

# Successfully Navigating the Promise and Peril of the Common Core Standards

A report by the Carlston Family Foundation  
for Public Education

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## About the Foundation

Established in 1987, the Carlston Family Foundation rewards outstanding California high school teachers who demonstrate an exceptional commitment to the academic success of students from culturally diverse, socioeconomically disadvantaged communities.

By recognizing these dedicated professionals, the Foundation encourages other educators to simulate these successful teaching patterns and to place these distinguished individuals at the forefront of discussions to improve public education across the state.

Recent and past award winners participate in an annual symposium to identify ways to improve instruction in California high schools, assist in teacher preparation programs, and influence the state's education policy.

This report is a summary of the November 2013 Educational Symposium.



With the adoption of the Common Core Standards (CCS), education is on the cusp of a monumental reform movement. Many people involved in education believe this change cannot come soon enough. For much of the past decade, teachers have been blamed for most of what ails education. Yet, they are the very people who have made the best out of the challenging circumstances created by budget cuts, lack of resources, and the high-stakes testing and punitive accountability that have accompanied No Child Left Behind. Unlike past education reform movements, teachers must now be at the forefront and have a voice in the conversations of the Common Core Standards and the teaching and assessments related to their implementation. What happens in the classroom on a daily basis has a significant impact on student learning, and the success of the Common Core reforms depends ultimately on the expertise and efforts of classroom teachers, who have the greatest impact on student learning and preparation for both college and career options.

The Carlston Family Foundation honorees, identified as some of California's top teachers, attended their annual symposium in November 2013 to address the following objectives:

- Understand the history of the standards movement



## *Carlston Teachers Change Lives of Students*

Carlston honorees are an exceptional group of educators. They are nominated by former students, many of whom had only faint prospects for academic success upon entering high school, yet eventually went on to attend a four-year college or university.

In their nominations, students consistently point to the life-changing impact of the teachers and how they have played an essential and long-term role in the students' academic achievement—by inspiring them, motivating them, and giving them the tools that they need to grow personally and academically.

The Foundation vets the nominees carefully, interviewing the nominating student, five additional students from across the teacher's career, colleagues, and school administrators. Each year, the Board of Directors chooses five California high school teachers to receive a substantial cash award, one-quarter of which goes to the teacher's school to use as the honoree desires.

- Examine the commonalities of standards and habits of mind required by the Common Core Standards across subject areas
- Identify the challenges related to the implementation of the CCS and how best to address these challenges
- Identify the ways in which implementation of the CCS will address the key findings of the 2012 symposium

### **History of the Standards Movement in the U.S.**

The Carlston honorees began their symposium by examining the history of the standards movement in the U.S. and the impact that the past 30 years of education reform has had on teachers and students in California. In the decades preceding the 1950s, teaching practices in U.S. public schools relied on lower level thinking skills like identifying, labeling, listing, matching, memorizing, recalling, repeating, and summarizing facts and information. The use of these skills helped students learn information but seldom required them to apply that information to a variety of increasingly complex tasks or critical thinking processes to demonstrate mastery.

The introduction of Bloom's Taxonomy in the 1950s encouraged teachers to continue teaching lessons that required students to use their lower level thinking skills in such tasks as learning vocabulary and remembering dates, formulas, and concepts; however, based upon Bloom's Taxonomy, teachers began more consistently requiring students to deconstruct, critique, and organize information and propose relevant and logical hypotheses in order to extend their thinking and construct new meaning and uses for information.



The widespread use of Bloom's Taxonomy constituted an advance in teaching, but the curricula and assessments were created and assigned primarily by individual teachers, without much attention given to what students in other classrooms, schools, and states were expected to learn in the same subject area and grade.

Beginning in the 1980s with the Reagan administration's report, "A Nation at Risk," education reform began a steady progression toward more standardized education goals and assessments. "America 2000," promoted by both the Bush and Clinton Administrations, and the most recent "No Child Left Behind" (NCLB) created under the leadership of the G.W. Bush Administration, continued that trajectory.

(Copyright © 2000, Education 388A, Stanford University [http://www.stanford.edu/~hakuta/www/archives/syllabi/CalTex\\_\\_SBR/historysbr.html](http://www.stanford.edu/~hakuta/www/archives/syllabi/CalTex__SBR/historysbr.html)).

