From educators like you...

I love it when I sit down to view a table of contents and end up reading the whole book. Pathways to the Common Core is the most useful unpacking of the Common Core State Standards available to date. Lucy, Mary, and Chris help us to understand what the standards emphasize and how this emphasis might lead us down different paths of instruction than we’ve taken before. With generous wisdom and experience, they help us keep one eye on rigor and the other on meaningful reading and writing.

—Gretchen Owocki, Ph.D., Director, Reading and Writing Clinic, Saginaw Valley State University, MI

Combining research, experience and common sense, Pathways to the Common Core is a virtual GPS providing step-by-step navigation through the new Common Core standards. It is a must-read for teachers, administrators, and instructional leaders looking to effectively implement the standards.

—Dr. Tom Bulla, Director of Elementary Education, Union County Public Schools, NC

Some of our most valuable resources in supporting a child’s journey toward college and career readiness are the teachers who guide that journey. If the standards specify what every child needs to know and be able to do to be college or career ready, then Pathways to the Common Core specifies what every educator needs to know and be able to do to effectively implement the ELA standards.

—Meghan Berry, CPS, K–5 Writing Content Lead Office of Reading and Language Arts, Chicago

At last!—a book that inspires educators to raise their sights above the politics of the Common Core and to focus instead on the unprecedented opportunities these new standards create. Loaded with practical examples, Pathways to the Common Core provides detailed explanations of the standards and thoughtful considerations for implementation. It will propel educators toward the rigorous, ambitious teaching that can truly accelerate student achievement.

—Dr. Erin McGurk, Director of Educational Services, Ellington Public Schools, CT

Lucy, Mary, and Christopher take us on an intellectual journey inside the Common Core State Standards, pausing to examine each standard with the eyes of teachers in real classrooms. Brilliant and accessible, Pathways to the Common Core gives a voice to our profession and invites us to reflect on the Common Core State Standards as an opportunity for collaboration and celebration.

—Lydia Bellino, Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction, Cold Spring Harbor Central School District, NY
Once again Lucy and the Reading & Writing Project blaze a trail for all of us—this time as we enter the new terrain of the Common Core. Pathways to the Common Core helps teachers recognize that this work is not new. Rather, it takes what we have already been doing and provides a road map for ways to make the work deeper and more rigorous.

—Phyllis Harrington, Ed.D., Superintendent, Oyster Bay–East Norwich Central School District, NY

While the standards may be daunting and technical, I am inspired by the way Pathways to the Common Core eases the reader through the concerns we all feel and supports us as we come together to take an honest look at our instructional practices and create systems that will accelerate student achievement. This book is encouraging, supportive, and has me feeling prepared to roll up my sleeves and get to work alongside my staff.

—Liz Tetreault, Principal, Port Salerno Elementary School, FL

Pathways to the Common Core delivers a road map for school leaders and teachers looking to navigate the bends and twists involved in implementing the Common Core State Standards. It is the perfect blend of instructional theory and classroom practice. This book has already become my most important resource.

—Christine Capaci, Principal, West Windsor–Plainsboro Regional School District, Village School, NJ

Lucy, Mary, and Chris have decrypted the CCSS. Pathways to the Common Core is a must-have addition to every educator’s library.

—Vincent M. Iturralde, Principal, Tarkington School of Excellence, Chicago

Engaging and intriguing, Pathways to the Common Core reads like a novel. You won’t want to put it down.

—Sheila R. Cole, Principal, Franklin School, NJ

Pathways to the Common Core is not a love letter to the CCSS; instead, it is a critical dissection of the standards focusing on what they include and what they marginalize, what is neglected, and what is ineffective. It shows what the standards look like in actual practice.

—Terrence P. Carter, Ph.D., Curriculum & Instruction Department, Academy for Urban School Leadership, National Teachers Academy, Chicago

An invaluable guide for systemically implementing the Common Core standards, Pathways to the Common Core is a must-read for educators interested in accelerating student learning and engaging in true school reform.

—Gaeton (Guy) Stella, Ph.D., Superintendent, Woodbridge School District, CT
Providing substantive and practical strategies for successfully implementing the CCSS, Pathways to the Common Core will become the resource for fostering shared professional study around the Common Core.

—Kelly Newman, Assistant Superintendent for Elementary Education, Great Neck Public Schools, NY

This provocative guide provides an invaluable resource for understanding the Common Core State Standards and the pathways that can be taken to achieve its ambitious expectations. If CCSS tell us what students are expected to know and be able to do, Pathways to the Common Core frames the discourse, sheds light on existing disputes—guiding educational practitioners away from any interpretation that goes against the standards’ emphasis on independency and proficiency.

—Davide Celoria, Ed.D., Associate Superintendent, Pacifica School District, CA
CHAPTER ONE  An Introduction to the Common Core State Standards

READING STANDARDS

CHAPTER TWO  Overview of the Reading Standards: What Do They Say and What Does It Mean for Us?
CHAPTER THREE  Literal Understanding and Text Complexity: Standards 1 and 10
CHAPTER FOUR  Reading Literature: Standards 2–9
CHAPTER FIVE  Reading Informational Texts: Standards 2–9

WRITING STANDARDS

CHAPTER SIX  Overview of the Writing Standards: What Do They Say and What Does It Mean for Us?
CHAPTER SEVEN  The CCSS and Composing Narrative Texts
CHAPTER EIGHT  The CCSS and Composing Argument Texts
CHAPTER NINE  The CCSS and Composing Informational Texts
Pathways to the Common Core will help you and your colleagues teach in ways that will bring your students to the Common Core State Standards’ level of work in literacy. This book will illuminate both the standards themselves and the pathways you can take to achieve those ambitious expectations. It will help you understand what is written and implied in the standards and help you grasp the coherence and central messages of them. Above all, Pathways to the Common Core has been written to help you tap into the standards as a source for energetic and beautiful reforms in your literacy instruction and in your work with colleagues.

