

TRANSCRIPT

Instructional Shifts in Common Core State Standards—English Language Arts

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EVENT TITLE Collaborating for Success: Implementing the Common Core State Standards in California

EVENT DATE 08/14/12

DAVID LIBEN Hi everybody. By this point in my talk you can probably figure out that I come from the same place that Yogi Berra played baseball. Before I got here I, read through the forms that you filled out on what you are doing to implement the standards and what challenges you have. And the challenge is were rather substantial. And you could feel, you could feel the frustration behind the writing even though it wasn't narrative as a rule. And one theme, a couple of themes are emerged that I'd like to address right away. One was, you could say a common theme was the need to collaborate. How can I get materials, how can I get professional development—all of which is aligned—and how can I get that now, and by the way I have no money. And that ran throughout all of them. And without—taking a chance on sounding like somebody who's running for office or the second coming of the Music Man—we actually have an answer to that. We have a very concrete answer to all of that. It's called the Basal Alignment Project. It's being done by a number of districts in California, I know Fresno, I know Long Beach. Meredith, do you want to give us the names of some others. LA, San Diego, Santa Ana.

The Basal Alignment Project is, it also relates to the story about that John Dewey told, that if the angels are not going to come down, we have to do it ourselves. So here's what the Basal Alignment Project is. The current basals that we use are not aligned with the standards. In fact, they are dramatically not aligned with the standards. The culminating assignment in every single basal in the United States of America that I have read, and I've read many of these basals this last four or five months, is a text-to-self connection. It doesn't matter what the story is, it doesn't matter if it's informational text. The culminating assignment is always how it relates to your own life, how you would do this if you were in a similar situation. That is not part of the Common Core Standards. And the smaller questions about the text are not aligned. Most of them; some are, but most are not. The basals were written before the Common Core Standards. So if you're doing, if your kids are answering questions five days a week, four weeks a month, nine or ten months

a year that are not aligned with the standards, it really doesn't matter what professional development you get, what new material—what materials you're thinking about getting, or anything else you do because on a daily basis the kids are addressing questions that are not aligned with the standards.

So what Student Achievement Partners did, working with the Council of Great City Schools, was bring teachers and district people from throughout the country together. We're going to do it three times; the first was done in Baltimore a couple of months ago. We did some professional development on how can we realign the questions in the basals. We can't get new—we can't get new basals now. A, many of us don't have money and, B, they are not aligned yet. The way most, the way many publishers—I am not saying all—the way many publishers responded was to run out and get some kind of stamp at Staples that said Common Core Aligned. So you have to be really careful at this point before you go out and you buy anything that is aligned with these standards, that says, that claims to be aligned with the standards. So we don't have the money, materials are not aligned. So what we did with the people we brought together—about 50 to 60 people all the way, who came all the way from Anchorage to San Diego. And we took a look at the basals, and we did training on how to take those questions and align them to the standards. And they then took the basals that they use in their districts, and they rewrote the questions to be aligned with the standards. And what we are doing is collecting these from throughout the country. And we have about six or seven people at Student Achievement Partners who review them. We review what the teachers from around the country sent to us. We send it back, they make some changes, and then it goes online. And right now it is online at a site called Edmodo. And there are already—even it's only been week or so—1,100 people from around the country have made the contact to download these new texts or to get ready to download these new text, and they'll all be there in September. So that any basal you are using, the first, the first unit, the first couple of months of work will be there so that you can take, you can employee these aligned questions. It's free. And it's available right away.

Here's another part of it. It's professional development, If every day your teachers are answer—are asking your kids questions that are aligned with the standards, these questions are very different from the basal questions. They are new for the teachers, they are new for the kids. It is going to be a bit of a struggle for all of them. There is bit of a learning curve here. But they are doing it, they are learning it as they do it with the kids. So it's embedded free professional development. So I really urge you to think about that as one way of addressing some of the problems that you outlined on the documents that you filled out for the, for the conference.

A second one that came up was how can we get ready for two test or two sets of standards at the same time? The Common Core Standards emphasize

learning from complex text, academic vocabulary, more complex syntax, and finding evidence. Focusing with your kids on evidence, text complexity is going to prepare them for any text that they take. There is really no, there is no conflict here. So you should rid yourself of that notion. If you follow the standards, if you dive in right now with more complex text, with a greater focus on vocabulary, with many of the things that you are going to hear today, in these next two days and I am going to briefly mention now, not only is it not going to hurt you for any California test, it is going to help you. So please don't, you should dispel yourself of that notion.