## The Impact of "No Child Left Behind" on California

Though well-intentioned, the past decade of NCLB has led to an increasingly pervasive emphasis on teaching information and discrete skills for the purpose of preparing students to pass state-mandated tests – in effect returning us to the focus on lower level thinking skills so prevalent before the use of Bloom's Taxonomy. In California the standards document read like a convoluted laundry list of skills and information that students needed to learn in order to score proficient on the state-mandated California Standards Tests (CSTs). Every school year, students in grades two through eleven would spend days bubbling in answers to objective test questions in core subjects. The scores were then used to compare and rank each school's performance. The increased emphasis on scores and rankings - and the punitive accountability measures that came with them - created a high-stakes testing environment that caused many district-level personnel and school site administrators to pressure teachers to narrow their instruction to the teaching of discrete skills and information. Some districts imposed "test-prep" pacing guides, which pre-determined the order and pace of instruction rather than allowing teachers to make curricular decisions based upon their professional knowledge and students' needs. It also perpetuated "target standards" thinking, giving teachers, administrators, and districts license to simply ignore some of the standards not tested on the state exams.

In many classrooms the higher order thinking tasks like writing essays and discussing concepts were often replaced with lessons and materials that led to students bubbling in multiple-choice questions. Class instruction focused on helping students score well on state-mandated tests in order for schools to meet the Academic Performance Index (API) targets and thereby avoid punitive sanctions.

Additionally, due to multiple days required for testing, teachers lost valuable classroom hours that could have been used for instruction. In spite of this emphasis on preparation for the CSTs, students lacked motivation to score well since their performance had no impact on their grades nor on their advancement from one grade level to the next. And since test results arrived at school sites several months later, near the end of the school year, teachers did not have adequate time to use the results to positively impact the teaching and learning of students.

Within this context, low test scores became the fodder for politically-charged discussions about whether teachers were competent and deserving of their pay while teachers' complaints about NCLB have been interpreted as an attempt to avoid high standards and accountability. Unfortunately, that interpretation not only minimizes the professionalism, knowledge, and dedication that educators bring to their classrooms and to the students and communities they serve but also ignores a significant reason for teachers' dissatisfaction and frustration with NCLB: the negative impact it has had on teaching and learning.

This climate of finger-pointing instead of problem-solving has had a pervasive and damaging effect on the education climate, leaving even the most dedicated and committed teachers feeling wary and distrustful of efforts at education reform. In spite of these circumstances, the Carlston teachers gathered together to learn more about the Common Core Standards, the potential that they have to improve the teaching and learning of students in California, and the concerns and challenges associated with their implementation.

**"The results of standards-based reform have been mixed. Some studies have shown improved test results, but achievement gaps between black and white students, rich and poor, and Hispanics and Anglos have not narrowed significantly. Race and class remain strong predictors of academic success."**

**Quote from Symposium Participant**

## Comparing the California State Standards to the Common Core Standards

In comparing California's old state standards to the Common Core Standards, the Carlston teachers pointed out that the most significant difference between the two documents is their scope and structure. The old state standards document included the English Language Arts (ELA), social science, mathematics, and science standards. Even though this one document included all the core subjects, the emphasis on high-stakes testing caused many teachers to develop a myopic approach to their content. This encouraged each content area to become an "island unto itself," with teachers focusing on the discrete skills and information students would need to know for that particular subject's section of the CSTs.

The Common Core document, on the other hand, contains a list of Anchor Standards in reading and writing that *unify* all core subject areas with a common goal: literacy. Now, regardless of subject area, teachers are expected not only to teach the content specific information, concepts, and skills, but to teach the reading and writing skills and strategies students will need in order to succeed within that discipline.

This focus on literacy enables teachers to extend their instruction beyond just lower level thinking skills. For example, a social science teacher at the symposium shared his plans to incorporate into his curriculum additional reading assignments that require students to read a document "then try to figure out who wrote it - when - where - [and] why." Unlike test-prep teaching, this task goes beyond just asking students to point out facts and summarize information. Students will have to use their higher order thinking skills not only to understand the text, but to interpret, evaluate, and analyze how word choice, content, and text structure may offer clues as to the author, the time period and origin, and the purpose and effectiveness of the text. Additionally, this task places the responsibility to make meaning on the students, instead of the teacher simply providing all the background information. This kind of assignment in social studies promotes the development and application of higher order thinking skills while also helping students to learn and use close reading strategies as they read for a variety of purposes in a discipline other than English. This in turn will help develop literacy and prepare students for college and career readiness.

