

12-1-2013

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Recommended Citation

Hendricks, Paige (2013) "Remaining Globally Competitive: Leadership and the Common Core State Standards (CCSS)," *The William & Mary Educational Review*: Vol. 2 : Iss. 1 , Article 16.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wm.edu/wmer/vol2/iss1/16>

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Remaining Globally Competitive: Leadership and the Common Core State Standards (CCSS)

Paige Hendricks

Abstract

State and local school systems maintained autonomy of schools, curriculum, classrooms, and instructional practices until roughly the year 2000. The passage of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation in 2001 shifted the educational role of the Federal Government, beginning an increased focus on accountability measures to ensure that the children of the United States remain globally competitive. However, the implementation of NCLB and, more recently, the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) has proven difficult for state and local school leaders. Important leadership skills such as increased communication (to ensure collaboration and capacity-building) and shared decision-making will assist leaders with necessary clarity and focus to successfully implement two concurrent educational approaches and ensure high accountability and achievement for all students in a globally competitive marketplace.

Keywords: No Child Left Behind, Common Core State Standards, leadership skills

Until roughly the year 2000, the Federal Government remained primarily an overseer of the educational systems in the United States rather than an enforcer of mandates and laws. Individual states and school systems had the autonomy to use a combination of federal and state dollars to determine how their students were educated. As a result of this autonomy, multiple views emerged about how curriculum, classroom, and instructional practices should function. Accountability measures plummeted, and an achievement gap was created between various subgroups of students nationwide (Center for Evaluation and Educational Policy, 2010). This resulted in a fear that the children of the United States were not learning what was necessary to remain competitive in a global marketplace (NCLB, 2001).

The passing of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) shifted the educational role of the Federal Government toward an increased focus on accountability as a means to becoming a more competitive society. The Federal Government was no longer just a funding resource in the pursuit of educational reform; rather, it became a fully regulatory operation, seeking to apply rules in a general yet formalized manner to large groups of people, resulting in a reduction of alternatives granted to these individuals (Fowler, 2013). These nationwide standardized educational practices increased the mandates and accountability

measures states used to show student learning and restricted state and local school districts' funding allocations. NCLB paved the way for the Federal Government to become more of a player in the role of future educational practice. However, NCLB also generated a number of implementation challenges, such as meeting the law's numerous requirements and developing leadership skills among key educational stakeholders needed to execute these requirements.

The implementation of NCLB proved difficult for a variety of reasons, but in particular state and local agencies lacked the capacity (e.g., funding, clear communication about objectives, leadership by relevant stakeholders, etc.) to implement all of the law's requirements (Sunderman & Orfield, 2007). These same sets of challenges appear in the efforts to implement the Common Core State Standards (CCSS; National Governors Association and Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). Successfully managing the challenge of implementing the CCSS while moving forward with remaining NCLB requirements necessitates strong leadership skills by state and local school leaders. The most important leadership skills include increasing communication between state and local agencies to ensure collaboration and capacity-building and using shared decision-

making skills when addressing current and future implementation of both educational mandates. Only when leaders adopt such leadership qualities will NCLB and CCSS have any chance of being successfully implemented in a way that produces accountability and achievement for all students in a globally competitive marketplace. Past efforts to implement NCLB and the requirement for concurrent implementation of CCSS require a new focus on clarity and effective leadership at all levels of the process.

Historical Context

Over time, the United States has assigned responsibilities and jurisdiction over education and educational practices to the state and local governments. The Elementary and Secondary School Act of 1965 (ESEA) signed by President Lyndon B. Johnson, was one of the first pieces of federal education legislation passed by Congress. ESEA's goals focused on primary and secondary education, establishing high standards and accountability, and lessening achievement gaps between student groups without adopting a standardized, national curriculum (ESEA, 1965). ESEA granted funding for states and local school districts to implement localized programs to achieve these goals allowing the Federal Government to remain impartial and yield to the states' educational judgments.

After ESEA, Congress passed two additional laws that maintained the Federal Government's detachment from curriculum, courses, and instructional practices of state and local school divisions. The General Education Provisions Act of 1970 (GEPA) and the Department of Education Organization Act of 1979 (DEOA) were passed following the establishment of the Department of Education (The Pioneer Institute, 2012). Both Acts exclude the Federal Government from "exercising any direction, supervision, or control over the curriculum, program of instruction, administration, or personnel of any educational institution, school, or school system" (GEPA, 1970). As with ESEA, the Department of Education's main function under both of these new laws was to allocate funds to local school districts nationwide and to allow state school systems to govern their own schools accordingly. While local school systems monitored educational content and curriculum for students, the Department focused on "aid for disadvantaged students, accountability, civil rights, and evaluation"

(The Pioneer Institute, 2012, p. 1).

