TEAMING FOR SUCCESS:
Common Core Implementation
at an Urban High School

Michele Meredith  |  Susan Fairchild  |  Anne Mackinnon  |  Angel Zheng

March 2015
PREFACE

New Visions for Public Schools was founded in 1989 with the mission of improving the quality of public education in New York City. In 2007, the New York City Department of Education invited New Visions to become a partnership support organization (PSO) to provide instructional, leadership, and operational support to a network of schools. Principals were given the authority to choose the organization with which their school would affiliate. Phil Weinberg, who was then principal of Brooklyn’s High School of Telecommunication Arts and Technology (Telly), chose New Visions.

Today, as a PSO, New Visions is accountable for the academic success of eighty schools, mainly at the secondary level, which together enroll close to fifty thousand students. An important dimension of New Visions’ work is to identify and document noteworthy school practices, such as the design-driven approach used by educators at Telly, previously documented in Design and Data in Balance: Using Design-Driven Decision Making to Enable Student Success, and their use of teacher teams in rolling out the Common Core, described in this report.

In 2011, New Visions, in partnership with the New York City Department of Education and the Silicon Valley Math Initiative, received an Investing in Innovation grant from the U.S. Department of Education to pilot the Algebra Through Inquiry (a2i) program in 30 secondary schools. An innovation designed to support teachers in their acquisition of standards-based skills, the a2i program seeks to reduce the barriers teachers face in transitioning from the New York State Standards to the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). At the time, we hypothesized that as teacher proficiency with the CCSS increased, so too would the demand for technologies and tools that would support deeper integration of standards-based assessments and grading within the flow of teachers’ day-to-day work.

In 2012, New Visions received funding from the Michael and Susan Dell Foundation to implement a standards-based gradebook, as well as other standards-based assessment technologies, to support teachers as they began incorporating CCSS into their practice. New Visions began to pilot a standards-based gradebook in our sample of a2i schools. We discovered, however, that the rollout of the standards-based gradebook was contingent upon teachers’ deep understanding of the CCSS. With encouragement from the foundation, we therefore realigned our strategies to put greater emphasis on strengthening teacher “ownership” of the CCSS, temporarily putting aside the gradebook technology. Since that time, we have sought to understand and document the challenges schools face as they integrate Common Core approaches into the day-to-day work of teachers, such that teaching practice is transformed and student outcomes are improved.
Research for this report was conducted by members of the New Visions knowledge management team, who met initially with Telly’s leadership in August 2013 to begin what would become a nearly two-year partnership of research and embedded support. Our earlier report, *Design and Data in Balance*, delved deeply into how Telly used both design and data skills to create systems that allow faculty to maintain constant awareness of student needs and provide differentiated support to keep students on track. This report builds upon that work by looking closely at the way Telly has used teacher teams to enable its Common Core implementation. New Visions staff visited Telly weekly from September 2014 through December 2014 to meet with the school’s principal and assistant principals, instructional leads, and grade and department teams to gain an understanding of how teams have taken ownership of CCSS. The authors also conducted extensive interviews with school leaders and teachers to get a clear picture of how their rollout strategy was formed, how it evolved over the course of four years, and where it stands today.

**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

*Teaming for Success: Common Core Implementation at an Urban High School* describes the work of leadership, teams, and individuals over many years in translating an external reform effort into an internally accepted and owned practice. We would like to thank members of Telly’s leadership, including Xhenete Shepard and Christina Mednick, for continuing to welcome us into their school and for finding the time within the hectic life of a school day to share their thinking, their stories, and their expertise. We are especially appreciative of the math department for allowing us to observe and participate in their weekly meetings. They are a uniquely effective and thoughtful team whose interactions reflect deep respect for each other’s professional opinion and commitment to their students. Special thanks to Ellie Terry, Katie O’Connor, and Evelyn Israel, who spent many afternoons with us, reflecting upon and sharing their individual experiences as teachers working with the Common Core. Their voice matters as they, like so many educators across the nation, are the implementors of the Common Core State Standards.