In addition to the scope of the Common Core Standards, another key difference is the way the standards are organized. Whereas in the old state standards document each standard was difficult to track and compare from one grade level to the next, the Common Core Standards

provide a logical progression of learning from one grade level to the next. This will enable teachers to more readily scaffold instruction and will reduce the practice of teaching only "target standards."

## What is NOT in the Common Core Standards

After the Carlston teachers compared the old and new standards, they focused on what is **not** in the CCS document. Although the Common Core Standards describe the essential skills and thinking processes all students are expected to learn and demonstrate for success in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the Standards **do not**:

- specify how the content should be taught
- mandate all that can or should be taught
- define the nature of advanced work for students who meet the Standards prior to the end of high school
- require specific intervention methods or materials that may be needed to work with students who are well below or well above grade-level expectations
- identify the supports that districts, school sites, and teachers may need for English Language Learners and for students with special needs
- include every characteristic or skill related to college and career readiness

*(CCSS for ELA & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects).*

The Carlston teachers noted that these omissions address many of the concerns that educators have about the negative impacts of NCLB. One significant way to transition to the CCS and make teaching and learning more meaningful and relevant was voiced by a Carlston honoree:

"The teacher should control the process and implementation, especially with regard to giving benchmarks."

By playing a more central role in the development of curricula, the pacing of instruction, and the creation and use of meaningful assessments, educators will be able to call upon their expertise and experience to more effectively meet the needs of their individual students. Instead of teaching information and skills in order to prepare students for bubbling in the CST objective tests, teachers will be able to make decisions based upon informal and formal assessments



created by both the teacher and the Assessment Consortium. School sites and districts will also be able to more easily tailor their decisions, resources, and short- and long-term visions to the needs of their unique populations.

## The Role of Higher Order Thinking Skills and Habits of Mind

The Common Core Standards are intended to help our students develop their higher order thinking skills such as critiquing, analyzing, applying concepts, and synthesizing. In discussing ways to cultivate these thinking skills, the Carlston teachers examined the habits of mind from the *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing*, developed by the Council of Writing Program Administrators, the National Council of Teachers of English, and the National Writing Project. The authors identify eight habits of mind: “curiosity, openness, engagement, creativity, persistence, responsibility, flexibility, [and] metacognition” and refer to them as “ways of approaching learning that are both intellectual and practical and that will support students’ success in a variety of fields and disciplines” (*Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing*). After watching a video of a young girl creating her own captions for a series of pictures in a book, the Carlston teachers identified the habits of mind she displays: curiosity, engagement, creativity, and persistence. Additionally, the symposium participants pointed out the higher order thinking skills she demonstrates such as interpretation, evaluation, and analysis in order to create appropriate and sometimes humorous dialogue for each picture.

As the video shows, it is easy to see children naturally demonstrating these habits of mind in their everyday lives as they play house, learn to tie their shoes, ask questions, learn to read, and investigate new places. When the Carlston honorees gathered in table groups to examine some of the key descriptors and language of the Common Core Standards, they concluded that these same attributes and behaviors are also essential for success in school and in every discipline. For example, when comparing some of the key descriptors across the College and Career Readiness Standards and the Practices in Science and Engineering, Mathematics, and History/Social Science, students are expected to build strong content knowledge, analyze information, and solve problems. In both the table groups and in the larger discussion, participants pointed out that in order to develop and apply these critical thinking processes, students will need to be curious and engaged in

learning, open to new ideas and methods, and flexible and persistent when an answer does not come easily. Being aware of their own learning styles and processes will also aid students in learning how to learn. Developing these habits of mind and higher order thinking skills will prepare students for the increased rigor in their k-12 classes as well as for the demands of college and careers.

The importance of creating materials and lessons that help our students develop higher order thinking skills and effective behaviors like the eight habits of mind was highlighted at the end of the day when a Carlston teacher reflected on one of the take-aways from the symposium:

“Children begin their education full of inquiry. They come with questions, and they are always asking ‘Why?’ The goal should be to keep them in that same state of mind.”

## Common Core Shifts in Instruction and Focus

The Common Core Standards are about helping all students develop their literacy skills, which are grounded in the ability to read, write, and reason effectively. The Carlston teachers examined six significant shifts in instruction and focus that will give students the skills to read and understand the wide variety of text types that they will encounter in both college and in the work place.