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) are a big deal. Adopted by forty-five states so far, the standards represent the most sweeping reform of the K–12 curriculum that has ever occurred in this country. It is safe to say that across the entire history of American education, no single document will have played a more influential role over what is taught in our schools. The standards are already affecting what is published, mandated, and tested in schools—and also what is marginalized and neglected. Any educator who wants to play a role in shaping what happens in schools, therefore, needs a deep understanding of these standards. That understanding is necessary for anyone wanting to be a co-constructor of the future of instruction and curriculum and, indeed, of public education across America.

Pathways to the Common Core is written for teachers, literacy coaches, and school leaders who want to grasp what the standards say and imply—as well as what they do not say—deeply enough that they can join in the work of interpreting the standards for the classroom and in questioning interpretations others may make. The Common Core State Standards are clear that the responsibility for interpreting and implementing these expectations
rests on the shoulders of teachers and principals (as well as those of state leaders). The standards say, “The Standards leave room for teachers, curriculum developers, and states to determine how those goals should be reached and what additional topics should be addressed. . . . Teachers are thus free to provide students with whatever tools and knowledge their professional judgment and experience identify as most helpful for meeting the goals set out in the Standards” (2010a, 4). *Pathways to the Common Core* expects that you will take the standards at their word and see it as your responsibility—individually and as a member of a school community—to study the expectations for end-of-grade results outlined by the CCSS and to use the Common Core as a lens for reflecting on your practice and for planning ways to support deeper and further learning. *Pathways* aims to help you embrace this role in shaping the future. It will allow you to listen critically to other people’s understandings of what it means to align curriculum to the Common Core and to either say yes or to say no. Most of all, it will allow you to make your own interpretations.

This book, then, is written for educators who are eager to embrace the responsibilities of implementing the Common Core, who see schools as centers of professional study, and who believe that teaching well means engaging in a continual process of studying students and their work in order to strengthen teaching and learning. The book will especially help you implement the CCSS in ways that strengthen student-centered, deeply interactive approaches to literacy, approaches that invite students to live richly literate lives, using reading and writing to pursue goals of personal and social significance. The rhetoric around the CCSS changes rapidly as new documents and assessments emerge. Rather than attempt to have the last word on the standards, we’ve chosen to help you with some implementation on the front end of the curve. We hope this decision helps with your immediate needs as well as your developing discernment and judgment, which will be brought to bear on future mandates.

We do not expect that you, our readers, will be wholehearted fans of every part of the Common Core, nor do we expect *Pathways* will erase your feelings of ambivalence about the standards. We are convinced, however, that ambivalence cannot be an excuse for not responding to the call for reform that is implicit in the standards.
You Can View the Standards as a Curmudgeon—or as if They Are Gold

Often, when we talk with teachers and principals about the standards, we begin by pointing out that each one of us can choose how we regard the standards. We often tell them about a minilesson in which we ask a class of young readers, “Do you know what a curmudgeon is?” and then tell the children that on Halloween, they probably circle past the neighborhood curmudgeon’s house, not trick-or-treating at his door lest he rush out, snarling and waving an angry stick. In the minilesson, we tell children, “You have a choice as readers. You can read like a curmudgeon,” and we illustrate by reading a line or two of the class’ read-aloud book as if it were duller than dishwater. But then we quickly reverse our tone and energy and we point out, “But you can, instead, read as if the text is gold.” Then we reread the passage, this time reading with heart and soul.

Reading the Common Core State Standards as Curmudgeons

Educators, like those young readers, have a choice. We can regard the Common Core State Standards as the worst thing in the world. Frankly, it can be fun to gripe about them. Sometimes, we say to the educators who convene at our Common Core conferences, “Right now, make your face into a curmudgeon’s face. As a curmudgeon, think about those standards—the timing, the way they arrived on the scene, their effect on your school. Now turn and, as a curmudgeon, whine and complain about the Common Core.”

If you do this with your colleagues, you will find the room quickly erupting into heated conversation. After just a few minutes, you can reconvene the group. If people share complaints, they’ll probably mention some of the following, as well as others.

If we really want to tackle the achievement gap, shouldn’t we be tackling poverty first and then standards? Why is now a good time to raise the stakes for our kids, when a huge percentage are living in poverty and when the safety nets have been torn apart and there is no funding to improve education? The percent of children growing up poor in this country continues to rise, from 16% in 2000 up to 21% in 2009 (National Center for Children in
Poverty 2009). Of all industrialized nations, the United States ranks second highest, only slightly behind Mexico, for the percentage of children living in extreme poverty (UNICEF 2005). Not surprisingly, the countries that most often outrank the United States in international education measures have child poverty rates less than half of our own.

