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Gaming in the Post-Information School

With all the world’s knowledge constantly at their fingertips, today’s students need skills that they can learn best from … games?

When I went to school — which was so far back in the evolution of technology that my teachers may as well have been velociraptors — books were for the classroom and games were for recess. In 21st century schools, those barriers are dissolving. Not only are fewer students doing their reading in hardback, but more of them are learning from games.

According to the Project Tomorrow Speak Up 2013 survey, 32 percent of elementary school teachers reported using games in their classrooms. The top two reasons they gave for choosing game-based pedagogy were increasing student engagement and addressing different learning styles. These are both smart goals to set, and I know intellectually that kids can learn a great deal from play, but my inner old fogey still grumbles, “These kids aren’t going to school to play games!”

But education is fundamentally different now than it was even 10 years ago. With a nearly ubiquitous Internet beaming all the world’s knowledge to an expanding universe of mobile devices, the ability to learn and retain information is becoming a smaller and smaller piece of the educational pie. Why waste time memorizing facts when your phone can remember them as quickly as your brain can?

In this post-information age, forward-thinking schools are already looking beyond drill and kill to focus on 21st century skills (such as communication and collaboration) and higher-order thinking, which includes analyzing and evaluating. And if I’m being honest, a great way to teach all of those things is through playing games. My inner fogey still thinks kids these days have it easy, though. Can’t we at least make them walk to school uphill both ways?
Feds Say That Inequalities in Ed Tech Resources Are ‘Potentially Unlawful Discrimination’

By David Nagel

The United States Department of Education has issued guidance to education leaders calling attention to disparities in educational resources along ethnic and economic lines and characterizing such disparities as "potentially ... unlawful discrimination." The list of those disparities explicitly included quantity and quality of technology-based resources available to students.

In a 37-page "Dear Colleague" letter sent to schools, districts and state agencies, Catherine E. Lhamon, assistant secretary for civil rights, outlined the various ways in which high-poverty schools and schools serving a large proportion of "students of color" are receiving unequal funding and access to resources, which, according to the latest guidance, is in conflict with federal law.

The letter, which focused extensively on access to technology, including devices, courseware and infrastructure, said, in part, "Access to these important instructional resources varies between high-poverty schools that are heavily populated with students of color and more affluent schools serving fewer students of color. While gaps by race and income in student access to technology are narrowing at a national level, disparities persist regarding the number and quality of computers or mobile devices in the classroom, speed of Internet access and the extent to which teachers and staff are adequately prepared to teach students using these technologies. High-quality instructional materials for students and teachers, including digital learning materials, textbooks, library resources and other materials, promote rigorous engagement with the curriculum, and so when school districts provide these resources they must ensure that students have comparable access to them without regard to race, color or national origin."

The guidance pointed out that lack of funds does not excuse states or districts from their obligation of providing equal access under the law. Nor, according to the guidance, does equal funding necessarily meet the requirement of providing equal opportunity to students.

Read the full article.
[industry update]

iPad Declines as Samsung, Lenovo Tablets Push Forward

Shipments of Apple’s iPad have fallen off 13 percent so far this year. Meanwhile, according to a new report, Samsung’s tablet shipments have increased 26 percent in the first half of 2014.

According to market research firm ABI Research, Apple and Samsung continued to account for roughly 70 percent of all tablet shipments in the first half of 2014. However, there is a new contender on the block.

“The roller coaster ride from the leading two tablet vendors has market watchers looking to other vendors to create sustainable growth,” said ABI Senior Practice Director Jeff Orr, in a statement released to coincide with the report. “All eyes are on Lenovo, as it is one of few to demonstrate consistent growth over the past year.”

Additionally, ABI noted that Intel has continued to “show progress toward its goal of 40 million devices powered by its processors in 2014. While many tablets will come out in non-branded models, 2014 looks to be the tipping point for Intel’s mobility processor strategy. The company has also set up market-specific relationships that should propel it forward during 2015.”

“Forty million units is only a minor dent in ARM’s domination of tablets, though Intel is quickly becoming a formidable applications processor architecture competitor,” Orr said. Overall, according to ABI, tablet growth for 2014 looks like it will slow to a “disappointing” 2.5 percent and fail to hit the 200-million-unit milestone.

Read the full article.
“Canvas Grants is aimed at helping anyone turn a great idea into reality,” he said, “whether that’s by designing new technology or testing instructional strategies that move us one step closer toward lossless learning.”

Two teams of judges, one for higher ed and the other for K-12, will grant five $10,000 grants to higher ed projects and 10 $5,000 grants to K-12 projects.

Last year’s competition had more than 400 submissions, with the winning entries ranging from a Philadelphia administrator who wanted to help inner-city students record stories about their communities and air them on TV to a librarian who wanted to outfit a makerspace at her school with Legos and MinecraftEdu.

Submissions will be accepted through Jan. 23, 2015, and winners will be announced at the SXSWedu conference in March. For details, click here. Read the full article.
Extron Electronics’ ShareLink 200 wireless collaboration gateway is designed to let students and teachers share content to a central screen from their personal devices. It can help users create a stand-alone wireless presentation system or add wireless capability to wired systems. Read the full article.

Casio’s new C-Assist is a free mobile app that lets educators display content from their tablet or smartphone onto any Casio projector. The app, which is available for Apple and Android devices, allows teachers to project a variety of content. Read the full article.

SchoolDude’s CrisisManager app allows administrators to make emergency plans available on users’ iOS and Android mobile devices. School leaders and public safety personnel can develop their own emergency response plans that staff and teachers can download. Read the full article.

Blackboard has launched a cloud version of its learning management system, Blackboard Learn. The online software will offer automatic updates with no service interruptions and is designed to scale elastically to support heavy usage and peak periods. Read the full article.

Canon USA’s five new portable projectors all use the company’s DLP BrilliantColor display technology to deliver 3,000 lumens of brightness and a 2,300:1 contrast ratio. The filter-free projectors can have up to 6,000 hours of lamp life in Economy mode. Read the full article.

Education.com has started a reading and math program for students aged 3-7, featuring mainly games and activities. Brainzy is buttressed by data collected by the site regarding the kinds of materials and worksheets its users were downloading. Read the full article.

AV & Presentation
- NEC’s DisplayNote Software Now Available in the Cloud
- New BenQ Projector Supports BYOD
- Lightspeed Updates Mobile Manager for Windows 8.1
- Mimio Rolls Out Interactive Displays, Upgrades MimioStudio and MimioMobile

Infrastructure & Facilities
- Red Hat Releases Enterprise Linux 7
- Aleratec Introduces New Charge/Sync Cabinet

Teaching & Learning
- Airwolf Rolls Out Expandable Entry-Level 3D Printer for Education
- Google’s Free LMS ‘Classroom’ Goes Live
- Kurzweil 3000-firefly Literacy Software Adds Tools for Struggling Learners
- Filament Launches Game-Based Science Curriculum
Under Matt Akin's leadership, his three-school rural district in northeast Alabama has gained national acclaim. The district's Piedmont High was named one of “America’s Best High Schools” by U.S. News & World Report, as well as an Apple Distinguished School and a Blue Ribbon School by the U.S. Department of Education. Akin is best known for using federal funding to make the entire town wireless as a way to increase equity for Piedmont students, about half of whom did not have Internet access at home.

