

Bridging the Gap between Common Core and Common Practice: Engaging Tennessee Teachers

Brianna Tuscani

Milligan College

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Abstract

Since 2010, the United States has seen a radical attempt to raise its standards of knowledge and skill in its school systems across the country. The reason behind this attempt is for American students to reach the educational level of other developed countries. In order to do so, individual states are using one common series of standards for curriculum and skill sets to prepare students for “college, career, and life” otherwise known as the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). I will explore what has already been done with Common Core for teachers across the United States, especially in Tennessee, and propose suggestions on classroom implementation for both school systems and the individual teacher who desire to hold students to a higher standard while not leaving any one student behind. While many have already taken to this task, I will present a fresh perspective with research on how the state of Tennessee has attempted to raise its standards to an international level. I will also explore how educators can aid students in reaching their full potential under these standards.

Key Words: Common Core State Standards (CCSS), Common Core, Curriculum, Tennessee

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Growing up in the transitional generation of students between “outcomes-based” education and “standards-based” education made my high school graduating class the “guinea-pig” class. I remember starting assessments to evaluate my educational performance in elementary school and my teachers throughout the rest of my education struggling to implement “standards” with curricula and classroom management. Our struggles in trying to meet higher and higher standards were reflective of not having this “standards-based” system since we began school. I found more and more of my classmates being left behind in the whirlwind of educational change. In the 2014 CUE (Computer Using Educators) conference keynote address, Sir Ken Robinson, author and world-wide spokesperson on issues concerning education, said, “The standards help, but they are subsidiary to the real purpose of education.” American educators are seeing raised expectations alone will not be able to bridge the gap between standards and student achievement.

In an effort to universalize the expectations across states, the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) were proposed by the National Governors Association and Council of Chief State School Officers in partnership with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and other various organizations. Common Core is “a set of high-quality academic standards in mathematics and English language arts/literacy (ELA) [and] these learning goals outline what a student should know and be able to do at the end of each grade” (*About the Standards*). The problem with these standards is that they provide specified expectations but no clear implementation guide, which some would argue is a preservation of the individual state and teacher’s rights. While school systems throughout the United States are struggling with these changes in education, some have more success than others depending on funding and training.

The state of Tennessee in particular has been struggling to bring its students to meet state and national standards. As one of the states who has led the efforts in adopting Common Core standards, the expectations for Tennessee students are some of the most explicit in the United States. Despite the comprehensive compilation of state standards, the student achievement gap between the expectations and outcomes is too large to be making any momentous gains towards improving education in the state. Even though there are some students who are meeting the standards, there are still others who are being left behind for reasons of circumstance or condition. Tennessee teachers need more than a list of standards. In order for higher standards to be maintained by all Tennessee students, adequate accountability for teachers and students needs to be coupled with supports in classroom implementation through assessment.

Where are we now? American Education Reformers and Education Reform in Tennessee

Educators can look to past reform efforts to improve contemporary situations, especially in Tennessee. One way to narrow the spectrum on education reform is to look to and learn from the states that have made the most significant gains towards reconciling Common Core standards with classroom implementation as well as those who have made less progress. Kentucky, the first state to adopt the Common Core standards, is one of the states that have seen less progress than desired in CCSS implementation. Even though the state was one of the first to implement the standards, it has seen minimal gain in student progress. This slight improvement was seen in the districts that were most committed to implementing the standards fully. Many are still struggling, especially the rural school districts, which are among the lowest scoring in the state due to lack of funding and a history of education culture that resists the goals of the new standards. (Butrymowicz) The state intends to see to this issue by “[promoting] implementation efforts by nurturing school culture, [supporting] necessary instructional shifts,” and using student

work to evaluate implementation efforts (Holliday & Smith). Tennessee has experienced similar results as Kentucky with a select group of districts succeeding with faithful implementation but rural districts falling behind. In looking to the example of the successful districts in Kentucky, authentic accountability and supports for the classroom, Tennessee can nurture school environments where student achievement flourishes. By encouraging its school districts to implement the state standards for the benefits it would bring with total commitment, Tennessee may see a large improvement in student performance, even in the more rural districts. Where Kentucky and Tennessee have struggled, Minnesota has succeeded.