**How can we possibly raise standards when conditions that support teaching and learning keep getting worse?** School budgets have been cut to the bone. In Hawaii in 2010, students lost nearly a month of teaching because of excruciatingly thin budgets. In California’s Orange County, Fremont and San Jose have pushed the cap for kindergarten from twenty up to thirty students in a class. In some Oregon districts, middle school teachers are squeezing more than thirty-six students into classrooms.

**Underlying the CCSS is the questionable concept that skills that are essential at the college level should be combed backward throughout all the grades.** The entire design of the standards is based on the argument that the purpose of K–12 education is to prepare K–12 students for college (the rhetoric touts preparation for career as well, but this is not reflected in the standards). Because the standards were written by taking the skills that college students need and distilling those down through every single grade, kindergarten children, for example, are expected to “use a combination of drawing, dictating and writing to compose opinion pieces in which they tell a reader the topic or the name of the book they are writing about and state an opinion or preference about the topic or book” (CCSS 2010a, 19). The very premise that decisions about kindergarten curriculum should be based on a study of what college students do is questionable. For example, what research supports that kindergartners should spend their time writing pint-size literary essays rather than writing about firsthand experiences and observations? Whatever happened to the idea that curriculum reflects children’s development?

**While the gridlike design of the document makes it easier to comprehend, this design also leads to questionable content.** For example, because the informational reading and literature standards are both grounded in the same ten anchor standards and because each grade level’s standard for informational reading has a mirror image in a standard for literature reading, every skill that is important to readers of informational texts must also be
spotlighted in the literature reading standards. While it makes sense that readers of informational texts must gather and read several texts on a topic, comparing and contrasting the points of view of those texts and noting the different ways authors accentuate their claims, it is less clear that this is important work for readers of literature. Is it really the case that in real life, fiction readers collect books by a single predetermined theme and then compare and contrast the points of view and craft moves in those books?

Who wrote the standards anyway? One can search all 399 pages of the document and its appendices and find no trace of an author’s name, and yet now that the CCSS have been ratified, two people, David Coleman and Sue Pimentel, have emerged referring to themselves as “the” authors in their own documents. If this is the case, why was their identity kept secret while states considered the standards? Was the goal to make it look like a large number of people (such as the Council of Chief State School Officers themselves) wrote the standards and thereby prevent questions about the specific authors’ credentials from derailing ratification?

Some documents published after the CCSS were ratified add guidelines for evaluating methods of implementation, contradicting the intention of the standards. Since the CCSS were ratified, Coleman and Pimentel (and even others claiming to have some connection to the CCSS) have continued writing addenda to and interpretations of the CCSS that are hailed as “written by the authors of the CCSS,” as if this gives these addenda and interpretations the same authority as the CCSS themselves. These new documents spell out methods of implementation in a fashion that directly contradict the CCSS’s explicit premise that implementation decisions be left in the hands of teachers and school leaders. The document that was reviewed and ratified by states explicitly says, “the Standards define what all students are expected to know and be able to do, not how teachers should teach” (2010a, 6). Yet now, after states have agreed to take on these standards, some people are spelling out implications and specifying what they wish the Common Core had said, doing so without approval from all of the subcommittees that worked on the CCSS or from the states that have already signed on. One can argue, then, that it is problematic. Thomas Jefferson couldn’t rewrite the Constitution that the states agreed to, nor was he (or any other one person) appointed as the Designated Interpreter of the Constitution. When documents such as the Publishers’ Criteria for
the Common Core State Standards in English Language Arts and Literacy, Grades 3–12 (Coleman and Pimentel 2011) and the Rubrics for Evaluating Open Education Resource (OER) Objects (Achieve 2011) are presented as if they’ve gone through the process of review and been ratified by the states on the subcommittees, it is troubling. Without that endorsement, these materials should not be regarded as having the authority of the CCSS.

The CCSS will be expensive. We hear the tests will be taken on computers. Many schools have so few computers that it would be impossible to put every kid onto one of them on the same day, or even the same week. Plus, in any school, half the computers or the server are not functioning at any one time. Spending every new dollar on the technology to support a massive testing program is problematic as compliance with the CCSS requires other expenses as well. The CCSS will cost money that could have supported smaller classes, professional development, even access to books, Kindles, and iPads.

If we assessed America’s students now, only 15% would perform at the level suggested by the standards. How will it be a good thing to label 85% of kids as failures? Who will pay for the remedial education after everyone fails?

We do not have enough successes to declare with confidence that we have a research-based One Best Way for K–12 teachers to prepare students for college and career success. The CCSS claim to be research based, but the vast majority of the research cited supports the fact that all is not well in America’s schools; the deficits in U.S. education are well documented in the Common Core. Granted, some of the particular solutions set forth do draw on some practices that are research based (e.g., writing across the curriculum). But on the whole, the image of curriculum implicit in the CCSS (and explicit especially in the new documents attempting to spell out implications for instruction) is not visibly research based; it is not based on large-scale reforms that have demonstrated a method for bringing high-needs students to the levels of the Common Core. If that were the case, then the nation would be invited to observe otherwise typical high-needs schools where most of the graduates are flourishing at their colleges. The CCSS represent an important hypothesis, but the problems are far better researched than the pathway forward.
After a few minutes of inviting people to share their qualms about the standards, we quell that conversation. We say to the principals, coaches, and teachers who have joined us to learn about the CCSS, “Like readers who need to decide if they will approach a book like they are curmudgeons or as if the book is gold, we also need to decide how we will approach the standards.”