Support for this case study was made possible by a grant from the Michael and Susan Dell Foundation.

**INTRODUCTION**

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) initiative stemmed from a demand to create K-12 education standards that would ensure that all students, regardless of where they live, would be college and career ready by the end of high school.³
The standards were developed through a state-led effort, with the Council of Chief State School Officers and the National Governors Association at the helm of a process that involved active collaboration by education advocates and experts, including teachers and administrators. The Common Core was launched in 2009 and quickly adopted by the vast majority of states, including New York, which adopted the standards in July 2010. A few schools in New York City began to pilot the CCSS during the 2010–11 school year—some through a city-sponsored initiative and some independently. The state recommended that all schools and districts begin implementation in 2011–12 and mandated that all high schools begin implementation in the 2012–13 school year.

The Common Core sets essential goals and expectations for English language arts and mathematics by grade but does not prescribe particular curricula or instructional methods for teachers. While the intent behind this decision was that teachers would not be constrained by a specific, mandated teaching style or set of practices and would tailor their lesson plans and strategies to the individual needs of students, an unintended effect is that a preponderance of schools are now struggling to align classroom teaching to the standards. More specifically, schools are faced with the challenge of translating a set of new, external expectations so that they make sense within their existing school culture while simultaneously supporting teachers in upgrading their curriculum and teaching practices to meet those expectations.

To understand better the translation of CCSS policy into practice, we turned to the High School of Telecommunication Arts and Technology (Telly), a high-performing school within the New Visions network. At Telly, the rollout of the CCSS has been a multiyear, multistep process that relies on strong structures and practices across the school. Now in its fifth year of implementation, Telly’s Common Core initiative has begun to achieve depth, sustainability, and ownership, three attributes identified by Cynthia Coburn in her seminal article “Rethinking Scale” as central to scaling innovation. (Not surprisingly, a handful of educators who have successfully incorporated the CCSS into their practice are now looking to standards-based grading as a means to support their new approach to teaching.)

In this report, we outline Coburn’s framework and explain its relevance for understanding Common Core implementation; describe the arc of CCSS implementation at Telly, focusing on teams as agents of change and tracking progress using Coburn’s model of scale; and report on remaining challenges and opportunities for full and meaningful implementation of CCSS at Telly and other schools. We hope that this case study of a high-performing urban high school serving a diversity of students offers useful insights into the challenges associated with achieving the deep, authentic changes in practice envisioned by the Common Core.
ADOPTION VS. OWNERSHIP: A FUNDAMENTAL DISTINCTION

In her influential article on scale, Cynthia Coburn argues that scaling educational change requires looking beyond aggregate counts of usage (i.e., total number of states, districts, schools, and teachers that have adopted a reform) to consider change in terms of four crucial dimensions: depth, or “attention to the nature of change in classroom instruction”; sustainability over time and in the face of competing priorities; spread of “norms, principles, and beliefs”; and ownership, or shifts in practice and understanding “such that reform can become self-generative.” From this perspective, the difference between adoption and ownership of CCSS is about much more than semantics; it is a critical distinction for understanding teachers’ authentic use of standards—and, eventually, of standards-based grading.

Regarding depth, Coburn characterizes “deep” change as “change that goes beyond surface structures or procedures . . . to alter teachers’ beliefs, norms or social interaction, and pedagogical principles.” Depth is not achieved by, for example, using a textbook labeled Common Core–aligned or by rewriting math problems to use more challenging numbers; rather, it happens when teachers embody the instructional shifts required by the Common Core in their daily interactions with students in the classroom, in their instructional practices, and in the way they enact their curriculum. To achieve depth, teachers must move from cognitive understanding of the standards to actual change in practice.

Sustainability, the second dimension, refers to the ability of a reform to be continued over time, regardless of the level of resources being allocated to its implementation. Spread, the third dimension, refers to diffusion, or how a reform spreads within a classroom, school, or district, and often entails putting “mechanisms in place at multiple levels of the system” to support teachers’ efforts. For Coburn—and, as we will see, at Telly—sustainability and spread often depend on the development of strong professional learning communities within and across schools. These communities are increasingly central to enabling deep change within districts or schools and, most important, among teachers.