**THE Journal**: What's the driving factor behind your technology strategy for the district?

**Matt Akin**: Well, we were once a big textile town, and as in a lot of other communities in the South, in the last couple of decades all of our industry has left. Five years ago, our board and I realized that if the school district didn’t become the catalyst for change, our community might not be here. It was at that point that we looked at how we could educate kids differently to give them the same opportunities they would receive if they lived in the suburbs or a big city ... and how we could do that in an environment where we don’t have a lot of teachers and our curriculum is limited.

**THE Journal**: How did you go about using technology to increase access?

**Akin**: We began with a federal grant that enabled us to obtain laptops at the high school. We then built on that with local funds, and five years ago we started a 1-to-1 initiative for our kids in fourth through 12th grades, putting MacBook Airs in everyone’s hands 24/7. We’re not an affluent community, so we really had to prioritize our local funds to make it happen.

We quickly realized, though, that even when all of our kids had computers, once they left the school grounds things weren't equal. One night in December, I was working late, and as I left school I thought, “What’s that on the front porch of our middle school?” It was the glow from a MacBook, with kids sitting around it pulling off of our wireless at school.

**THE Journal**: How did you end up making the entire town wireless after that?

**Akin**: We were one of 19 school districts chosen to participate in an E-rate program pilot project. Others used their funding to give a device to every kid; since we already had the devices, we hired a vendor to build a network over our city and then used the funds to lease Internet access from that vendor. This ensured that wherever our students went, they could pull up lessons and instructional resources. It changed everything for us. Our teachers could truly do flipped instruction and require projects that needed Internet access to complete. We had been saying, “Whatever your kid needs he can download before he leaves school,” but that’s just not possible.

When the pilot program ended, we worked out a funding agreement with the city and the vendor to keep it going, because people would probably run me out of town if we took it away now.

**THE Journal**: How are you using the technology in ways you couldn’t have before?

**Akin**: For one thing, all students at Piedmont High School take at least one online class. Our thought is...
THE Journal: When did you become sold on the importance of technology, particularly for rural communities?

Akin: I grew up as a computer nerd. I got my first Tandy Radio Shack computer when I was 13, had an uncle who was a college professor who gave me a programming textbook and learned a lot of that on my own. I got my degree to be a math teacher, and the first job offer I had was teaching computer science. Even then, teaching in a low-income school in 1991, I saw the impact technology could have in motivating kids and how it could give them access they wouldn’t normally have. As I moved into a district role, I saw how it could individualize instruction, whereas you could never hire enough teachers to provide that individual instruction. It is definitely a game-changer in Piedmont, Alabama. And I think there are a lot of Piedmont, Alabamas in the country: small, rural school systems that can use technology to provide opportunities that their kids wouldn’t otherwise have.

that if kids in high school learn the self-discipline and management to take an online class and be successful, when they get to college they’ll have those skills. We’ve also begun expanding that to middle school kids. More than 40 percent of our middle school students earned high school credit for online courses this summer, which keeps them engaged in learning.

We’ve also used a Next Generation Learning Challenges grant at Piedmont Middle School to redefine education to utilize competency-based learning, project-based learning and mentors for all students. We try to meet kids where they are and progress them quickly by using technology to provide individualized instruction. Instead of teachers being in front of the whole class teaching one standard, they can pinpoint which students need teacher-led instruction, which ones benefit from computer-led instruction, and which ones can be working on an advanced project that really gets in depth into a standard.

DreamBox Learning™ Math delivers a highly personalized learning environment to promote conceptual understanding and the ability to solve real-world math problems. The result is a K–8 learning experience that students love, actionable data that support teachers, and outcomes you’ll be proud to share.

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Increase in Academic Performance Index

CLEVELAND ELEMENTARY
Santa Barbara, California

* Based on a value-added calculation of testing data and expected outcomes
10 Terms You Must Include in Contracts With Online Service Providers

A responsible approach to student data privacy requires careful scrutiny of the agreements that schools make with vendors.

Our nation’s schools are increasingly becoming learning ecosystems reliant on the use of technology, and this is great news. Ushering in a new era of connected learning holds countless possibilities for transforming the way our school systems function and how we meet the needs of students — but administrators and other school leaders face the challenges associated with connectivity every day. One of the most pressing challenges is protecting privacy.

Protecting student privacy and data has been an issue since at least the 1970s, when the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) became law, and even before. The issue of privacy again came to the fore with the enactment of the Children’s Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA), which went into effect in 2000 and applies to websites providing content for children. While both laws impact schools’ use of data, the reality is that they are static, while the world we live in is fluid, ever-evolving and fast-paced.

To promote conversation about protecting privacy in schools today, the Consortium for School Networking (CoSN) is developing a suite of resources as part of our Protecting Privacy in Connected Learning initiative. Created in partnership with Harvard Law School’s Cyberlaw Clinic at the Berkman Center for Internet & Society, and with support from Microsoft, Lightspeed Systems and Schoolwires, our toolkit details factors that education leaders should consider when choosing an online service provider for their school district. It includes the nuts and bolts, from determining a school’s needs to obtaining parental notification and consent.

A key section of the toolkit is focused on evaluating and contracting with online service providers. Here are CoSN’s top 10 suggested contract terms:

1) Contract scope: Identify all elements that comprise the agreement and what order of precedence will be followed in the event of a contradiction in
terms. Identify any contract terms that are incorporated by reference (such as a URL).

2) **Purpose:** If you have determined that the provider qualifies as a “school official” under FERPA and you will use the school officials’ exception as the vehicle for disclosing FERPA-protected information to a provider, specify: a) that the provider is considered a school official; b) the legitimate educational interest that the provider is fulfilling; c) the nature of the data collected; and d) the purpose for which any FERPA-protected information is being disclosed.

3) **Data collection, use and transmission:** Specify how the provider may use or collect data from the school system and your students, and any restrictions that may apply to the provider’s use of that data. Ensure that you bind the provider to those uses and restrictions.

4) **Data security:** Detail any security requirements that the provider must follow to the extent that it maintains, processes or stores any information on behalf of the school system. To watch a video of Rich Contartesi, the assistant superintendent for technology services at the Loudoun County Public Schools (VA), discussing his district’s provisions for data security, click here.

