

Realizing the Promise of College- and Career-Ready Standards

A PCG White Paper

Cheryl Liebling, Ph.D. and Sharon DeCarlo, CAGS

May 2017

With the 2015 enactment of the bipartisan *Every Student Succeeds Act*, all states are required to adopt and implement college- and career-ready standards (CCRS) in English language arts and mathematics. Today, most states and the District of Columbia are implementing rigorous, comparable CCRS and assessing student proficiency in meeting those standards.

Despite this, significant challenges thwart the promise of CCRS as the foundation for grade-level proficiency and readiness for college and careers for all students. Chief among these is the limited availability of high-quality, aligned instructional materials and supports that educators need to effectively deliver CCRS-aligned curriculum. This PCG White Paper describes a multidimensional approach to address this challenge, focusing on the design and delivery of curriculum and instructional practices that align strongly with rigorous, comparable CCRS to maximize student engagement in standards-aligned content and skills.

To that end, PCG's approach integrates 1) analysis of curriculum and instructional materials for evidence of alignment with college and career-ready standards, 2) guidance for the design of CCRS-aligned curriculum, and 3) guidance for the design and implementation of CCRS-aligned curriculum delivery.

Limited Availability of Curriculum and Instructional Materials that Align with Rigorous, Comparable CCRS

A recent analysis of National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) microdata over a twenty-year period reports trends in the narrowing of the achievement gap between white and Hispanic students and white and African American students of similar socioeconomic background (Conroy & Garcia, 2017). While noteworthy and promising, these findings, as well as data from the 2015 Nation's Report Card, affirm persistent achievement gaps in the performance of students from a wide range of subgroups including Hispanic/ Latino English learners, students with disabilities, and students from all racial and ethnic groups who are eligible for free and reduced price meals (Conroy & Garcia, 2017; National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2015). One important strategy to close persistent student achievement gaps is to engage all students in curriculum and instructional practices that align intently with college- and career-ready standards.

Forty-three state legislatures and the District of Columbia have adopted high-quality, rigorous comparable state standards (Salazar & Christy, 2014). In recent national surveys of large, representative samples of educators and state- or district-based focus groups, educators report that they generally understand their state's college- and career-ready standards and are prepared to teach them. However, maximizing students' daily engagement in CCRS-aligned instruction remains a significant challenge due to the limited availability of exemplar models of well-aligned district curriculum and published instructional materials, including standards-aligned Online Educational Resources (OER) (Kane, Owens, Marinell, Thal, & Steiger, 2016; Kaufman et al., 2017; Opfer et al., 2016; Palacios et al., 2014; Rentner, Kober, Frizzell, & Ferguson, 2016; Zubrzycki, 2016).

Concerns of English language arts educators include:

- **Text Selection.** The instructional shifts associated with grade-level CCRS for English language arts call for a balance of carefully selected high-quality fiction and nonfiction based upon grade-appropriate complexity. A significant challenge in the elementary grades is the widespread and often over-reliance on leveled readers in teacher-led, needs-based reading instruction groups to

the exclusion of sufficient opportunities for students to read independently high-quality, grade-appropriate complex text.

Because leveled text is at students' instructional levels rather than their grade levels, it may not align well with the CCRS focus on grade-appropriate complex text as the basis for reading comprehension, writing, and speaking with evidence. The problem is compounded for English learners, students with disabilities, and students who are reading below grade level, as limited opportunities for active engagement with grade-appropriate complex text makes acceleration to grade-level proficiency all but impossible.

If students are to become proficient in comprehending grade appropriate complex text, they need to have daily opportunities to actively engage in reading, writing about, and discussing text of appropriate complexity. Educators need clearer guidance on the selection and use of grade-appropriate complex text in needs-based English language arts in elementary and secondary classrooms (Kaufman et al., 2017; Opfer et al., 2016).

