

A mentoring program drills down on the Common Core



Common Core

The learning goes in both directions in a program to develop teacher mentors; five important lessons result.

By Emily Davis, Steve Sinclair, and Laura Gschwend

When California began the transition to the Common Core State Standards in 2012, the Santa Cruz/Silicon Valley New Teacher Project believed mentor teachers could play a significant role in helping schools integrate the Core into curricula and teacher practice.

At the Santa Cruz/Silicon Valley New Teacher Project, we have 75 mentors and 40 partner districts and charter schools willing to invest in this effort. In collaboration with our sister organization, the New Teacher Center, long recognized for its work to improve the effectiveness of new teachers by providing outstanding induction services and programs, we prioritized Common Core and put it at the center of our induction work with mentors and new teachers. Over the course of this three-year initiative, we reached 1,500 new teachers through their relationships with our mentors.

As we embarked on this work, several questions were clear: How could we accelerate mentor understanding of the Common Core? How could we transform the Common Core mandate into an opportunity to deepen our mentoring practice and ultimately transform teacher practice? How could we leverage the standards to ask new teachers deeper questions about meaningful, relevant instruction?

After three years of prioritizing the Common Core, we have promising evidence of how induction mentors can affect new teacher practice. Along the way, we've learned five valuable lessons about how to help mentors and new teachers transition to the Common Core.

EMILY DAVIS (edavis@newteachercenter.org) is New Teacher Center program director for the Santa Cruz/Silicon Valley New Teacher Project and a 2013-14 PDK Emerging Leader. **STEVE SINCLAIR** is lead program consultant for the Santa Cruz/Silicon Valley New Teacher Project. **LAURA GSCHWEND** is former program director for the Santa Cruz/Silicon Valley New Teacher Project.

Lesson #1: Mentors need ongoing support to develop their readiness and willingness to guide new teachers in implementing the Common Core.

High-quality induction demands highly trained mentors who possess exemplary pedagogical knowledge, interpersonal skills, leadership capacity, and predispositions as learners. Hence, our mentor professional development arm is robust. Induction mentors typically attend two half-day professional development forums per month for as long as they are mentors. We realized we couldn't assume mentors had a strong understanding of the Common Core standards because many of them had not used them in their own classrooms. The graphic (Fig. 1, below) illustrates our three-year journey.

