



Knowledge Matters

Restoring Wonder and Excitement to the Classroom

Top Three Takeaways

1. Some strategies that boost reading scores in the short term are counterproductive long term.

2. Younger grades should be privy to content curriculum if literacy is expected to prosper in later grades.

3. A responsive learning environment for teachers coupled with content-rich curriculum is necessary to improving literacy and vocabulary.

Torrey Palmer is a project director with [TNTP](#); she supports districts in analyzing, selecting, and implementing curricular resources aligned to college- and career-ready standards. Previously, Palmer was a teacher and teacher leader with Washoe County School District in Reno, Nevada, where she co-created the Core Task Project, a nationally recognized model of professional development to support teachers in understanding and applying the Common Core standards for literacy.

Building Knowledge

How Washoe's Core Task Project Revealed the Key to the Common Core and Reading Comprehension

By Torrey Palmer

As a second- and third-grade teacher in the early 2000s, and a fifth- and sixth-grade teacher in the latter part of the decade, I developed as an educator under No Child Left Behind (NCLB). Like thousands of others during this era, I taught in a large, diverse district where we worked relentlessly to boost graduation rates and close achievement gaps, often on a shoestring budget.* My former district, Washoe County, Nevada, serves 64,000 students. Across 63 elementary schools, 39 percent of the students are Hispanic and 45 percent are white, with the rest being a diverse array. Sixteen percent are English learners and 48 percent receive free or reduced-price lunch. My colleagues and I were committed to ensuring an excellent education for each and every one of them—and we were especially focused on developing proficient readers.

Early on in my 10 years in the classroom, my literacy instruction focused on skills and strategies as learning outcomes. I expected my students to learn certain skills each week, and I built my lessons accordingly. Dictated by my school's basal series, this approach was further reinforced by my district's weekly pacing of target standards. My colleagues and I introduced a skill or standard on Monday, taught the standard throughout the week (often in leveled reading groups), and then gathered data from a common assessment on Friday. The following week we would introduce a new standard while attempting to remediate students who did not perform well the prior week. Not surprisingly, students in the remedial group were largely the same week after week. Common planning time was spent identifying activities or lessons that would enhance the week's focus skill or standard. As expectations for NCLB's "adequate yearly progress" ramped up, we ensured students had sufficient opportunities to practice with assessment question "stems" released by the state.

Though my colleagues and I were meeting regularly and there were many hours of professional learning offered, we never paused to discuss the unintended consequences of our efforts to double down on adequate yearly progress. Teaching reading is complex work. In our well-meaning push to accelerate our students' progress on discrete standards and skills, we were walking further and further away from research-based best practices for improving literacy.

In many ways, this was a product of the context in which we were working. In the NCLB era, standards-based teaching and learning prioritized this focus

* Nevada is [ranked](#) 43rd in per-pupil funding.



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on discrete skills, isolating standards, and monitoring for mastery to yield the desired increases on the state and local benchmark assessments. To some degree, this approach worked in Washoe: We made slight gains on state assessments. But those gains were test specific; we'd found ways to obtain small boosts in scores through sustained and targeted test preparation. Our students were not really advancing as critical readers, writers, and thinkers.

In the younger, "untested" grades, teachers were beholden to a basal textbook that, despite offering strong programming in foundational skills, featured low-level texts and emphasized pushing state assessment stems into the primary grades as a means of gaining an additional advantage. This approach failed to provide students sufficient opportunities to master complex language, engage with rich content, or develop academic knowledge and vocabulary.

I ensured my students left second grade able to read. However, I generally did not follow their progress after they left me in June of each year. I didn't often think about how they read in fourth and fifth grades, or how their later achievement was related to my work with them in second grade. *—Debbie Reynolds, second grade teacher*

