategies, and many other tools to help students be successful.

Demonstration of Learning

The CCSS are to be accompanied by matching high-level assessments. It is likely that some of these assessments will be more useful to teachers than others, and the immediate emphasis appears to be on summative assessments. It is important that we remember the critical role of formative assessments. As we ask students to meet a new set of standards that is more challenging, they will likely struggle. One of the best scaffolding strategies we can use is to assess their work frequently in a manner that provides feedback so they can adjust what they are doing.

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It is imperative that we not allow students to fall through the cracks in this process. Formative assessments can provide information about each individual student so that we can catch each student at the point when they need assistance. Keep in mind that formative assessments may be written, or more formal, but the key is to assess each individual student. Calling on one student in a large group to answer a question provides formative assessment for that one student. There are alternatives that allow you to assess all students throughout the learning process. Ask students to use pair-share to answer the question, then ask each to turn to a new partner and share what their first partner said. This allows each student to participate, and it requires a higher level of listening skills than the standard pair-share. You can also use thumbs-up/thumbs-down to ask students to determine if they agree with one student's answer. Clickers are a high-tech option for immediately seeing each student's response; individual dry-erase boards offer a low-tech alternative.

Ultimately, the new CCSS are an excellent way to create immediate, rigorous expectations for students. However, standards, benchmarks, curriculum maps, and lesson plans are all just plans for the future or outlines of practice. They come to life in classrooms...places where risk taking is encouraged and supported, minds are challenged, and learning and learners are valued. This environment is carefully crafted by teachers.

Real change, lasting change, change that impacts the students who need it the most, happens at the classroom level. The true power of making a difference for a student lies in the hands of the teacher. The teacher is **always** the key. It's not the textbook, or the latest program on the market, or even a policy. It is how an individual teacher—it is how **you** use the textbook or program with your students. It is how **you** implement the policy.

In classrooms where all students learn, regardless of gender, ethnicity, poverty level, or background, teachers care about their students. The old proverb is true: students really don't care how much you know until they know how much you care. Building a strong relationship with your students is important, but it isn't enough. You also have to care enough to connect to your students in ways that help them rise to higher levels.

Rigor is ensuring that each student you teach is provided the opportunity to grow in ways they cannot imagine. (Blackburn, 2008)

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