Minnesota's reform efforts qualify it as one of the top leaders in American education. It is especially recognized for its reform through focusing on one area of implementation alongside giving assessments that measure essential educational skills. Instead of adopting all of the CCSS standards at once (both math and reading), the state chose to adopt only the reading standards. This allowed the state to put more effort into making sure the teachers fully committed to this side of the standards through monitoring the results. At the same time, however, Minnesota was developing its own set of mathematical standards that are harder than the national Common Core standards. (Post) In addition to creating its own standards, Minnesota is assessing its students using the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment tests (MCAs). These assessments are more difficult because they challenge the student to use more advanced comprehension skills instead of just using context clues to make "educated guesses," like on typical assessment tests throughout the U.S. (Post). Although it may not be the most feasible option for Tennessee to adopt Minnesota's methods, it can look to its embrace of higher standards and use of more comprehensive assessments. Tennessee can also look to Minnesota's strengths in devoting energy to working on one specific issue at a time; this principle can be translated into teacher

accountability, student assessment, or classroom supports.

The state that is most widely known for exemplary implementation of the Common Core State Standards is Massachusetts. A series of examinations in 2013 revealed that “only three educational systems worldwide statistically outperformed... in reading, and only six in science and nine in math” (Tanden). This success in student proficiency was not new, as Massachusetts students have ranked first or tied for first in comparison with other states in math and reading assessments for fourth and eighth grade since 2005 (Tanden). Peterson and Kaplan of *EducationNext* ranked Massachusetts State Schools first in having the highest expectations of student proficiency and the best aligned standards with international benchmarks (Peterson & Kaplan 47). According to these authors, the state has set higher standards of proficiency than National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) standards in fourth grade math (reflecting the high caliber of student standards across grade levels) (Peterson & Kaplan 48). Even though Tennessee has adopted the same expectations as Massachusetts, its students performed somewhere between 10-25% less than the New England students, varying on the grade level and subject being tested over (Peterson & Kaplan 48). Much like Tennessee, an existing issue is the achievement gap between white, upper-class students and lower-income and minority students (Tanden). Neera Tanden, the president of the Center for American Progress, wrote, “High standards, well-designed tests of higher learning skills, genuine accountability, regular supports for teachers and extra help for low performing students and schools is the formula that worked in Massachusetts” (Tanden). Tennessee can learn from Massachusetts’ authentic accountability, comprehensive assessments, and efforts put towards supporting teachers and low performing students.

TENNESSEE

This national reform effort is present in Tennessee as well, and the state has made some of the most dramatic efforts in trying to raise its standards for student success. In 2007, Governor Phil Bredesen led a public effort to overhaul academic standards since Tennessee students were not getting the skills they needed to enter into the competitive job market. The standards were raised and the tests were made to be “more challenging” (actually just more accurate in assessing students’ current skill levels versus measuring how well they can take tests) and students’ proficiency dropped from 90% to 50%. (Peterson & Kaplan 48) Since the 2009 drastic drop in test scores, the state has taken significant gains toward education reform including Tennessee Core Standards (TNCore) and student supports such as Response to Intervention (RTI). TNCore standards were proposed by Governor Haslam in an attempt to maintain high standards in the state, or even raise them from the national system of CCSS, but by taking up standards independently, Tennessee education is taking back some sovereignty in its decisions (Bidwell). RTI sets “high expectations for student achievement,” focuses on students’ individual needs, makes interventions for students based on the outcomes of assessments, and uses teams of teachers, counselors, and other staff to identify what each students needs to have academic success (www.tncore.org). With successful case studies such as ones in Memphis and Nashville, Tennessee schools are finding that “cyclical reform” is making teachers feel more apt to tackle education by way of standards and assessments. “Cyclical reform” is having “Core Coaches” or teachers who come for training in Core curriculum and standards, who then return to their school systems and serve as the go-to person for questions, training, and guidance on implementing higher standards. (*Core Leadership*) These teachers than then go on to help and train other teachers, and they go onto train more, so on and so forth. Yet, despite all of these reform efforts,

some Tennessee students are still falling behind in reaching state standards.

In school systems where the equivalent of success is reaching high standards through test scores, many Tennessee students slip through the cracks of education. Based on the demographics of Tennessee students alone, it becomes easy for the general public, and even education leaders, to take the numbers as merely facts and figures, while outliers are simply a natural consequence of change. “The outliers,” however, are still students that have real lives, with real issues, and will become a real part of American society someday sooner rather than later. In a personal interview with Emma Thompson, a student from Jonesborough, TN, she said (about Tennessee students’ general sentiments), “We feel like we’re the bottom of the barrel, and the problem is, we’re okay with it” (E. Thompson, personal communication, April 2014).

Although Tennessee students have made progress, including minorities and lower socioeconomic students, the gap is still very much present. These students that are being “left behind” will not be met where they are instantaneously. Educators must fully embrace the reform efforts that are already in place, and effective teacher and student accountability and classroom supports to close the gap between Tennessee student achievement and state standards.