1. **Balance informational and literary text** - the CCS require that students still read literature, but the national standards call for students to read a significant amount of informational texts across all content areas. While the majority of literature will continue to be the domain of the English department, reading will now be a *shared responsibility* among teachers in all disciplines rather than the sole responsibility of those who teach English classes.

This first shift lays the foundation for the remaining five.

2. **Build knowledge in the disciplines** - to help students increase their background knowledge and vocabulary within each discipline, teachers will need to provide guided classroom instruction and scaffolded lessons that build connections across content areas.
3. **Staircase text complexity** - teachers need to choose texts that are grade-level appropriate rather than texts that reflect the reading levels of our students. By choosing texts that are below grade level, we have created a skill and knowledge gap that has left students unprepared for the reading required in the work force and in college. The change to grade-level appropriate texts will require scaffolding and direct, guided instruction

3. (con't) that move students from lower level thinking tasks like listing and recalling to higher order thinking skills like inferring, critiquing, and analyzing. Additionally, "instruction must move generally toward decreasing scaffolding and increasing independence" ("CCSS Appendix A" pg. 9).
4. **Text-based answers** - rather than allowing students to rely on impressions or feelings to support their interpretations and arguments, students are now being asked to interpret, evaluate, and choose evidence from texts. This will require students to use text-based evidence to justify their reasoning and interpretations.
5. **Write from sources** - teachers are expected to place a greater emphasis on lessons that require students to persuade (40%) and explain (40%). Students will still write from personal experience (narrate) (20%), but this shift away from writing from personal experience will require students to pull evidence from texts to support their claims.
6. **Build academic vocabulary** - to increase reading comprehension and build background knowledge, teachers across disciplines need to use and teach common academic vocabulary. In order for students to be able to access a variety of complex academic and work-place texts and complete challenging tasks, they need to be familiar with frequently occurring academic language.

(From [EngageNY.org](http://EngageNY.org) of the New York State Education Department. "Pedagogical Shifts Demanded by the Common Core State Standards." Internet. Available from [Engaged NY.org](http://EngagedNY.org); accessed 1 Nov. 2013).

In addition to the shifts established by the Common Core Standards, California will be transitioning from state-mandated CSTs to national assessments aligned to the CCS. These assessments, created by the Smarter Balanced Consortium, will require students to employ a wide range of critical thinking skills to demonstrate mastery. The Carlston teachers reviewed the Smarter Balanced assessment claims for ELA and literacy for all students:

**Claim #1 – Reading:** "Students can read closely and analytically to comprehend a range of increasingly complex literary and informational texts."

**Claim #2 – Writing:** "Students can produce effective and well-grounded writing for a range of purposes and audiences."

**Claim #3 – Speaking and Listening:** "Students can employ effective speaking and listening skills for a range of purposes and audiences."

**Claim #4 – Research/Inquiry:** "Students can engage in research and inquiry to investigate topics, and to analyze, integrate, and present information" (*Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium*).

In light of the shifts encouraged by the CCS and the change to performance-based national assessments, the Carlston honorees worked with Webb's Depths of Knowledge (DOK) to identify and compare the levels of critical thinking. Similar to Bloom's Taxonomy, Webb's DOK descriptors represent the kinds of tasks and critical thinking processes that teachers incorporate into their lessons to help students demonstrate a variety of lower level to higher order thinking skills. After reviewing Webb's DOK, the Carlston participants read and discussed in table groups several classroom and Smarter Balanced performance tasks representing a variety of disciplines and identified the habits of mind and levels of thinking that each task required students to demonstrate. This activity highlighted for the participants the need to scaffold their lessons so that students are more consistently required to move from lower level to higher order thinking. For example, asking students to compare and contrast two events just to identify the similarities and differences is an example of a lower level thinking task. While this is an important part of the learning process, students should be expected to think more deeply.

By asking students to evaluate the significance of specific similarities or differences of two events is now establishing a more complex purpose that requires students to demonstrate higher order thinking skills such as interpretation, evaluation, and drawing conclusions. Examining classroom assignments and sample Smarter Balanced performance tasks led the Carlston participants to reflect on the implications for their own teaching:

"I also found it valuable to be able to take a look at some performance sample tasks for the CCS. I now have a better idea of how I might begin to restructure my own assessments."

"A paradigm shift needs to happen!"