For depth, sustainability, and spread to take root within a school, Coburn argues, a reform must come to be “owned” by the school. She therefore sees ownership, the fourth dimension, as arguably the “central element of scale,” achieved when the reform transitions from “an externally understood and supported theory to an internally understood and supported theory-based practice.” Efforts to support school-level ownership are high-leverage activities that help a school align its own culture and practices with the central principles of the reform. Within a school, key
individuals (typically the principal and other leaders and a small number of teachers) must develop deep knowledge of the reform and establish schoolwide strategies and structures through which to communicate their knowledge to teachers. School-level ownership requires leadership to create structures and communities that ultimately move reform expertise and authority from external forces to the internal actors—teachers.

By establishing structures that lead teachers to deeper knowledge, school-level ownership sets the conditions for teacher-level ownership. To own a reform, teachers need both knowledge of the reform and the authority to make decisions in their classrooms about the instructional strategies and structures that will best communicate that knowledge to their students. Educators’ “assumptions about how students learn, the nature of subject matter, expectations for students, [and] what constitutes effective instruction” must shift to align with the central instructional principles of the reform, and those assumptions and expectations must in turn be translated by educators into critical decisions about how the reform is enacted.¹³

In this report, we track the steps of educators at Telly since fall 2010 as they work to implement the Common Core State Standards across the school. We use Coburn’s framework to analyze the processes they used and the changes they achieved at each stage. Overall, we see strong evidence that Telly has moved steadily toward authentic ownership of the CCSS at both the school level and the teacher level, although it is also clear that much work remains to be done before all teachers have fully embraced the knowledge and authority needed to enact the standards in their classrooms.

**CASE STUDY: COMMON CORE IMPLEMENTATION AT TELLY**

**Phase 1: Small-Scale Pilot to Build Understanding (School Year 2010–11)**

New York State formally adopted the Common Core State Standards in July 2010. By the fall of that year, Telly had begun to implement a plan for schoolwide adoption. As one of the first schools to independently pilot the standards in New York City, Telly intentionally started small in its first year by seeking out teachers willing to work together to develop and deliver one unit using the new standards.

The initial group—two English teachers, two social studies teachers, two science teachers, and four math teachers—came together twice a week with assistant principals and staff developers from New Visions to develop lessons, observe each other’s lessons being enacted, and debrief afterward. The six humanities and science
teachers decided to collaborate in creating a unit and lessons on argumentative writing and analyzing literary significance and text complexity, or Reading Standards 9 and 10. The math teachers chose to develop lessons that would require students to persevere through problems by applying prior knowledge and inquiry methods, or Standard of Mathematical Practice 1. Nine months later, the teams of teachers would present their units and lessons to the full staff and describe what they had learned about how the new standards had changed their instruction.

The humanities and science team focused on how literacy would manifest across the three content areas: English, social studies, and science. Through joint lesson creation and observation of lessons being implemented in classrooms, this team modeled the first steps toward increased collaboration and coherence across the subject areas, focusing on reading complex texts and writing argumentative essays. Similarly, the math team began thinking about planning lessons that incorporated both new content standards and new skill standards. Because Telly was already working with the Shell Centre for Mathematical Education at the time, they began to administer lessons that incorporated formative assessments in order to deepen their understanding of students’ strengths and weaknesses before designing their new standards-based unit.14

Coburn points out that teachers and schools often focus on “surface manifestations” of reform, emphasizing “discrete activities, materials, or classroom organization” rather than deeper change.15 In 2010, during the early stages of the CCSS rollout in New York, materials did not yet exist, curricula had not yet been created, and professional development had not yet been deployed.16 Without those materials to rely on, the educators at Telly chose to establish a collaborative process that would enable them to push collectively for a deep understanding of the standards, one that would necessarily manifest in a change in their teaching practice.