**Reading the Common Core State Standards as if They Are Gold**

Cory Booker, the mayor of Newark, New Jersey, has, through his approach to his city, helped us think about the need to read the standards or any initiative as if they are full of potential, to see them with eyes of hope. In a recent commencement speech at Williams College (2011), Booker told the story of how, as a young Yale law student, he decided to become a community organizer and thought the best place to start was Newark, the city that *Time* magazine had called “the most dangerous city in the nation.” People in Newark said to him, “If you want to help this city, you don’t need to learn from all those Yale professors. You need to learn from the Queen Mother.”

“The Queen Mother?” he asked. He said that it was suggested that he visit a woman who lived on the fifth floor of Brick Towers, one of Newark’s most notorious developments.

Cory Booker climbed the stairs and knocked on the door of Virginia Jones’ apartment. A seventy-something-year-old woman came to the door. Retelling this story, he recalled saying, “Ma’am, I am Cory Booker. I am from Yale Law School, Ma’am. I am here to help you out.”

The Queen Mother, unimpressed, responded, “Well, if you really want to help, follow me.” They walked down five flights, through a courtyard, past a group of drug dealers, and into the middle of the street. “Tell me what you see around you,” she instructed Cory.

In his speech, Cory began to describe the scene around him: “I see an abandoned building filled with people doing nefarious activities, I see graffiti. . . .”

The Queen Mother stopped him. “Boy, you can’t help this city,” she said and stormed off.

Cory ran behind her, stunned. “Ma’am? Ma’am?” he asked. “What just happened?”

Virginia Jones wheeled around and said to Cory, “You need to understand something, boy. The world you see outside of you is a reflection of what you have inside of you. If you are one of those people who only see
problems and darkness and despair, then that is all there is ever going to be for you. But if you are one of those people who sees hope, opportunity, and love, then you can make a difference.”

Cory Booker learned this lesson as he stood in the intersection of a busy street. We, in this country, stand at the intersection not of a busy city but of educational history. The field of American education is changing in ways that are more dramatic and more far-reaching than anything any of us could have imagined. If we are going to play a role in shaping the future, then we need to take the Queen Mother’s advice to heart. We need to see hope and opportunity. As part of this, we need to embrace what is good about the Common Core State Standards—and roll up our sleeves and work to make those standards into a force that lifts our teaching and our schools. For there is good in them. We would be pleased indeed if students in all our classrooms could do this level of work independently.

So let’s look back to the standards, this time reading them as if they are gold. While concerns and questions are valid and important, we believe there is a lot to celebrate in the Common Core State Standards as well. We are convinced that if we can get about the business of embracing what is good in this document, we can use it to support dramatic improvements in our schools. Equally important, seeing the good in the standards can position us all to talk back to the not-so-good aspects.

So, what is good about the standards?

The CCSS provide an urgently needed wake-up call. America has gone from providing our children with a world-class education to scoring far below other countries on international assessments, landing in fourteenth place on the most recent PISA (Program for International Student Assessment) test for reading (OECD 2010).

Meanwhile, the world has changed. Whereas twenty-five years ago, 95% of jobs required low skills, today low-skills jobs constitute only 10% of our entire economy (Darling-Hammond et al. 2008). New levels of literacy are required in the information economy of today. Consider this statistic: During the four years between 1997 and 2002, the amount of new information produced in the world was equal to the amount produced over the entire previous history of the world (Darling-Hammond et al. 2008)! The old mission for America’s schools—providing universal access to basic education and then providing a small elite with access to university education—may have fit the world of yesterday, where most jobs required low literacy skills, but children
who leave school today without strong literacy skills will not find a job. It is no longer okay to provide the vast majority of America’s children with a fill-in-the-blank, answer-the-questions, read-the-paragraph curriculum that equips them to take their place on the assembly line. The assembly lines have closed down. Instead of continuing to provide the vast majority of students with a skill-and-drill education, the United States needs to provide all students with a thinking curriculum, with writing workshops, reading clubs, research projects, debates, think tanks, Model UN, and the like. The Common Core State Standards offer an absolutely crucial wake-up call.

The CCSS emphasize much higher-level comprehension skills than previous standards. Although some may question a few particular priorities of the Common Core, the document becomes more admirable when one considers what it replaces. It was just a few years ago when No Child Left Behind (NCLB) required educators to focus on the expectations of the National Reading Panel. Back then, the whole big world of comprehension was compacted into one small item in a list of five priorities—phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension—with all of comprehension being equal in emphasis to phonemic awareness. One glance at the Common Core’s expectations reveals that today’s document places a much stronger emphasis on higher-level comprehension skills. Even young children are asked to analyze multiple accounts of an event, noting similarities and differences in the points of view presented, assessing the warrant behind people’s ideas. Readers of today are asked to integrate information from several texts, to explain the relationships between ideas and author’s craft. Whereas the nation’s last attempt to lift the level of literacy instruction defined literacy in a fashion that fit easily into basal reading programs, with their emphasis on seatwork and on little reading groups convened under the teacher’s thumb, this new call for reform forwards an image of literacy instruction that involves students in reading lots of books and documents of all sorts, meeting in small groups to engage in heady, provocative conversations about what they have read, taking stances for and against the views they find in books, and engaging in accountable-talk interactions. Surely this represents an important step ahead.