With the implementation of the Common Core Standards, the bar has been raised for teachers and students. Teachers must examine their practice and determine where and how they can increase the rigor in the classroom while at the same time make sure that students are supported in their efforts to learn and apply information, concepts, skills, and thinking processes.

After reviewing the expectations set forth by the CCS and Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium, the Carlston teachers gathered together in content area groups to look more closely at specific Common Core Standards, examine classroom lessons and possible modifications, discuss student work, and share resources. At the end of the content area collaboration time, the participants shared how they had benefitted from working with their colleagues:

“I heard some very powerful lessons and methods of implementation for full school CCS. This will help my colleagues and I to collaborate and support each other through this change.”

“I feel much more prepared to address my department about NGSS [New Generation Science Standards] requirements: what should be our focus, how we can improve our communication to our feeder school teachers, how we might be able to work collaboratively with our math department.”

“Looking at how teachers are already doing CCS related lessons reduced the feeling of being overwhelmed.”

“Being able to sit with other amazing math teachers and discuss Common Core was very valuable. I was able to learn a lot of information about CCS that I can now take back to my site.”

“We started an Edmodo group to continue to share.”

## Concerns and Challenges Associated with the Common Core

In the afternoon the Carlson honorees read articles about the perceptions and concerns educators, parents, and the public have about the Common Core Standards and shared their own site and district level experiences. This led to rich and meaningful small and large group discussions about the concerns and challenges associated with the implementation of the CCS.

### Lack of Consensus

While the Carlston honorees have in common high expectations and a commitment to helping every student succeed, support for the CCS is not universal among this group. This is not due to varying levels of dedication or commitment to excellence or a lack of belief in students’ ability to be engaged and to learn; rather, differing levels of support for the CCS is a reflection of teachers who are cautious and thoughtful about the changes that have to happen in order to successfully implement the new standards. Additionally, some of the participants who have taught through more than one education reform movement are worried that many of the same missteps could derail the CCS and the best intentions of those who try to implement them.

Even within the larger education community there is not a united front embracing the Common Core Standards. While many have touted the positive aspects of the CCS, some educators who have reservations feel they are being ignored and even pressured to just accept the impending changes. One Carlston participant feels that “... it’s not really safe/ok

for educators to say anything bad about CCS or Smarter Balanced.” While there are some people in education who want to silence discord, the honest and frank conversations at the symposium exemplify that many educators have a willingness to discuss even the most challenging ideas and issues.

### Misinterpretations of the CCS and Possible Ramifications

One of the most alarming concerns voiced during the afternoon discussion is the sometimes unclear, inconsistent, and inaccurate information being communicated to teachers and administrators about the implementation of the Common Core Standards. Additionally, there is a concern that even when the information is accurate, at times it is being misinterpreted by those shaping policies and making district and site decisions. For instance, one participant noted that many sources are stating that the CCS require a shift to teaching 30% fiction and 70% informational text, and because of this “some districts have moved away from fiction.” Rather than adding the reading of informational text across all the disciplines while still retaining the teaching of literature in English classes, some administrators and teachers mistakenly think that they are supposed to abandon the teaching of literature in an effort to prepare students for college and careers. As district personnel and teachers move closer to full implementation, such misinterpretations of the intent and language of the CCS could cause unnecessary and harmful changes to curricula, depriving students of a well-rounded education that includes the literature that, along with informational text, has been a vital staple of English classes.

### Addressing Student Diversity While Increasing Rigor

Testing data and graduation rates clearly show that not all students are successful in the current educational setting. Students in every classroom represent a wide variety of needs and abilities. Some are English Language Learners; some have special needs; others are performing either above or below grade level. Students also have different goals for life after high school. Some students are intent on entering the work force, the military, or other career options rather than attending college. With this diversity of student needs, abilities, and goals, coupled with the residual effects of more than a decade of NCLB, the Carlston honorees contemplated the possible consequences of shifting instruction and content to increase the rigor without taking into account the amount of time, resources, and instruction that will be necessary to help both teachers and students successfully transition to lessons and assessments grounded in the Common Core Standards.

Increasing rigor is a consistent theme related to the Common Core Standards. While doing so has many positive implications, the Carlston honorees expressed concerns about whether the people in charge of state-wide implementation and assessments have fully considered the current state of education and the short- and long-term ramifications of shifting to the CCS. The participants pointed out that “the [current education] system is not working for our kids. We’re operating on an old paradigm.” Making classes more demanding has to go beyond simply raising expectations, assigning more work, and giving harder tests. “...[W]e need also to consider the perils to a generation of school kids who are already buckling under the demands of ‘rigorous’ curriculum, which often vastly overestimates their cognitive development and assumes that there is more than 24 hours in a day.”