5) **Data retention and disposal:** Assure the proper management and disposal of data or information pertaining to the school or its students. All data disclosed to the provider or collected by the provider must be disposed of by secure means to ensure that it is protected from unauthorized access or use.

6) **Bankruptcy or acquisition:** Specify what happens to your district’s data if the provider goes out of business or is acquired by another firm. Is there a source code or data escrow provision?

7) **Service levels and support:** Be clear about the service levels that the provider must meet and any credits you will receive for any failure by the provider to meet these service levels. Require the provider to supply the school with all the technical assistance you may need to use the services.

8) **Governing law and jurisdiction:** Typically, a provider’s default contract will state that it is governed by the law of the provider’s home state. Public institutions generally have significant restrictions on their ability to consent to such provisions under the school system’s state laws.

9) **Modification, duration and termination provisions:** Establish how long the agreement will be in force, what the procedures will be for modifying the terms of the agreement (mutual written consent to any changes is a best practice) and what both parties’ responsibilities will be upon termination of the agreement — particularly regarding disposition of student information maintained by the provider. Upon termination of the contract, the provider should return all records or data and properly delete any copies still in its possession, including archives and/or backups.

10) **Liability:** The provider should be held liable for the activities of its staff and subcontractors.

These are the basic rules of engagement for contracting with an online service provider to help protect privacy in connected learning environments. You can learn more by visiting the toolkit here.

Keith R. Krueger is the CEO of the Consortium for School Networking (CoSN).
Playing games at school can inspire students in ways that nobody could predict. For proof, just take *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*. At the very end of the story, slimy Slytherin House is celebrating its seventh consecutive win of the house championship cup — until Headmaster Albus Dumbledore rises to his feet during the end-of-year feast and hands out a generous helping of “last-minute points” to Ron, Hermione and Harry for various feats. Suddenly, Slytherin and good guys Gryffindor are each tied with 472 points. The room goes wild. Will the two houses be forced to share the cup? No. Dumbledore raises his hand for silence and pronounces the memorable line, “It takes a great deal of bravery to stand up to our enemies, but just as much to stand up to our friends.”
The victory is decided by the modest 10 points Dumbledore grants to Gryffindor’s Neville Longbottom, and with it comes a lesson worth learning: Following your conscience, even in small ways, can have a big impact. Trying to impart that lesson without the game would most likely have had as much impact as the lunch ladies making a switch from peas to carrots. Because games immerse students in a world outside their daily experience game-based pedagogy can help students learn skills that they could never grasp by reading a textbook. Here are five of them.

Connecting Physical Experiences With Learning

Some subjects are best learned through feeling them. Take the science of plate tectonics, for example.

Lucien Vattel, CEO of GameDesk, a nonprofit that develops learning games and game-based curriculum, said, “Normally the way that would be taught is that a teacher would have the student review the textbook,” he said. That book would use words, pictures and possibly arrow symbols to describe the invisible turmoil of the earth that happens beneath our feet all the time but at a very slow rate. The problem with a textbook is that it has only two dimensions to explain “what is fundamentally a hyper-dimensional 3D phenomenon,” Vattel explained. “It’s not something that happens as a still image. It happens with movement.”

By using a game environment with simulations, such as GameDesk’s Plate Tectonics, students can experience what happens when the earth’s plates move, except in a dramatically speeded up amount of time. As Vattel noted, “When you experience a concept, the mind integrates that knowledge in a very different way.” Plate Tectonics relies on an $80 Leap Motion controller that allows students to use hand gestures in front of the screen (not on it) to manipulate the plates to pursue various objectives set by the teacher. “Students are challenged to create mountain formations, deep sea trenches, volcanoes, island chains — and they have to understand how plate tectonics works and how the land masses and plates move under and over and across each other in order to create these different geological phenomena,” said Vattel.

And, he added, that physical experience of learning is codified in the student’s brain “in a very different way than when we read something or when we receive a lecture or a verbal or visual representation.”

Vattel recounted an experiment in which a group of students were tested on what they learned from the Plate Tectonics activities. “We observed that when they read the question, some of the kids would close their eyes and then move their hands in the direction that they played the game in order to really make sure that they understood and had the answer right. I thought that was very powerful.”
3D space is important for certain types of learning, Vattel emphasized, in ways that could never be matched with the use of flat materials — not even a touchscreen: “A screen has a fundamentally 2D surface. You can’t move into the screen; you can only move across the screen. So already the screen is now interpolating a separation from the actual phenomenon. Plates move in the 3D space; they have x, y and z directionality. The minute you are limited to the surface of the screen, you would only be able to look down at a continent and then move it with your fingers across the x and y directions. However, if you’re in a completely open 3D space, you can move your hands forward, back, up down, across, diagonally — and that’s connected to how 3D geological formation actually exists.”

Rising to the Competition
Kristin Paolillo has been teaching full time for nine years, most recently at Joseph Melillo Middle School in East Haven, CT. Last school year she and her colleagues had the opportunity to pilot the use of Amplify tablets along with multiple software offerings available for the device, including games. And she found that whether games are played on digital devices or with small whiteboards that students hold up like junior Jeopardy players, one outcome was the

BEST PRACTICES FOR GAME-BASED LEARNING

Play-test your games. When Institute of Play works with teachers to design games for specific lessons, they encourage them to “play-test” their games with a small group of kids to look for “evidence of student learning” and to ask for feedback: “How did you like the game? How did it make you feel? What do you think you learned?” PD director Rebecca Rufo-Tepper said that teachers “almost always say to us, ‘I now realize how critically important it is to involve students in the process and really think about what they think they’re getting out of it.’ ”

Align games with Common Core and other state learning standards. Game-based learning is a way to support students in learning “specific and concrete goals,” Rufo-Tepper suggested. “You can’t have a game that’s just about fun. There’s got to be some kind of challenge in it. If you can take a challenge and it comes from a standard, it works very nicely.”

Fit the game to the goal. New Jersey teacher Matt Farber suggested, “Look for games that use mechanics that match up with what you’re trying to teach. You don’t want to shoot the zombie to solve a math problem. You want something more like DragonBox, where it’s using balance to teach algebra, because that’s what algebra is.”

Create an authentic learning experience. Rather than hoping your students will remember a “bunch of facts that have no connection,” advised Farber, try to find ways to bring lessons to life in ways that go beyond mere text, photos or videos. His middle school social studies classes tried out Mayan Mysteries, which puts the student into the authentic context of being an archaeologist in Mayan ruins.

Games don’t have to be digital to work. Lucien Vattel has developed games that are “high-tech,” “low-tech” and “no-tech.” GameDesk’s Plate Tectonics fits into that first category; the second group includes games that can work on “most old PCs and don’t require much technological infrastructure.” No-tech games can be as simple as taking kids to an open field and letting them “explode” away from each other while pretending to be cosmic dust.
same: Game-playing teaches good old American competitiveness. Or as Paolillo put it, “how to be more on your toes, especially if you’re competing against a time clock or other people in the class.”

