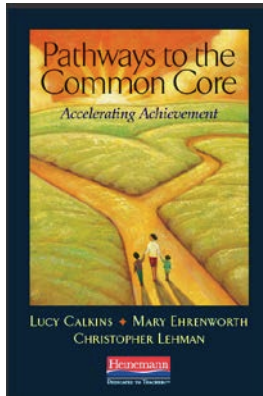


## Book Review



*Pathways to the Common Core: Accelerating achievement.* Lucy Calkins, Mary Ehrenworth, and Christopher Lehman. 2012. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann. 216 pp. Paperback. **ISBN-13:** 978-0-325-04355-5. US\$33.13

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The Common Core State Standards (CCSS), currently adopted by forty-five states, possess the potential to prompt a rigorous, sweeping reform of the country's educational system. As the individuals directly responsible for implementing these new standards, teachers, literacy coaches, and school leaders are striving to understand and implement the new standards. By offering a detailed and thoughtful exploration of the new standards and how they might be implemented, in *Pathways to the Common Core: Accelerating achievement*, Lucy Calkins, Mary Ehrenworth, and Christopher Lehman speak not only to those currently engaged in the day-to-day efforts to infuse this new framework into K-12 schools, but also to educational researchers, teacher educators, teacher candidates, and various other educational stakeholders across the nation.

From the first pages of the text, the authors acknowledge the mixed reception that the Common Core State Standards have received, noting that cautious optimism, tentativeness, suspicion, and even adamant resistance have greeted state mandates for implementation. The authors acknowledge that "concerns and questions are valid and important" (p. 8), but they also recognize how appealing it is to greet new concepts, especially those that require significant change, with negativity and to thereby dismiss out-of-hand the positive aspects that new approaches to teaching and learning may offer. In an effort to acknowledge what the Common Core State Standards bring, Calkins, Ehrenworth, and Lehman suggest twelve important promising aspects of the standards. The CCSS

- provide an urgently needed wake-up call;
- emphasize much higher-level comprehension skills than previous standards;
- place equal weight on reading and on writing;
- stress the importance of critical citizenship;
- emphasize reading complex texts;
- have a clear design, with central goals and high standards;

- convey that intellectual growth occurs through time;
- call for proficiency, complexity, and independence;
- support cross-curricular literacy teaching;
- emphasize that every student needs to be given access to this work;
- aim to put every state on the same measuring stick;
- respect the professional judgment of classroom teachers. (pp. 8-13)

By focusing on the potential of the standards to foster dramatic improvements in K-12 students' education, the authors posit that the standards are a reasoned, foundational, and ambitious approach to accelerating the literary development of children within this country, and repeatedly and vigorously stress the CCSS assertion that the successful implementation of the standards rely upon individual teachers' skills and awareness of their students' abilities and needs. Consequently, the ways in which the standards are implemented will differ from classroom to classroom and school to school, as each educator and each educational setting recognize and respond to the needs of their children. That belief, explicitly stated in the CCSS, forms the basis for the authors' warning that teachers and schools should use extreme caution when considering the adoption of prepackaged materials that claim to align with the Common Core State Standards, but that have no knowledge of the specific children who inhabit that teacher's classroom or that school building.

Calkins, Ehrenworth, and Lehman present a logical and clearly structured means for approaching the literary Common Core State Standards. The introduction, which provides a general overview of the standards, is followed by eight chapters: four on reading and four on writing. The penultimate chapter is devoted to the Speaking/Listening and Writing strands. Within each of the three sections dedicated to the CCSS's strands, the authors offer an overview of specific standards; suggest how learning-focused applications that place students squarely at the center of the standards might be enacted; and describe opportunities for collegial interaction and professional growth. The culminating chapter offers a synthesis of overarching, intertwining concepts and strives to illuminate ways in which the Common Core State Standards may provide a means for pursuing whole school reform to enhance the educational experiences of all children.

Because the book is divided into chapters dedicated to the various strands, readers are invited to focus on their particular priorities, possibly depending upon their roles within their schools. While an administrator may wish to begin the text with the first chapter in order to focus on how the various parts of the CCSS serve as "interlocking puzzle parts [with each part affecting] other work" (p. 21), a classroom teacher may wish to begin with the reading chapters and follow up with the writing chapters to consider how reading and writing inform and enhance each other. A speech/debate teacher may see a benefit to beginning his journey through the CCSS with the speaking and learning chapter and walk back to other chapters once the speaking/learning foundation is established.

Though individuals may wish to dive into the text at different points, the authors stress three important steps for school communities dedicated to working together to

explore and implement the CCSS. First, they highlight the need to understand the current state of their district's existing literary initiatives in order to identify any possible alignments with the CCSS. Such an approach affords an opportunity to recognize and enhance programs that are already in place. Second, they urge school communities to identify gaps in the prevailing curriculum and ways to address the fundamental mandates of the CCSS. For example, a school community might recognize the need to implement a writing workshop curriculum that spans various subject areas and grades, or it might choose instead to systematically implement a new focus on analytical nonfiction texts across the curriculum. Finally, because the Common Core State Standards emphasize that assessment data, gathered from authentic, unrehearsed performance tasks, serve as the guiding force in developing appropriate curriculum, Calkins, Ehrenworth, and Lehman encourage school communities to carefully examine the kinds of assessments that they are using to track student growth.

Within each set of strand-aligned chapters (Reading, Writing, and Speaking/Listening and Language), Calkins, Ehrenworth, and Lehman explore the specific standards for each literacy strand, walk through them as they relate to a particular professionally authored or student-created text, and provide ways that teachers may work collaboratively to enhance their own understandings of the Common Core State Standards. For example, in discussing the Reading strand, they highlight that the CCSS downplays reading as a personal act, one which asks students to draw connections between their own lives and texts and instead stresses textual analysis; that non-fiction texts make up an increasingly greater percentage of a student's reading; and that students are required to recognize and remain aware of particular conceptual threads that weave through and create the tapestries of texts. They then explore specific Reading standards in relation to a commonly used text, *Charlotte's Web*. The section concludes with a scenario in which collaborating teachers take up the student role to personally understand and effectively apply the CCSS to E. B. White's text. While the examples used tend to favor elementary and middle school texts, 9-12 standards and commonly used high school literature are also referenced. A similar structure is followed for reading informational non-literary texts within the Reading strand and for engaging with Writing, Speaking/Listening and Language.

In concluding their text, Calkins, Ehrenworth, and Lehman return to the potential for Common Core State Standards to influence educational experiences for K-12 children. They provide insight into what meaningful school reform will require and how to approach it in a sensible manner. Offering a look backward, they delineate educational missteps in the past, and looking forward, they identify possible strides that we may take in the future. Finally, they close by stressing the belief that by working together to implement and assess effective teaching and learning, dedicated, knowledgeable educators will create a successful pathway to accelerated achievement for our nation's students.



## About the Reviewer



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