

Common Core: A California kindergarten teacher's experience

Our reporter
11 April 2013

A kindergarten teacher in California, spoke with the WSWS about the impact of the Common Core curriculum and testing regime on students and educators.

At the first staff meeting in September, our principal designated several teachers to go through the district's training for Common Core. I was designated the Kindergarten-1st grade Common Core math lead teacher. Every few months we attend district trainings. There are about 75 of us. We're supposed to go back to our schools and teach our fellow teachers. One of the required pieces is the "Just the Facts" program, which teaches the kindergarteners the commutative property of addition. "If $2+3 = 5$, then $3+2 = 5$." It's accompanied by a song, which we teach the children. All this, before we have even covered addition in the third trimester. I only have it up in my room. I did it twice and then stopped. I know that at least three other kindergarten teachers out of six have done the same.

The other part of the new Common Core for math involves having cooperative groups, where the children work together and talk in small groups and try to grapple with math concepts. Some of this is good because it gives the kids time to figure out things. But this takes time. Every teacher is supposed to have up on their walls, the eight "Talk Moves" posters, which are supposed to remind us what to say and prompt the children.

For example, in order to introduce the numbers 21-30, I divided the children into groups of three, gave each group a container of about 80-100 bottle tops. I told them they had to work together to figure out the best and fastest way to count them. All of the groups were counting one by one, and there were some arguments because one child would count and lose track of where he was when others around him were also counting. Then I showed them how to make groups of 10, and then all they had to do was count by tens to quickly come up with the answer. Then afterward, when I get all the children back together for

discussion, I'm supposed to use the "Talk Moves" posters to get them to talk about what they learned.

In Language Arts, the new Common Core standards stress the need for students to be exposed to more nonfiction, informational text to prepare them to compete in the global market. Right now, only 15 percent of text in elementary school is informational. They're saying that informational text comprises up to 80 percent of the reading done in college and the workforce. It's harder to understand, and students have to be prepared for this reality. The new standards will shift the informational/narrative percentages to 50/50 at the elementary level, 60/40 in middle school, and 75/25 in high school.

Instead of teachers asking how a particular issue or situation relates to their own lives, we have to ask "text-dependent questions" (TDQs), which means the kids have to locate the answers in the text, present arguments based on the actual text they have read. Much of this at the kindergarten level is pointing to new vocabulary words, which the children are supposed to figure out by context clues from the sentence and the story. The problem is the vast majority of our students are still learning the letter names, letter sounds, and sight words.

At this point in the second trimester, about one-third of my 30 students know about half of the newly required 30 sight words. We play Round the World sight word games to try to make it fun. Right now, seven kids know all 30, and that's because their parents are very involved in their children's education. They're also the more educated and better-off economically. There's a big question of time they can spend with their children every day because many of them are working. And then there's the issue of access to computers and technology. One parent has no email address because their family has no computer. The mom is unemployed. So I give her a hard copy of my class newsletter.

Almost all of the kindergarten and first grade teachers I work with are very angry about this expectation because we're still trying to get the kids to be able to read. One of my first grade colleagues told me their grade level met and spent hours preparing TDQ lessons on one story. She said the first grade team also had to do a "thinking map" (graphic organizer) comparing and contrasting how a meteorologist predicts the weather as compared to the kids themselves. That was obviously way over the heads of the children.

A fourth grade colleague said she Googled TDQs for her grade level, and all she found was the one the district gave them in the training. All this is new, and teachers are expected to spend hours of their own time devising lessons for each story, then assessing in overcrowded classrooms, then entering data, and then, and then.

The other part of Language Arts is writing, and the district uses the "Write From The Beginning" program, which heavily involves using graphic organizers, or what's called Thinking Maps. There are a total of eight, which we're required to have posted in our rooms. We make a circle map to brainstorm ideas, a bubble map to describe something, a tree map to categorize, etc. Those are the only ones I use.

For some kids this is very difficult, especially the tree map. By June, an Advanced Proficient kindergartener is writing at least four sentences, on topic, with proper capitalization and punctuation—and also drawing people, not as stick figures, but with details, i.e., eyelashes, eyebrows, neck, legs, arms and fingers.

The introduction of the Common Core scheme has nothing to do with resolving the real problems of teachers and students who have suffered decades of educational budget cuts. This has intensified under Obama, who has overseen the elimination of more than 300,000 teaching positions and the closure of an estimated 4,000 schools.

During the last big layoffs, hundreds of teachers lost their jobs. Before this, the district laid off many custodians, instructional aides, recreational aides, bus drivers, school psychologists, nurses and office staff. The position of the union is that they are fighting to "protect the classroom." In other words, damn the lower paid, classified staff. Not that what they face would ultimately be aimed at the teachers themselves and the democratic right to free, quality public education. This is really the lesson of the recent struggle of the New York City school bus drivers.

Our school nurse taught me how to use an "Epipen" in case a student has an allergic reaction. She told me that

there used to be more than 100 school nurses in her district about 10 years ago. Now it's one-third that. That's why she's only on campus 1.5 days a week. She has to split her week between our elementary school and the middle school. She's behind on doing the hearing and vision screening of our kindergarteners. Who takes care of the kids the other days when we send sick kids to the office? The school secretary and the attendance clerk!

Educating children is a complex, arduous, long term, and very labor-intensive field. We need ALL these people, specializing in areas that work together to provide for the many needs of children. These are not clients or widgets or car parts. These are children, who comprise a huge proportion of those living in poverty in California.

Last week, I heard that 70 percent of our students receive free lunches. That's astounding! They're trying to prove that better teacher training can overcome the poverty that our students live in. Well, yes, it does help, but not really in the long run. It cannot overcome the enormous social crisis our children live in every day.

Given the impact of the economic crisis, we are also seeing many more cases of behavioral problems, psychological problems like sexual abuse and neglect. That kind of stuff really hits me hard. Three of my students (5- to 6-year-olds) are seeing therapists for various issues.

Four years ago, I had 20 kids in my kindergarten class. Three years ago, I had 25 kids. Last year and this, I have 30. Every teacher is experiencing greater numbers of children who cannot perform at grade level. This while the new rubrics to get us ready for Common Core is higher too. I have one little girl, who is the sweetest little thing, who at this point in the year only knows the names of half of the alphabet letters. She's supposed to know all of them by now, which is the middle of the second trimester.



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