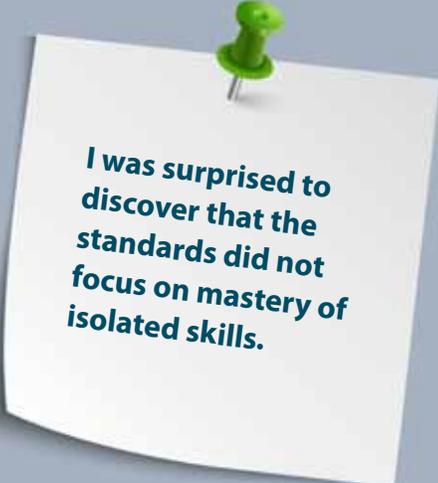
Shifting Toward the Common Core

When Nevada adopted the Common Core State Standards in 2010, I was teaching fifth grade. I was apprehensive about the standards, largely because they felt like one more initiative that we would have to implement with too little time and not enough support. Washoe's district leaders encouraged school administrators and teachers to approach the new standards in the same way we'd worked with the previous Nevada State Standards. Crosswalk documents, released district-wide, offered explicit guidance on where standards had moved under the Common Core, or highlighted subtle changes in language. We spent a huge amount of time analyzing these documents, but the district message was to continue with business as usual: We would focus on one standard at a time to teach reading comprehension.

In our district we had been doing what was called "Skill of the Week," where teachers focused on a single standard or reading skill for that week, assessing for mastery on Friday. *—Aaron Grossman, then a teacher-leader in the district department of Curriculum & Instruction, now a fourth-grade teacher*

It was within this context that I left the classroom, troubled by the deluge of policy mandates that interfered with (rather than aided) effective classroom practice. Frustrated but committed, in 2011 I became a district coach and, eventually, part of the department of Curriculum & Instruction, where my colleagues and I were tasked with rolling out the Common Core State Standards.

Given my experience as a teacher during the early implementation of the Common Core, I was surprised to discover—once I got closer to the standards themselves—that the standards did not focus on mastery of isolated skills. The supporting research for the standards, and the explanations accompanying the standards, called for an integrated approach to literacy instruction, one that prioritizes quality text, use of evidence, and building knowledge. These priorities



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are articulated explicitly in the guidance on instructional shifts as well as in the introduction and appendices of the standards themselves.

What would these new priorities mean in practice? Under the Common Core standards, it is still essential that in the early grades students learn *how* to read (in other words, that they gain the foundational skills that Washoe was already teaching), *and also* acquire a solid foundation of broad content knowledge and vocabulary for later comprehension. With our basal texts, leveled readers, and assessment stems, we were hardly building any knowledge or vocabulary at all. Building content knowledge is an essential element of the Common Core, but in districts across the US it's all too often misunderstood or written off—as it was when my colleagues and I were encouraged to continue focusing only on skill development in our literacy lessons.

Part of the challenge in shifting the paradigm for literacy instruction is that most of us are already assuming that students gain knowledge in school—that they “learn stuff.” Pre-NCLB, many students experienced primarily thematic units in school—lessons that integrated literature, science, history texts, and more, all related to a common theme; however, a challenge with this approach was that there were not common expectations for what students would learn. NCLB sought, critically, to promote equity and introduce some accountability for districts to ensure that students were meeting standards. In the process of implementation, however, many districts—like mine—lost their focus on academic content in the push to build skills. If we were to take the best from the past 25 years, it would be setting clear expectations for student performance *and* helping students meet those expectations with a content-rich curriculum.

The trend in elementary schools has been to emphasize skills and strategies rather than knowledge acquisition. The topics in the texts don't matter, this idea holds, as long as students have the opportunity to practice the required skills. The research supporting the Common Core standards sought to rectify this—to show that what students are reading about, hearing about, and discussing is just as important as which skills they are mastering. The knowledge students glean in the primary grades serves as a critical foundation for comprehending what they read later on, and indeed, for building the very literacy skills they need to understand any content they're given.

The great reading researcher Jeanne C. Chall introduced the concept of the “fourth-grade slump,” or the deceleration of students' literacy achievement in later elementary grades and onward. The slump is the result of limited vocabulary and lack of exposure to broad content knowledge. It's particularly common among at-risk students in comparison to their more privileged peers, with at-risk children typically having fewer opportunities to learn academic words and concepts at home and at school.

While a content-rich curriculum seems to be an obvious solution, educators would need a collective understanding of why such a curriculum matters and the desired changes we all need to make to get there. In Washoe, this was new territory for all of us.

Introducing the Core Task Project

To address this huge implementation challenge, my colleagues Aaron Grossman, Cathy Schmidt, and I built the Core Task Project, an inquiry-based model of professional learning that evolved from our curiosity about what the authors of the Common Core truly intended in the design of the standards. Based on the one-to-one crosswalk alignment documents produced by the Nevada Department of Education, the Common Core didn't look substantially different from our old state standards; however, we believed the Common Core's introduction and appendices told a very different story.