The CCSS place equal weight on reading and on writing. When NCLB expectations became the law of the land, there was zero emphasis on writing. Writing was not even mentioned in those mandates. What a reversal!
Now, in these new standards, the emphasis on writing standards is parallel to and equal to the emphasis on reading, and furthermore, one can’t help but think that reading will be assessed through writing, making writing even more critical.

Face it. People across our nation do not agree on much. This is a nation in which people are divided between Fox News and CNN, between the Tea Party and Occupy Wall Street movements. It is huge, then, that a nation as divided as ours has come together to say that higher-level comprehension matters, that critical reading and analytic thinking matter. It is even more remarkable to think that the whole nation has agreed that writing needs to take its place alongside reading.

**The CCSS stress the importance of critical citizenship.** The adoption of the Common Core suggests that America’s image of what it means to be educated will change. The Common Core document asks us to bring up a generation of young people who listen to or read a claim and ask, “Who is making this claim? What is that person’s evidence? What other positions are being promulgated? How can I compare and contrast these different views, think about the biases and assumptions behind them, weigh their warrants, and come to an evidence-based, well-reasoned stance?” It is hard not to celebrate any effort to move our nation toward this sort of critical citizenship.

**The CCSS emphasize reading complex texts.** Then, too, most of us agree with the Common Core’s emphasis on the importance of students learning to handle texts of increasing complexity, and have been engaged in this work for years. It is a relief to see that the makers of tests and standards are coming around, belatedly, to understanding that the level of text complexity a student can read is a big deal. For years, we have heard that when a student got this or that question wrong on a high-stakes test, it showed this or that skill deficit—he couldn’t infer, she couldn’t handle cause-and-effect questions—and for years, we have known that the issue was more likely to be that the particular passage was either a challenging one or one that came late in the test.

**The CCSS has a clear design, with central goals and high standards.** Also, when one reads the standards like they are gold, it is hard not to admire the clean, coherent design of the document. The Common Core text repeatedly says
that the aim should be for standards that are high, clear, and few. These standards accomplish this goal. The design is admirable, with ten anchor standards in reading and ten in writing, for example, which capture the ultimate goals. Then each of the ten reading anchor standards is rolled out across grades K–12, with corresponding, parallel work being expected in fiction and nonfiction. For educators who are accustomed to state standards that can’t be contained within a huge bulging notebook and that ramble on endlessly, the design of the CCSS is impressive.

The CCSS convey that intellectual growth occurs through time, across years, and across disciplines. Another strength of the Common Core document is that it articulates grade level benchmarks and a trajectory of skill development. For example, reading anchor standard 2 is determining central ideas of texts and analyzing their development. The grade level standards create a progression of this anchor standard by expecting students to be able to retell stories in a way that includes details in grade 1, to determine a central message, meaning, or moral of a story in grade 3, to determine a central theme or idea and to show its development in the text in grade 8, and to analyze how themes develop and interact with each other across a text in grade 12. This kind of specification is helpful for grade level curriculum planning and for designing assessments. When one can see the spread of work across the grades, it can be a wake-up call, showing you that what seemed to be challenging eighth-grade work is in fact work that should be taught in the fifth grade. Then, a teacher can ascertain where her students are in the trajectory of skill development and then begin there, ramping up their proficiencies.

The CCSS design is also one of strongest features of the standards because it sends a message loud and clear: Growth takes time; it can’t be the job of the fourth-grade teacher, or the tenth-grade teacher, to be sure students reach the expectations for that grade level. Instead, students need to be supported by a spiral curriculum within which teachers across the K–12 spectrum share responsibility for students’ progress along trajectories of skill development.

The CCSS call for proficiency, complexity, and independence. It is important to note (and celebrate) that the emphasis in the Common Core is on students learning to read and write complex texts independently at high levels of proficiency and at a rapid enough rate to be effective. That is, it doesn’t do a student a lot of good if she can handle college-level work only with
her classmates and her teacher in tow. The Common Core State Standards focus on proficiency and complexity, yes, but also on independence. The Common Core want to be sure kids graduate from high school able to do quick, on-the-run research when needed, to express their thinking verbally and in writing, and to summarize, synthesize, analyze, and design without needing teachers to insert the key questions along the way or to walk students through a step-by-step approach.

The CCSS support cross-curricular literacy teaching. These standards embrace the notion that literacy is everyone’s work. Social studies, science, and math teachers are all expected to support literacy. The same rich, provocative, critical reading and writing work that happens in ELA needs to be present across the curriculum.

The CCSS emphasize that every student needs to be given access to this work. Students with IEPs (individualized education programs) still need to be taught to question an author’s bias, to argue for a claim, to synthesize information across texts. Teachers are invited to use assisted technology or other scaffolds to be sure that every learner has access to the thinking curriculum that is at the heart of the CCSS.

The CCSS aim to put every state on the same measuring stick. It is a big deal that forty-five states have signed on to the CCSS. For years, each state has commissioned its own state test and has, year after year, made the test easier or more predictable to make it seem that students across the state have been steadily improving. Meanwhile, however, on the one and only test that has been given consistently across every state for decades, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), kids’ scores across the same interval have flatlined.* The Common Core aims to put all of us alongside the same measuring stick, creating a basis for credible judgments as well as encouraging states to learn from one another in ways that move the nation toward higher levels of accountability for student achievement.