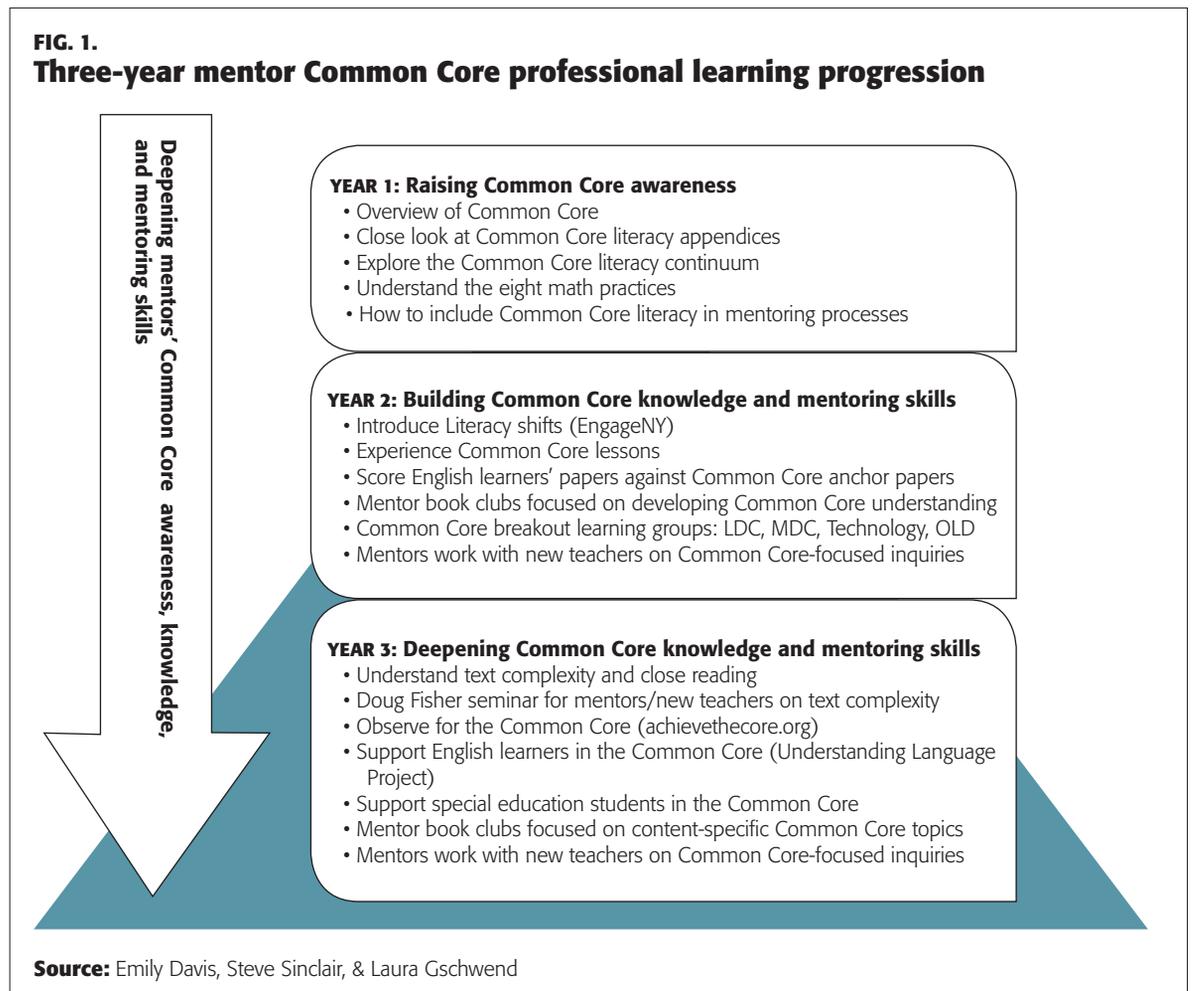
During the first year of Common Core mentoring, we discovered that mentors needed repeated exposure to the Common Core document in order to internalize it. Where are the content-area literacy standards, and how do they parallel the English language arts standards? How do the eight math practices cut across grade levels? Have foundational reading skills disappeared? What do the appendices tell us, and

how can they be used as mentoring tools?

Some mentors discerned neither the value nor relevance of the Common Core, particularly retired mentors with no plans to return to the classroom. Other mentors underestimated the changes that the Common Core would bring to mentoring, new teacher development, and student learning. We focused on Common Core literacy standards because mentors support teachers in a variety of contexts and the standards cut across all grade levels and subjects.

In our first year, we worked to raise mentor awareness. During our forums, we shared overviews of Common Core standards, collaboratively examined the Core's literacy appendices, digested the eight math practices (specifically, practices related to our literacy focus), and zeroed in on how the Common Core might be integrated into the New Teacher Center's formative assessment processes used with all new teachers.

It wasn't until the second year of our Common Core focus that mentors truly began to understand how deeply the Common Core would influence their work with new teachers. During year two, we focused on



moving mentors from mere awareness of the Common Core to deeper knowledge of its implications by:

- Delving into literacy and math shifts;
- Studying sample Common Core lessons and scoring English learner writing samples using Common Core exemplars in Appendix C; and
- Leveraging grants to provide subject-specific Common Core professional development — using experts from the Literacy Design Collaborative, Math Design Collaborative, and Oral Language Development.

By spring, mentors indicated they felt equipped to assist new teachers in implementing the Common Core. In our project, mentors and new teachers engage in cycles of inquiry where the mentor and teacher pairs set goals, analyze preassessment student data, plan a lesson series, gather observational data, analyze postassessment data, and reflect on the results. This inquiry cycle embeds numerous entry points to engage new teachers with the Common Core. We asked mentors to identify a few teachers who might focus their spring inquiries on Common Core implementation. We were amazed at the diversity and quality of Common Core inquiry questions, which included:

- How might I improve my 5th-grade students' abilities to write and evaluate algebraic expressions by using small-group math stations?
- In my 11th-grade U.S. history class, how might modifying primary source documents and embedding close reading scaffolds affect students' abilities to successfully interact with primary source documents?