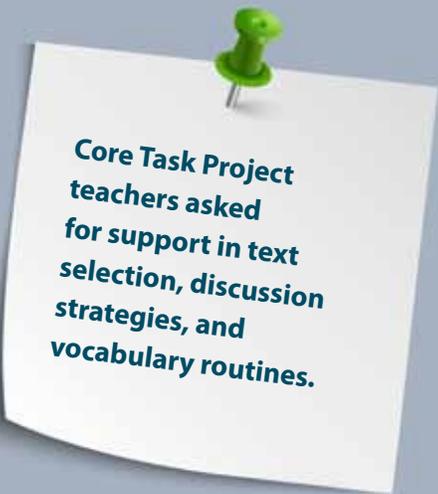
The Core Task Project was different from many other professional learning opportunities around the Common Core because we attempted to deliver the message unfiltered: we did not want to layer our interpretation over the words of those who had carefully designed the standards. If the standards were designed with an integrated model of literacy, as described in the introduction, appendices, instructional shifts, and Publisher's Criteria, then we needed to ensure teachers had the opportunity to read and process those documents. If there were exemplar lessons modeling the integration of multiple standards to drive students toward a deep understanding of a carefully selected, high-quality text, we needed to ensure our teachers had the opportunity to try teaching those lessons.

We had to find a way to shift practice so that teachers were engaging all students in unlocking the meaning of high-quality texts, rather than focusing on mastery of discrete literacy standards. We were actually lucky that Washoe had no money, because "free" became one of the principles of the Core Task Project. I would comb the internet for high-quality content—video, podcast, print—of educators most intimately involved with the standards. And that is what we shared with teachers, so they could discover firsthand—or "unfiltered"—about the importance of text complexity, evidence, and building knowledge.

—Aaron Grossman

To get there, the Core Task Project invited groups of teachers to engage with the research supporting the standards together, to collaboratively explore an exemplar lesson, and then to try teaching that lesson. The group would return two weeks later to debrief and reflect on next steps. Aaron, Cathy, and I culled teachers' reflections to determine the content for the next session. Instead of deconstructing standards or drilling down to isolated skills or standards, Core Task Project teachers asked for support in text selection, discussion strategies, and vocabulary routines; and that is what we shared. Over three years and eight to 12 sessions per cohort, teachers had time to understand the research on how to cultivate readers with solid skills and strong comprehension.

Even though this approach to professional learning isn't typical, it isn't new either. Over the past several decades, researchers have identified five essential features of effective professional development: content focus, active learning, coherence, duration, and collective participation. Yet, even professional development programs organized around these features are often ineffective. A recent meta-analysis found that only nine of 1,300 professional development studies yielded significant gains in student achievement. TNTP recently released *The Mirage*, a study of teacher development efforts across three large districts and one charter



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management organization, which echoed the challenges of providing effective, evidence-based professional development. *The Mirage* found that despite huge investments in teacher support (and many success stories in terms of teacher satisfaction), there is little evidence that professional development is helping teachers get substantially better at scale. With the Core Task Project, we sought to approach professional learning in a way that would truly build teacher understanding and transform instructional practice in measurable ways.

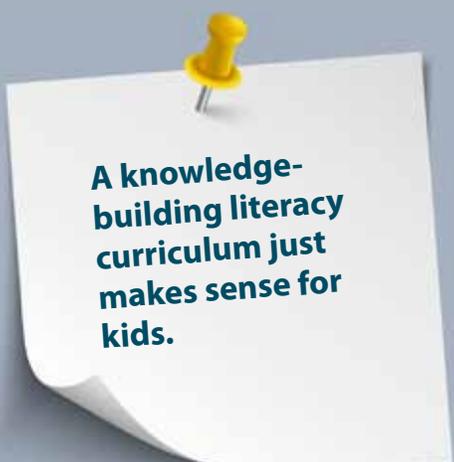
As we approached teachers in the early stages of the Core Task Project, we made clear that we were not experts on the standards, but that teacher reflection and student learning would drive our work together. The evolution of the Core Task Project eventually led us to deeply explore the third instructional shift demanded by the Common Core: building knowledge.

Why “Building Knowledge”?

