

CURRICULUM CORNER



Dr. Brian P. Chinni



Dr. Matthew Murphy

The New CCCC: Connecting the Common in the Core to Create Coherence

We have been long influenced by the seemingly endless stream of mandates and related initiatives that have been imposed upon us by external forces throughout our storied educational history. The cynic in us believes that, more often than not, these mandates are driven by unfortunate influences, such as social strife, economic crises, political benefit, and impulsive respond to “silver-bullet” solutions. The eternal optimist in us believes that these mandates are driven by our society’s indefatigable pursuit for educational excellent for all students. Perhaps it is C, “all of the above.” Whatever the reason, most important is how we, as educational leaders, approach these mandates that will determine their ultimate success – as defined by positive impact on teaching and learning.

No other time in our educational history has presented such exciting opportunity and potential for education. The growing body of cognitive research regarding “how the brain learns” continues to influence pedagogical practice. The common belief that every child deserves an excellent educational experience appears to be genuinely accepted across all individuals and political parties. This common belief is symbolized in the adoption of Common Core ELA and Mathematics Curriculum Standards across 47 States in our Union. It will soon be further engrained in common state-mandated assessments that are

“A pessimist is one who makes difficulties of his opportunities and an optimist is one who makes opportunities of his difficulties.”

Harry Truman

shared by governing and participating states of the PARCC and Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortia. As referenced above, the influence of these unprecedented mandates on student learning will be ultimately determined, in large part, of the leadership effectiveness that drives their execution in our local communities.

The mission of the Common Core State Standards (2012) is “...to provide a *consistent, clear understanding* of what students are expected to learn, so teachers and parents know what they need to do to help them. The standards are designed to be robust and relevant to the real world, reflecting the knowledge and skills that our young people need for success in college and careers. With American students fully prepared for the future, our communities will be best positioned to compete successfully in the global economy.” In careful consideration of this mission statement, the challenge becomes immediately apparent – How do we ensure a *“consistent, clear (deep and authentic) understanding of what students are expected to learn”* so that teachers can help each to be adequately prepared for their life and work in this contemporary age? To borrow the

words of Grant Wiggins, what does it mean to understand?

Common (Number) Sense

Quality control in our schools has long been a challenge. It is often said there are varying forms of curriculum – the written, explicit or overt curriculum; the hidden or covert curriculum; the null curriculum; the tested curriculum; the societal curriculum; and, even, the electronic curriculum, to name a few. Therefore, we must leverage the unprecedented “*opportunities*” fostered by the “*difficulties*” of the Common Core, PARCC and related mandates, with maximum return to ensure:

- a deeper and authentic understanding of curriculum across all stakeholders, specifically teachers and educational leadership;
- the most valid and reliable means of assessment and evaluation of its impact of on student learning; and
- alignment of the curriculum to exemplary instruction and assessment to create a coherent curriculum and more importantly – process!

In order to ensure that our curricula is truly “common and coherent,” it was essential for us to create opportunities

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for those responsible for its implementation – our teachers and educational leaders – to work collaboratively to thoughtfully examine, unpack, discuss, and, ultimately, gain a deeper understanding of the standards that drive it. To this end, the five school districts of the Pascack Valley Region – Hillsdale, Montvale, River Vale, Woodcliff Lake and the Pascack Valley High School District – launched a mathematics curriculum renewal and common (online) assessment initiative that has already proven to be successful in their efforts to provide a world class mathematics program for every student in the region. In response to the aforementioned growing pool of cognitive and pedagogical research, and federal and state mandates, the regional district leaders convened a Task Force comprised of approximately 25 dedicated mathematics teachers and administrators. Under the collaborative guidance and facilitation of Mrs. Judith T. Brendel, Pascack Valley Regional High School District Mathematics Supervisor, and Dr. Brian Chinni, Montvale Public Schools' District Supervisor of Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment, the Task Force members embarked upon a formal multi-year process that includes the following six distinct and essential components:

- 1) Common Course of Action - professional research and preparation;
- 2) Common Curriculum - curriculum evaluation, unpacking, revision and development;
- 3) Common Language and Practice - examination, identification and alignment of exemplary mathematics instructional practices; professional development program planning and implementation;
- 4) Common Assessments - benchmark assessment item bank development and administration of online assessments; and
- 5) Common Resources – program (s) selection and recommendation;

In order to gain important insights and timely information regarding state and national educational policy changes and related mandates, the Task Force was most privileged to have worked with various experts and State-level officials, including Mrs. Willa Spicer, former NJDOE Deputy Commissioner, and current Director of the NJ Office of Student Learning Assessments, Dr. Jeffrey B. Hauger. Former Deputy Commissioner Spicer provided the Task Force with important information regarding the implementation of the Common Core Mathematics Standards, and the implications for essential shifts in instructional and assessment practices. Dr. Hauger offered insights regarding impending significant changes in the overall design, substance, and administration of the New Jersey assessment program.

While this work should always be considered ongoing, to date, the Task Force has achieved most of its intended goals and desired outcomes: the development of a common curriculum framework; common practice through common professional development; and the development and administration of common (web-based) assessments, evaluation, and resulting data analysis. This year, we will focus on using our professional learning communities to use the data to make recommendations for a common instruction program.

Perhaps two of the most important discoveries determined through this unprecedented initiative was that distinct school districts can and do work cooperatively without being told to and what we long thought to be common and consistent across our schools and classrooms, was, in fact, rather uncommon and inconsistent. Therefore, in the absence of such **challenges** we may have never

created such essential **opportunities**. Remember, it's what you choose to make of your circumstance that ultimately determines the outcome. Best wishes to all...

Note: Many of our colleagues throughout the State have expressed enthusiastic interest in participation in our Consortium. The Consortium members welcome your participation and involvement. We are currently accepting additional district members for the 2012-2013 school year. Therefore, if you would like to learn more about how your district can become a 2012-2013 Consortium Member please contact: Dr. Brian P. Chinni, Montvale, District Supervisor of Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment, bchinni@tmieducation.com; or Dr. Matthew J. Murphy, Chief Educational Officer, River Vale Schools mmurphy@rivervaleschools.com.

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