Some kids have no competitive spirit, Paolillo observed — until you get them involved in a game. Then it’s every student looking out for No. 1 — never mind those fashionable 21st century soft skills like teamwork and collaboration. “When you’re going for a job, nobody is collaborating with you. They’re doing what they can to get the job instead of you,” she pointed out. “There’s collaboration once you get the job, but you still have to have that sense of competition and that fight within yourself to get what you want. And if nobody has ever instilled that in you, you’re never going to get where you want to be.”

**Working as a Team**

Of course, as Paolillo added, working together effectively is also a skill we all need to learn. But simply putting students into groups and having them collaborate on projects won’t necessarily produce the outcome you’d expect. Inevitably, complaints arise:

One version of the game StoryWeaver is designed for eighth-graders studying “dystopian fiction.”
teammates aren’t pulling their weight, aren’t listening or don’t really want to work with each other. Often the problem is that there’s no structure around the teamwork, said Shawn Young, a high school physics teacher at Le Salésien High School in Sherbrooke, Quebec. “There are no roles and responsibilities. There are no accountabilities. These are all things that exist in real work teams.”

To provide that structure, Young created Classcraft, a freemium online role-playing game that works as an extra layer on top of existing curriculum. Students play in teams as “mages,” “warriors” and “healers,” each with unique powers, and each requiring the others to succeed.

School is a dichotomy, Young observed: both a social and an individual endeavor. “You’re graded on your own. You do your own work. But everybody is in the same room living the same experience together.” Classcraft is intended to provide a structure for pushing the social aspects. “It has kids helping each other who would never even talk. But because it’s a game, they really want their team to do well so they start helping each other. Then it just becomes second nature. They’re always in their team. The game is really built so that you can’t succeed if you don’t work as a team.”

It helps when the teacher comes up with real risks and rewards (called “consequences” and “powers”) for the teams. They can buy or lose extra test time, arrive late or receive detention, or force a teacher to sing a song of the team’s choosing.

Grasping Systems Thinking
Well-designed games have an intrinsic motivation that drives players through the experience, and that persistence can be put to good use in the classroom. Take a math example: Many students have trouble working with fractions. According to Rebecca Rufo-Tepper, director of professional development for the nonprofit Institute of Play, any game that expects to replace the traditional drill-and-kill worksheet approach to fractions needs to place the students into a space where solving fraction problems is repeated, but in a way that gets “increasingly complex and ... where there’s some kind of strategy involved and there’s also some kind of fun and play element to it. For us, a really great game will automatically make a player want to keep playing it.”

A similar approach can be used to help students practice analyzing text. Institute of Play has developed a game called StoryWeaver in which students collaborate to create a story. This requires what Rufo-Tepper calls “systems thinking,” which leads students to understand the relationships within and among components. To play the game, “You start by pulling a setting card,” said Rufo-Tepper. “The card says the setting is on Mars. You have to write a few sentences about the setting. You have to use a spinner to pick whether you’re in first person or third person.”

GAME-BASED LEARNING: NOT AS COMMON AS YOU’D THINK

According to the Project Tomorrow Speak Up 2013 survey, only a third (32 percent) of elementary school teachers report using games in their classrooms. The top two reasons they give for using games were increasing student engagement in learning (79 percent) and providing a way for teachers to address different learning styles in the classroom (72 percent).
You might write a few sentences and then you pass the story to the next partner, and they have to add in a character. They draw a character card and the character is a mouse. Okay, now you’ve got mice on Mars. What’s happening here?”

In the first round of play, the students create a story that has a character, a setting and a conflict. In the second round of the story, they go back through the story to add in metaphors, similes and edits. By the third round, “they have a pretty good draft of a story together,” said Rufo-Tepper.

The game then asks the students to express how having that specific character in that particular setting affected the kind of conflict that took place, “to see the story as a system and see how all these discrete elements of the story interact. That’s much more powerful than just being able to identify the plot of a story and a setting of a story,” noted Rufo-Tepper.

The goal, she said, is for students to understand that the story “creates this system and these things all need to align to create a coherent message for the audience. For me, that’s much better to
Dr. George Araya, Director of Educational Technology for Desert Sands USD in southern California, gets clearly excited when he talks about the district’s new 1:1 initiative. “We’re creating an environment that will provide all of our 30,000 students with the 21st Century skills that will help them advance in higher education and in the job market,” he says.

Planning for the district’s 1:1 initiative began more than three years ago. At that time, the district had two main objectives. “First,” says Dr. Araya, “we wanted to focus more on students learning than teachers teaching.” To do that, district administrators knew they would need to change the traditional teacher-centric educational model to one that was more collaborative and self-directed.

Secondly, the district wanted to make sure students were prepared to take the new Common Core online assessment tests called the California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASP). “With CAASP coming up,” Dr. Araya explains, “we felt it was critical for us to give students practice every day with the same device they’ll use for the assessments.”

According to Dr. Araya, the only way the district could accomplish those goals was if they could provide all students with a computing device, but at the time this appeared to be an impossible task. “The cost of a laptop or desktop for every student — plus software, various license fees, and maintenance — would have been prohibitive,” says Dr. Araya.

Today, however, the district is well on their way to achieving their 1:1 goal, thanks to Common Core funding and the Samsung Chromebook. Why the Chromebook? “The only way we could achieve our objectives,” says Dr. Araya, “was with a mobile computing solution that was easy to manage for IT, easy to integrate into teaching and learning for students and teachers, and cost-effective. We got all of that with the Samsung Chromebooks.”

“When you use a Chromebook, all your information and files are saved, encrypted to your account,” Dr. Araya continues. “This makes it easy for students to share a device, or switch between devices. It’s an incredible environment for productivity in the classroom,” he says.

Now, with more than 17,000 Samsung Chromebooks in 500 classrooms, Desert Sands is on track to achieving its ultimate goal: to have a Chromebook for every student from 2nd grade up. Dr Araya is keen to stress that professional development has been critical to the success of the program, because the devices are only effective as the teacher’s ability to integrate them into learning.

This fall the district is also piloting the new Samsung Galaxy Tab® 4 Education, designed exclusively for education. The tablet shares many of the benefits of Chromebooks with its web-based management console, while also adding easy NFC provisioning technology. “Our plan is to use the Galaxy Tab 4 Education in kindergarten and first grade because the touch screen is so intuitive. It’s perfect for kindergartners and first graders,” he says.

In the final analysis, when asked about the manageability, ease of use, and cost effectiveness of the Samsung Chromebook, Dr. Araya and his technology team respond in unison: “A+”.