Students with prior knowledge or experience with particular topics can more readily make connections between what they are reading and what they know. The more students know about a topic, the stronger their framework for reading (and listening) comprehension. A knowledge-building literacy curriculum just makes sense for kids, but as we’ve seen, shifting from the randomly sequenced stories in the basal reader to such a curriculum would be an enormous change for many teachers and schools. The first barrier to making this shift is simply embracing the premise that knowledge, vocabulary, and literacy development start long before children begin learning to read, and that reading well depends on building broad knowledge. Actually finding high-quality materials and enhancing instruction is another huge barrier, one that requires a long-term commitment to intensive professional development and support.

Initially, when presented with a new, content-focused literacy curriculum, I was excited to teach these complex and rich topics to my second graders. They were topics that I believed were interesting, engaging, and challenging. Some I had never taught myself, and some it had been a long time since I’d learned about them myself. I was a little intimidated with some more than others. While I agreed to give the curriculum a try, it was not without skepticism. After all, it was, once again, something new! But once I jumped in, I was thrilled with how my kids took to the content—they loved it, and it really transformed our discussions and their writing! —*Debbie Reynolds*

Debbie Reynolds and a few of her K–2 colleagues volunteered to pilot a content-rich literacy curriculum at their school in Sparks, Nevada. Through these teachers’ experiences with new materials that were radically different from the basal program they’d been using for nearly 10 years, we were able to chart a path for responsive and sustained support for teachers and school leaders as they opted into literacy materials driven by content. The Core Task Project model of professional learning was grounded in a commitment to changing instructional practice and challenging assumptions about what students are capable of through explicit, actionable opportunities to practice instructional shifts and modify instruction in the classroom, with ample time to reflect on student learning and plan next steps. Through teacher reflections and classroom observations, we gathered evidence of shifts in instructional practice as well as improved student learning.



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Ongoing, Voluntary, and Effective: The Core Task Project's Model for Professional Learning

In 2015, Anthony Bryk et al. published a framework that could serve as a summary of much of the Core Task Project's work, *Learning to Improve: How America's Schools Can Get Better at Getting Better*. While we were not working together, the improvement process Bryk et al. describe is strikingly similar to our approach with the Core Task Project. In *Learning to Improve*, the authors show that our experience is not a one-off; rather, it is a replicable model with valuable lessons for districts across the country.

According to Bryk et al., a working theory of improvement answers three questions. The first asks, **what are we trying to accomplish?** In order to reverse the deceleration of reading achievement in later elementary grades and beyond, students need broad background knowledge and vocabulary to strengthen reading comprehension. In the Core Task Project, we drew on experts such as [Dr. Catherine Snow](#), [Dr. Dan Willingham](#), and [Dr. Gina Cervetti](#) and [Dr. Elfrieda Heibert](#) to frame a compelling case for change, offering all our stakeholders—including administrators—foundational content to build their understanding of why the shift toward content-rich curricula mattered so much. In the spirit of the Core Task Project, we shared this content unfiltered, engaging participants through readings and video excerpts.

The second question Bryk et al. pose is **what change might we introduce and why?** We aimed to introduce and implement a content-rich literacy curriculum to ensure all students had ample opportunities to build content knowledge and vocabulary. Finally, **how will we know that a change is actually an improvement?** While pilot teachers gathered evidence of incremental changes in discussion, writing, and reading comprehension in the earlier grades, as students come up through the grades, the goal is for reading comprehension to improve significantly in curriculum-embedded assessments and standardized comprehension assessments. A strong working theory of improvement would monitor for short-term changes over two to three months, mid-term goals over one to two years, and more substantial gains over three to five years.

While this theory of improvement, or something comparable, may seem overly simplistic, too often districts introduce a new literacy curriculum (content-rich or not) without addressing the reason for change at all. New curricula are typically introduced because the content area is next in the textbook adoption cycle—not because there has been any serious examination of students' needs or new research.

Once we had established our evidence-based theory of improvement behind this transition to content-rich curriculum, we turned to the critical phase of understanding the context for implementing change. "Common practice in education today is to go straight to large-scale implementation. Yet rarely do reformers operate under conditions where they truly know how to make a new idea work well, where the necessary capacity exists to execute it at scale, and where the workforce is ready to take on a new challenge," state Bryk et al. (p. 120).