The CCSS respect the professional judgment of classroom teachers. Also impressive is the humility with which the standards writers introduce their

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* NAEP scores for fourth and eighth grades have essentially remained flat since 1992, the first year the test was given, with only slight improvements at grade 8 and no change at grade 4 since 2007 (National Center for Education Statistics 2011).
document, taking several pages to outline not only what is in the standards, but also what the standards do not intend to do. Limitation 1 even begins: “The Standards define what all students are expected to know and be able to do, not how teachers should teach” (2010a, 6). It is important to celebrate that the standards acknowledge that teachers need to draw upon the knowledge of our field in order to bring students to these ambitious levels. Embedded in the document, then, is the right for the teachers across a school or a district to make decisions. This document does not support mandates that say, “Your standards-based classroom must look like X, Y, Z.”

IMPLEMENTING THE COMMON CORE

In the end, the most important aspect of the Common Core State Standards is the part that has yet to be figured out: the implementation. As challenging as it must have been to write and to finesse the adoption of this document, that work is nothing compared with the work of teaching in ways that bring all students to these ambitious expectations. The Common Core State Standards have been written, but the plan for implementing them has not. The goal is clear. The pathway is not.

We trust that once you have read this book, you will be poised to think between your existing approach to literacy and the goals outlined in the Common Core. In order to determine a pathway for implementing the Common Core, it helps to know the standards inside out, but it is even more important to know the resources you can draw upon in your own classroom, school, and district. In developing a plan for implementation, you will need to consider initiatives that are already under way in your school, the resources and assets you will (and will not) be able to draw upon, the pressures that your students, teachers, and parents most want addressed, the nature of your student body and of your existing curriculum, and of course, the knowledge base and the beliefs of the professionals who will be involved. That is, you and the others who know your school well will, in the end, need to be the ones to determine your particular pathway to implementing the Common Core.

Having said this, it is also true that teacher educators at the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project have now helped hundreds of principals and teacher leaders design plans for adopting the Common Core. As we’ve worked together to study school after school, in each instance engaging in data analysis and strategic planning, a few principles have emerged
that are broadly applicable across many different settings. Because some of our advice could influence the way in which you read this book, we will summarize a few especially important recommendations in this first chapter and return to the recommendations in the final chapter, at which point our discussion of schoolwide standards-based reform will be well grounded in the details of the document.

The first thing we want to stress to anyone who is interested in standards-based reform is that the Common Core is, above all, a call for accelerating students’ literacy development. The most important message centers on lifting the level of student achievement, not on course coverage and compliance. The most important reforms that a school system can make will be those that involve creating systems that support continuous improvement of instruction and increased personal and shared accountability for raising levels of student achievement.

It is tempting to interpret the mandate for reform as requiring a school to add some new little thing to your school day. But it will be a missed opportunity if the call to align curriculum to the Common Core is seen as a call for curricular compliance that leads a school to add this or that to the curriculum so that teachers can say, “Sure, we do the Common Core—we do it from 11:15 to 11:35.” The real work on Common Core reform needs instead to revolve around creating systems of continuous improvement that result in teachers teaching toward clearer and higher expectations and doing this work in more transparent, collegial, and accountable ways, with teachers working together within and between grade levels to be sure that students make observable progress along trajectories of skill development. We discuss this in more detail in our final chapter.

For now, let’s just say that if you are going to adopt the Common Core State Standards, it will be important for teachers across your school to work together to ratchet up the level of instruction and, in so doing, to develop stances and systems for engaging in continuous improvement. It also won’t be possible to tackle this work across the board, all at one time, so you will need to decide the best place to start.

**First, look at your current literacy initiatives and set goals for how to improve them.**

We strongly recommend that in order to determine a starting place for Common Core reforms, you look at literacy initiatives already under way in your district and ask whether any one of them is already aligned to the
Common Core. And then instead of checking that one facet of your literacy work off, declaring it a done deal, and moving on to address your deficits and gaps, we suggest you consider strengthening teaching and learning within that one area in ways that will allow your school to develop systems and habits of continuous improvement that can eventually be used more broadly.

If you feel as though one of your school’s newer initiatives is already aligned to the Common Core, then we suggest that after taking a few minutes to pat yourselves on the back, you reread the standards, this time looking closely and critically at your students’ work and at your own teaching. If your school is truly teaching this particular subject in ways that bring all students to the level of the CCSS, then examine the systems that are working well and consider ways to use those same systems to support other aspects of your curriculum. But chances are good that when you said, “Yes! We do this!” you meant, “Yes! We are on the way toward doing that.” And if that is the case, your yes should be a beginning, not an ending, of your reform work.

If you and a group of colleagues do a schoolwide walk-through to look honestly between the CCSS and an area of actual classroom practice and then do some reflective observations within your own classroom, chances are good that you’ll see opportunities for growth. For example, you’ll see instances when the promising initiative has not been implemented with fidelity. You’ll see instances when people are implementing the initiative in a rote, mechanical fashion, without any real personal commitment to these methods. You’ll see instances when teachers continue to teach and teach and teach, without noticing that the student work is not improving as it should, without stopping to let students’ work function as feedback to the teachers, prompting them to revise the instruction so that it actually supports observable progress. Addressing these underdeveloped initiatives is one of the most important things you can do to implement the Common Core, and to raise levels of student achievement.

Next, look at gaps in your curriculum and develop a long-term plan for reform.