Although ESEA was reauthorized every five years, by the year 2000, new visions about the Federal Government's role in educational practices began to emerge. In 2001, the government shifted its educational focus to the equality of national educational practices through standardized assessment practices. Here, according to NCLB, all states were to use standardized testing to improve education in the United States (Zhao, 2012). NCLB created a common core of academic content in mathematics and language arts connected to ongoing assessments, thereby limiting each state's ability to determine curricular content, pace, and level of mastery for their diverse student population. It also interfered with the GEPA and DEOA Acts from thirty years prior by allowing government to dictate curricular and instructional practices. Due to its definitive nature, the focus on assessment limited educational practices at the state and local levels, thereby reducing each state's autonomy of educational practice.

In 2009, the Obama Administration signed the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) providing additional funding for educational practices under a program titled Race to the Top (RTT). RTT funds enabled states to spur innovation in elementary and secondary schools through the use of four government reform components: adopting international education standards and assessments; building data to measure student success; increasing teacher and principal effectiveness within schools; and turning around the lowest-achieving schools (The Pioneer Institute, 2012). A point system was designed to allow state competition for RTT funds. Although not mandated, higher points would be awarded to states that adopted national educational standards, thereby meeting the first component of the RTT program. As a result, the first few states acquiring the RTT funds also adopted the CCSS. A second round of RTT funds was distributed to additional states that quickly followed suit (Hamilton, 2010).

To date, 45 states, the District of Columbia, and four U.S. territories have adopted the CCSS (National Governors Association and Council of Chief State School Officers, 2012). General consensus has provided the platform for our government to create a nationalized set of educational standards for all students through implementation of both NCLB and the CCSS (ASCD, 2012; National Governors Association and Council of Chief State School Officers, 2012;

Sunderman & Orfield, 2007). The National Governors Association (NGA) and Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSO) oppose this premise. Proponents argue the fact that so many states have adopted the CCSS is an indication that it is an appropriate and effective set of standards (National Governors Association and Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). The CCSS prescribe language arts and mathematics curricular practices based upon consistent high standards nationwide. The goal is to ensure that all of our students are prepared with the basic skills and knowledge they will need to compete with students around the world, thereby ensuring America maintains its competitive edge (National Governors Association and Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010, FAQs).

Leadership and the Common Core

The overlaps in implementation of NCLB and the CCSS have resulted in similar challenges facing current school leaders. Arguably, in both instances, implementation challenges prompted school leaders to develop increased leadership qualities, including high-level communication skills and shared decision-making through trust, in order to deal with the challenges. NCLB created an expectation that all state-level education departments would achieve extraordinary educational progress and apply sanctions that would result in significant interventions in thousands of schools (Sunderman & Orfield, 2007). A recent study of the CCSS found many challenges surrounding implementation including an incomplete overall understanding of the standards and uncertainty about how they will be implemented and measured (Center on Education Policy, 2011). For leaders, these are major pitfalls that threaten successful implementation (Center on Education Policy, 2011). Leaders must continue to adopt and foster the development of high-level communication skills to ensure collaboration and capacity-building. They must also utilize shared decision-making skills through trust to become the leaders needed to overcome these obstacles.

Communication Skills for Collaboration and Capacity-Building

Communication plays a critical role in educational practice as “it underlies or permeates the instructional, interpersonal, organizational, and administrative processes and structures of schools” (Hoy & Miskel, 2013, p. 389). The verbiage of

both NCLB and the CCSS must be written in a concise and clear manner to ensure the messages sent through goals, strategies, symbols, as well as verbal and nonverbal cues are received as intended. Leaders must also check for feedback from multiple stakeholders periodically to ensure overall understandings and make necessary corrections when misinterpretations prevail (Hoy & Miskel, 2013). States that adopted the CCSS initially found it difficult to determine how the standards would be interpreted and implemented directly in schools and classrooms. Principals, teachers, school boards, and community members must communicate openly and freely to ensure that all participants have a clear understanding of the standards and can ensure that the standards are used in best practices for student learning.