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My full staff wasn't ready the first year of implementation of the new curriculum. I knew I had teacher leaders that brought passion and enthusiasm so they became the early implementers. I wanted to ensure I had a strong core of teachers who were successful and could support their colleagues with implementation. By year two we had the capacity to support the content-rich curriculum. The passion and enthusiasm from the early implementers became inspirational and resulted in a powerful school-wide implementation.

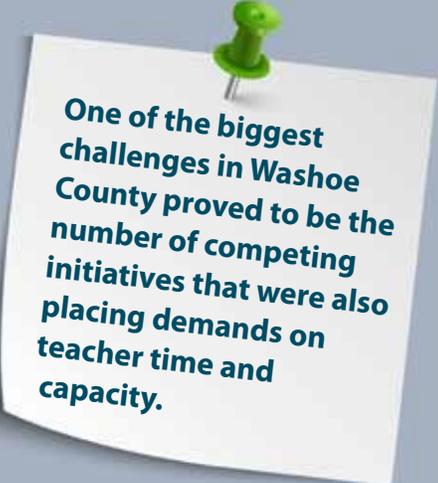
–*Tiffany McMaster, principal*

Bryk et al. identify three considerations for analyzing institutional context: available know-how, organizational capacity and human capabilities, and the good will and engagement of those who are subject to the change. In the context of the Core Task Project, available “know-how” refers to the knowledge necessary to implement a content-rich curriculum. Do teachers, leaders, and support staff deeply understand the implications and inherent challenges in rolling out a content-rich curriculum? Are we prepared to address potential questions and challenges, such as how to monitor learning within current assessment and progress-monitoring expectations? What are the recommendations for intervention if students struggle? What supports are appropriate for English language learners? What time and support do teachers need to adequately prepare for content-rich lessons, especially with unfamiliar content? These are just some of the questions raised as we charted a path for implementation.

In Washoe, we developed “know-how” by working with one school as a pilot to test the waters with the new curriculum. During this pilot, we applied the principles described through Bryk et al.’s Plan-Do-Study-Act cycle, meeting with teachers monthly to gather feedback and to reinforce a low-stakes frame for implementation. After the initial enthusiasm for something “new” waned, teachers experienced a period of frustration as they struggled to find their instructional stride with materials that were fundamentally different. Questions about expectations of student mastery, how to manage instructional time, and engagement routines surfaced as teachers reflected on their teaching and student learning. Together, they problem-solved and returned to the classroom to try new approaches, while we gathered copious feedback about implementation. We were developing our “know-how” through the pilot teachers’ successes and challenges with the new materials.

A third element in assessing the context for change is an analysis of the good will and engagement of those who will be subject to change. In today’s educational context, how “initiative weary” are teachers? Will they be receptive to new learning and new materials? One of the biggest challenges in Washoe County proved to be the number of competing initiatives that were also placing demands on teacher time and capacity.

Washoe was embarking on a rigorous effort to improve STEM instruction and implement the Next Generation Science Standards, Student Learning Objectives, Social Emotional Learning, and many other equally important initiatives. We approached the district’s regional superintendents to ensure that principals and teachers who opted to implement the new content-rich materials would not be stretched too thin from other initiatives. We held meetings for interested



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principals and leadership teams, explicitly sharing with them the rationale and the time commitment for electing to roll out the new materials. Ultimately, we tried to ensure regional superintendents, principals, and leadership teams were keenly aware of the commitment it would take to do this work well.

After the first year, we had sufficient evidence to implement the materials with a larger group of schools, using the same Plan-Do-Study-Act cycle. Teachers met monthly to reflect, plan, learn a new strategy (such as discussion strategies, vocabulary routines, or strategic selection of texts), and prepare for implementation. Lesson demonstrations and collaborative professional learning, focused around the common materials, allowed teachers to reflect on student learning and their own learning needs each month. Teachers gave input on what they needed next to improve while facilitators continued to gather evidence of challenges and successes, observing classrooms when possible and still relying heavily on teachers' feedback in the monthly sessions. As teachers posed questions and challenges, facilitators logged them and found fresh content to advance the improvement cycles.

I was fortunate to have spent a year outside the classroom learning and working with teachers around the standards and the instructional shifts in practice. So I knew and deeply believed in the importance of background knowledge and vocabulary in reading comprehension. But when I returned to the classroom, actually making the leap to a content-rich curriculum was kind of terrifying. It felt like I was jumping into the unknown.