By deciding to start small in the first year, Telly acknowledged that the transition to CCSS, while largely impacting the curricular landscape of the school, would also have major implications for the school’s scheduling and programming pathways and for social structures designed to support students academically and behaviorally. School leaders were engaged from beginning to end, so that the full range of implications for the rollout could be understood. Further, the teachers participating in the initial group were all volunteers: the work of changing the hearts and minds of skeptical or resistant teachers would come after the pilot had been evaluated and a strategy formed.

Phase 2: Limited Rollout to the Entire School (School Year 2011–12)
New York State’s Common Core implementation timeline recommended that all schools begin to implement the standards during the 2011–12 school year. Telly
decided to build on its early, small-scale pilot by asking all staff members to choose one unit toward the end of the year’s curriculum to align with the Common Core. To provide common ground, the school requested that all teachers experiment with a unit on argumentative writing based on complex texts. By encouraging teachers to choose units to be taught toward the end of the year, Telly gave teachers time to work collaboratively within their departments to plan their lessons, using a draft “skills sheet” developed by teachers under the leadership of assistant principal Xhenete Shepard (now the school’s principal). The skills sheet broke down each of the larger standards into teachable skills. The school’s assistant principals also led teachers in creating baseline assessments to be administered early in the year so that the CCSS unit planning process could be aligned with demonstrated student need.

To deepen their understanding of the new standards, department teams engaged in an inquiry process during the first semester using student data from the baseline assessments to determine which skills were most important. Additionally, each teacher chose five students and tracked their progress against key skills over the course of the year, grading students on a three-point scale: could not do, could do, or excelled at the skill. Teachers volunteered each week to teach one skill they had identified as necessary from the baseline and to share their approach at the department meeting. By beginning the year with this work, teachers were able to support one another as they experimented with new approaches in their teaching before enacting their full, standards-aligned units.

Teachers closed the year by revising the skills sheet based on their experience with teaching the newly designed units. The skills sheet, a central component of the teachers’ inquiry work and the foundation upon which their first units were built, therefore came to be owned by the entire teaching community at Telly, and expertise expanded beyond school leaders and the initial group of teachers involved in the first-year pilot.
Phase 3: Schoolwide Implementation (School Years 2012–13, 2013–14)

In the 2012–13 school year, all high schools were expected to be in the process of implementing standards-aligned units, according to New York State guidelines. Telly exceeded these expectations by requiring all teachers to align their entire curriculum with the standards. To support this major shift and promote knowledge building and ownership across the faculty, school leaders transferred responsibility for CCSS work from department teams to grade teams, making these cross-curricular teams the central change agent in the school for the Common Core rollout.

The Telly “Skills Sheet”

As Robert Marzano points out in Formative Assessment and Standards-Based Grading, standards often serve the purpose of providing a fairly clear target of what students should know by the end of a grade but “do not provide any guidance regarding the building blocks necessary to attain that goal.” Therefore, to be able to enact standards in the classroom and in the context of a curriculum, teachers must understand how the standards can be broken down into smaller pieces that build upon one another.

In 2010, Telly’s principal, Philip Weinberg, recognized that if the new standards were to take on meaning in the school, teachers would need to engage in the development of these breakdowns and progressions. Led by assistant principal Xhenete Shepard, the school’s department teams began to use their lesson study cycles to write, test, review, and edit breakdowns of the knowledge and skills students would need to master in order to reach the end goal of mastery of a major standard. Those breakdowns were compiled in a common “skills sheet” used by all teachers in the school.

In the 2012–13 school year, Telly transferred ownership of this process to the grade teams, which have produced a 28-page document detailing skills to be mastered at each grade aligned with the CCSS Writing, Reading, Language, Speaking and Listening, and Mathematical Practice Standards. The document is reviewed at the beginning of each year and revised again at the end of each year based on feedback from teachers.
The decision marked an extension of a strategy that had worked well for the school in the past: small learning communities, bolstered by deep, collaborative work by 9th- and 10th-grade teams, have been a hallmark of Telly’s success over the past 15 years. In 2012–13, grade teams were established for 11th- and 12th-grade teachers as well, and the teams began to meet regularly. These grade-level working groups also reflected leadership’s recognition that the Common Core literacy standards were designed to bridge subject areas and would require teams of teachers to work together to develop strategies for reading and writing that could be used in history, science, math, and English classes.

