

# **Increasing Teacher and LEA Flexibility: North Carolina ASRC**

## **Rationale**

Since its inaugural meeting on September 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2014, the North Carolina Academic Standards Review Commission has debated the merits of the Common Core Standards in North Carolina classrooms, discussing benefits and pitfalls, and taking into account the input of teachers, parents, school officials, and other interested parties. General consensus is that the current Common Core Standards do not fully meet the needs of North Carolina's education system, and that significant adjustments must be made. At the last meeting in December, it was the decision of the ASRC that the Commission's current approach should focus on three elements: standards simplification, developmental appropriateness, and teacher and LEA flexibility in the standards. This document seeks to explain the need for flexibility in the standards, and propose options for how to begin building that flexibility into a standards framework.

## **The Need for Teacher and LEA Flexibility in NC Classrooms**

Every time a teacher is presented with a new group of students, whether it be with year-round classes in elementary and middle schools, or semester-long classes in high school, those teachers are tasked with meeting the needs of an incredibly diverse set of students. This group is likely to have heavily varied reading abilities, senses of self-efficacy, background knowledge in the content area, and an array of "learning gaps" as compared to the standards progression leading up to their current grade level. Because of these myriad differences in student ability, interest, and willingness to learn, it is imperative that teachers have a significant degree of flexibility in their classrooms when it comes to implementing standards through curriculum. Flexibility is the cornerstone for meaningful differentiation in the classroom. Just as no two children are exactly alike, no single method of delivery will be sufficient to successfully help all students master a given concept. Differentiation is what allows a teacher to meet the needs of all students while teaching within the framework of the given standards. This means that in the same classroom, a teacher may have multiple lessons or tiers of a single lesson going at the same time. This flexibility is what allows a teacher to successfully teach a group of students and address the gaps and deficiencies of those who are behind, while also providing meaningful enrichment and guidance for those who are ahead. It allows for teachers to reteach in an effort to fill in learning gaps. Standards provide a framework for learning goals, but without flexibility in the implementation of those standards teachers are left with only a "standardized" form of education in which all students, regardless of ability or proficiency, are held to the exact same tasks and expected to meet the exact same goals.

## **Impediments to Teacher Flexibility in Standards Implementation**

One of the most common issues teachers have in terms of flexibility in standards implementation, is that standards are inherently seen as inflexible. They are generally viewed as a rigid canon of skills that must be addressed in the classroom, regardless of the abilities, interests, or prior preparation of the students. When standards are implemented so as to address all levels of the student population, taking into account that “proficiency” does not look the same for every student”, teachers and LEAs can find flexibility in the standards, and translate that into their classroom. When the standards are implemented in a manner such that they may not address all levels of the student population, it can be incredibly hard for teachers and LEAs to incorporate flexibility into their classrooms.

Furthermore, many teachers see standards as test/assessment-driven, and because of this they do not feel they can be flexible in their teaching. They know they will be assessed on having covered all standards, and so they feel they have to teach all standards in the allotted time in preparation for a standardized assessment. Research clearly shows that not all students master concepts at the same pace as their peers, but this system often results in teachers moving ahead long before students have had time to really master the concepts. The result is that student achievement becomes secondary to the main goal of “covering all the material”, a seemingly contradictory concept when talking about meaningful education.

It should also be taken into account that when talking about flexibility and the importance of it for teachers themselves, a great deal of the decision making that affects flexibility is not in the hands of the teachers. Standards are approved by the state. Decisions about standards implementation through curriculum and pacing are oftentimes dictated by LEAs and school districts. By the time the teacher begins planning her lesson, the majority of the autonomy has been ceded to other entities. The resulting problem is that the person who needs the most control over flexibility for the education of her particular students has, in fact, the least amount of control. Most teachers are left with only the option of differentiating instruction within the existing standard framework. For example, though a student may be on a fifth grade reading level, they are in a tenth grade classroom. That teacher is required by the standards to teach the tenth grade material, even though she knows that student cannot achieve that level because of serious learning gaps. The teacher has two options: she can either teach the standards as they are, and hope that the student makes some progress, or she can go back to the standards the student never accomplished in previous grades, and address those so as to try to fill the learning gaps. With the first option she is meeting the requirements of the standards. For the second option, she may be eschewing the intended standards, but she is meeting the needs of the student.