“When you combine the cloud solutions from Google and the Samsung Chromebook device, you have the perfect environment for delivering 21st century skills.”
use than just having them read through a story and answer a worksheet.”

When teachers go through professional development delivered by Institute of Play, they learn a powerful assessment technique: involving students in the game-design process. Rufo-Tepper explained that after students play a game, the teacher can ask the players how the game could be made more interesting or how a rule could be added that changes how the game works. “There’s something about doing that that makes them dig really deep into the process,” she explained, “and it allows them to learn the content more deeply because they’re changing the system of the game.”

**Compromise and Iteration**

In Matt Farber’s social studies classes at Valleyview Middle (NJ), one area that he covers is the U.S. Constitution. To help students experience what early Americans must have felt when they created the document, he has his class rewrite the middle school’s student handbook. Students work in small teams, each assigned a category such as dress code or school dance policy. The teams do their writing virtually in Edmodo and the results are placed on WikiSpaces or Google Drive.

Throughout the day, teams in subsequent classes may rewrite what a previous group wrote. Farber said, “I have four sections of seventh-graders. They all have access to one wiki. The first period might write something and it might be gone by eighth period. That can get the students enraged sometimes.” And those feelings are okay, he added. “When you’re designing a game, you also want to design emotions that people take away. It’s not necessarily about play, it’s about the emotions you want people to feel, and those emotions should be lined up with what you’re trying to teach. There’s a frustration in government, there’s a frustration in compromise.”

On the last day of the project, the students vote on whether to ratify the document they’ve come up with. “And they have to get two-thirds of the vote just like the Constitution,” Farber pointed out. “The first year I ran this, it didn’t pass. Then we talked about, ‘Where do you go from there?’ A couple of students complained that they were absent and didn’t get to vote, and I explained that if you’re absent on election day, you don’t get to vote. That’s the way government works.”

Farber likes to point out to his students how government has elements of gaming, too. “The Articles of Confederation was the rule sheet for our government. They play-tested it, and it didn’t work. It was hard to use, so they got rid of it. They iterated like a designer would do and they rewrote and ratified the new Constitution,” he said. “They were trying to create a better experience. That’s a takeaway too. The world is not a standardized test where you take a test once. The world works by the design process of looking at the challenge, prototyping, testing and then iterating.”

Dian Schaffhauser is a senior contributing editor based in Nevada City, CA.
A higher-order thinker is a critical thinker. What exactly does that mean? In The Miniature Guide to Critical Thinking Concepts and Tools, Richard Paul and Linda Elder describe a well-cultivated critical thinker as someone who:

- raises vital questions and problems, formulating them clearly and precisely;
- gathers and assesses relevant information, using abstract ideas to interpret it effectively;
- comes to well-reasoned conclusions and solutions, testing them against relevant criteria and standards;
- thinks open-mindedly within alternative systems of thought, recognizing and assessing their assumptions, implications and practical consequences as need be; and
- communicates effectively with others in figuring out solutions to complex problems.

How can the use of apps on an iOS or Android tablet help teachers develop these critical thinking skills in students? Concentrating on apps that can target the cognitive thinking skills at the high end of Bloom’s Revised Taxonomy (2000) is one way to work on this process.

Since many schools now have BYOD programs, finding apps that are available for both the iOS and Android operating systems makes it easier for teachers to develop formative and summative assessments that all students can complete. If educators are familiar with what the creative tool is capable of, they are more likely to develop engaging and meaningful assessments as well as provide technical support for their students.

Educators should first re-familiarize themselves with the concepts inherent in the higher-order thinking skills of Bloom’s Revised Taxonomy.

**HOTS Levels of Bloom’s**

**Analyzing** includes breaking information into parts to explore understandings and relationships. Apps that fit into the “analyzing” stage improve the user’s ability to differentiate between the relevant and irrelevant, determine relationships, and recognize the organization of content. When analyzing, students complete...
tasks that involve structuring, surveying, outlining and organizing.

The evaluating level has students making decisions about the value of content based on criteria set by themselves or external sources. Apps at this stage help students judge content reliability and accuracy, quality and effectiveness. They also help students reach informed decisions. In evaluating, students show their understanding of a topic or participate in evaluating a peer’s understanding of a topic.

The creating level helps students reorganize acquired knowledge and information to create a new end result. Apps at this level provide opportunities for students to generate ideas, design plans and come up with a new way of doing things. Creative projects can involve video editing, storytelling, video-casting, podcasting or animating.

Integrating Apps Into Instruction
Showcasing apps out of the context of the instructional process is not very helpful. Pedagogy should always come first, and the tool second. The following activity begins with students watching a video that tells a story. I’ll then offer two sample assessments of each of the three highest levels of Bloom’s Revised Taxonomy, as well as an app for each assessment.

Analyzing assessment 1: Outline the relationship between implicit and explicit themes in the video.
Assessment type: Mind/concept map
App: Mindomo (free for iOS and Android)

Concept maps allow students to brainstorm their thoughts on a topic and then arrange them into connected categories and groups. Mindomo helps them import images from the camera roll/gallery and labels and place them on connecting lines. For this assignment, students could easily grab screenshots from the video and import them into their Mindomo map to provide the supporting textual information about the implicit and explicit themes in the video. Mindomo also has many icons that can be placed in the map to provide further clarification. In addition to iOS and Android, Mindomo is available for Mac, Windows and Linux operating systems.

Here’s a sample Mindomo mind map. I also have a page with much more information dealing with the ways concept and mind maps can be used to support the instructional process.

Analyzing assessment 2: Differentiate the ratio of pathos/logos/ethos in the video.
Assessment type: Podcast
App: audioBoom (free for iOS and Android)

Podcasting can be used for students to analyze a topic. Students first write their script and then record the podcast. audioBoom is an app for tablets that allows students to create up to five-minute-long podcasts. Students can record, pause and play back their “boos” before publishing them to the audioBoom website. They can also add an image to illustrate their podcast. Students will need an audioBoom account to publish the podcasts, since they are hosted on the audioBoom site. An RSS feed is attached to each podcast, making it easy for a teacher to aggregate and assess the podcasts.

audioBoom has a page with other educational ideas and samples here, and also offers an Edmodo plugin. Ed tech consultant Tony Vincent provides other ideas for using podcasting in the classroom on his site, too. Here is a sample of a podcast rubric, and here’s a sample audioBoom podcast.

Evaluating assessment 1: Evaluate the credibility of the video and suggest two ways it could be improved.
Assessment type: Screencast
App: Lensoo Create (free for iOS and Android)
A screencast or screen recording is created on a tablet by starting with a blank page. A student then imports an image to use as a background and marks it up while recording a voiceover. Videocasts allow users to add additional pages and create a movie that can be shared.