While pleased, we knew many more mentors needed to address their Common Core knowledge and mentoring ability to significantly affect instruction. So, in year three, we worked to bolster mentors' confidence in focusing on the Common Core with increasing numbers of teachers. We deepened our focus on literacy through forums that explored the role of text complexity and close reading across content areas. Mentors further developed content-specific applications of the Common Core through reading and discussing current books on Common Core strategies in content areas. (See sidebar above.)

We also introduced mentors to practical strategies for mentoring around the Common Core, including:

- Using Common Core observation tools developed by Achieve the Core (achievethecore.org) with Teaching Channel videos;
- Examining Common Core Stanford teacher resources supporting English learners

Useful books

These books were particularly useful for subject-specific applications of the Common Core:

- ***Putting the Practices into Action: Implementing the Common Core Standards for Mathematical Practice, K-8*** (Heinemann, 2013);
- ***Reading Like a Historian: Teaching Literacy in Middle and High School Classrooms*** (Teachers College Press, 2012); and
- ***Pathways to the Common Core*** (Heinemann, 2012).

Next year, book clubs will examine the *NSTA Reader's Guide to the Next Generation Science Standards* (NSTA, 2013).

through scaffolding, purposeful grouping, oral language development, and activating/building background knowledge; and

- Embedding Common Core deeper in our formative assessment processes, resulting in increased numbers of new teachers completing Common Core cycles of inquiry.

After a three-year professional development initiative, we can proudly report results from a post program survey that 77% of 475 teachers in our program confirmed that, "My mentor assists me in planning instructional strategies based on the Common Core." Clearly our Common Core initiative is having an effect.

Lesson #2: Mentors need to be "grand generalists" of the Common Core so they can work with teachers in a variety of contexts to implement them.

Districts make every attempt to match mentors with new teachers in their subject or grade-level expertise, but it is not always possible. Because literacy is critical at all grade levels and subjects, we made it the focus of our professional development. EngageNY (www.engageNY.org) was an invaluable source in painting a broad picture of the kinds of literacy practices mentors should be observing in all classrooms.

The clarity of the EngageNY English language

FIG. 2.
EngageNY’s pedagogical shifts (or threads) demanded by the Common Core

Shifts in English/Language Arts (ELA) and Literacy		
SHIFT 1	Balancing informational and literary text	Students read a true balance of both informational and literary texts.
SHIFT 2	Knowledge in the disciplines	Students build knowledge about the world (domains/content areas) through text rather than just the teacher or activities.
SHIFT 3	Staircase of complexity	Students read the central, grade appropriate text around which instruction is centered. Teachers are patient and build more time, space, and support into the curriculum for close reading.
SHIFT 4	Text-based answers	Students engage in rich and rigorous evidence-based conversations about texts.
SHIFT 5	Writing from sources	Writing emphasizes use of evidence from sources to inform or make an argument.
SHIFT 6	Academic vocabulary	Students constantly build the transferable vocabulary they need to access grade level complex texts. This can be done effectively by spiraling like content in increasingly complex texts.

Source: EngageNY. www.engageny.org/resource/common-core-shifts

arts/literacy shifts (or threads; see Fig. 2) allowed mentors to frame conversations as they moved from classroom to classroom and site to site. Content varies but the literacy shifts remain constant. We added our own seventh shift to this away from formal presentations and toward small collaborative conversations. Although most teachers see the value of collaborative work, a primary shift in classroom practice will be in monitoring the quality of student talk in these groups.

Two other valuable resources helped mentors process Common Core literacy shifts:

1) *The Literacy Design Collaborative:* This free web source contains task templates that align with Common Core standards for ELA, literacy in history/social studies, and science and technical subjects. These task templates focus students on reading nonfiction and writing informational and argumentative modes rooted in either teacher-assigned texts or original research.

2) *Douglas Fisher and Nancy Frey:* Fisher and Frey’s recent work on engaging students with complex narrative and nonfiction texts has critically informed our professional development and practice (Fisher & Frey, 2011). Common Core Reading Standard 10 will affect all classrooms because it demands that students read complex texts independently. Although scaffolds are critical to reading instruction, the Common Core requires that teachers gradually remove those scaffolds. Standard 10 changes our mentoring conversations as we support new teachers in giving students what Fisher and Frey call “the opportunity to struggle” as part of learning

to read. Fisher and Frey insist, however, that teachers be cognizant of the full range of texts students should be reading. In addition to quantitative and qualitative measures of text, teachers must consider the reader and task and provide students just-right texts to develop fluency and a love of reading. Mentors must be prepared to talk to teachers about the range of complexity of the texts they choose and the use (or strategic omission) of scaffolds. These kinds of conversations are new — especially to secondary content teachers.