### **The Need for Additional Support for Teachers Transitioning to the CCS**

The importance of making informed decisions that will improve education for all of California’s students brought to the forefront a disconcerting issue regarding how teachers will be supported throughout the implementation of the CCS and national assessments. In the past, reforms and higher expectations were imposed on educators without making available additional resources, collaboration time, and meaningful professional development to ensure a successful transition. As a result, teachers are worried that once again they will be held accountable for student performance without being provided with enough resources and time to adapt. Several of the participants shared questions about the impact of the CCS on their teaching:

“How is Common Core going to be implemented at schools?”

“How is Common Core going to change how we assess students?”

“Does this mean the end of multiple-choice tests? Shouldn’t I be changing how I’m assessing?”

“What strategies can we use to increase rigor and how can we scaffold these effectively?”

“How can we help our colleagues teach writing and reading in other disciplines?”

On a positive note, these questions reflect the care and dedication that many of California’s educators bring to their profession and affirm that there is a genuine interest in improving the teaching and learning across all disciplines. On the other hand, these questions also reveal that even the most committed and hard-working teachers need additional support in the form of accurate and timely information, time to collaborate, and access to resources in order to successfully transition to the new standards.

The Carlston honorees identified a lack of time to collaborate as an issue that district and school site administrators must address. Even though the participants come from different teaching contexts, they agreed “[t]eachers need more PD and time to prepare” and “[h]aving time to do that [share materials and ideas] is always important, but often no time is carved out to do it.” A lack of opportunities to collaborate will lead to some teachers feeling isolated and overwhelmed by the increased demands of the CCS. Without time and support for collaboration, effective and knowledgeable teachers will continue to provide robust and meaningful learning experiences while the weaker teachers will continue to provide mediocre learning experiences, thereby perpetuating the very inequities the CCS are trying to address.

### **Articulation between K – 12 and University Schools of Education**

Among the Carlston symposium attendees were representatives from university schools of education, and they voiced the need to include college faculty in the conversations about the Common Core Standards. It is imperative that those who teach and prepare our next wave of educators are informed about the new standards and are included in developing effective ways to help their teacher credential candidates prepare to teach lessons based upon the CCS. However, one challenge a university faculty member identified was the “difficulty of coming up with shared talking points” that could be communicated across a wide network of schools of education.

### **Public Perceptions about the CCS**

Misunderstandings and concerns about the Common Core Standards are not limited to those in education. Based upon articles and their own experiences, the Carlston honorees acknowledged that “there is a lot of confusion surrounding the CCS among the public,” who lacks the necessary accurate information to fully understand the intent of the Common Core Standards and the related assessments. A result of this lack of information is that some members of both the education community and the public at large believe that the Common Core Standards were created and imposed on states by the federal government and that states will eventually be required to adopt a mandated, national curriculum. This issue has many people worried, upset, and resistant to efforts to discuss and ultimately implement the CCS.



In addition to feeling wary about the political ramifications associated with the CCS, another concern that parents have is that basic, lower level thinking tasks like memorization of the multiplication table, spelling, and vocabulary will be discarded and as a result students will not develop a strong foundation built upon essential information and fundamentals. At the symposium, as well as at many school sites, conversations about the CCS have focused on developing lessons that require students to demonstrate higher order thinking skills and habits of mind. Educators are familiar with these higher order thinking skills and behaviors, but many parents believe that this shift in focus will come at the expense of students building a strong base of foundational knowledge.

Parents worry that kids will lack basic skills and the development of common knowledge from one grade to the next. One of the participants summed up why some parents have misgivings about the CCS: “‘Habits of mind’ is abstract. Parents want concrete. They see spelling and vocabulary. But critical thinking happens over time.” Parents and the public in general want to see what students are learning, and memorizing and reciting spelling lists, vocabulary, and the multiplication table are concrete representations of what students know. Parents are familiar with these activities.

Abstract concepts like higher order thinking skills and habits of mind cannot be demonstrated and assessed the same way; the lack of familiar, concrete measurements and the incorporation of more performance based assessments have parents feeling like the traditional building blocks of education are being tossed aside for more abstract and new methods of teaching that may leave students struggling and unprepared for life after high school.