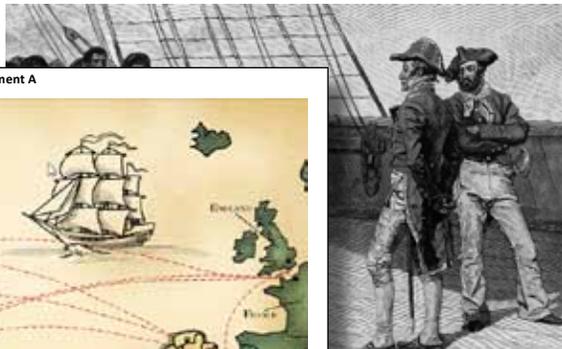
–Chris Hayes, then a teacher-leader with the department of Curriculum & Instruction, now a second-grade teacher

One request we heard often was for more specific guidance for writing tasks matched to the content-rich curricula. In response, session facilitators shared information on the rationale for the emphasis on source-based writing. In turn, a group of teachers worked together to develop document-based questions (DBQs) matched to the materials. Chris Hayes, curious to see what her second graders were capable of, gave her students a DBQ assignment on the War of 1812 last spring. While some students wrote long responses, others referenced a deep understanding in class discussion and playground chatter. Across the board, all of her students, including those receiving English learner and special education services, far exceeded her expectations. She found that in prior years, she had underestimated what they were capable of reading and understanding.

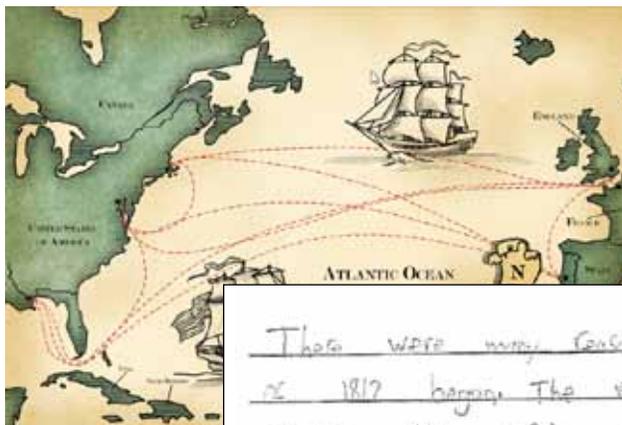
Second Grade DBQ – Core Knowledge - The War of 1812

A Document Based Question (DBQ) is an authentic assessment whereby students interact with historical texts. A DBQ asks students to read and analyze historical records, gather information and fill in short scaffolding response questions, assimilate (as a written essay) to an assigned outside information.

Document B



Document A



1. Look carefully at the map. What do you think the dotted lines represent?
2. What do you think the dotted lines represent?
3. What do the ships represent?
4. How does this document help to explain the war?

There were many reasons why the war of 1812 began. The British were stopping the USA from trading. The British were stopping them because the Americans were trading with France and the British were fighting France so the British were trying to stop the Americans from trading. The Americans were trying to stop the British from stopping the Americans from trading because the British were forcing the Americans to be sailors on their ships (Doc. B) Americans thought the British were selling guns to Native Americans. The Americans thought the British were selling guns to the Native Americans because the Native Americans didn't have guns (Doc. C) The war started

They had a better chance of winning. They were sick and or hate of Americans. War was being fought. That's all I know about the war of 1812. It began by

These student work samples illustrate the range of responses Mrs. Hayes received the first time she tried the DBQ about the War of 1812 with her second-grade students. It's important to note that even the student who is struggling with learning to write displays some understanding of the complicated topic—a topic that he engaged with enthusiastically in class discussion.

More principals and teachers wanted to try the new content-rich curriculum because of what they were hearing from their peers.

Ultimately, through the Core Task Project, teachers were afforded a sheltered, responsive environment in which to transition to the new content-rich curriculum. In year three, Washoe expanded the shift from 21 to 30 schools—nearly half of the district’s elementary schools—with many schools opting in because of the enthusiasm they’d witnessed in the early adopters. More principals and teachers wanted to try the new content-rich curriculum because of what they were hearing from their peers.