Lensoo Create is a screen-recording app that helps students create a single page at a time. The recording pauses between pages, giving the student time to prepare for the next page. The platform interface includes a text tool, image import and a library of icons to add to the recordings. Lensoo Create also allows users to import PDF files.

Students create an account on the Lensoo site and publish their completed screen recordings to their account online. The recordings can be public or private, and students can share the URL with others. The free account allows for unlimited recordings up to 15 minutes in length.

You can find additional ideas, tips and rubrics for using screencasting in class on my page here, and here’s a sample Lensoo Create screencast.

Evaluating assessment 2: Reflect on the theme of the video and relate it to a personal experience.

**Assessment type:** Blog post

**App:** Tumblr (free for iOS and Android)

Writing blog posts can help students learn reflection, especially when they get comments from the teacher and/or their peers.

Tumblr allows students to type, insert images and videos, and share links as they find or create material to share in their reflection. Users can create Tumblr posts and comments when they’re offline and then upload them when they’re connected to the Internet again.

Tumblr also provides a special e-mail address for students to use if they want to post text via e-mail. Students can save drafts of their posts to work on later and even queue their posts to be published on a certain day.

It is often helpful to provide students with a rubric for a self-reflection post (or to create one with the class). Here’s a sample rubric, and here’s a sample student video reflection.

Creating assessment 1: Re-create the video from another perspective.

**App:** Tellagami (free for iOS and Android)

Tellagami allows students to create a virtual avatar and then import a background image or draw their own background picture to use in a 30-second video. Users can record their own voice or type the dialogue and pick a voice for their avatar to use. This comes in handy when they need a voice of the opposite gender for a character. Users send their completed “gamis” to the Tellagami server, and the link can be posted to Twitter or e-mailed. The “gami” can also be saved to the mobile device’s camera roll or gallery, or uploaded to video-hosting sites or a file server.

To create a longer digital story students can make a series of 30-second “gamis” with various avatars contributing to the story. They can then import these movies into a video-editing app on their mobile device and create a digital story from another perspective. Here’s a sample Tellagami digital story.

Creating assessment 2: Revise the video for a new audience.

**Assessment type:** Video

**App:** Magisto (free for iOS and Android)

An important communication skill for students to practice is to watch a video and then create a presentation or video for a different audience than the intended audience of the original video. This can take the form of slides with words, a mixture of
Developing higher-order cognitive skills takes practice—and relevant assessments.

Magisto is similar to Animoto, but students can upload up to 10 images or videos from the camera roll or gallery, pick a theme and music, and the app will automatically create a movie. Students have the ability to make their movies public or private and just share the URL. (Videos are hosted on Magisto’s site.)

To create their content slides, students can use Keynote, Haiku Deck or Google Presentations on the mobile device and take screenshots of their completed slides. They can then insert these screenshots into the Magisto project. There is a random nature in some of the Magisto themes, so students should experiment with a few different themes to decide on the impact they want to make. Here’s a sample Magisto movie.

Wrap-Up
Developing the higher-order cognitive skill set takes practice. By providing relevant assessments that take advantage of the powerful technology students now have at their fingertips, educators can help their students become the critical thinkers we want them to be.

Kathy Schrock is a featured FETC presenter, an instructor at Wilkes University and Arcadia University (PA), an Adobe education leader and a Google-certified teacher.
4 Tech Tools That Support New Teachers

Facing high attrition rates among new hires, districts are using software and online communities of practice to help give them the PD they need to succeed.

The statistics about the percentage of new teachers who stay in the profession are alarming. Several studies have estimated that between 40 percent and 50 percent of new teachers leave within the first five years of teaching. To combat this trend, most districts have developed formal induction programs that offer mentorship from principals and other teachers. But in both rural and urban areas, it can be difficult for districts to relieve teachers of their classroom responsibilities to give them the time to mentor newer teachers. This is where technology can play a role.

In his first year of teaching five years ago, Lamont Hollifield, a math teacher at the Urban Prep Charter Academy for Young Men in Chicago, found help through the e-Mentoring for Student Success (eMSS) program offered by the nonprofit New Teacher Center. The online program brings together new and veteran teachers and university professors to share ideas and experiences in a structured curriculum.

Hollifield recalled, “My mentor phrased comments in a way that caused me to reflect on my practice. I found it was not the way the school was being run, but my failure to adapt to what they were asking me to do in the school that was the problem.” Hollifield is now giving back by acting as a mentor in the program himself. Reflecting on his role as an online sounding board for new teachers, he said: “Once you build trust with teachers, they will talk about things they might not be comfortable sharing with a department chair, such as content they feel challenged to teach.”

The eMSS program was created 12 years ago by the New Teacher Center in partnership with the University of Montana and the National Science Teachers Association (with funding from the National Science Foundation) to connect new teachers with each other and with mentors. The program is built around a Facebook-like academic social platform.
where discussions and forums take place. Participants also can access video-annotation software that helps them comment on their own and other teachers’ classroom activities. The fee is $1,500 per beginning teacher per year for the full program.

Alyson Mike, New Teacher Center’s senior director for online professional development, said, “When we started 12 years ago, it was tough to find a platform to use for this work.” Instead, she added, “We ended up using an online courseware platform. With the shift to mobile and social media, our technology shifted that way.”

Mike said that many mentors now use mobile devices, texting, Google chats and Skype “in ways they never could before, and because bandwidth has increased, they can share video content. Initially we had to use dial-up connections.” One of the benefits an online mentoring program offers is its combination of synchronous and asynchronous communication. New teachers feel particularly time-challenged, Mike said, and they like the idea of a tool that is available 24/7.

Online Communities of Practice
Building an online community of practice among rural math teachers has been one of the goals of the New Teacher Network, a three-year mentoring and professional development program for new secondary mathematics teachers in Nebraska. In four years, 66 teachers have gone through the program, which offers them 24 hours of graduate credit at no cost to the teacher for tuition or fees. The program forms cohorts and has them work intensively together in person over the summer, creating a foundation for what they do online over the year. Wendy Smith, assistant director of the Center for Science, Mathematics and Computer Education at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, explained, “Teachers can feel that it is risky to admit that they don’t know something, so a big component is to develop that trust early on so they will feel comfortable sharing with each other.”

All of the teacher’s reflections and responses are conducted in a password-protected online environment that allows group collaboration, discussion and sharing. Regular small-group meetings are also conducted online, using videoconferencing. “The teachers are able to shoot videos of their own teaching and annotate [them], and have others provide feedback,” Smith said. They also get time off to observe other teachers and write evaluations.

Most of these new Nebraska math teachers work in rural settings, so they don’t have much of a local support group. “We want them to retain the bonds they built in this program, and anecdotally we hear that they are,” Smith said. “We don’t have a control group, but we know that nationally 50 percent of high school teachers leave within five years. Of this group of 66 math teachers, only two have left. And over two-thirds have or are working on a master’s degree. And in math, having a master’s degree does correlate with better student outcomes.”