Together, the grade teams built upon, modified, and deepened the work modeled in the two previous years, using inquiry as the foundation for their weekly meetings. Three central tenets guided the development of a consistent grade team meeting structure: (1) teachers needed to work together to break the larger standards down into actionable, teachable skills and objectives; (2) all classroom instructional moves should be based on student evidence; and (3) observing one another enact Common Core–aligned lessons and reflecting upon these lessons as a team is a practice central to reaching the depth of knowledge required for individual ownership.

What has emerged from this multiyear process of iteration and refinement is a set of protocols and processes that span the year and are deeply embedded in the practice of each grade team. Across all grades, teachers’ inquiry work begins after the administration of a baseline assessment: the New York City Performance Assessments in English and math, used in both 2013–14 and 2014–15. Teams engage in a norming exercise before they begin grading, which enables them to clarify their shared understanding of the city’s expectations and to think more deeply about their own practices in the classroom. Once the grading is done and the data collected, each team analyzes the results to identify students’ strengths and weaknesses. This analysis serves as the basis for the teams’ ongoing lesson study cycles, in which subgroups choose a specific standard and subskill or objective on which to focus, jointly plan a lesson to address that skill or objective, observe one another enact that lesson, and come back together to examine evidence of whether the objective has been met or the skill mastered.

Phase 4: Toward Sustainability and Ownership (School Year 2014–15)
In the current school year, Telly has continued to build the depth, sustainability, and scale of its CCSS work. As noted above, the grade teams routinized their meeting protocol and their approach to baseline student assessment and analysis. The school also addressed a key element for ensuring the sustainability of professional learning communities—teacher scheduling. In both 2012–13 and 2013–14, grade
teams met three times a week during a 42-minute professional period and for an additional, longer session once a week. Teachers also met for one period a week for professional development around the Common Core. These 42-minute periods were the primary mechanism for the CCSS rollout, yet, according to the school's current principal, Xhenete Shepard, these periods were too short to enable teachers to accomplish their meeting objectives. Too often, work was left unfinished and teachers' learning was interrupted, leaving teachers under pressure to find time in their already full schedules to continue the work they had begun.

This year, the Department of Education amended teacher scheduling policies to include an 80-minute professional learning session once per week after school. Telly has capitalized on this opportunity by using that time for grade team meetings twice a month, department team meetings once a month, and teacher-led professional development once a month. The 42-minute professional period now provides teachers with a flexible period during the school day. Grade teams, which continue to be the primary vehicle for CCSS implementation, often use these 42-minute periods to finish and fine-tune lesson plans they began during their extended sessions. They also commonly hold one day a week for “kid talk,” during which teachers focus on supporting struggling students. In many cases, however, teachers use the shorter, school-day sessions as they see fit—to seek advice from colleagues, to plan upcoming lessons, or to meet with students—with the understanding that should any member of the Telly community feel it is necessary to meet, that meeting takes precedence.

This flexibility regarding teachers’ meeting times has been tremendously valuable for supporting the sustainability of Telly’s CCSS work. It signals that Telly’s leadership understands the difficulty teachers face in shifting to the CCSS and is willing to support teachers fully in this endeavor. It honors their time and the commitment they are making to changing the culture of the school. It also provides teachers with multiple opportunities during the week to engage with “a supportive professional community of colleagues . . . that reinforces normative changes and provides continuing opportunities to learn” with varying levels of structure and accountability.