- **Curriculum and Instructional Practices.** Due to limited availability of well-aligned curriculum from commercial publishers, many educators across the country have turned to “coherent, standards-aligned Online Educational Resources (OER) curriculum materials” such as those created and maintained by EngageNY (engageny.org) (Kaufman et al., 2017). Others, however, continue to rely on commercially published, teacher-developed, or OER materials that include practices that do not align strongly with rigorous CCRS and related instructional shifts and are not properly vetted for quality (EdReports, n.d.; Kaufman et al., 2017; Opfer et al., 2016; Rentner et al., 2016; Zubrzycki, 2016). The result is that students may not have sufficient opportunities to engage in daily instruction that yields progress toward achievement of grade level CCRS.
 - Elementary teachers report that they are not always sure they are implementing close reading instructional practices with fidelity. The American Teaching Panel survey calls for more guidance on the characteristics of close reading practices that effectively engage students in text-based discussion and writing (Opfer et al., 2016).
 - Recognizing the mismatch of most available curriculum and the instructional focus of grade level CCRS, teachers report that they often rely more heavily on guidance from colleagues, professional learning, and self-study to identify instructional practices that align with the instructional shifts rather than use commercial curriculum that is insufficiently aligned. This includes, for example, practices for critical thinking and problem solving (Rentner, Kober, Frizzell et al., 2016), and writing with evidence (Kane, Owens, Marinell et al., 2016).

PCG's Multidimensional Approach for Successful Implementation of CCRS

To address the challenge of limited availability of texts, written curriculum and instructional materials that align with rigorous, comparable standards, PCG's multidimensional approach integrates: 1) analysis of curriculum and instructional materials for evidence of CCRS alignment, 2) guidance for educators' design or revision of curriculum and selection of instructional materials, and 3) guidance for curriculum delivery of well-aligned instructional practices. Figure 1 represents the three elements of PCG's multidimensional approach.

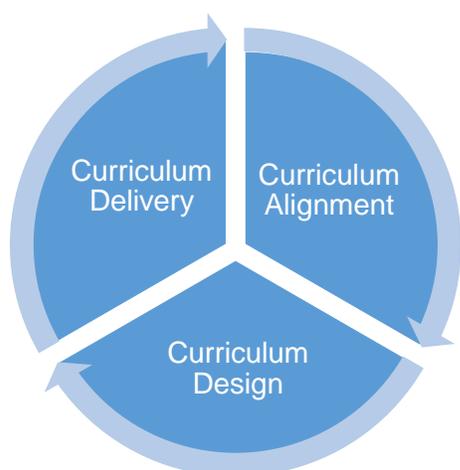


Figure 1. PCG's Multidimensional Approach for Successful Implementation of College- and Career-Ready Standards

Analyzing CCRS-Aligned Curriculum and Instructional Materials

PCG's curriculum audits and facilitated program reviews provide educators with important information regarding the extent to which existing curriculum and instructional materials align with rigorous CCRS. Decisions regarding the need to design or revise curriculum or to select new instructional materials are based on data that indicate the need for stronger alignment. These data are garnered from analysis of the existing curriculum and, if available, evidence of student proficiency on CCRS-aligned assessments including student work protocols.

For example, PCG recently conducted a curriculum alignment study that explored the extent to which a district's curriculum was planned, executed, and assessed in accordance with the state standards for English language arts and mathematics. To answer this

question, PCG used customized tools to examine: 1) the written curriculum and instructional materials for evidence of alignment with CCRS and related instructional shifts, 2) curriculum-based assessments for evidence of alignment with CCRS, and 3) classroom practice for evidence that instruction aligns with rigorous standards.¹

PCG compiled the data in a comprehensive report to summarize findings for specified criteria and identify significant themes that highlight the district curriculum's strengths and challenges. For each challenge, the report recommends opportunities to improve the written curriculum, assessments, and the taught curriculum by strengthening alignment with CCRS and related instructional shifts. The final report provides a roadmap to support the district's design of new curriculum or revision of the existing curriculum, selection of instructional materials, and planning of professional learning to enhance curriculum delivery of recommended instructional practices.

Guiding Educators in Curriculum Design

Through the process of designing the rigorous [EngageNY ELA curriculum for grades 6-12](#), PCG gained an understanding of the essential elements of CCRS-aligned curriculum design.² This understanding is the basis of PCG's guidance for educators' design or revision of curriculum, or selection of published instructional materials. Through this process, educators learn to recognize the features of CCRS-aligned curriculum, to write curriculum units, and to improve their own instruction to meet the rigorous standards.

