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## **Writing Across the K12 Curriculum**

*Common Core mandates for success.*

*By:*

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Back in 2010, then-elementary school Principal Catherine White focused on writing in the Attleboro (Mass.) Public Schools. And with that, the school's fourth graders beat the state average for long composition on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System.

"Not one kid cried during long comp 2010," she recalls. "No one ripped up their papers. No one threw up. Kids wrote almost the whole day long, and when announced that it was done, the fourth grade cheered and yelled so loud I could hear them downstairs in my office. Kids were so proud. Kids were having conversations all over the building about their writing."

White, now a literacy specialist in the Natick (Mass.) Public Schools, looks at that accomplishment as a foreshadowing of the success that's possible with Common Core State Standards.

In preparation for new testing in the fall of 2014, district leaders are increasing writing and shifting it across the curriculum as they teach to the new Common Core standards. District literacy must supplement narrative and opinion writing with information-based writing and evidence-based argumentative writing not just in English Language Arts, but in civics, science, and even math, according to White and Bruce Bradley, curriculum director for the North Royalton (Ohio) City Schools.

Now that SMARTER Balanced Assessment Consortium and the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for Colleges and Careers are on track to deliver online assessments in the 2014-2015

academic year, consortia and district leaders say they are more determined than ever to improve students' writing performance and enhance professional collaboration internally.

Barbara Kapinus, director of English Language Arts and literacy for SMARTER Balanced, says more writing is essential. "It's a way of getting to deeper levels of thinking," Kapinus says. "You just can't get the level of thinking with multiple-choice (test) items that you get with writing an essay."

The added emphasis on writing as a whole helps with critical thinking, says Bonnie Hain, PARCC's senior advisor for English Language Arts and literacy. The Common Core standards were created to improve students' ability to translate information and communicate it through writing across disciplines—a skill needed for careers beyond college and technical school. "When you look at why Common Core was adopted in the first place," Hain says, "states saw a number of research reports that [revealed that] students were not coming out of school prepared for college and career readiness. Whether it's college or careers, writing is a skill we hear (about) over and over again."

### **New Ways of Writing**

Some district administrators are devising ways to deliver writing across the curriculum by imposing new, more intricate ways of writing for 21st-century students. They include: writing vertically; argumentative writing, which relies upon citing textual evidence to establish, counter, and prove a claim; real-life situations; and linking reading to writing.

White says that having teachers plan for writing "vertically," or knowing what is taught in prior grades, is critical. And earlier grades may need to master narrative writing skills that include opening with an engaging hook and clearly identifying a problem, for instance, she says, while middle school students beginning to write argumentatively will have to know how to make a claim and back it up with evidence from assigned texts.

To keep students motivated, embedding a writing assignment in real-life, problem-solving situations can be invaluable, adds Jana M. Alig,

executive director of elementary education in the Reynoldsburg City (Ohio) Schools, which serves 6,000 students. “They don’t even realize they’re doing the writing when they create the ‘How Can We Help Our Environment’ pamphlet,” she says. “If they produce a product that helps solve a real-world problem, that seems to be a great motivator.”

## **Building an Argument**

Argumentative writing requires students, particularly in middle and high school, to do more than summarize content for an assignment or test. Students must show what they know and how they know it, using evidence in the texts provided. And teachers must work together to achieve that result.

This past year, leaders in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg (N.C.) Schools, which has 141,000 students, asked every teacher to use argumentative writing in a lesson based on Common Core standards. The task was “new for absolutely everyone in the district and it would cross content areas,” says Becky Graf, director of the district’s humanities department.

For this multidisciplinary lesson, students in every grade used different texts pertaining to World War II, such as news articles, paintings, and song lyrics, to build to a convincing argument. Common Core standards included reading, research, and synthesizing data as well as writing argumentatively, says Jami D. Rodgers, humanities literacy specialist for the district. “We wanted to bridge the connection between reading and writing, [to have students] not just recognize the skill but produce it, use it, and internalize it,” he says. “We wanted our history, music, and math teachers to see themselves in this lesson. Before this, every teacher didn’t have to be trained on the same concepts.”

In New York, some districts are using a curriculum tool called Writing Matters to help teachers collaborate on teaching methods used with Common Core. In a pilot study completed in December, researchers from ALTA Solutions Group, an independent education program evaluations consultant, found, in part, that students writing argumentative assignments who were taught by these teachers substantially outperformed their peers, says Lynette Guastaferrero,

executive director of Teaching Matters, which is a nonprofit that helps teachers increase their effectiveness, and which created the tool.

Another experience with an argumentative writing task illustrates that even students who typically excel can be challenged by these new approaches. Charlotte-Mecklenburg leaders were surprised to find that in one lesson, honors students did not have an edge over other students in writing effectively. Grade 10 students had to write an editorial about whether the political views of the Federalists and anti-Federalists were still relevant today. The honors students “regurgitated” and summarized information, failing to establish and maintain a claim by using text-based evidence to support their argument. Yet, other grade 10 students were successful, Graf notes. “What used to be an honors standard (summarizing content) didn’t cut the mustard with Common Core,” she says.

### **Linking Reading and Writing**

In the North Royalton, Ohio, district, which serves about 4,600 students, district leaders have been introducing more writing to middle school students by focusing on reading across content areas, says Bradley, the district’s curriculum director. The program is called RICA, or Reading In the Content Areas.

“The whole premise is for teachers to directly teach reading and writing in the content, for instance as it applies to fifth-grade science or social studies,” he says.

Some fifth-grade science, math, and social studies teachers are teaching Common Core reading and writing standards for one period a day, linking reading and writing assignments directly to their subject, Bradley says.

Science teacher Sarah Franko’s most popular lesson is one in which fifth-graders read short, nonfiction National Geographic articles on animal intelligence and seahorses. Students must then compare and contrast the information.

Proof of the effectiveness of this type of teaching is evident not just in the assessment results, Bradley says, but in students’ enthusiasm in completing the work. “When you write across content,” he adds, “you

can make a connection. It's not writing in isolation. It ties it all together."

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