## **The Need for Informed Legislators**

Even though teachers have the greatest impact on what students learn on a daily basis, the Carlston teachers are aware that legislators have the ability to impact policy and public opinion. There is also the danger that they can be easily swayed by public opinion; therefore, it is imperative that those in the political arena are well informed about the CCS. Yet, busy and often well-intentioned legislators may not have the time and background knowledge to fully understand the Common Core Standards. The participants expressed their concerns about whether our state representatives are seeking out and receiving well-informed and unbiased sources of information.

## **A Call to Action – Addressing the Challenges of Implementing the CCS**

As of November 2013, a total of 45 states and the District of Columbia had adopted the national standards; however, after reviewing the Common Core Standards and the many benefits and concerns associated with their creation, content, and implementation, it is clear to the symposium participants that more work needs to be done to ensure that those in the teaching profession, the public, and the policy makers have a full and complete grasp of their scope and intent. The Carlston honorees, with the support of the Carlston Family Foundation, identified several actions that could help to dispel some of the misinformation and apprehension associated with the CCS and in turn make possible a more effective and efficient transition to the new standards.

### **Carlston Teachers Commit to Providing Leadership**

Disagreement among professionals does not mean that the Common Core Standards should be discarded, any more than agreement means that they should be embraced without question. Education reform, and all that the transition to the CCS entails, is complicated. The Carlston participants acknowledge that “[teachers] are struggling... More transparent conversation is needed to enable all to be successful.” Teachers must understand the CCS before they can effectively implement them in their classrooms. To that end, the Carlston honorees have resolved to return to their own school sites and educate other teachers and administrators about the Common Core Standards. Sharing accurate information about the CCS and providing a safe environment for open and honest conversations will help educators work together to address the many concerns and issues that will arise.

Providing educators with opportunities to become familiar with the content and structure of the CCS and to discuss related issues is a logical first step. Yet, to positively impact teaching and learning on a daily basis, professional development opportunities need to go beyond just developing familiarity with the CCS. The Carlston honorees shared ideas about what could be done at school sites to help colleagues transition to the CCS:

“We need to educate more teachers on the strategies and resources they can use to help their students.”

“I think that if we could set up a system to first help each other and then to help train new teachers and support them that we will be in a better place.”

“[Teachers] need to be trained on how to collaborate. Interdisciplinary collaboration doesn’t mean just sharing materials.”

To ensure that professional development and collaboration efforts are relevant and useful within each school’s unique context, knowledgeable teachers, like those at the Carlston symposium, need to actively provide leadership and coaching at their sites by answering questions, modifying and creating lessons, modeling effective strategies and teaching practices, identifying and sharing resources, and establishing successful collaboration protocols within and across disciplines. Providing professional development will assist teachers in increasing the rigor in their classrooms, while helping them to keep in mind the individual strengths, needs, and goals of their students.

### **Administrators Must Play a Significant Role in Supporting Teachers**

The Carlston teachers agreed that “[o]ne of the keys to effectively implementing the CCS is to have a knowledgeable administration.” Having a comprehensive understanding of the CCS will empower administrators to talk with their staff, parents, and community members about the new standards and assessments and how they plan to support teachers and students as they transition to the CCS. As important as it is to be informed, understanding the CCS is not enough. In addition to being well-versed on the CCS, one of the most meaningful courses of action administrators can take is to provide consistent collaboration time for teachers to discuss lessons, examine student work, share strategies, and identify and try out best practices all within a supportive professional environment. The Carlston honorees felt strongly that there needs to be a “bigger push for collaboration.” Building a more collaborative climate will enhance the ability of teachers of all disciplines to support each other in helping students to learn content knowledge, skills, and concepts.



**Carlston  
Family  
Foundation**

## **Strengthening Teacher Credential Programs**

**D**iscussions of the Common Core Standards have been centered on grades K-12, but in order to ensure the greatest chance for successful implementation, university faculty, especially those in schools of education, need to be invited into the conversation. California’s newly-credentialed teachers must be knowledgeable about the CCS and know how to plan and teach lessons that will be consistent with the new standards. Unfortunately, there has been a lack of consistent articulation between public K-12 educators and college faculty. As the CCS are increasingly integrated into K-12 classrooms, this lack of articulation could cause an even greater disconnect between what newly-credentialed candidates are prepared to do and what will be required of them as teachers in California’s classrooms. As a starting point in addressing this potential problem, one university faculty member at the symposium commented that the “‘habits of mind’ and Practices across the disciplines [Science and Engineering, Mathematics, and History/Social Science] seem key – I want to help education faculty use these in teaching future teachers.” Additionally, the college faculty representative stated the need to “develop talking points for college faculty.” The Carlston Family Foundation will continue to support a collaborative effort among the Carlston honorees, deans, and faculty of schools of education in California to examine ways to strengthen credential programs. It is paramount that schools of education are at the forefront of improving their own programs in order to positively impact the teaching and learning for all our students.