Bryk et al. highlight the importance of starting small to learn quickly. “A set of general principles guides the approach: 1.) Wherever possible, learn quickly and cheaply; 2) Be minimally intrusive—some changes will fail and we want to limit negative consequences on individual’s time and personal lives; and 3) Develop empirical evidence at every step to guide subsequent improvement cycles” (p. 120). Aaron, Cathy, and I launched the Core Task Project based on these principles—starting small and then building to the large-scale implementation of a content-rich curriculum matched to the Common Core across Washoe County.

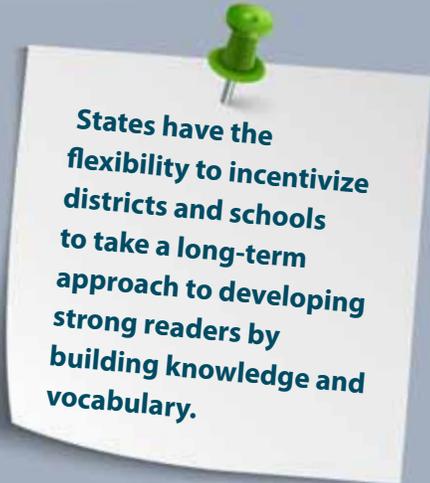
Washoe County School District will not be able to fully measure the impact of the content-rich materials for several more years. The long-range goal is to analyze student learning for those who have systematically been offered the opportunity to build knowledge on a variety of academic topics from kindergarten through fifth grade. But already at sites where teachers and principals have embraced the paradigm shift, they report that students have more to write about in the early grades, and that lunchtime discussions are surprisingly richer. Students are accurately using sophisticated vocabulary in discussion and writing, and sharing widely about their new knowledge of the world. Of course, there are also many challenges that may impede measurable growth—among them, offering teachers sustained professional support for using these materials effectively.

Over the course of our three years together in the Core Task Project, we developed a strong model of professional learning that honored and advanced instructional expertise, a formula that is reinforced in *Learning to Improve*. A critical piece of effective professional learning, which *The Mirage* also highlights in its case study of a charter management organization, is fostering a culture of continuous improvement for teachers. At the heart of the Core Task Project was exactly this: an effort to give teachers and school leaders a process and space for continuously reflecting on their practice, testing new approaches, receiving feedback, and refining their practice yet again.

Unfortunately, the Core Task Project chapter closed, almost at the same time as TNTP released *The Mirage* in the summer of 2015. We managed to reach around 3,000 teachers with the Core Task Project messaging, though in terms of sustained investment, the number was closer to 300 teachers. *The Mirage* illuminates the immense challenges of identifying, scaling, and sustaining high-quality professional learning, compared with the costly—and ineffective—investment that often prevails. Even in Washoe County, the Core Task Project was just one of possibly hundreds of professional learning efforts, some effective, others less so. In Washoe and districts throughout the nation, a huge part of the problem is that the vast majority of the professional development efforts have no mechanism for reliably assessing their impact on teacher practice.



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States have the flexibility to incentivize districts and schools to take a long-term approach to developing strong readers by building knowledge and vocabulary.

Moving Forward with the Common Core

This is what I didn't know as a teacher in Washoe during the very early days of the Common Core: These standards are truly a step toward a stronger instructional future. In many ways, the Common Core presents an unprecedented opportunity to bring together the best pieces of our pre-NCLB, thematic approach to literacy instruction *and* the NCLB era's focus on adequate yearly progress. By using content-rich curricula, students will build the knowledge base, vocabulary, and comprehension skills necessary to engage with rigorous content as they grow.

Now, with NCLB replaced by the Every Student Succeeds Act, states have the flexibility to incentivize districts and schools to take a long-term approach to developing strong readers by building knowledge and vocabulary. However, this will require that parents and stakeholders hold district and state decision makers accountable for ensuring all students have access to high-quality, content-rich curricula, and that teachers are afforded strong professional learning and support to implement these materials well. This will not be an easy lift, considering the dominance of a skills-heavy approach over the past 15 years. It will require state and local education leaders to be critical consumers of the range of materials and professional learning available.

Effective implementation of the Common Core State Standards is deeply complex. To get there successfully, professional learning efforts will need to give teachers ample opportunities to engage with the instructional shifts, practice, receive feedback, reflect together, and use student learning to drive changes to their practice. We must be willing to collaboratively investigate the best ways to build student knowledge if we are to improve literacy instruction at scale and see better outcomes for all students.

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