In looking at these various influences, it seems logical that more flexibility should be given to the teacher in the classroom when it comes to determining how to implement the standards. To do this, a fair approach would be to actually build flexibility into the way standards are taught, so as to address student learning gaps and differences in ability and prior knowledge.

## **Current Issues of Flexibility with Common Core**

### **1. Clarity of Standards**

When speaking about Common Core Standards specifically, several issues have come to light. First is the issue of clarity in the standards. A significant amount of teachers, parents, and school officials have noted the confusing or ambiguous nature of many standards. Some are written vaguely, whereas others contain several standards within what is written as a single standard. The result is that when standards are unclear, teachers do not fully know what is expected of their lessons, and when that is the case they do not feel comfortable enough to employ flexibility (differentiation of content or mode of delivery) in their lessons. An unstable basis for curriculum results in unstable delivery of content.

### **2. Quantity and Depth of Standards.**

The second most common issue raised is that of the quantity and depth of the Common Core standards. To be sure, the Common Core is a rigorous framework and demands a lot of students. However, many stakeholders have noted that the sheer number of standards for each grade level and content area is overwhelming. In an effort to develop rigor, it seems there may have been some mistaking rigor for quantity. This becomes compounded when teachers feel that they also have to close previous learning gaps which adds to the number of standards they must accomplish in order to have students show growth. When teachers feel pressed for time in the classroom, they often employ less creativity and flexibility in their lessons. It can become more about “covering the material” than actually fostering growth for students.

### **3. Developmental Appropriateness**

A third issue with Common Core is the question of developmentally appropriate standards. When a student is developmentally unable to grasp a standard at a certain point in the curriculum, it is difficult to say that teacher flexibility can accommodate that issue. For instance, if a child is being asked to think conceptually before they have learned to think concretely, there is little flexibility that a teacher can build into a lesson to successfully help that student master the skill. Without developmentally sound standards, a teacher's lessons may not be able to facilitate mastery, regardless of the care and flexibility put into their design.

#### **4. Assessments**

Finally, it must be clearly stated that the current assessments aligned with Common Core Standards are an impediment to teacher flexibility. Teachers are held accountable to the CC standards and know that at the end of the semester or year, their students will take an assessment that gauges their mastery of the grade level standards. Teachers do not know specifically which standards will be assessed or which standards might receive particular emphasis. Thus, teachers feel they are forced to cover every standard, regardless of a child's readiness for that task, in preparation for an assessment that will impact their "rating" as a teacher. Through this it seems the focus again falls more towards "covering the material" than to quality, masterful teaching. Teachers often do not feel they have flexibility in standards implementation because there is no flexibility in standards assessment.

#### **A Note on Decision-Making Power in Teacher Flexibility**

It is in the best interest of students in North Carolina's classrooms that their teacher, a highly qualified professional, be the one who has the most power when it comes to educational decision-making. Students are not statistics, and decisions of how to implement standards so as to maximize a student's learning potential should lie heavily with the person who has the most direct contact with and impact on the individual student. This will be monitored and evaluated by school administrators, but a teacher's flexibility to customize learning for her students is imperative to a successful education.

#### **The Commission's Goal Should Be to Create:**

Based on this information, it is recommended that in an effort to increase teacher and LEA flexibility the ASRC seek to create the following:

1. Standards that aren't exhaustive or restrictive in their quantity
2. Standards that are concise and clear in their intent
3. Standards implemented in a manner that allows teachers the power to customize students' education
4. Standards that the ASRC legitimately believes all students are capable of mastering
5. Standards that represent real-life (college and career ready) applications and skills
6. Standards that are fairly assessed

#### **Interim steps for the ASRC: Flexibility Workflow**

### **January 16th meeting:**

1. First, it is essential that the ASRC identify what teachers believe to be the central issues with flexibility in terms of the current standards. This should also include an opportunity for them to identify how these problems could be addressed. This can come from formal or informal surveys, and hopefully will also be addressed in the data from the DPI survey results.
2. Second, the ASRC must find the means to identify the most severe learning gaps present in our current student population. (ex: severe reading gaps in K-3/ gaps in secondary math) so that we can address where standards implementation needs to be the most flexible.
3. From this discussion, the ASRC should create a work plan for collecting this information, preferably in time for our February 16th meeting. To do this we will need to identify the sources which can help us collect this information and determine the means by which we will collect information from teachers.

