



Gifted Learners: Poised to 'Join The Conversation'

Still, educators may have to go deeper

to meet the needs of such students

While many educators feel that the common-core standards fall more in line with the pedagogy of gifted education than previous states' standards, the standards in and of themselves will not be sufficient to challenge a school's most advanced learners, gifted education advocates say.

"Some students will be able to meet the standards faster than others, and the developers [of the common core] realized that one size does not fit all," said Jane Clarenbach, the director of public education for the National Association for Gifted Children in Washington. "They specifically [said that] children with disabilities and advanced learners are going to need more."

The bottom line, said Ms. Clarenbach: Differentiation continues to be necessary for gifted learners under the common core.

But some parents of gifted children as well as gifted education advocates worry that until teachers gain a strong understanding of the standards, advanced learners may not receive the supports and differentiation they need to stay engaged.

Jared B. Dupree, the secondary mathematics coordinator for the eastern region of the 664,000-student Los Angeles Unified School District, explained.

"In order to differentiate, you have to understand the standards and know what they entail. That's ground zero," he said. "I don't see ... a strong outlook for quality differentiation for the gifted population for years ... maybe three or four years down the road."

As part of his job, Mr. Dupree works with educators of gifted and talented students in nearly 180 Los Angeles schools to teach them how to implement the new common-core math standards.

In moving to the common core, Mr. Dupree said, some schools are also relying less on prepackaged textbooks and curricula, which can make the transition even more challenging for educators and curriculum writers.

That is also the case in the Autumn Creek Elementary School in the 5,500-student Yorkville district in Illinois. Ashley E. Badger, the gifted resource teacher there, said her team has been knee-deep in rewriting and aligning the school's curriculum to the common-core standards for the past three years.

The school rolled out the math standards last year and is rolling out the English/language arts standards for the first time this year. Having teams of teachers, including gifted educators, rewrite the standards, and moving from a textbook to teacher-gathered curricula and resources, was intentional, said Ms. Badger.

"The administration felt that by teachers having to filter through the common-core standards and the new curriculum, they were getting more ownership over what they already had to teach," she said. "It gave them a deeper understanding of what they needed their children to learn as well."

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'Teachers Overwhelmed'

Ms. Badger also acknowledged the increased workload on teachers as a result of the transition to the common core.

"Teachers are especially overwhelmed, even veteran teachers," she said.

Educators of the gifted, including Sally C. Krisel, the director of innovative and advanced programs at the Hall County school district in Gainesville, Ga., expressed concern that teachers—at least initially—will be more focused on

bringing struggling learners up to speed than they will be in challenging their most advanced learners who have already mastered the minimum standards set by the common core—an issue for educators even before the shift to the common core, she said.

“If we look at school reform efforts over the last decades here in the United States, a very noble cause has been to focus on our most fragile learners,” said Ms. Krisel. “And we absolutely must take care of all of our children, but by doing that, we’ve established this artificial plateau. It’s not fair to [gifted] students. They need to be challenged to the greatest degree possible.”

By the same token, says Ms. Krisel, the common-core standards are more aligned with gifted education pedagogy than previous state standards, putting gifted educators in a strong position to implement the standards and collaborate with classroom teachers around best practices and strategies.

“Our gifted education experts are poised to be in a really good position to join this conversation,” said Ms. Krisel. “Now’s an opportunity for us to sit down with our colleagues and say, ‘Here’s how we use interest-based instruction to engage these kids long enough to master the standards.’”

The Bui is a gifted-and-talented-certified teacher at Edison Elementary School in Ontario, Calif., which has a program for gifted and talented learners in grades 3-8. He hopes the standards will raise levels of understanding for all students, including gifted learners.

“Everyone’s going to benefit ... because the standards are so clear and so specific,” he said. But the standards force teachers and students to approach teaching and learning differently, said Mr. Bui.

“There are so many more skills involved now,” he said. “In one standard, they will ask the child to critique and evaluate, comprehend, and discern. The challenge for us is to turn them from answering machines into thinking machines.”

Those teachers who have received training in gifted education should feel well-prepared to implement the common core, he said.

“There are so many parallels,” said Mr. Bui. But, “nothing matters if you don’t change how you teach,” he added. The idea of raising the bar for students is also the same idea as raising the bar for teachers.”