Readiness to mentor for Common Core success requires that mentors understand the standards and be ready to support others in learning and implementing them across a wide range of contents and contexts. Mentoring on the Common Core at this level requires time and repetitive practice among mentor cohorts and with new teachers in the field.

Lesson #3: Rolling out the Common Core requires leveraging resources and relationships in new ways.

In order to train mentors to support new teacher implementation of the Common Core, we had to reconceive how we used grants, resources, and stakeholder partnerships. We began by growing the knowledge and skill of our leadership team. Our partnership with the Santa Clara County Office of Education and participation in their professional development helped us integrate the Common Core into our mentor forums and our formative assessment and support (FAS) processes. It also enabled us to bring in Douglas Fisher to share his literacy expertise with over 300 mentors, new teachers, and school leaders.

Our affiliation with the New Teacher Center has resulted in numerous grants that helped us deepen the knowledge of our mentors, including bringing in experts from the Gates-funded Literacy Design Collaborative and the Math Design Collaborative to work with our mentors regularly over two years. Partnership with the Sobrato Family Foundation funded mentor training in oral language development. A Texas Instruments grant, in partnership with Resource Area for Teaching and the Santa Clara County Office of Education, allowed us to infuse STEM resources into our Common Core work. These valued resources were key in building mentor capacity to work with a wide range of teachers in subject-specific ways.

Leveraging our resources and relationships also enriched our wider community. Our fall induction summit, attended by more than 120 administrators, educational leaders, mentors, partners from higher education, and funders highlighted the link between new teacher induction and the Common Core. Participants learned about and practiced using the instructional practice guides developed by Achieve the Core to observe for Common Core literacy skills in a Teaching Channel lesson of a secondary history teacher or a middle school math teacher, followed by a debrief session. Many participants indicated much greater clarity as a result of this experience. The highlight of the event was a new teacher sharing her story of how she integrated the Common Core in her inquiry cycle as a result of working with her mentor.

We couldn't assume mentors had a strong understanding of the Common Core standards because many of them had not used them in their own classrooms.

Finally, we regularly discussed the Common Core with our steering committee, the governing body of our induction program that is comprised of representatives from partner districts, charter schools, and universities who meet bimonthly to oversee induction goals, processes, and their effect. At steering committee meetings, we shared professional development models, exemplars of practice from mentors and new teachers, outcomes from integrating our formative assessment and support system with the Common Core, and NTC data about our ef-

fect. Having our steering committee involved in the Common Core induction integration process built a synchronous commitment to the end goal of providing new teachers Common Core training while obtaining their credentials.

Successful Common Core implementation requires that programs make the best use of resources and relationships. The key is to reimagine how you use your current and possible resources in service to your goal.

Lesson #4: Working with new teachers is a balancing act.

New teachers enter the profession with widely varying levels of readiness. Some come from strong teacher education programs, ready to start their careers focusing on the nuances of teaching and learning. Others — especially those who start their careers as interns or on emergency credentials — may need help with basic classroom management and instructional planning.

Although we encourage mentors to make the Common Core the focus of their work with new teachers, some new teachers aren't ready to implement it right away. A primary job of mentors is diagnosing teacher readiness — to figure out where new teachers are with their content knowledge, planning, pedagogy, and classroom management skills — and to meet them where they are, not where the mentor wants them to be.

Even teachers who enter the profession with a high level of readiness have much to learn about students and their families, building equitable classroom communities, classroom management, data-driven and differentiated instruction, authentic assessment, and engaging, culturally responsive pedagogy. Facing all these areas of focus, mentors must seek entry points — natural places where the Common Core can be implemented within the context of what all new teachers need. Data from our mentors show that second-year teachers are more ready than first-year teachers to implement the Common Core.