¹ PCG's customized tools are drawn from the Toolkit for Evaluating Alignment of Instructional and Assessment Materials (Achieve, Council of Chief State School Officers, Council of the Great City Schools, & Student Achievement Partners, 2015). http://achievethecore.org/content/upload/Materials_Alignment_Toolkit_Overview_June2015.pdf

² PCG authored the EngageNY curriculum for grades 9-12. PCG's partner for the grades 6-8 curriculum was Expeditionary Learning.

In working with educators, PCG follows a process that includes understanding the standards themselves, enacting the instructional shifts implied by the standards in instructional activities, and incorporating the principles of high-quality curriculum design. What follows is a description of the process and examples of our client work in supporting educators' design or revision of CCRS-aligned curriculum.

Understanding the Standards

To design CCRS-aligned curriculum, educators first need to understand the intent of individual standards and the ways in which the standards relate to one another within and across the domains of reading, writing, language, and speaking and listening. This begins with a close reading of each individual standard to determine what students must do to achieve the standard and what teachers must do to instruct or support them in doing so.

Once educators become familiar with individual standards, they explore relationships across standards. These relationships are purposeful and meaningful, and, in large part, responsible for creating coherence and complexity within and across domains. The standards are part of a continuum that begins in kindergarten and progresses through grade 12. Each standard builds in complexity from year to year but maintains the same consistency across the grades. Often, adjacent grade-level standards explore various aspects of an anchor standard, rather than building directly on each other.

To teach the standards thoroughly within a particular domain and across domains, it is important to understand not only what each standard is asking, but also how the different standards interact with one another. Standards within domains are organized into clusters or categories, and these clustered standards will have similar expectations at a grade level. Understanding the relationships across the domains is also integral to the development of a CCRS-aligned curriculum. The standards include explicit articulation of relationships across domains, as well as less apparent—but no less significant—unarticulated relationships.

Enacting the Instructional Shifts

In addition to addressing the standards and maximizing the relationship of standards to one another, educators consider the instructional shifts that the standards require and the implications for instructional materials and practices.³

In English language arts, for example, these shifts require curriculum that:

- **Includes a balance of appropriately complex literary and informational text.** Texts align with the requirements of the grade level standards and are selected with the intent of helping students build knowledge. Additional consideration is inclusion of texts that allow the standards to be thoroughly taught. For example, one ELA standard for reading (CCRS.R.8) requires students to “delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, including the validity of the reasoning as well as the relevance and sufficiency of the evidence.” To do this, students need to read appropriately complex text in which the author makes claims and develops an argument.

³ See Student Achievement Partners (2013). Common Core Shifts for English language arts/literacy. http://achievethecore.org/content/upload/122113_Shifts_ELA.LIT.pdf

- **Addresses standards multiple times throughout the year with increasingly complex text.** Well-aligned curriculum supports educators in chunking text and conducting close reading with sequenced text-dependent questions and tasks.
- **Requires the use of evidence from text in reading, writing, and speaking to demonstrate comprehension.** Well-aligned curriculum provides extensive opportunities for students to read and analyze appropriately complex text, building arguments based on textual evidence to support comprehension of text meaning.
- **Focuses on building students' academic vocabulary both in and out of context.** Well-aligned curriculum provides opportunities and structures for students to collaborate productively and engage in academic discussion and writing about text.

Incorporating the Principles of High-Quality Curriculum Design

As with all high-quality curricula, a CCRS-aligned curriculum incorporates the principles of backward design from goals to assessments to lessons. The writers of PCG's *EngageNY* curriculum first designed unit performance assessments aligned with the targeted standards, and then created interim and lesson level assessments that charted a path toward the unit assessment. PCG's writers wrote lesson plans after planning assessments.

To support educators' design or revision of curriculum, PCG engages educators in the backward design process, from standards specification to design of curriculum-embedded assessments and culminating in an articulated sequence of lessons within a learning plan. These sequences specify the instructional practices and student activities that align with the CCRS. They also include differentiated support to meet the needs of students that struggle academically, students with disabilities, those who are English learners, and those that benefit from acceleration.