### **February 16th Meeting:**

1. Information on learning gaps and teacher issues with flexibility should be presented to the ASRC and discussed.
2. The ASRC should then identify sources who can speak to addressing these problems through standards design and implementation.
3. These sources should then be scheduled to speak at the soonest possible meeting date, preferably the March 16th meeting

### **March 16th Meeting:**

1. The ASRC should hear from sources on addressing learning gaps and teacher flexibility through standards design/implementation
2. The ASRC should begin to implement this information in our restructuring/ redesign of the standards.

### **Later Possibilities for the Commission to Explore in Standards Design**

1. A tiered approach to standards which establishes "levels" of standards
  - a. this has been discussed briefly at a previous meeting. The initial concept was that we would determine what standards were absolutely essential and which were to be reserved as possible enrichment for students who show special aptitude in a given area. Conceptually, all students would be held to the basic standards, but the "extra" standards would be applied based on student ability/readiness
2. Considering a backwards design approach in which we establish our ultimate end goal for students before creating standards
  - a. Most teachers recognize backwards design as a particularly effective tool in lesson-plan design. The premise is that we would look at each "area" within the

standards and determine what skills students should have in that area- what should they be able to do as a measure of their mastery? We would then work backwards to determine what standards must be taught in order to develop that mastery

3. Standards that aren't completely prescriptive in their scope of grade or age ( will become clearer with discussion of developmental appropriateness)
  - a. This is a cloudy issue at this point, as we have a great deal to learn about developmental appropriateness. The idea is that standards would not necessarily be aligned just to age or grade level, but would be aligned to student's ability. For instance, a student who was on an eleventh grade reading level in ninth grade would not be working on the same standards as a student on a fifth grade reading level in the ninth grade.
4. Reducing the number of standards per grade level/content area
  - a. As the Common Core standards are written now, the depth and breadth of standards are extensive. Though this may be an effort to maintain rigor, it often results in teachers sacrificing quality of education for coverage of material. By distilling the standards to the most essential (and still keeping them challenging) we will ensure students learn a depth of important material, rather than a smattering of a broad spectrum
5. Rewriting standards with an eye for clarity and conciseness
  - a. Standards should be easily understood by not only teachers and education professionals, but also parents, members of the business community, and the general public. All standards should be clear in their intent and leave no room for ambiguity- this will enhance teacher flexibility in the classroom.
6. Creating standards that address the career needs of **all** students.
  - a. Standards should be written with a keen eye for real-world application. Students are rarely invested in content that they cannot readily apply to their life. A student who intends to go straight into the workforce should not be made to feel as though their curriculum does not apply to their life. At the same time, a student who intends to pursue post-secondary education does not need to be held back by standards that do not challenge them.

## **Summation**

It is the goal of the ASRC that through the work of this Commission it produces a set of standards that reflects and meets the needs of North Carolina's students, teachers, and education professionals. In order to maintain the highest level of academic success and integrity, teachers and LEAs must be given the ability to incorporate flexibility into the classroom through lesson planning and curriculum design. Since curriculum design and lesson planning necessarily stem from the adopted standards, it stands to reason that any redesign of standards must incorporate teacher and LEA flexibility into the framework. This will require restructuring of standards organization and language. It is the goal that through this restructuring, more of the educational decision making power will be made to lie with

professionals in the classroom, thus resulting in higher teacher and LEA flexibility and higher achievement for North Carolina's students.

**Pertinent Articles:**

*Educational Standards: To Standardize or To Customize Learning* by Charles M. Reigeluth

*The Flexible Teacher* by Leila Christenbury