Collaboration and capacity-building surrounding the overall vision (including effective implementation) of both NCLB and the CCSS must occur at several levels: between the Federal Government and states; between states and local schools and districts; and between P-12 schools and colleges and universities with teacher training programs. Building capacity for the vision of NCLB and the CCSS cannot occur without a thorough understanding of the standards through effective speaking and listening strategies between and among all of the relevant stakeholders. School leaders must seek all available information on both NCLB and the CCSS through conferences, webinars, papers, and reports to learn as much as possible about these two educational policies. Ivey and Ivey (1999) explain that, after individually processing this information, leaders should open the communication between their schools and districts, embracing attending, questioning, encouraging, paraphrasing, reflecting, feeling, and summarizing skills (as cited in Hoy & Miskel, 2013). This will guarantee that all stakeholders understand the policy and practice of implementing NCLB and the CCSS in their schools. In addition, school leaders must also open communication lines between their districts and state leaders, as well as with surrounding colleges and universities with teacher training programs. Collaboration with teacher training programs

will ensure that young teachers coming into a school setting for the first time will have some foundation in both NCLB and CCSS, which will help them manage the transition to full-time teaching. Without collaboration and capacity-building through effective communication, these connections will become ineffective and implementing NCLB and the CCSS will remain an elusive process.

Shared Decision-Making and Trust

Empowering teachers through a shared decision-making process will prove effective when implementing NCLB and the CCSS in schools. Although the mandates originated from an arena outside teacher control, teachers should remain invested in the process to ensure high-quality decisions are made (Hoy & Miskel, 2013). Decisions made at the local school and district levels regarding the implementation of NCLB and the CCSS can remain of high quality when teachers participate in the process of achieving successful learning outcomes for all students through sharing individual viewpoints with others. “Lessons learned by colleagues will help educators learn and develop capacity, as well as avoid pitfalls” (ASCD, 2012, p. 36). For example, Kentucky, one of the first states to implement the CCSS, encourages teachers to share resources, lesson plans, and assessments, increasing knowledge and understanding of the standards (Konz, 2013). Through shared meaning, all stakeholders are open, communicative, and invested in success.

The implementation process of NCLB and the CCSS may also be out of the zone of acceptance (Hoy & Miskel, 2013) for most teachers and stakeholders, as these individuals lack expertise on the mandates, but have a personal stake in the implementation process. One such example came after the CCSS assessment rollout, when many states found their technological infrastructure insufficient to maintain and properly support all students simultaneously. One consortium, the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) offered information to leaders and educators on ways to acquire and access higher levels of technology to support the implementation of the CCSS (PARCC, 2012). PARCC also supported involving teachers and support staff in conversations about technological needs in order to become creative in considering additional future computer devices, increased bandwidth, and funding. Leaders should include

the extensive involvement of teachers and stakeholders in this process immediately and in an ongoing manner. “The earlier the individuals can be involved in the decision, the better” (Hoy & Miskel, 2013, p. 375). Involving teachers allows increased understanding of the mandates and a higher overall investment in the implementation process.

The effective leader will not be successful with the concurrent implementation of NCLB and the CCSS unless he establishes a culture of trust. This leader recognizes that the implementation of two mandates is, and will continue to be, challenging. Fostering a culture of trust allows the stakeholders and leaders to become vulnerable, “based on the confidence that the latter party is benevolent, reliable, competent, honest, and open” (Hoy & Miskel, 2013, p. 194). ASCD, for example, has collected multiple resources to assist teachers and administrators in the implementation process of the CCSS. The resources include books, webinars, conferences, and skill-building handouts generated around a common theme: trust (ASCD, 2013). Collectively these resources engage all stakeholders in high levels of open communication, affording purposeful dialog and trust-building opportunities. These characteristics, in both the stakeholders and the leaders, demonstrate a higher level of connection, which can foster greater and more successful implementation and overall change. The significance of trust in leadership cannot be ignored. Trust as a tool can be used to the advantage of many leaders and afford skills to increase the level of implementation of complex laws and regulations such as NCLB and the CCSS.

Conclusion

The current educational system practice of equity through accountability has become a process mandated by the Federal Government with the passing into law of NCLB and the adoption of the CCSS. As such, the simultaneous implementation of both mandates remains challenging and requires school leaders to adopt particular leadership qualities to ensure success. These leaders must embrace and adopt high-level communication and shared decision-making skills to ensure full cooperation and collaboration among all stakeholders. High-level communication skills will foster capacity-building within schools and school districts as well as between school districts and states and school districts and universities. Further, employing a shared decision-making

process allows all stakeholders opportunities to learn from each other and move toward successful implementation of both mandates and systemic change. Finally, leaders cannot negate the power of trust when asking stakeholders to work through the process of implementing confusing and often conflicting educational mandates. The implementation of NCLB concurrently with the CCSS requires leaders to prove that student learning and success in a competitive global market is everyone's ultimate educational goal.

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About the author

Paige Hendricks is a PhD student in the Educational Policy, Planning, and Leadership program, focusing on K-12 Administration and Gifted Administration.