According to Alyson Mike, online mentoring programs offer a combination of synchronous and asynchronous communication that appeals to new teachers, who often feel particularly time-challenged.

Data-Based Professional Development
Providence Public Schools (RI) had 82 new teachers this fall; the previous fall it had 106. Like other urban districts, Providence faces challenges retaining these first-year educators. Nkolika Onye, the district’s executive director of performance management, said, “We
want to make sure we are providing them with the tools and foundation they will need to make progress in their schools and give them the confidence they need to mature and stay with us.”

In the last several years, the district has supported new teachers in part by helping them interpret data that can inspire them to reflect on their teaching, said Onye. The district uses the Teachscape system, which offers software tools, online content and services designed to allow educators to assess their skills, collaborate and build their expertise.

Six years ago, PPS, which has approximately 2,000 teachers and 100 administrators, started with a Teachscape classroom walkthrough tool that gives principals the ability to take notes on what is happening in their schools during four-minute data-collection visits. Eventually PPS and Teachscape developed a customized toolset to manage the district’s evaluation process from beginning to end.

Last year, PPS started a teacher induction program that includes a four-day summer seminar. “We include online video professional development that is available to us through Teachscape,” Onye said. “We plan to spend a lot more time using Teachscape tools with the new teachers. Last year was the launch. This year we

SCREENING TEACHER CANDIDATES ONLINE

Tech tools can help new teachers connect to mentors, colleagues and professional development materials, but they also can help districts find teachers most likely to succeed in the classroom. If you open up a third-grade teaching position in a large urban district, you might get 800 applications. If you require two years of experience and a master’s degree, that may whittle the number down to 300. But how do you narrow it down further? Some districts are using online screening tests such as Teacher-Match or Applitrack’s TeacherFit or to help principals and superintendents prepare questions for prospective hires.

TeacherFit claims to measure adaptability, communication and persuasion, concern for student learning, cultural competence, fairness and respect, and planning and organization. A report by the Sioux Falls School District (SD), which began using TeacherFit in 2012, found that the tool was an accurate indicator of teacher performance on 84 percent of new hires, with an additional 7 percent of teachers performing better than predicted.

THE Journal asked Alison Coker, executive director of human resources in North Carolina’s Guilford County Schools, how her school system uses TeacherFit to help hire 350 to 400 teachers per year.

THE Journal: What are some ways the TeacherFit tool aids with the hiring process?

Coker: Continuing to use cultural competence as an example, if an individual’s rating indicates that she or he may not possess a strong understanding and awareness of cultural backgrounds and their influences on students or other staff members, we may ask additional interview questions to gain a better sense of the applicant’s capacity in this area. Planning and Organization is another competency area assessed in TeacherFit. If an applicant scores low in this area, we can pose scenarios or ask about previous experiences that would give us a better idea of the applicant’s ability to develop and implement long- and short-term planning.

THE Journal: Do you have any data to assess the impact of the tool, such as improvement in teacher retention rates?

Coker: Not yet. We just started using the tool in May 2014. We are hoping to collect data for a couple of years to determine if it is correlated closely with the performance of our hires.
Members of the New Teacher Network shoot videos of their own teaching, annotate them and have others provide feedback.

plan to integrate more technology. We focus on having data–rich conversations with teachers,” she added. “We have become proficient at conducting evaluations. We are looking closely at how all our teachers, particularly new teachers and challenged teachers, are faring in terms of results and receiving learning that meets their needs.”

PPS is also working on incorporating video-annotation tools. It is piloting Teachscape’s cameras in some elementary, middle and high schools. Teams made up of one administrator and a new or experienced teacher went through training last year and developed small projects that they will launch this year using the cameras to gather data.

Onye said the district uses the Reflect tool to manage the evaluation process, and the Learn tool for professional learning. Users can select the professional learning they would like to take, and their results are documented. The library of online professional learning is connected to the Common Core State Standards. Onye added that, based on their own evaluation results, teachers can select the PD that is most relevant to them.

“All the research shows that students need effective teachers long-term,” Onye said. “We don’t want people to come for two or three years and then leave because the work is so difficult that they are unable to cope. So we are looking for ways to support them. We want to see if induction is making an impact on teacher effectiveness and student achievement.”

David Raths is a freelance writer based in Philadelphia.
9 Ways to Help Parents Understand the Common Core

Jared Myracle, author of *Common Core Standards for Parents for Dummies*, shares his top tips for ensuring that your school community understands what the standards are — and what they aren’t.

If there’s one misconception that parents have about the Common Core State Standards that rankles Jared Myracle above all others, it’s that somehow teachers are now having their curriculum dictated to them by the federal government. “It just couldn’t be farther from the truth,” he said. “We spend a lot of time clarifying that standards are just an expectation for what a student should be able to do at the end of the year and the curriculum is something [teachers] have developed by themselves or with a team of teachers across the school or district. Those are two totally different things. There’s far less control over what is being taught than what opponents of Common Core would like to have you believe.”

Myracle (pronounced “my-rackle”), the supervisor of instruction at Gibson County Special School District (TN), is the author of the recently published book *Common Core Standards for Parents for Dummies* ($9.99, Wiley). In an interview, he insisted that nobody can point to a Common Core standard and say, “I have a problem with this. I don’t want my kid to evaluate information from multiple sources. That’s not something that people are getting fired up about.” But there’s no denying that opponents are getting fired up, among them many parents. Here, Myracle shares nine ideas for making sure that the parents in your district understand the Common Core, so that you can focus less on misdirected community protests and more on student learning.

1) Use multiple modes of communication.

There’s no right or wrong way to communicate about Common Core, said Myracle. “It’s very much a potpourri of doing a little of this, a little of that.” For example, he writes editorials about the Common Core for one of the local newspapers. Updates are posted to the school websites and other social me-
COMMON CORE

The schools hold evening events to walk parents through a simplified version of the implementation plan. Then the parents go off to their children’s classrooms with the teachers to work through basic exercises so they can learn what to expect. Attendance at these events varies, he noted. Whereas some schools attract half of their families, others get just 15 or 20 percent.

The point is “to keep adding more layers to that and add an extra coat of paint every year. Last year we did this, and now this year we’re going to do this and this — because people prefer to communicate in different ways. Some parents would rather come to an event and some would rather read a letter.”

2) Develop a message and hammer it home.

Myracle’s district always starts its communication from the same place: “What we’ve done in the past just isn’t good enough.” The district offers proof by sharing a comparison of end-of-school assessments and ACT results. In the first, a large majority of students score as proficient in English; in the second, only a fraction of students meet the benchmark. “We know ACT is more aligned with college and career expectations. We don’t know that about our state assessments. There’s obviously a gap between what we’re expecting on our state assessment and what we know they’re going to need in college and career. [The use of the Common Core] is how we narrow that gap.”