Having said that we do not recommend that a school rush around adding this or that to the school day in order to be “Common Core compliant,” we do think that a school needs to reflect on the gaps that exist between what the school is already doing and what the Common Core requires,
looking especially at the biggest and most fundamental mandates of the CCSS. Then the school needs to begin to plan and engage in at least one and perhaps more than one new area of long-term, systemic, and deep school improvement work. In weighing the decision over areas of priority, educators should know that there are a few emphases in the Common Core, and any one of these could lead to critically important changes. We suspect, however, that some areas of reform will be easier and less expensive to implement and will lead to more obvious, dramatic changes. Others seem to us to be options for schools that already support high levels of comprehension and composition and are ready to tackle new terrain.

Implement a spiral, cross-curricular K–12 writing workshop curriculum. Certainly for many school districts, we recommend a district-wide effort to improve writing instruction. There are many advantages to making writing instruction a priority. First, it’s inexpensive. A school needn’t purchase costly supplies for every student. The only expense is that of providing teachers with the professional development and the teaching resources they need to become knowledgeable in this area, both of which are important, as this is an area where few teachers have received any training at all.

Another advantage of instituting a district-wide writing initiative is that the way forward in the teaching of writing is very clear. In the field of writing, there are no substantial debates over how best to proceed. Even the very conservative and old-fashioned textbook Warriner’s supports a writing process approach to the teaching of writing, as do the standards. The CCSS are exactly aligned to the work that experts in the teaching of writing have been doing for years (although there are a few new priorities in the Common Core). We suggest, then, that a district implement a K–12 spiral curriculum, allowing students to spend considerable time working within informational, opinion, and narrative writing units of study, producing work that matches the work described in the Common Core.

An additional advantage to spotlighting the teaching of writing is that when students are actually taught writing and given opportunities to write an hour a day within a writing workshop, their skills develop in a very visible fashion. By teaching a genre-based writing workshop with an attentiveness to skill development along trajectories of skills, teachers can learn a great deal about the relationship between teaching well and student progress. By helping teachers plan and teach writing together and by
Move students up levels of text complexity by providing them with lots of just-right high-interest texts and the time to read them. Then, too, we recommend a focus on moving students up the levels of text difficulty in reading. As we discuss later, the standards in reading place special emphasis on this. Research and experience both have shown that often when students do higher-level thinking, the challenge is not that they do not have skills enough to compare and contrast, for example, but rather that they can’t handle the texts in the first place. As Allington states, “You can’t learn much from books you can’t read” (2002). We recommend, then, that teachers across a K–5 school, and across some middle schools as well, be asked to conduct running records of students’ work with texts at a gradient of text levels, ascertaining the level of text complexity that the students can handle, and to track students’ progress up the ladder of text complexity. Of course, in order for students to make the necessary progress, they need at least forty-five minutes in school and more time at home to read books that they can read with 96% accuracy, fluency, and comprehension. The challenge here is that students need access to lots and lots of high-interest, accessible books that have been leveled. This reform, then, is not an easy one to put into place, but if schools begin to divert monies from expensive textbooks and toward single copies of trade books, it will make an important difference. Teachers will also want to collect data not only about the volume of reading students are doing and their progress up the gradient of text difficulties, but also about the actual eyes-on-print time they have in which to read. Chances are good that students who are not helping them collect student work, teachers can learn a lot about working within systems of continuous improvement. The final advantage to supporting ELA writing instruction is that once students become fluent, fast, structured, and proficient writers across a range of genres, it is easy to take those skills on the road, using writing as a tool for thinking across all the disciplines. When students write across the curriculum, it not only escalates their engagement in other subjects but also makes teachers more accountable and more responsive. When students write about their fledgling understandings, teachers can’t help but take students’ ideas into account and to adapt instruction so that it has real traction. Supporting writing instruction and then using writing across the curriculum may be one of the most potent ways to help teachers across the entire school become more student focused and accountable.
making optimal progress as readers do not have time in school each day for forty-five minutes of eyes-on-print reading (not talking about books, not writing about books) and similar time at home.

These first two priorities are urgent. Students need to become strong writers, and to do that, they need expert instruction, time to write, and meaningful opportunities for writing a wide range of informational, argument, and narrative texts. They also must become proficient readers of more complex texts, and that means they need expert instruction and opportunities to read a wide range and very deep volume of texts. A school simply must get these two literacy cornerstones in place. Assuming that these initiatives are in place and that you have already invested considerable energy in lifting the level of teaching and learning within these areas, then your school will probably want to consider how to support higher levels of reading and writing.

**Prioritize argument and informational writing.** You may decide that your school has a strong approach to writing but that you need to prioritize argument and informational writing. To start with this work, you’ll need to recognize that writers generally refer to those kinds of writing differently. Instead of saying he or she is writing an argument, a writer is apt to say he or she is writing a review, a persuasive letter, an op-ed column, an editorial, or an essay. Instead of saying he or she is writing an informational text, a writer is apt to label the work as an all-about book, an article (or feature article), or literary nonfiction.