Developing Teachers' Expertise through Curriculum Design

PCG's curriculum institutes and hands-on workshops immerse educators in designing or revising local curriculum or selecting instructional materials that align strongly with the CCRS and instructional shifts. When educators create or revise curriculum units, they gain a deeper understanding of the standards and shifts, and they feel empowered to select instructional materials that will engage students actively in instruction that will enable them to achieve rigorous CCRS. One example of this work is a recent four-day statewide institute in which PCG consultants led pre-K–12 teachers in the design of local curriculum that aligns with the state's college- and career-ready standards. During the institute, participants:

- **Analyzed standards.** Participants learned about the relationships within and among domains and grades, and selected standards for their model units.
- **Learned the backward design process.** Participants studied the EQuIP rubric, and they practiced evaluating exemplar units with the rubric, noting the implications for their own unit development. Working backward from the standards and texts they selected, they designed assessments to provide evidence of student mastery of the standards.
- **Created a learning plan.** Participants mapped the sequence of lessons, culminating in a curriculum-based performance task that is assessed formatively for evidence that students are progressing toward grade level proficiency. During the institute, participants learned about rigor

as it applies to the depth of knowledge required by grade-level standards. As they crafted lesson plans, they learned how to conduct close reading lessons and create sequences of text-dependent questions. They also identified high-leverage vocabulary and learned protocols to engage students in collaboration and evidence-based discussion. Best practices in writing to text as well as writing to learn were introduced and included in the lessons.

- **Learned the principles and practices of Universal Design for Learning (UDL).** Participants viewed videos of classroom instruction that exemplified UDL practices and learned how to incorporate these practices in lesson planning.

Before completing the institute, teams self-evaluated their draft units with an EQiP (Achieve, n.d.) checklist and noted areas that need to be more fully developed. They then completed their units and submitted them to PCG for feedback and evaluation with the EQiP rubric. Based on PCG feedback, educators revised the units. The CCRS-aligned exemplar units are posted on the state's website, and educators are encouraged to use them as supplementary curriculum.

On a different scale but with similar purpose, PCG conducted an interactive workshop at the 2016 International Literacy Association convention in Boston. The workshop, *Dancing with the Standards: Choreographing Curriculum with Text, Task, and Standards* (Stanko, DeCarlo, & Liebling, 2016), introduced the process that PCG curriculum writers used when writing the EngageNY curriculum. Participants in the workshop learned to unpack a standard and map its implications for student and teacher responsibilities.

Using a text at their grade level, participants read the text closely and, with their colleagues, identified standards that “reside within” the text—that is, standards that can be addressed within the structure, content, and language of that text. After unpacking the language of the standards they selected, participants designed a culminating assessment prompt.

Then, chunking the text into lesson segments, they created a lesson-level assessment prompt that mapped toward the culminating prompt they had already created. Finally, they created a series of text-dependent questions to scaffold students in closely reading the text and responding to the lesson level prompt. At the end of the workshop, participants compared their lessons to those of other teams using the same text and discussed how their standards “danced” with the text to create a high-quality lesson.

Feedback from workshops and institutes suggests that when teachers learn to design rigorous CCRS-aligned curriculum, they also gain knowledge that will raise the rigor of their own teaching and empower them to select published instructional materials that strongly align with the intent of CCRS. Teachers report that they better understand that close reading requires multiple readings of the same text for different purposes and is not something students just “do.”

Teachers understand how thoroughly they must know a text before they introduce it to their students, and that teaching a standard means addressing it more than once, attending to the parts of the standards. They learn that discussion and collaboration must be structured in order to be productive. Additionally, they recognize the value of backward design of units and how important it is to create assessments before writing lessons. Through designing and revising CCRS-aligned curriculum, educators feel better prepared to select or evaluate instructional materials and to deliver curriculum that helps students meet grade-level or course expectations.

Guiding Educators in Curriculum Delivery

Effective implementation of the written curriculum and its instructional practices often determines whether students will achieve grade-level proficiency and advance towards college and career readiness. Using a variety of integrated modalities, PCG customizes comprehensive, blended professional learning to maximize educators' engagement in instructional practices that align strongly with CCRS-aligned curriculum. The modalities that are included in PCG's professional learning models include:

- Face-to-face institutes that build knowledge and skills.
- Online professional learning modules that educators complete individually or in facilitated group coaching to deepen knowledge.
- Online semester-long courses for graduate or continuing education credits led by national experts and facilitated by online coaches.
- Classroom-based coaching in which expert coaches work with teams of grade-level teachers in lesson study cycles to implement recommended instructional practices that result in improvements in student learning.⁴

Conclusion

Rigorous, comparable CCRS, in and of themselves, will not ensure that all students achieve grade level proficiency. Realizing the promise of CCRS to close achievement gaps requires that educators strengthen the connections of college- and career-ready standards, the CCRS-aligned written curriculum, and enacted instructional practice. PCG's multidimensional approach embraces a continuous improvement cycle of analysis and refinement of curriculum alignment, adjustments in curriculum design, and fine-tuning of implemented instructional practices. By maximizing instructional opportunities for engagement in CCRS-aligned curriculum and instruction, educators will improve teaching practice, and students will gain the knowledge and skills they need to graduate from high school ready for college and careers.