Third thing that came up, text complexity. Text complexity is a real problem. I mean, what is complex text? For most of our lives, the way, as educators, the way we've approached—the way we've answered that question is the same way Potter Stewart answered the question about pornography. Well, I can't define it, but I recognize it when I see it. That's pretty much the way we've responded to complex text. And we really, since it's now a standard, standard ten, every grade: students can read independently and proficiently complex text. We have made text complexity a standard, so you can no longer have a situation where, in doing some research we would find some states had a text on the sixth-grade test and other states had the same exact text or passage on an eighth-grade test. That will no longer be the case because text complexity is a standard. In order to deal with that as a nation, we needed to have some way to determine what is complex text, both quantitatively through computerized tools, qualitatively through our own analysis and our own professional judgment. And we needed a system for doing that that is user-friendly, transparent, free, and easily accessible. And it was called for, that was called for in Appendix A, if you read Appendix A. And so we ran a research project sponsored by Student Achievement Partners that I could say Meredith and I ran, but really Meredith ran it, and that incorporated text complexity tools, quantitative and qualitative, from around the country. And that is going to be on the Common Core website, commoncore.org tomorrow. And that will help you in how to find tools to measure text complexity, in how to determine complexity, as I said, quantitatively and qualitatively. And that will be on that website starting tomorrow morning.

We found in our work going around the country, with states and districts implementing the standards, three overarching, closely related trends or implications of dealing with the Common Core Standard shifts that asked for more complex text: academic language, learning from nonfiction and informational text, and evidence. The first one came from teachers and the way the teachers put it is, really what you're asking, above and beyond the three shifts that we talk about all the time, is that we've always considered ourselves successful if we smooth the road for our students, but these standards are saying that that's not the way to go. Rather than smoothing the road for our students, we need to give them the tools to deal with the bumps.

And that's a huge change. Because we have not looked at teaching that way; we have looked at it, many of us, the way that these teachers have said. Another way to look at it—Carol Jago, a former president of the National Council of Teachers of English phrased, came up with a phrase that turned out to be the exact phrase that I used all the time. The zone of proximal development has become the zone of maximal comfort. We're afraid to ask our kids to deal with complexity, we're afraid to ask our kids to wrestle with questions, and we're afraid to put in front of them texts that they have to learn from on their own, with support, that is more complex. And this comes in a number of forms.

Catherine mentioned prereading. If any of you have followed Tim Shanahan's blog on prereading, there has been a debate about how much prereading should be given. And the way Tim put it is prereading has gone berserk. In looking at some of the basals that I have read, in front of a passage about a boy, passage of a fourth-grade text, story about a boy working with his grandfather who has Alzheimer's and is losing his memory. The teacher is instructed to tell the kids before reading the story, "Read this story about a boy who's trying to help his grandfather who has problems because he is losing his memory." They've essentially given the kids the main idea before they start reading the text. There are texts about the Titanic, where it's felt that there is a need to tell the kids that this was a very large ship before they start reading it. Any kind of careful reading of these text shows you that this was a rather large ship, not to mention the picture with the four, with the four stacks on the front. One of my favorites is not as humorous, but it's sad, a great book that I used teaching when I first started teaching 114 years ago: *My Side of the Mountain*, about a boy stranded in the Catskills who has to learn how to survive. And the teacher is told to tell the kids, "Read this story about a boy who's stranded in the mountains and in order to survive he learns from all the other—all the animals who are there." That's the exact point of the whole passage, if not the whole book, and so teachers are told to explain that to children before they start reading it.

Now if you do all that, you are certainly smoothing the road for the kids. They are going to comprehend that specific text better. But you are not teaching them to navigate any of the bumps. Vocabulary. How much vocabulary do we give to kids? If we give the kids every difficult word in the text before they read it, that is certainly going to smooth the road, but it's not giving them any tools to navigate the bumps. If we don't spend some time on determining the meaning of words in context, then we are depriving the kids of perhaps the most necessary tool to becoming a proficient reader. But it's not done nearly as much as it should. The basals do it hardly at all, and in my experience observing teachers over the years, we don't want to do it because it takes time. You'd rather get to the big ideas, you'd rather get to the essential questions, than to take time out on determining the meaning of words from context. But I assure you, on these new tests and in any complex text, there

are going to be words that children don't know even on most proficient readers. So if we don't get them used to determining meaning from context, even if they can't get it right, then we're essentially crippling them in terms of complex text.

Think-alouds. Think-alouds are another tool that could be valid if used correctly but have also gone berserk. At key points in the text, the basals—and many other programs, not just the basals—tell teachers to stop and explain those key points, key or most difficult. Stop and explain those key or most difficult points in the text to the students, so that they don't have to come up against it and figure it out on their own. A wonderful example in the Basal Alignment Project was this story called *When Charlie McButton Lost His Power*. So this is a third-grade text about a boy who lived for his electronics and lived through his gadgets and suffered a power failure for the first time in his life. And he thought he was going to die, not because he was in any danger but because he couldn't use any of his computers or any of his games. And his heart started to go and he saw his life flash before his eyes. And then his little sister comes across the room with some kind of talking doll that's walking with her. And his eyes pop wide open and he says to himself, "Triple A batteries." But alas Charlie has no batteries. So he is doomed. He couldn't resist the temptation, and he of course pounces on the doll, plucks out the triple A battery, and finds himself shortly thereafter in the McButton timeout corner. Given a chance to think, he decides that his sister isn't that bad after all, because his sister ran off crying to the bathtub, where she sat and sulked while Charlie was in timeout. His sister is not so bad after all, she slips—she eats his peas for him when he is supposed to eat to them, she doesn't drool, and as things go, generally she is a pretty good little sister. And then as soon as he comes out from timeout, he finds his sister sulking in the bathtub, asks if she wants to play hide and go seek, her all-time favorite game. They both run out jubilantly, play hide and go seek, as the day goes on they play castles and wizards and so forth. And one of the—the teachers are instructed, "After Charlie is in timeout, why did Charlie go to the bathroom and make up with his sister and play these games with his sister?" And the teacher is instructed to explain that Charlie was thinking that his sister isn't so bad, Charlie didn't feel that bad, he felt badly about hurting his sister, so he went to make up with her and play hide and go seek.

The whole point of the episode, rather than the children figuring it out on their own, the teacher was instructed to stop and tell them to do that through a think-aloud. That's pervasive in all the basals that we use, and it's really, I think, pretty much pervasive in our instruction. Rather than asking the kids to wrestle with that difficult, with that question, which in this case wasn't even that difficult, and then write an answer to it, do a stop-and-think, or talk-and-turn, we tell them the answer to all of these most difficult parts of the text.

Complex text itself is a challenge if you put complex text in front of kids, some kids are going to be frustrated. Even with the support we talk about at Student Achievement Partners and on our website of multiple reading, working with vocabulary, giving some vocabulary because you always have to give some, not all but some. Complex text is still a challenge for kids. One way to support that is to tell the kids that the text is complex. They are not expected to understand it right away. They are expected to read it more than once. We are going to do it together. We are going to chunk it into portions. And we are going to work on it. And if you throw that challenge to the kids and they know it's different and they know it's difficult, that helps the way that they respond to it. We have done what we call exemplars around the country, a very complex text.

One of the teachers we worked with did—how many people have heard David Coleman talk about the Gettysburg Address? One of the schools we work with did the Gettysburg Address in his class at the end of June—New York City schools usually close around June 24. And he did the Gettysburg Address for five days. The Gettysburg Address is, I believe, 287 words. They analyzed that very complex text closely for five days. And so we said to him, “We think you should get some response from the kids after it’s done. Can you have them fill out a questionnaire or write some responses?” Because we were worried—of course we were—we were worried that some of the responses might be “We felt like calling 911.” Five days on the Gettysburg Address in the end of June, and it wasn’t even in American History class. He was doing it because he was fascinated with the concept of close reading; he saw this exemplar is actually a world history class. The kids respond—the kids totally rose to the challenge. My favorite response was one kid who said, this was ninth and 10th graders. “This was interesting,” he said. And first of all when you get a ninth grader in New York City to say “this was interesting,” that’s a moral victory equivalent to the fall of the Berlin Wall. He said, “This was interesting. Usually we read these things once and then make a whole bunch of assumptions.” What he really meant by that was, we read it once and then we talk about what we think about it and then we move on. He found diving into the text for four or five days interesting. The kids will rise to this challenge of complex text.

In Reno, Nevada, a fourth- or fifth-grade English language class was doing—were they doing the poem by Emma Lazarus? They were doing the poem by Emma Lazarus, which is really—what’s the name of that poem again? What? “The New Colossus,” by Emma Lazarus. You know, “Bring us your tired, your poor.” This was a fourth- or fifth-grade class, many EL students. They spent at least a week on it, and they felt so good about the work at the end that they clapped for themselves when they were finished. If it was high school kids, I’d get a little nervous about clapping because they might be clapping because it’s over, but younger kids would clap because they—and that’s what they were—

they were clapping because they were so proud of their accomplishment. But it wasn't easy. The road was bumpy all along in that, in both of those texts.

So that's one pattern that we've seen, one implication of the shifts. Another implication of the shifts. As Linda said, critical thinking is all over the shifts. It's in the standards, rather, and in the shifts; it's in the speaking and listening standards, the reading standards, and the writing standards. However, there's a huge difference with these standards, and that is it's also critical thinking with the text. Critical thinking that is not growing right out of the text will not help your children with these standards or these tests. And there was a very interesting piece of research that came out in 2009, I believe it's Murphy and all 2009, and they studied all of what's called the intensive discussion programs, like junior great books, the Paideia program, and literature—not literature circles, but a few others like that. And this was an extensive study. And what he found is, in heavily discussion-oriented programs, do the kids speak more? Yes. Do the teachers speak less? Yes. Are the utterances—and they actually broke down what the kids said—more conceptual and less literal? Yes. Do they improve in reading as measured by end-of-the-year reading tests? No, none of them, not one. Well, one, a 30-year-old program called Philosophy for Children by a man named Walter Lippmann, which is no longer available. But none of the other programs produced long-term gains in reading comprehension.

And what he concludes is discussion—intense, organized, active, engaged discussion—is necessary to make children literate. But it is not necessary and sufficient; that discussion needs to be about the text. And we often move away from the text way too soon. And that moving away from the text is ultimately harmful. So critical thinking in this, now, is critical thinking about the text. What that means is we have to find texts worth reading and questions worth answering—not just complex text, but text that is rich and meaningful—and we have to find it on a regular basis. That's not easy, but it is doable. And in our session tomorrow, Meredith's and my session tomorrow is all about finding resources right now that are readily available, that are free or almost free, and that you can begin to use that are aligned with the standards. And one of the things we'll talk about is how can you get complex text beginning in third grade, and we'll talk about read-aloud later on a regular basis so that students are reading texts worth reading and answering questions worth answering.

So another part is smoothing the road versus supporting students in navigating the bumps, critical thinking but critical thinking, deep thinking, as Linda said, with text. The third is—and this is the most problematic. I often think—I am accused of being pessimistic—but I often think, how can this go bad? If the Common Core Standards take a dive, if four years from now we find—someone mentioned this—that beginning with the implementation of the Common Core

Standards, we increased the achievement gap rather than decreased the achievement gap, what could be happening, what could happen to cause that? I find it helpful to think about that before it happens. And one of the possibilities is that we focus on what's right in front of us and what's immediate, and we don't focus on what can make kids in the long term durable lifelong learners. And how does that play out in class? Well, for one thing fluency, reading fluency. There is abundant research—many of you I am sure are familiar with the work of Tim Rasinski that fluency is necessary to comprehension. Fluency does not guarantee comprehension, but lack of fluency pretty much guarantees lack of comprehension. Well, what are we doing with fluency? We're raising the standards, we're raising the text that kids have to read. More complex text means, above all, longer sentences and more uncommon words and more multisyllabic words. If kids are disfluent, more multisyllabic words and longer sentences produce more of a problem. Those kids who were disfluent, who were not fluent enough to read previous levels of text at previous levels of complexity, are now going to be asked to read more complex text on the test.

More insidious, those kids who were fluent with previous levels, some cohort of those fluent readers are no longer going to be fluent. So we need to find—we need to be sure that we are assessing fluency, but we have to assess it with text at current levels of complexity, not with what used to be fifth-grade text. And we need to find those kids who are disfluent and work with them on it. The research on fluency on how to address it is equally clear. Repeated readings of text, or listening to text read aloud by a fluent reader while the student follows along, whether that's in science class, social studies class, or ELA. But fluency would have to be—it has to be addressed. I see—we see almost no concern with dealing with the Common Core, the increased demands on fluency that the standard will present.

Second thing, volume of reading. Unless students read a cert—everything students read can't be grade-level complexity. There are students who can't read text at current levels of complexity. They have to have other text that they can understand that is on their level. If you don't have a volume of reading, you won't develop stamina, you won't develop vocabulary, and you won't develop background knowledge. And if you have no stamina, no vocabulary, and no background now you aren't going anywhere with complex text. So volume of reading. Sometimes it comes from traditional independent reading programs. One suggestion I give to a lot of schools all the time that they grab onto is independent reading shouldn't be only stories. Independent reading should be informational text also because that's part of the standards, but also newspaper articles, magazines, sports magazines, hunting magazines. That's what they read in Vermont. They don't read that in Brooklyn that much. But those kinds of texts are ideal for independent reading; they are informational text, and boys tend to like them more. So that's another way to

get in volume of reading. We're going to talk about this in our session, but volume of reading is essential if we're raising the complexity level of the standards.

Vocabulary. If you take a look at the study that we did to find text complex, to find ways to measure, to define and measure text complexity. one of the findings of that study is that there are many features which makes a text complex. Long paragraphs make a text complex. How often the author tries to tie the text together. Some authors will repeat words. They'll use connective words like *because of this* or *as a result* or *afterwards*, or they'll say *as we saw earlier*. They will try to glue the text together. The less of that, the more complex the text is. Abstract words make a text more complex. There are many ways you can make a text more complex, but there's two that are the most important by far in terms of determining the difficulty that students have with it, and that's the vocabulary and the syntax.

Now, ask yourself, in your school systems how much time is devoted to teaching children to deal with complex syntax? Do you take second graders and expose them to long sentences, break it up into shorter sentences, count the number of words in the sentence? Second graders love that; they think we are doing math and reading at the same time. How—what attention at all—you don't have to start diagramming sentences again, but what attention has paid to syntax? Syntax is one of the two most powerful predictors of student difficulty with complex text, yet we pay almost no attention to it in our instructional programs. The other one is vocabulary. Vocabulary we pay attention to, but given how principal a cause it is of student difficulty, ask yourself, in your schools, in your districts are you spending enough time on vocabulary? Is there a coherent vocabulary program in your school? Do teachers know which words should we spe—which words should we teach? Which words should we spend more time on? Which words should we spend less time on? Are we all on the same page with that? The basals will not do it for us. In looking at the basals, we saw very clearly that the basals pulled out about five, at the most ten words per each passage in the basal. They let go many powerful academic words that could be taught, and in the context of the story or the text could be taught pretty quickly.

If you have a word like, from Charlie McButton, *pluck* as when he plucked the battery out of the doll, just call kids' attention: what does pluck mean? Oh, it means take out. Oh, well, how is it a little different? Well, when you pluck you pull it out a little faster or maybe it's a little smaller. So you spend 30 or 40 seconds talking about *pluck*. Some kids will figure out the meaning of *pluck* from the context, and that's fine. Other kids won't. The chances are the kids who won't are the kids we need to support the most. So spend some time on each of those words. We've been able to find in every single passage in every single basal for grades three to five 20 to 30 academic words that should be

addressed. The basals only address five to ten. Another reason for addressing those words, in addition to the obvious, the passage is in the basal are not, usually not complex enough. Fifth grade, a fifth-grade basal might have half the passages be Common Core fifth-grade complexity, but roughly another half might not. We can't change those passages right now. Those are the basals we have, but it's very interesting; although they are not the same complexity if you lexile them, they will not be Common Core complexity. They will be—they will have complex academic vocabulary. So if you spend time on that vocabulary—I just got the two-minute warning—if you spend time on that vocabulary, then you are making up for the lack of complexity.

The other thing, that implication that we've seen—and this wasn't in all the schools; some of your schools I noticed are paying attention to K-2. But there is not enough attention paid to K-2 with these new standards. I am not sure why that is; it may be because some people feel they are not tested so they don't need to pay much attention to it. But K-2 is essential. And a few things about it. Don't forget the foundational skills. Don't get so carried away with informational text and anything else that you forget the foundational skills. The foundational skills are more important than ever because when they leave K-2, they are going to be asked to read more complex text in third grade than they have been asked before. So you can't let go of that. Read-aloud. Read-aloud has to take an entirely different role in your K-2 programs. First of all, the standards—and even in first grade—cannot be met with materials students read themselves. Standard three, the interaction standard in first grade, students will recognize how characters respond to events and challenges. Now, think about that: students will recognize or describe how characters respond to events and challenges. Can they do that with what they read on their own in first grade? It can only be done with read-aloud. So you have to take a look at your read-aloud program; if you are going to align with the standards, you have to teach these concepts with read-aloud.

Secondly, the standards call for 50% informational text. Rich, complex informational text. But K-2 comes from read-aloud. And that needs to be done in a coherent sequence. The standards also say very clearly on page 33, teach informational text in the elementary school years with the coherent sequence of text that builds up a body of knowledge. That means the way most of the country teaches informational text, which is time for kids. Kangaroos one week, explorers the next week, astronauts the third. Nobody gets a chance to build up a coherent body of knowledge; plus, that kind of approach privileges the kids who have more background knowledge to begin with and puts at a disadvantage the kids who have less background knowledge. So how are you going to do that in K-2? You can only do that in K-2 by picking a topic—whether Antarctica, explorers—and getting four or five read-aloud books on it—there are hundreds of wonderful read-aloud books with informational text—and making a little unit where you read aloud complex informational text. Read-

aloud can no longer be something we do when the kids come in from recess and are sweating or while they are having their snack. It's got to be a fundamental part of K-2.