

Foreword

In this thoughtful and immensely practical book, Cheryl Dunkle brings the Common Core State Standards to life. For those readers who, like Cheryl, experienced the dawn of the standards movement two decades ago, it will be comforting that our profession has learned a few things since the days of dumping three-ring binders full of standards documents at the schoolhouse door and telling teachers to “read ’em and weep.” If the experiment of 50 sets of standards for 50 states taught us anything, it is the essential message that standards documents alone are insufficient to influence educational progress. Although the establishment of the Common Core represents an essential first step toward a clearer definition of what students should know and be able to do, it is insufficient to enact the teaching and leadership changes essential to implement the Common Core. That is what this book is all about, with the author providing three essential challenges to move us from theory to practice.

First, Dunkle challenges us to rethink the premises of teaching, knowing that the delivery of the content of standards is but a small part of the task ahead of us. Certainly content expertise is important, as the expectations the Common Core make on teachers require greater and more specific expertise at earlier grades than at any time in our educational history. Kindergartners will be writing, 5th grade students will be doing pre-algebra, and middle school students will be composing more advanced essays and engaging in deeper critical thinking than ever before. But content expertise is a necessary but insufficient condition for success. Dunkle reminds us that great teachers need effective leadership support. Contrary to the prevailing political winds of educational leaders as those who can quickly rate, rank, sort, and humiliate teachers, the author challenges leaders to inspire, innovate, and implement. Leaders must collaborate with teachers to achieve the depth and rigor of the most effective instructional practices, a discipline that requires focus and energies that elude many preoccupied school administrators and overwhelmed classroom educators.

Second, these pages place the burden of transforming the Common Core into effective curriculum and assessment precisely where it belongs—on the daily work of teachers and school leaders. We cannot afford to wait for any national group, however well-intentioned and sophisticated, to replace the daily work of teaching. Although the Common Core represents a step forward in clarity and focus compared to many previous standards documents, standards without accompanying curriculum and assessments will be a muddle. The essential question is not merely “What do the standards say?” but rather “What evidence must students provide that they are proficient?” The definition and generation of that evidence remains an obligation of the professionals in every school. Dunkle provides a thoughtful framework for these discussions, but her advice does not preclude the necessity for the difficult conversations that lie ahead. Among the many warning signs that the first generation of academic standards were headed for trouble was when teachers sighed, “I give up—just tell me what to do.” When teachers disengage—intellectually and emotionally—from the implementation of standards, then schools are left with the illusion of education. Grand vision and mission statements, bold standards, and lofty rhetoric will yield only frustration if the people responsible for getting the job done are disrespected, disengaged, and disenfranchised. They are not merely the recipients of standards, but the architects of their implementation.

Third, Dunkle confronts policy makers and educational leaders who might otherwise succumb to the mirage of standards-based tests as a substitute for meaningful educational accountability. This is the central challenge of our time, as we recover from a decade of equating educational success with standardized test scores. However promising the Common Core may be, they are only a fraction of the equation when schools consider the profoundly important question of what makes for effective teaching, learning, and leadership. The author reminds us that while student proficiency in the Common Core is essential as a matter of securing our nation’s future, the accountability for that success is not merely the sum of the test scores of children, but rather the product of a complex set of variables that includes the adults—parents, teachers, and school leaders.

Cheryl Dunkle has devoted a lifetime to supporting the ideals expressed in this book, and readers who take the time to study, discuss, and learn from her years of wisdom will find their investment of time and energy well rewarded.

—Douglas B. Reeves
Boston, Massachusetts