References

Achieve, Council of Chief State School Officers, Council of the Great City Schools, & Student Achievement Partners (2015, June). *Overview: Toolkit for evaluating alignment of instructional and assessment materials to the Common Core State Standards*.

http://achievethecore.org/content/upload/Materials_Alignment_Toolkit_Overview_June2015.pdf

Achieve (n.d.). About EQulP. <https://www.achieve.org/EQulP>

Carnoy, M, & Garcia, E. (2017, January). *Five key trends in U.S. student performance*. Washington, DC: Economic Policy Institute. <http://www.epi.org/files/pdf/113217.pdf>

Ed Reports (n.d.). Ed Reports. <http://www.edreports.org/>

⁴ See PCG's forthcoming (2017) white paper on professional learning for detailed information on PCG's approach to professional development.

EngageNY. (n.d.). *Welcome to EngageNY*. New York State Education Department.
<https://www.engageny.org/>

Kane, T. J., Owens, A. M., Marinell, W. H., Thal, D. R., & Staiger, D.O. (2016, February). *Teaching higher: Educators' perspectives on Common Core implementation*. Cambridge, MA: Center for Education Policy Research, Harvard University. <https://cepr.harvard.edu/teaching-higher>

Kaufman, J. H., Davis, J. S., Wang, E. L., Thompson, L. E., Pane, J. D., Pfofmer, K., & Harris, M. (2017). *Use of open educational resources in an era of common standards*. RAND Corporation.
https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1773.html

National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) (2015). *The Nation's Report Card: NAEP 2015 Mathematics & Reading Assessments*. <https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/reading/>

Opfer, V. D., Kaufman, J. H., & Thompson, L. E. (2016). *Implementation of the K-12 state standards for mathematics and English language arts and literacy*. RAND Corporation.
http://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1529.html

Palacios, M., Casserly, M., Corcoran, A., Hart, R., Simon, C., & Uzzell, R. (2014). *Implementing the Common Core State Standards: Year three progress report from the Great City Schools*.
http://www.cgcs.org/cms/lib/DC00001581/Centricity/Domain/4/CCSS%20Implementation%20Report%20Year%20Three_FINAL.pdf

Rentner, D.S., Kober, N., Frizzell, M., & Ferguson, M. (2016, October). *Listening to and learning from teachers: A summary of focus groups on the Common Core and assessments*. Center on Education Policy. <https://www.cep-dc.org/displayDocument.cfm?DocumentID=1461>

Salazar, T., & Christie, F. (2014, September). *States and the (not so) new standards – where are they now?* Education Commission of the States. <http://www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/01/14/21/11421.pdf>

Stanko, R., DeCarlo, S., & Liebling, C. (2016, July). *Dancing with the standards: Choreographing curriculum with text, task, and standards*. Presentation at the International Literacy Association Conference, July 8-11, 2016, Boston, MA.

U.S. Department of Education. (2015). *Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)*. <https://www.ed.gov/essa>

Zubrzycki, J. (2016, December). Teachers say they know more about the Common Core, but challenges linger. *Education Week*. <http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2016/12/22/teachers-say-they-know-more-about-the.html> (subscription).

About Public Consulting Group

Public Consulting Group, Inc. (PCG) is a leading public sector consulting firm that partners with health, education, and human services agencies to improve lives. Founded in 1986 and headquartered in Boston, Massachusetts, PCG has nearly 2,000 professionals in more than 60 offices around the U.S., in Canada, and in Europe. The firm has extensive experience in all 50 states, clients in six Canadian provinces, and a growing practice in Europe. To learn more, visit www.pcgeducation.com/education or contact an education subject matter expert directly at pcgeducation@pcgus.com or (800) 210-6113.



PUBLIC CONSULTING
GROUP

www.publicconsultinggroup.com