Another concept that’s been effective with both parents and teachers is the “umbrella” metaphor: “We have one umbrella in my district, and that umbrella is college and career readiness,” said Myracle. “If it doesn’t fit under that umbrella, we’re not going to spend much time on it. It’s not important. Whether it’s social skills, academic skills, things they...
learn in athletics or extracurricular activities, those things need to contribute to what that child wants to do when they graduate from high school. We try to frame the conversation around preparation for college or career. And Common Core happens to be the next thing that we’re using to get their kids across that finish line.”

3) Keep everybody on message.
It’s important for teachers to be able to give at least an abbreviated version of the same message. As Myracle explained, it only takes one school or district employee giving “confusing verbiage on something” to get parents upset and turn the Common Core into an issue. For example, if a new teacher tells parents at an open house that Common Core is the “new curriculum for the class,” misunderstandings begin to take root.

So it’s critical that everyone who talks to parents gets professional development dealing specifically with how to explain “very accurately and efficiently and in language that parents care about” why the Common Core is important and how it’s being used.

When Myracle has spoken publicly about this particular aspect of the standards, he uses a very clear example: “You know, one of my ninth-grade English teachers likes to teach To Kill a Mockingbird. And guess what book they’re going to teach next year using the Common Core Standards? To Kill a Mockingbird. They don’t have to make wholesale changes to what they’re teaching.”

4) Explain that the Common Core doesn’t dictate reading texts.
Appendix B of the standards, “Text Exemplars and Sample Performance Tasks,” includes lists of texts that would be appropriate for each grade level. “There are some people that think those are required,” sighed Myracle. “That’s not true.” They’re there, he explained, for teachers to use as examples for length and complexity upon which to base their own reading selections.

Some of the examples in the appendix have some parents up in arms. “They’re saying, ‘You’re telling me my kid has to read this book and there’s stuff in there that I’m not comfortable with my child reading.’ Well, no, they don’t have to read that. That’s just there as a recommendation so as a teacher I can compare what I’m asking my kids to read to what the standards are recommending that they read, to make sure that I’m not out in left field.”

5) Emphasize that “online” doesn’t mean “unsecured.”
One message parents seem to need to hear repeatedly is that the move to online assessments such as those being developed by Smarter Balanced and PARCC is not an “evil, sinister plot” by the federal government to gather data about their children. “When something moves away from paper and pencil, people automatically jump to this Big Brother mindset,” Myracle said. “Just because it’s on a computer, now anybody can access their child’s information!”

Myracle has plenty of experience in counting out test booklets and answer sheets and getting those boxed up to return to the publisher for scoring. “Our kids take tests; we send them off to Discovery Education; they get scored and sent back. All that’s fine. But now because we’re doing it for our end-of-year assessment and 16 or 17 states may be using the same test, all of a sudden, that’s a problem?”

When somebody asks, “How can you ensure that my student’s information is going to be secure in this online testing forum?” Myracle responds, “Well, what information do you think we sent to the testing vendors before? We sent them the same information; it was just on paper. Isn’t this more secure than taping it up, [placing] it in a box and putting it on a UPS truck?” He then
explains, “We’re going to utilize all this technology we have sitting around for the purpose of assessment, and it’s going to be more efficient and it’s going to be something kids are going to be comfortable with.”

6) Debunk the myth that state standards started with Obama.

As a history major, Myracle goes a little crazy when people talk about how the Common Core originated with Barack Obama. “In fact, this has been an ongoing conversation for roughly 20 to 25 years around trying to develop a set of common standards,” he asserted. “And there have been multiple failed attempts — in Congress even — to try to do this. At the end of the day, 48 states came together and said, ‘This is what we want to do.’ Just because it’s so many doesn’t mean it originated from the federal government.”

He added that some people suggest that Race to the Top grants were a bribe by the feds to get states to adopt the Common Core. That’s not true either. What RttT did require was that states adopt common college and career-ready standards in cooperation with other states. “It didn’t say you had to do Common Core, and there were states that received that grant money without adopting the standards,” Myracle said. In fact, he pointed out, in the rubric by which RttT proposals were assessed, “The standards were a relatively small piece.”

7) Show how the standards emphasize literacy in many subjects.

Most parents have already heard the message that English/language arts and math are part of the Common Core. What they may not realize is that literacy standards are part of it too, and those are part of every subject that students study.

Myracle said, “Now my social studies teachers, wellness teachers, art teachers, my [career and technical education] teachers — they’re all going to be incorporating reading and writing into their classroom.” The overall effect, he said, is that, “Now we get to support literacy in every single classroom. I don’t understand who could be against that.”

8) Clarify that Common Core makes student assessments more relevant.

The goal of the new assessments being developed by the two consortia of states is to do a better job of evaluating what students are doing in class on a daily basis. As Myracle put it, “I’ve never shown up at work — and you probably haven’t either — where my boss has asked me to answer multiple-choice questions all day long. That’s not a realistic way to assess what students learn.”

Yet those new assessments are still using multiple-choice in many cases. What’s changed? As he explained, students now have to justify their answers, possibly by answering another multiple-choice question. “At least there’s an added layer,” Myracle said. “ ‘This is my answer and here’s why this is my answer.’ That’s a bit closer to real life than just moving through a sheet of 60 bubbles without any rhyme or reason.”

The tests also have writing components. “I spend half my day composing responses via e-mail or in meetings, putting thoughts together, pulling together multiple sources to do so,” Myracle said, so to his mind, the writing sections are “a lot closer to a college or job experience than bubbling in multiple-response questions.”
Sooner rather than later, districts should get beyond explaining what CCSS is and show it to parents in the classroom.

On the math side, students have to fill in blanks rather than selecting from choices. And in some cases, they have to show how they came up with that solution or set up a function to arrive at the answer. "It's a whole other level that is so much closer to what we ask them to do on a daily basis in classrooms," Myracle said.

9) When the talking is over, show parents.

By now, suggested Myracle, parents know that the standards exist and they've either "heard that message or ignored that message." Sooner rather than later, districts should get beyond explaining what the Common Core is and show it to parents in the classroom. That means sharing an activity, for example, that might be done in a science class and pointing out the Common Core-aligned literacy expectation that works with that science content.

The Common Core standards, he explained, can seem like "a very gray sort of ill-defined thing," until he goes into the classroom and watches teachers working with students. Then, he said, "It's crystal clear what it is and how it's impacting our students."

As the teachers gain a better understanding of the standards, he concluded, "The assignments they're sending home are going to be much more on par with what students need to do." From there, he said, "Parent communications will take care of themselves."

Dian Schaffhauser is a senior contributing editor based in Nevada City, CA.
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