### **Informing Parents and Community Members**

As California’s educators work to provide a more rigorous and equitable education for all students, an informed citizenry is one of the keys to our success; however, it is clear from news accounts and articles that many people are lacking the necessary relevant and accurate information to understand the Common Core Standards and the benefits associated with their adoption and implementation. As active participants in the education of their children, parents want to know that our education system reflects the expectations and unique characteristics of their communities while still preparing their children for the national and global demands of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This desire for local influence and control has people concerned that the Common Core Standards were created and imposed on states by the federal government. Additionally, some parents have become increasingly concerned that their children will not be able to handle the increased rigor and expectations in math, science, and other core content areas.

To address these concerns, the Carlston honorees suggested that educators set up school-based forums to provide opportunities for parents and community members to share their concerns and questions. At these meetings educators will be able to explain that unlike previous education reform efforts, the creation of the Common Core Standards began as a bipartisan effort among state representatives to create a set of common, internationally benchmarked standards that would establish academic equity in America's classrooms. They were intended to standardize expectations for rigor and content without relegating classroom instruction to test-prep.

Additionally, these school-based forums will give teachers the opportunity to explain how the sequencing of instruction and concepts may change. Parents and community members must be informed about how students will be supported in learning foundational knowledge and skills as well as increasingly complex concepts. Parents need to know that their children will receive a high-quality education in California and that teachers are prepared to support all students in developing literacy. The Carlston honorees see these school-based forums as opportunities "to reach out to parents to help them have an accurate and positive understanding of the Common Core." Inviting parents and community members into the conversation about the CCS will give educators the opportunity to strengthen ties to the community and to show that teachers are knowledgeable and prepared for the changes ahead.

Another idea that participants discussed was for educators to "have a one minute and a three minute speech ready to inform parents and community members" about the importance of higher order thinking skills and why and how they will be integrated into lessons. These brief speeches will provide useful information and hopefully encourage more conversations between teachers and parents during the school year.

In addition to educating people on the local level, knowledgeable educators need to step forward and inform the public and address their concerns on a larger scale. The Carlston honorees identified public service announcements (PSAs) as one way to reach out to the public in order to ease the concerns of parents and community members. In these PSAs educators will be able to explain the CCS and how they will be used to prepare children for the careers and local and global demands of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## Informing Legislators

In order to address the particular needs of our state representatives, the Carlston teachers are developing

talking points and creating and gathering together reputable sources of information about the CCS that can be used as quick and comprehensive resources for legislators when discussing education reform with their constituents and when voting. It is important that educators are on the front lines of advocacy to ensure that the nature and intent of the CCS are not watered down, misinterpreted, or dismantled. But, educators cannot do this on their own. They need well-informed political leaders to help ensure that the implementation of the CCS is effective and maintains its integrity.

## The Role of the Carlston Family Foundation

While there is not complete consensus on the benefits and need for the Common Core Standards, what the Carlston honorees do agree on is that we cannot simply ignore the changes in education that are already under way. One of the significant contributions of the Carlston Family Foundation is providing a supportive and safe environment for educators to discuss the issues that impact education in California and to develop ways to address the most pressing topics. The 2013 symposium participants feel confident in the ability of those in the education community to positively impact the teaching and learning of all students, and they appreciate the role that the Carlston Family Foundation is willing to play in this endeavor. One participant's comment sums up what many at the symposium believe: "The Carlston Family Foundation is an example of how others can build and support good teaching."

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## 2013 Carlston Family Foundation Outstanding Teachers of America



**Student Nominators:** Back Row L-R: Marvin Cruz, Devan White, Bodero In, Kyla Buckingham, Heriberto Olive

**2013 Honorees:** Front row L-R: Yo Azama, Cindy Page, Elizabeth Lawson-Rohner, Adrian Valdivia, Susan Groff

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