Implementation Concerns

But not everyone feels that the common core is having a positive impact on gifted learners. Some parents, for instance, say the new standards have made education more rote and scripted.

Gina Tampio said her son, who is in 2nd grade and an advanced learner, has lost interest in school since the common-core standards rolled out at his elementary school last year. (The school he attends no longer classifies students as gifted.)

“My main concern is that the the common core has made the curriculum so rigid and rote and, frankly, just boring,” she said. “When my son has to identify the main theme in a story, the story is so boring and nonsensical that he has learned not to care.”

Her son’s school, Daniel Warren Elementary in Mamaroneck, N.Y., has moved to a prepackaged common-core curriculum that Ms. Tampio said is highly prescriptive and requires every-

one to learn at the same pace.

In a statement emailed to *Education Week*, school district officials deny that claim.

“The Rye Neck School District is proud of its challenging curriculum and its attention to the needs of all learners,” it said. “We are a high-performing district, one that will naturally adapt to the common core while continuing to exceed that baseline with individualized attention to every one of our students.”

But Ms. Tampio said that her son has not experienced an individualized curriculum. When her son’s teacher tried to differentiate the curriculum for him, Ms. Tampio said he was simply given extra work.

“In some ways that backfired because it was almost a punishment for him,” she said.

To move beyond simply giving students extra work to challenge them, teachers must undergo intensive professional development to understand how to properly implement the standards, said Susan K. Johnsen, a professor of educational psychology at Baylor University in Waco, Texas.

“The adaptation of the standards is going to be dependent upon the professional development that teachers receive,” she said. “Teachers need to learn how to go about doing more problem-based approaches, and they need the support and resources to do that.”

Assessment Concerns

One question mark that remains is how gifted students will fare under the new common-core-aligned assessments, said Ms. Clarenbach of the National Association for Gifted Students.

She is concerned that the grade-level assessments will not provide an accurate picture of where gifted students may be if the students are far above grade-level standards.

“When assessments have ceilings, you can’t tell where a student is performing,” she said. “Who’s going to take the blame when you can’t show learning growth because the assessment won’t allow it? It’s an example of how gifted students have not been included in the consideration of things.”

Although there was not a specific advisory committee assigned to look at the needs of gifted learners, gifted education experts were brought in to address the needs of those learners for the Smarter Balanced assessment, said Shelbi K. Cole, the director of mathematics for Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium, one of the two state consortia developing general tests for the common core.

Likewise, features have been built into the assessments designed by the Partnership for the Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers, or PARCC, to accurately measure the knowledge of gifted students, said officials at that testing consortium. They said that feedback from sample tests suggests advanced learners will be challenged by the test.

Mr. Dupree, who works with math teachers in the Los Angeles district, said he is excited for the new assessments but concerned about how assessments with more open-ended questions will be scored.

“When you’re opening yourself up for students to demonstrate what they know, you need to be open to the idea that they’re showing you something you don’t know,” he said. ■

Building on a Standard

Researchers at the University of Southern California, working in collaboration with teachers, developed a sample lesson plan to show how a common-core standard can be adapted for gifted students in grades K-8.

COMMON-CORE STANDARD

Anchor Standard #7—Evaluate content presented in diverse media formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

GIFTED EDUCATION STANDARDS

Critical Thinking—Judge with criteria, relate, prove with evidence, determine the relevance.

Problem Solving—Define the problem, hypothesize, gather data, present a solution.

OBJECTIVE

Students will be able to define how various types of evidence can facilitate or hinder understanding of a problem in any discipline/subject area.

ACTIVITY

- Show students pictures of a beauty pageant, a dog show, and a flower show.



- Ask and/or research with students the various types of evidence used to determine the “most” beautiful, etc., for each of the shows.
- Discuss why evidence is an important variable for decisionmaking.

DEEPER DISCUSSION

The teacher presents an idea to the class: “There are many different types of evidence. All types of evidence are not the same.”

Working in groups, the students share situations or events in literature, mathematics, science, or social studies where the problem doesn’t match the evidence collected to solve it. Students are then given evidence cards that define different types of evidence, such as statistical, experimental, or observational. Students sort the cards based on how helpful each type of evidence would be in solving the problem they have identified.

REAL-WORLD CONNECTION

After students share and discuss their efforts, the class tries to identify other examples—potentially from current events—where evidence is needed to solve a problem.

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