Where can we go? Bringing Tennessee Students to Success

ACCOUNTABILITY

In order for Tennessee students to maintain higher standards, their educators must be held to higher standards, and this begins with authentic teacher accountability. Instead of biased and inaccurate systems of accountability like many states have adopted before, accountability for teachers should come primarily in the form of small group responsibility and responsiveness. In a study by Nye, Konstantopoulos, and Hedges, “...encouraging teachers within a school to observe each other, to plan together, and to adopt shared teaching methods can dramatically improve teaching and learning in a school” (Calkins 184). The main idea behind this proposition

is that teachers would meet in “small groups” with varying disciplines collaborating with administrative personnel so that the “higher-ups” get into the field and become aware of the day-to-day issues with standard implementation. They would also have a “standards specialist,” similar to the “Core Coach” idea that has already been attempted in Tennessee, who could guide them on implementing core standards into their classrooms. These groups would serve as accountability partners in that these coworkers would analyze data from student performance across multiple disciplines, offer suggestions about why students may have performed the way they did, and if there are any successful teaching strategies amongst the educators, they could share with the others. In this type of environment, the goal would be to find the best ways of creating a productive and enjoyable learning environment in the classroom that stems from teacher collaboration. The administrators involved with these groups would have a more personal understanding of the issues teachers face but would need to be able to remain objective in conducting observational assessments and analysis of student progress data from testing. This would “share the responsibility” of implementing standards-based reform and cause the teachers to respond in a productive way.

Variations of my proposition have been made by other educational professionals, but this practice of small group accountability is definitely not universal. In Pathways to Common Core Lucy Calkins writes, “...the real goal is for people at the same school to learn how to learn together and, in doing so, to learn how to become a school where professionalism involves recognizing, implementing, and improving upon high-impact teaching practices rather than about individual teachers going their own way, oblivious to everyone else” (Calkins 186). In Leading the Common Core State Standards, Cheryl Dunkle speaks to the importance of collaboration among peers in the education environment and reevaluation through “transparent data” to move

through the “sometimes messy and uncomfortable” change that comes with education reform (Dunkle 8). These efforts to create teams of teachers with an expanded repertoire of successful strategies and evidence could also take into account an expanded body of student opinions on what they feel works for them. The teachers on these teams would be able to hear about other teachers’ students’ opinions, successes, and failures.

One successful real-life implementation of this idea is in elementary education in Japan. In what is called “Lesson Study,” “teachers work in small teams to design, teach, observe, analyze, and refine individual class lessons” (Dunkle 85). The findings from these groups are distributed throughout the schools and the country so that other educators are able to learn from each other (Dunkle 85). This creates a universalized expectation of professionalism and teamwork among educators and removes much of the pride and stress that infiltrates American schools far too often. Just as the standards cannot stand alone in the education reformation movement, accountability will not be the only solution to the slew of struggles teachers and students are facing in Tennessee schools with raised expectations and lagging students. Accountability of teachers through small groups coupled with authentic accountability of students would allow Tennessee education to make strides towards reconciling standards and day-to-day practice.

ASSESSMENT

Once the accountability of teachers has been established, it is more logical to expect students to “be held accountable” for their work. This education term tends to have a negative, constraining connotation so instead, my proposition is to “see where students are” and meeting them there faithfully. The current assessment scene for Tennessee is seemingly never ending series of transitions: from one state test system, Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program (TCAP) to the Common Core-aligned PARCC test, to others that individual school systems are

taking up in efforts of trying to test student achievement in the “best way.” As mentioned in a case study of metropolitan Nashville, the researchers said, “...teachers are teaching to new standards, but students are being tested (and teacher’ value-added evaluation scores are therefore based) on the old standards” (Cristol 49). Not only are these types of exams expensive, the student scores on these types of assessments are being analyzed as “results.” By giving so much weight to these scores, the other, more critical and comprehensive work of students is sometimes overlooked.

I propose that school systems use a combination of summative assessments (the normal multiple choice-type assessments that are common today) and formative assessments. According to the Glossary of Education Reform, formative assessment is “a wide variety of methods that teachers use to conduct in-process evaluations of student comprehension, learning needs, and academic progress during a lesson, unit, or course” (www.edglossary.org). With this type of active assessment, teachers would set up clear expectations (for example, showing previous proficient student work), set up well-planned classroom discussions (teachers asking critical, well-developed questions and guide students in discussion, for example), and giving constructive feedback, answering students’ “So what?” questions behind why their education is the way it is. This type of assessment can also be led by the students in self-evaluation and peer evaluation. Teachers may find it difficult at times to take into account all students’ work if they are working in small groups, but this is where student self-evaluation and peer evaluation can play a major role. During larger class discussions or individual work, the teacher is better able to use formative assessment to accurately measure student achievement. This type of assessment is much more affordable as it is a daily classroom practice by teachers that evaluates the students’ work in a practical way. Summative assessments, or standardized tests, are estimated to cost

anywhere from \$22 to \$35 per student. It would not only be more beneficial for students to have formative feedback to know how they can improve, but the teachers would be able to see student achievement in a more tangible way, and therefore be more equipped to helping those students who are falling behind with individualized care.