By giving teams clear direction and parameters for their work while also allowing them the flexibility to make decisions regarding time, instructional foci, and meeting patterns, Telly has successfully created structures to ensure ownership at the school level; further, through these structures, they have set the conditions for individual ownership by teachers. Placing this work in the hands of grade teams has sent a clear message that teaching to the CCSS standards is the responsibility of all teachers,
regardless of subject area. Implementing and owning these standards has become a whole-school endeavor, extending beyond the standards’ nominal focus on math and English language arts. As it currently stands, the yearlong protocol for grade teams provides teachers with a collaborative structure to reach toward a depth of understanding of the standards that can, over time, result in changes in their beliefs and practices. This routine also solidifies the sustainability of this work by allowing teachers to see their colleagues as legitimate resources for learning about and developing best practices for enacting the standards in the classroom. At Telly, the grade team structure has transitioned the CCSS from an externally imposed reform to an internally owned initiative.

REMAINING CHALLENGES

Today, the deep knowledge required for true ownership of the CCSS initiative and the authority to make decisions regarding its enactment rest jointly with Telly’s school leaders and the grade-level teams. This balance between the two levels has pushed teacher teams to take ownership of the standards and to work collaboratively to understand and enact them; however, deep knowledge of CCSS has not yet taken root in all individual teachers. Across the school, the CCSS has influenced most teachers’ thinking, and most teachers have begun to integrate their new understanding into their practice—but with considerable variability. It has taken time for ownership of the initiative to transfer from school leadership to teacher teams; similarly, it will take time for individual teachers to feel they own the CCSS.

As the work of the teams has continued this year, Telly’s leaders have relied upon staff members who function as “instructional leads” to ensure that each grade and department team meeting accomplishes its objectives. School leaders and instructional leads meet every other week to set objectives, discuss the team’s progress, and continue to plan out the year’s work. While this tiered decision making has strengthened
school-level ownership, the same structure seems to have contributed to uneven ownership at the individual level. The instructional leads work more closely with school leaders and devote more time to thinking through the CCSS than do their peers, and so they have greater knowledge and authority than most teachers. To be effective in their leadership roles, instructional leads have had to rethink and reconstruct many of their core beliefs to align with the Common Core, whereas others are still undergoing that process. It is not surprising, then, that the classrooms of the instructional leads show signs of deeper and more consequential change than do most other classrooms in the school.

Many teachers still seem to rely on their grade teams to push their thinking about the Common Core and to translate that thinking into practice, suggesting that they have not yet fully internalized the instructional shifts the Common Core requires. For example, during the 2013–14 school year, one instructional lead saw evidence that some teachers viewed the one day per month when their grade team jointly planned and observed a math lesson as their “mathematical practice day”—indicating that, for them, responsibility for creating lessons that explicitly teach both a content standard and a standard of mathematical practice, or math skill, remained isolated to the days when they were required to do so or could rely upon others to help construct the lesson. She believes that it will take time for teachers to change this mind-set, but she is optimistic that the continued practice of lesson study will help address the challenge.

The math department team has found it difficult to assess whether students are mastering larger skill standards that speak to the practices of mathematical thinking, as opposed to specific content. At the beginning of each lesson design meeting, the enacting teacher articulates the core math content for that day. Once the team understands the core content, they begin designing activities that will help students build both the content knowledge necessary for the content objective and the subskill that is the Standards for Mathematical Practice (SMP) target for the week. Each time the team has observed one of these lessons, the debrief has surfaced teachers’ difficulty in separating content knowledge from skill acquisition, a difficulty voiced in other teams as well. For example, teams can find it hard to untangle whether a student persevered through a difficult concept because of a strategy provided in the lesson (for example, to make connections between problems) or because that student knew the theorems at a deep level. Before collectively and individually owning the SMPs, teachers and teams will have to continue to develop their understanding and application of assessment for both skill and content.
Common Core Implementation Challenges

The Center on Education Policy (CEP), a national, independent advocate for public education and more effective public schools, conducted a survey in February through June 2014 of district leaders in states that had adopted the Common Core in an attempt to understand the perceptions, progress, and challenges of districts implementing the CCSS. They received 211 responses, which were weighted to reflect a nationally representative sample. This research follows previous CEP surveys regarding Common Core implementation in 2011, 2012, and 2013.

