Essential Leadership Elements in Implementing Common Core State Standards

By Linda H. Eilers and Martha D'Amico

Six essential elements enable school leaders to approach and implement any change such as the Common Core State Standards Initiative in K-12 schools in the United States. Leadership requires a clear purpose, priorities, alignment, professional discourse, risk taking, and feedback. The authors describe each element and implications for effective school leaders.

School leaders are those who guide the teaching and learning in institutions charged with educating today's youth. These leaders include but are not limited to principals, instructional facilitators, coaches, and lead teachers. As school personnel whose role is to affect student learning, school leaders in the United States have the responsibility of guiding the implementation of curricular changes such as the Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSSI). The CCSSI is a state-led effort orchestrated by the National Governors Council and the Council of Chief State School Officers to provide clear-cut goals for what students in U.S. schools serving kindergarten through Grade 12 should know, understand, and be able to do to be successful in college and the workplace.

The CCSSI is based on achievement data of U.S. students and input from critical stakeholders. These stakeholders include scholars, teachers, school leaders, professional organizations, and parents, who developed a set of Common Core Standards that provide learning outcomes for all students in all schools across the United States. The Standards are a roadmap for schools, teachers, and parents. However, unlike some past initiatives that dictated curriculum, assessment instruments, and pacing of instruction, these Standards do not dictate how teachers must teach. The development and implementation of curriculum to meet these goals is left to individual states, districts, schools, and specifically the school leaders (Council of Chief State School Officers and National Governors Association, 2011).

School leaders have the responsibility of deciding how best to meet these Standards by moving faculty and staff to uncharted territory. Because of the immediacy and requirements from state departments of education, many may find themselves dictating instructional changes that have not been carefully thought out in an effort to implement these Standards. Without guidance from a skilled leader, teachers and students are likely to experience frustration and failure. To avoid such a scenario, we challenge school leaders to consider the following elements as they embark on this new initiative. These six essential elements are selected from those identified by experts on school leadership and the ones we believe are the most critical to successful implementation of the CCSSI (Benjamin,
2011; Brown, 2004; Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning, 2010; Engels, Hotton, Devos, Bouckenoooghe, & Aelterman, 2008; Friedman, 2004; Fullan & Knight, 2011; Mendez-Morse, 1992; Printy, 2010; Seashore Louis & Wahlstrom, 2011; Thessin & Starr, 2011; Wise & Jacobo, 2010). These elements are (a) establishing a purpose, (b) setting priorities, (c) aligning personnel with curricular needs, (d) practicing professional discourse, (e) encouraging risk taking, (f) and providing feedback.

**Establish a Purpose**
The first essential element of effective school leadership is to set a purpose. Brown (2004), Engels et al. (2008), Friedman (2004), Mendez-Morse (1992), and Printy (2010) argued that a shared purpose and vision, a goal-oriented mission, and a focused course of action are critical to teaching and learning. School leaders must develop an informed, shared vision for how their schools will operate to implement the Standards fully. They must immerse themselves in the tenets and spirit of the initiative to promote (a) deeper coverage of less content; (b) thoughtful balance of text type and genre; (c) connection of mathematical practices to content; (d) integration of history, social studies, and science into language arts; (e) college- and career-readiness anchor standards for each of the language arts; and (f) a heavy emphasis on all types of technology embedded into all curricular areas (Council of Chief State School Officers and National Governors Association, 2011). This purpose includes complete familiarization with and critical analysis of the resources available to school personnel to implement the Standards. The purpose must be clearly established with input from faculty and staff from the initial stages to ensure success.

**Align Faculty and Staff**
Once the purpose is set, the second essential element is to align faculty and staff. Fullan and Knight (2011), Mendez-Morse (1992), Printy (2010), Thessin and Starr (2011), and Wise and Jacobo (2010) asserted that school leaders should identify, value, and use the professional strengths of each individual as they seek input and bring the individual into line with the overall vision. School leaders are encouraged to begin by determining the knowledge and skills of all personnel to orchestrate shifts in content and pedagogy. They also have the responsibility of defining areas of strength and opportunity within individuals to bridge existing practices to those assuring the college and career readiness of all students. After making such determinations, the school leaders must provide the appropriate support and feedback to each person or group by scaffolding learning shifts one step at a time. This can be accomplished by (a) reorganizing teams to maximize strengths, (b) providing intensive professional development to build on opportunities, and (c) identifying key faculty members to provide collegial support to team members who are hesitant. These decisions

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require school leaders to exercise careful consideration and integrity.

**Determine Priorities**

Establishing a clear vision and getting everyone on board require setting priorities. The third essential leadership element is prioritizing steps in the implementation process. The Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning (2011), Mendez-Morse (1992), and Printy (2010) all claimed that good leaders proactively guide change through setting agendas to chart the course. School leaders have the responsibility of building a climate and structure for change by determining the importance and sequence of the stages involved in any change (Mendez-Morse, 1992). Each stage must be translated into manageable tasks that are achievable and measurable to accomplish the intended purpose. Effective leaders create a prioritized and proactive structure to reduce anxiety and frustration while ensuring success. Implementation of the new Common Core Standards requires leaders to quickly identify appropriate priorities based on staff, curricular, and student needs and to respond accordingly to shifts in the organization as they arise.