It is crucial for teachers to create an environment where these types of assessments are taken seriously, and they can do this by making it an inherent characteristic of their classroom, a normal part of daily routine. This type of assessment, coupled with summative assessments, will give teachers real-time information on how their students are doing. According to *Leading the Common Core Standards*, formative or “performance assessments” lead to clearer expectations between student and teacher. Students see progress for themselves and their work is recognized by others, which results in students and teachers seeing “concrete, observable results.” (Dunkle 103-105) For those students who struggle on the “multiple choice” or essay-type summative assessments, their teacher will be able to assess where they are at through formative assessments. While some teachers already do this, it is important for the state of Tennessee to recognize both forms of assessment as critical tools in education reform as public education policy.

Assessment results should not be the only goal of education but instead a guiding tool that will simply inform teachers and the state on the closest analysis of student proficiency levels and point to bigger issues. Since testing seems to be an unavoidable part of American education today, teachers should not be pushed to “[teach] to tests that do not assess complex abilities” (Calkin 187). Instead, the state needs to put in the resources to make the assessment system as comprehensive as possible and equip the teachers to assess the “complex abilities” of all students. We should not sacrifice quality for financial gain or political agenda. Tennessee, as every other state, does not have a plethora of funds waiting to be used for education, but

education reform decisions should be made with much consideration and time devoted to implementing the reform faithfully before making assumptions with irresolute results. The key takeaway here is as Cheryl Dunkle states in Leading the Common Core State Standards, “the ultimate purpose of assessment is improvement in the teaching and learning process” (Dunkle 129). As a result of having a diverse plan for assessments, teacher and students’ experiences will be enriched throughout this time of education reform and after.

Why does it matter? The Importance of Education Reform in Tennessee

The desire behind American education reform is to successfully prepare students to face competitive job markets and an ever-increasingly competitive world stage in terms of which country will “come out on top.” Educators are raising up the next generation of world leaders, and in the midst of whirlwinds of change, the individual teacher and student often become lost in the shuffle of bills, standards, and data. In trying to universalize the education process and raise standards throughout American education, many students are still left behind. While there are pros and cons to every attempt at reform, setting higher standards for all students, for example through Common Core or Tennessee’s TNCore, the foundation is being built to launch education in the United States to the next generation of high-achieving and well-rounded citizens. Understanding how past and current reform efforts have failed and succeeded will help the state of Tennessee look at its current state of education affairs and move forward in the most beneficial way. In looking to Kentucky’s struggles and Minnesota and Massachusetts’ successes, Tennessee can adapt efforts to the particular struggles its students face such as literacy rates, career and college readiness, and gaps in socioeconomic status, school culture, and motivation. As Cheryl Dunkle says, the standards put in place will help to aid students with these struggles in imagining them as adults, successful and well-rounded adults. With authentic

accountability and assessment, the goal of education can be met by the groundwork of the field in Tennessee. The goal of education has not been completely lost there and in other states, but it may just need to be dusted off a bit.

To reach those students who Emma Thompson described, those Tennessee learners who “feel like they are the bottom of the barrel and they’re okay with it,” every effort must be made in reaching those students who seem the most unreachable. Miss Thompson said after this statement, “They might be okay with it, but I’m not. I have big dreams, you know.” More students need to be encouraged to have the same attitude as this one student. Tennessee is not the only place in the world where students fall through the cracks or intentionally fly under the radar. This is why it is so crucial that education reform leaders look up from their stacks of papers and politics to see the day-to-day struggles of teachers and students, and the state of Tennessee can set an example in leading reform efforts. Sir Ken Robinson’s statement about the standards being helpful but “subsidiary to the real purpose of education” acknowledges how the standards must be used to support students and not to use students to support the standards. The real purpose of education may be different for every individual, but one purpose underlines it all: to grow students, support them, and prepare them for whatever they will face after they leave the doors of our classrooms. It will take one intentional step at a time to get American education where it needs to be, but Tennessee can help pioneer these efforts if they tend to their students’ particular struggles and implement practical changes such as accountability and assessment. As Rufus Jones, an American Quaker, said, “I pin my hopes on the small miracles and quiet processes in which genuine and reforming change takes place” (qtd. in Calkin 181). Education reform can take small steps that lead to monumental change, starting with the potential that lie in Tennessee classrooms.

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