**Focus on higher-order comprehension instruction.** You may think that if you have students moving up levels of text difficulty, you already have in place the higher-order comprehension instruction that is one of the hallmarks of the Common Core. You may. But it’s very possible that your readers are mostly reading for plot, grasping the gist of what they read, moving rapidly across books, but not really working on their reading. And it may be that the comprehension work that second-grade readers are doing is not all that different than the work that sixth graders are doing. You and your colleagues might do a shared walk-through, noticing, for example, the way second graders and sixth graders grow theories about characters. If seven-year-olds are writing on sticky notes, “Poppleton is a good friend
because . . . ,” and sixth graders are writing, “Abe Lincoln is humble because . . . ,” you and your colleagues may decide that it would be helpful to detail the intellectual work that students are doing at different grade levels in order to make sure that the same strategies are not being recycled year after year. This shouldn’t be the case in a school that takes Common Core expectations for comprehension seriously. When you look at the standards for reading, you may find that even the adults in the building want to work on their reading in order to meet the high expectations of the CCSS. That is, the standards focus on a certain kind of close textual analysis. If you are familiar with Webb’s depth-of-knowledge work, you’ll see right away that the Common Core wants readers to be doing the intellectual work that is at levels two and three of Webb’s hierarchy. That is, the Common Core State Standards expect students to sort and categorize, compare and contrast, evaluate, analyze, and reason. You’ll see when you read Chapter Four of this book that the level of fiction reading demanded by the CCSS is very high—and the height comes not just from the level of text complexity that students can handle but also from the nature of their reading. If your students are already reading a lot and moving up levels of text difficulty, you’ll find that the reading chapters in this book will provide you with pathways you can take to raise the level of work your students are doing as they read.

**Increase cross-curricular, analytical nonfiction reading.** For many schools, the Common Core State Standards are a wake-up call, reminding people that students need to read more nonfiction texts across the curriculum as well as to receive focused ELA instruction in nonfiction reading. It is a mistake, however, to interpret the CCSS as simply a call for more nonfiction reading. The standards also call for students to move away from simply reading for information, toward reading with a much more analytical stance. The standards suggest that at very young ages, readers be taught to compare authors’ perspectives and points of view. If the sum total of discipline-based reading that occurs within your school is textbook reading, you will want to consider making some social studies and science units into reading-rich domains, and to do so you will need many primary source materials, trade books, and digital texts related to those topics of study. The Common Core emphasizes the importance of reading several texts about a topic, with readers determining the central ideas, issues, and disputes in those topics, and anticipating the arguments around a topic. That means that instead of reading a summary of the American
Revolution, fifth graders in a CCSS–aligned classroom will read speeches made by Patriots, look at propaganda on the part of Loyalists and Patriots, weigh the reasons people took sides in that war, and imagine themselves in the shoes of people who hold different views on this topic.

**Finally, wherever you decide to begin your Common Core work, you’ll find that you’ll need to focus on assessment as well as instruction.**

In writing, you’ll need assessments that will let you see the visible progress students are making as writers along the way, so that you’ll be able to track the success of your teaching. You’ll need the same in reading. Most schools already have formative assessments that let teachers see how students are moving up levels of text difficulty in fiction (though some secondary schools may find these assessments new and helpful as well). Many schools, though, have struggled to track meaningful progress in nonfiction reading and in upper-level interpretation and analytical skills across any kind of text. So as you focus your initiatives and decide on priorities, remember that assessment is a crucial part of that decision making. Chapter Eleven provides some help with looking at the assessments that are currently available and with designing assessments to give you insight into students’ and teachers’ progress.

**How the Book Is Structured and How You May Use Individual Chapters**

We’ve organized the book so that you can read the whole text at one time, or you may dive into individual chapters according to your priorities. If you are a school leader, you’ll want to read across the whole text, as the parts of the Common Core work are interlocking puzzle parts, and each piece is affected by other work. The reading and the writing work build on each other. The speaking and listening work can help students with the reading and writing work, and so on. Also, we tuck research and tips into each chapter where each seems most appropriate and don’t repeat that research and those tips in other chapters. We have, however, designed the chapters so that you might choose one chapter at a time to read as a study group for a faculty meeting, a think tank, or a grade level or department level study. The one caveat is this: if you choose a reading or a writing
chapter, you’ll want to quickly read the overview chapter to reading or writing to give you some background before you get started.

In each chapter, we made decisions about how to best understand the Common Core State Standards and how to use them to raise achievement. We made these decisions after working with teachers and school leaders in workshops, in think tanks, and across yearlong studies. You’ll see, therefore, that each chapter begins by unpacking the most significant aspect of the standards themselves. Then there is a section on implementation, where we have made practical suggestions for pathways toward achieving the standards. Where we thought it would be helpful, we have described some activities that teachers might want to try, in order to come to a closer understanding of the implications of the Common Core. We’ve tried to write those activities in such a way that you could duplicate them in a study group.

We wish you all the best as you embark on your Common Core studies. We’ve found this work to be illuminating. We’ve found that it has helped us raise the level of work students are doing in our schools. And we’ve found it can be a unifying force to help teachers think and work together. We hope it is the same for you.
About the Authors

LUCY CALKINS is the Founding Director of the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project at Teachers College, Columbia University. For more than thirty years, the Project has been both a think tank—developing state of the art teaching methods—and a provider of professional development. As the leader of this world-renowned organization, Lucy works closely with policymakers, superintendents, district leaders, school principals, and teacher-leaders to initiate and support school-wide and systemwide reform in the teaching of reading and writing. But above all, Lucy works closely with teachers and with their classrooms full of children. Lucy’s many books include the Units of Study for Teaching Writing series for grades K–2 and 3–5, and the Units of Study for Teaching Reading series for grades 3-5. Most recently, she published a set of year-long, grade-specific curricular plans for grades K–8 that help you align your reading and writing workshop instruction with the Common Core State Standards.

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