**Facilitate Professional Discourse**

Once a shared vision is established, personnel are aligned for efficiency, and priorities have been set in the actual implementation process, the fourth essential element requires that school leaders build professional communities. Benjamin (2011), Brown (2004), the Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning (2010), and Thessin and Starr (2011) pointed out that school personnel do not automatically know how to work together to live up to their potential. Research by Seashore Louis and Wahlstrom (2011) found that “principals are the critical link in stimulating the conversations that led [sic] to classroom practices that are associated with improved student learning” (p. 54).

School leaders must promote professional discourse among faculty and staff to reach the Standards set by the CCSSI. Guiding personnel through productive professional conversations requires school leaders to study and discuss all aspects of the initiative with faculty, ask questions to promote critical thinking, and lead everyone to seek answers together. This facilitates the creation of a plan of action for each grade level and subject area, and it also means that school leaders must attend learning sessions with faculty and facilitate study sessions on the school campus as each aspect of the CCSSI implementation is examined. Each grade level and subject area must be included and addressed to bring about clarity. The Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning (2011) recommended that leaders arrange schedules to allow for common planning time, opportunities for peer observation, and focused vertical alignment through cross-grade meetings. Thessin and Starr (2011) argued, “Simply putting well-meaning individuals together and expecting them to collaborate is not enough” (p. 50).

**Encourage Risk Taking**

The fifth essential element of effective leadership is the ability to create an environment in which school personnel are empowered to take the risks involved in making strides necessary to tackle and implement change. Brown (2004), The Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning (2011), Engels et al. (2008), Friedman (2004), and Seashore Louis and Wahlstrom (2011) conjectured that building trust is the catalyst to risk taking that allows change to happen. Changes in education involving teacher practices, student achievement, and parental support are best accomplished when everyone involved has
established a common knowledge base and a system of beliefs that view risk as a positive venture.

In order to establish this common ground regarding CCSSI and ultimately a strong trust among the faculty and staff, school leaders must encourage collaboration by observing and engaging in dialogue about the positive side of taking risk with the idea of making gains rather than the potential for tension or loss. Effective leaders pay close attention to learning along with the faculty to support and encourage experimentation appropriately. This helps teachers feel safe to take risks, thus building confidence and trust in the implementation of CCSSI. Guarantees of professional support and safety to try new things enable school personnel to modify content and instructional practices required to make each student college and career ready. Because the Standards do not dictate how goals should be reached, risk taking with support must be embedded in all other essential elements to bring about change.

Provide Specific Feedback
The final essential element of strong leadership is continuous support through corrective and specific feedback. The Center for the Future of Teaching Learning (2011), Friedman (2004), Fullan and Knight (2011), Mendez-Morse (1992), and Thessin and Starr (2011) noted that moving toward change requires a differentiated, supportive working environment with clear expectations. Similar to risk taking, feedback in the form of communicating what is working and assisting necessary changes to what is not working without fear of reprisal generates positive change.

Feedback is the basis for modification and maintaining motivation while valuing each facet of the implementation of any change. Frequent and focused feedback with faculty is critical to the positive flow of ideas and exchanges within the school environment. Outcomes required by CCSSI are best achieved through two-way discussion with specific input from the leader that results in shared plans about how to improve instructional decision making. School leaders from principals to instructional facilitators must continually lead teachers to look closely at curricular changes, question each practice, and make adjustments as needed. This process is a way to determine if the overarching purpose is being met and to refine instruction constantly to further enhance student achievement. Effective leaders encourage teachers to share their journey with other professionals, building confidence and security in the process of implementing any change such as the CCSSI. Printy (2010) suggested that school leaders who “encourage instructional improvement draw together to engage in joint work to improve teaching and learning” (p. 115).

Conclusion
The CCSSI sets standards for learning to ensure that all students in U.S. schools are ready for college and the workplace. Although implementing any mandate requiring change is a challenge, the CCSSI poses the additional challenge of not providing a blueprint for leaders. Rather, the school leaders are required to chart and modify the course as needed, identify the vessels for the journey, and keep everyone on board throughout the voyage.

We have identified six essential elements as the framework for successful leadership of an implementation of the CCSSI. These elements are the framework for actions that will enable school leaders to transform schools into learning communities where students are prepared for success in college and chosen careers. Only skilled and principled leaders will facilitate the necessary changes in school personnel and climate required to establish more
rigorous and robust schools. School leaders who embrace these elements will be better equipped to move their colleagues from current beliefs and practices to new and uncharted territory.

References


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The Subtlety of Bullying
By Dianne H. Thomas

Bullying is an ongoing and serious issue that takes place in all types of schools—rural, urban, suburban, affluent, and economically challenged. The bully may be socially marginalized, popular, or one of the average students in the classroom. Victims are not always easily identified, nor is evidence of bullying easily seen. In this article, a veteran teacher discusses the subtlety of bullying as viewed from her own teaching experiences. The detrimental results of bullying are discussed based on information gleaned from a review of literature chosen from the voluminous pieces on this important topic. The author discusses results of a survey she developed and draws conclusions on ways that teachers can address bullying.

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