The survey found that the number of district leaders who view the CCSS as more rigorous than their state’s previous standards has risen since 2011 and that more agreed that CCSS implementation will lead to improved skills among students. Yet district leaders are also experiencing significant challenges to implementation because of the comparative rigor of the new standards. The survey indicated that a large percentage believe that implementation will require new or substantially revised curriculum materials (88% in 2014 vs. 64% in 2011 for mathematics curriculum; 82% in 2014 vs. 56% in 2011 for English language arts curriculum) and fundamental changes in instruction (89% in 2014 vs. 50% in 2011 for math instruction; 86% in 2014 vs. 50% in 2011 for English language arts instruction).

Recognizing that these significant changes are necessary, the majority of district leaders communicated that they do not expect to achieve major implementation milestones until school year 2014–15 or later, with one-quarter to one-third of respondents saying that they do not expect to fully achieve implementation until 2015–16 or later. With these figures in mind, it is also important to note that the majority of these milestones do not speak to the depth of implementation of the CCSS within a district. Rather, they are more traditional measures of scale—implementation of CCSS-aligned curricula in all schools, having the technological infrastructure to administer assessments, adopting CCSS-aligned textbooks, and so forth—that speak to basic implementation.

Further, 86% of respondents reported experiencing major or minor challenges that went beyond funding issues for continuing and sustaining the CCSS rollout within their districts. Challenges included district staff levels and expertise, identifying and/or developing CCSS-aligned materials, and providing CCSS-related professional development. Over 90% of the districts saw time as a key challenge to implementation.
REFLECTIONS ON COMMON CORE IMPLEMENTATION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR STANDARDS-BASED GRADING

Transferring ownership of a major new initiative like the Common Core typically flows from state to district, from district to school, and from school leaders to teachers, requiring time at each level and posing a distinct set of challenges. As this case study illustrates, Telly’s leaders chose to add a phase to the usual process by transferring ownership initially to teacher teams, rather than directly to individual teachers. Although a decision like this may appear to delay the implementation of necessary change, Telly’s experience suggests that, to the contrary, this “extra” phase has the potential to have an outsized impact on teacher practice and student performance.

A central argument of Coburn’s is that implementation that does not result in authentic ownership produces tepid reforms that merely ripple throughout a school, lacking the force to reshape educators’ mindsets and practices. At Telly, we have observed an iterative implementation process that relies heavily on sophisticated team structures that provide constant feedback and thus promote continuous learning—a powerful foundation for building individual and collective ownership among teachers.

Writing in 1998 in the early days of the modern standards-based reform movement, Robert Marzano and John Kendall could not have foreseen the development and widespread adoption of the Common Core State Standards, yet their oft-cited work on standards-based assessment clearly and usefully defines four high-level steps to implement standards-based grading: (1) organize content around standards, (2) plan the types of assessments to be used to assess the standards, (3) organize gradebooks around the standards, and (4) assign grades based on performance on the standards. At Telly, work by each teacher to align the curriculum to the CCSS, efforts by the entire faculty to use the skills sheet to break down larger standards into teachable learning progressions, and teams’ regular practice of analyzing the results of baseline student assessments to understand students’ strengths and weaknesses have arguably accomplished the first two steps. Yet an aggressive move to advance to the next two steps would overlook two essential points: first, some teachers at Telly are still working to reshape their practice in a way that deeply reflects the pedagogical principles underlying the Common Core; and second, changing the grading practices of an entire school involves a difficult-to-master skill set that would require an additional and extensive strategy. While organizing a gradebook may seem like a small element within an already large and complex task, it is the core element that distinguishes standards-based grading (SBG) from traditional grading and requires a change in behavior around a central and traditional teacher practice. To shift a school’s grading policy and practice, leadership must be confident that the faculty’s understanding of the standards upon which this shift relies have achieved depth, sustainability, spread, and ownership.
It is therefore not surprising that New Visions’ attempt to introduce SBG faltered in the midst of Common Core implementation, since the foundational work of building ownership of the standards had not yet reached far enough into New York City schools and classrooms. Our experience suggests that the work of implementing the CCSS was so challenging in its own right that it competed with schools’ adoption of SBG. This is a common problem in school reform, where multiple initiatives, even those that appear to complement one another, are often experienced within schools as overwhelming or out of sequence.