The inquiry cycle provides numerous opportunities to integrate the Common Core into the general work of learning to teach. When working on close reading, for example, teachers must not only hold students accountable for rigorous thinking but also for on-task, focused, collaborative conversations. This requires the teacher, with mentor support, to learn about both Common Core standards and classroom management strategies simultaneously.

To truly succeed, programs must ensure that mentors know how to accurately assess new teachers' needs and use mentoring tools and processes to meet them where they are while finding entry points to work with them on the Common Core.

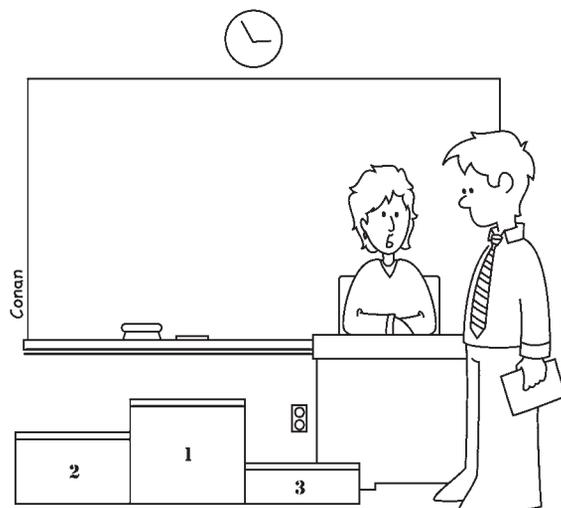
A primary job of mentors is diagnosing teacher readiness and to meet teachers where they are, not where the mentor wants them to be.

Lesson #5: Mentors and new teachers can quickly become Common Core leaders.

One of the most exciting things about transitioning to the Common Core is that a new set of standards means all teachers — new and veteran — must become learners again. This gives our newest teachers an interesting advantage over their veteran peers. New teachers know they have much to learn, are more accustomed to being learners, and aren't yet deeply attached to a teaching style. With the support of a knowledgeable mentor to help them implement the Common Core standards from the beginning, mentors and new teachers can quickly become comfortable facilitating professional learning communities as well as whole school and district learning opportunities focused on the Common Core. Early career teachers are moving more quickly into leadership roles as well. Their Common Core work is highlighted in school and district events, and veteran colleagues and administrators are asking them to help make Common Core-focused curricular and instructional changes.

Where do we go from here?

We are proud of the role that our new teacher project is playing in helping teachers, schools, and districts transition to the Common Core. Yet, many



“Rewards are a big part of my approach to classroom management.”

challenges and opportunities lie ahead. Each year brings new mentors to our group, necessitating that we develop a recursive structure of professional development that differentiates for new mentors and returning mentors ready to deepen their knowledge and skills. Hard questions abound:

- How do we assist new teachers in aligning classroom assessments with national models?
- How will we ensure that our students have the technology skills to take these assessments?
- How do we coach new teachers to consider the three levels of text complexity needed for reading growth — especially secondary content area teachers?

Moving forward, we want to leverage technology better. We'd like to record key Common Core mentor forum modules and put these on our web site as resources for new and veteran mentors and other stakeholders. We're also considering how mentors and new teachers can use technology to observe classrooms with a Common Core lens and help teachers ensure that their students have the technological skills to navigate the new online assessments. We must continue to learn about Common Core assessments and how these will affect how mentors and new teachers differentiate instruction for English learners and special populations. Finally, we must continue working closely with our partners to ensure our Common Core work aligns with their needs and goals.

Mentors have the power to create change in schools and districts by leading from the middle. Powerful mentoring can reach in many directions at once — to new teachers, veteran peers, administrators, and out to other stakeholders. We use mentors to accelerate the learning and develop not only new teachers, but whole schools and districts. Our internal survey and other observations show that by leveraging our resources to provide purposeful Common Core mentor training for new teachers, we are developing robust Common Core-aligned instructional practices that put them far ahead of their veteran peers. As a result, new teachers are assuming leadership roles in their schools and districts more quickly than ever. This is what leading from the middle truly entails: accelerating the development of mentors, new teachers and, through them, our partner schools and districts. Our three-year journey shows that our work is affecting the academic success of thousands of students touched by our teachers each day. **K**

Reference

Fisher, D. & Frey, N. (2011). *Teaching students to read like detectives: Comprehending, analyzing, and discussion*. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree.