

When Common Meet Uncommon

by Janet Price

BY NOW, MOST PARENTS HAVE HEARD AT LEAST SOMETHING about the new Common Core State Standards. Since 2010 when they were introduced, all but five states have approved the standards and have begun implementing new curriculum based on these guidelines. (The states which have not approved the standards are Alaska, Minnesota, Nebraska, Texas and Virginia.) While the name might suggest that the effort is national in scope, it actually has been entirely state-driven and subject to voluntary approval with no involvement from the federal government. The initiative was conceived and developed under the leadership of the National Governors Association (NGA) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), with input from stakeholders such as teachers, parents, school administrators, and others.

The Common Core State Standards were developed in response to a number of trends and concerns in the education community. The United States is perceived as slipping relative to other nations in respect to quality of education. Students need to be prepared for an increasingly complex and interconnected work world, as well as for the rigors and challenges of higher education. Thus, the standards emphasize collaborative learning, cross-discipline relationships and real-life applications. There is a renewed emphasis on critical thinking skills—analyzing information, describing relationships, and discussing findings—as opposed to rote memorization. The standards themselves consist of expectations for what a student should be able to accomplish by the end of grades K-12 for the areas of Mathematics and English/Language Arts, a subset of which is Speaking and Listening.

While each state's specific curriculum will differ, the expectations for outcomes and skill sets will be equivalent and based on the Common Core. So theoretically, although the content of instruction may differ (for example, exactly which books are part of the state's high school English literature curriculum), students educated in New York, Kansas, or California should graduate high school with similar levels of readiness to move on to higher education or succeed in the working world.

Classroom implications for students with ADHD

Many school systems have already started reaching out to parents to explain changes that will take place to align with the Common Core State Standards. In math, for example, parents will see a shift towards develop-

ing a deeper understanding of concepts and using logic to explain a solution. In Language Arts, instruction may begin with a whole group lesson then move to small group discussion. The Speaking and Listening State Standards, which are part of Language Arts, emphasize the importance of informal discussion among peers to collaboratively problem-solve and build understanding. In these instances, the role of the classroom teacher may be more of a facilitator to guide student-led insights.

The concern is that students with ADHD who have difficulties in the areas of attention and executive function also tend to have difficulties beginning, maintaining, and completing classroom work independently. Students who have issues with impulsivity may be unable to work collaboratively in a small group setting without clear-cut directions and adult support. Students with ADHD and other learning disabilities who are impacted with processing speed and working memory challenges may not be able to keep pace with a classroom discussion in which they are expected to lead the way with probing questions to develop a deeper understanding of the text. These same students may also have difficulty explaining the logical reasoning behind mathematical concepts in addition to simply solving the problem, especially if multi-part steps are required. What happens then?

Proponents of the Common Core State Standards point to Universal Design for Learning (UDL) as the guiding principle for differentiating instruction for students with special needs. In *Technology and Learning: Meeting Special Students' Needs*,* David Rose and Jenna Gravel liken Universal Design for Learning to a similar principle of architecture: Just as architects

Core Standards Learners

What You Need to Know About Changes in the Classroom

and engineers work to make a physical structure accessible for all, so too do educators use the precepts of Universal Design to make instruction accessible for different kinds of learners. Rose and Gravel write, “At its simplest, the scope of UDL is based entirely on three principles: providing multiple means of representation; providing multiple means of action and expression; and providing multiple means of engagement.”

The confidence placed in using UDL principles to meet the needs of students with ADHD and other learning disabilities may be overly optimistic, or at the very least premature. In “Common Core vs. Common Sense,” published in *Education Week* on December 5, 2012, Ronald A. Wolk notes, “Our present teacher workforce has not been trained to teach the way the new standards require, and prospective teachers are not being adequately prepared for the challenge.” This observation was borne out at the CHADD conference held in San Francisco this past November. During a session I presented with my colleague Linda Spencer, PhD, a group of about thirty educators from around the country was asked whether or not they were familiar with Universal Design for Learning. Only one raised her hand, commenting that she only knew of it because she had just come from an earlier session on that topic.

Despite hurdles yet to be overcome, it's not all bad news when analyzing the Common Core State Standards with respect to students with ADHD. While it is true that many of the new expected outcomes speak directly to areas of difficulty for these students, it is equally true that now that these skills are explicitly part of the general education curriculum, it is difficult for a school district to argue that there is negligible educational impact when a student with ADHD is able to otherwise achieve, but struggles with attention, self-regulation, collaborative group work, and multi-part instructions.

Case study: Montgomery County, Maryland Public Schools


What if the areas of Collaboration, Effort/Motivation/Persistence, Intellectual Risk Taking, and Metacognition were considered to be Academic Success Skills embedded into the curriculum, complete with a scope and sequence of indicators from kindergarten on up? That is exactly the approach that the Montgomery County, Maryland Public School System (MCPS) has taken with its roll-out of Curriculum 2.0, aligned with the Common Core State Standards. MCPS's September 2010 Elementary Integrated Curriculum Framework (available online at <http://www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/uploadedFiles/curriculum/integrated/EIC-Framework.pdf>) divides its Thinking and Academic Success Skills Scope and Sequence of Indicators into three sections: Critical Thinking Skills, which include analysis, evaluation and synthesis; Creative Thinking Skills, which include elaboration, flexibility, fluency and originality; and the aforementioned Academic Success Skills.

Using Grade 3 as an example, in the area of Metacognition, by the year's end a student should be able to: explain thinking processes; self-monitor strategies to assess progress and apply new thinking; and seek clarification and adapt strategies to attain learning task/outcome. A third grader should, in the area of Effort/Motivation/Persistence, be able to: identify

an achievable, yet challenging goal; identify and describe the outcome of a goal; identify the components of goal-setting; and develop and demonstrate a sequenced program of action to achieve a goal or solve a problem.

These, of course, are precisely the areas in the executive function realm where students with ADHD often struggle the most. Yet, it is far from a given that students with ADHD will not succeed under the Common Core State Standards. One could make a case that the new standards recognize important areas of education that are often impacted by ADHD and other learning disabilities, and demonstrate the need for specialized instruction in order to access the general education curriculum.

What is meant by specialized instruction? Many students with ADHD receive accommodations through a 504 plan, a section of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, which may include strategies such as priority seating, extended time, or breaking down multi-step assignments into manageable chunks. Students who demonstrate the need for more than just accommodations, but also specialized instruction in their areas of weakness, may qualify for an Individualized Education Program (IEP), which falls under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). An IEP documents a student's present levels of performance, sets measurable individual goals for the academic year in the student's areas of weakness, and provides for accommodations and supplementary aids and services. With an IEP, progress is reported at regular intervals, at least as often as report cards are issued. The Common Core Standards may in fact change the nature of interventions for a student with ADHD, as accommodating for executive function weaknesses does not necessarily teach the student to independently master the skills indicated in the curriculum.

The Common Core is here and, as with any new initiative, there are bound to be growing pains associated with its roll-out. The best way to prepare to advocate for your child is to understand what the changes mean in your individual state and school district, and how these explicit skills might translate to specialized instruction or support under IDEA or the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. 

Janet Price is the Director of Related Student Services at Weinfeld Education Group, LLC, an educational consulting group in the Washington, DC, metropolitan area, as well as an advocate for families of children with special needs. Price is the coauthor of the award-winning *Take Control of Asperger's Syndrome: The Official Strategy Guide for Teens with Aspergers and Nonverbal Learning Disorder* (Prufrock Press, 2010), and coauthor of *Take Control of Dyslexia and Other Reading Difficulties: The Ultimate Guide for Kids* (Prufrock Press, 2011). She has lectured at Towson University and American University, and has presented on topics related to special education at numerous conferences around the country, including the 2012 CHADD International Conference on ADHD and the 2013 LDA National Conference.

* *Technology and Learning: Meeting Special Students' Needs* by D.H. Rose and J.W. Gravel, was originally published as “Universal Design for Learning” in *International Encyclopedia of Education* (Oxford: Elsevier, 2010).