While Telly is not yet at the point where schoolwide adoption of SBG is feasible, individual teachers have begun to experiment with its implementation. Math instructional lead Ellie Terry is in her second year of using SBG in select classes. For her, this decision makes sense. She has seen trusted colleagues from Math for America and the Park City Math Institute adopt and implement SBG with success. Additionally, she has taken opportunities inside and outside the school to deepen her knowledge of the CCSS and strengthen her ability to lead teachers and support their professional development.23

Telly has introduced a powerful, schoolwide model of implementation designed to build the crucial elements of depth, spread, sustainability, and ownership. The collaborative work of teacher teams over the past four school years has led to an increase in the rigor of the texts students are reading, formalized and routinized the use of formative assessments and looking at student work, and begun to push teachers to include a content and skills objective in every lesson. Yet even this school, with its strong culture of professional learning communities, inquiry, and data-based decision making, continues to face challenges with CCSS implementation. Telly’s greatest strength may be the confidence of its leaders and teachers in their own ability to improve. In the words of principal Xhenete Shepard, “We have to get better. And we can . . . We can add a layer.” That layer will mean reaching individual teachers and supporting them as they assume full ownership for enacting CCSS in their classroom.
As of January 2015, New Visions for Public Schools became an affinity group, continuing to provide resources and guidance to New York City public schools. For more information, see the New York City Department of Education’s January 2015 report “Strong Schools, Strong Communities: A New Approach to Supporting New York City’s Public Schools and All of Our Students,” http://schools.nyc.gov/NR/rdonlyres/C955EF12-EBBC-4B41-AF8D-20597C55DF0C/0/StrongSchoolsStrongCommunities_NYCDOE.pdf.

Over the course of the five-year grant, New Visions will serve more than 18,000 students and 200 teachers through the a2i project. The a2i project was launched in 14 schools (10 district and 4 charter) in September 2012 and an additional 13 schools in September 2013 (11 district and 2 charter). Five more district schools joined the project in September 2014.


Coburn, “Rethinking Scale,” 1.


The Shell Centre for Mathematical Education is known around the world for its innovative work on mathematics education. The team has a wide range of ongoing activities, including design, development, and research. For more than 40 years the Shell Centre has had a close association with the School of Education at the University of Nottingham, and the core team is now part of the School’s Centre for Research into Mathematical Education. They have worked with New Visions for Public Schools to develop and implement formative assessment lessons that are designed to elicit information about students’ thinking that can then be acted upon by teachers.

Robert Marzano, *Formative Assessment and Standards-Based Grading* (Bloomington, IN: Marzano Research Laboratory, 2010), 11.

According to the United Federation of Teachers, most secondary school teachers and elementary teachers in eight-period schools are programmed for a professional period, for which they elect a professional activity. Teachers select their activity from a menu appropriate to their grade level or can participate in an activity not listed on the menu with the permission of their principal. For more information, see United Federation of Teachers, “Professional Activity Options,” http://www.uft.org/our-rights/know-your-rights/professional-activity-options.


23 Ms. Terry also participates in New Visions for Public Schools’ Collaborative Leadership to Advance School Success (CLASS) program. This program offers a clinically based leadership development program for teachers looking to make an impact in their schools. Program participants enroll together, take classes together, and build their knowledge and skills in partnership with each other, the faculty, and their principals and peers.

24 Marzano, *Implementing Standards-Based Education*.

25 Ms. Terry also participates in New Visions for Public Schools’ Collaborative Leadership to Advance School Success (CLASS) program. This program offers a clinically based leadership development program for teachers looking to make an impact in their schools. Program participants enroll together, take classes together, and build their knowledge and skills in partnership with each other, the faculty, and their principals and peers.


Marzano, Robert J. Formative Assessment and Standards-Based Grading. Bloomington, IN: Marzano Research Laboratory, 2010.


