

Raising the Bar

Embracing Common Core will not be easy, but it will be worth it.



It's in their best interest.

By [Judy Burton](#) and [Dacia Toll](#)

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Nearly 25 years ago, two education movements started independently of one another – the introduction of charter schools and the push toward rigorous standards for all students. Both grew from the mix of frustration over the quality of American schools and the analysis of what was lacking.

Both movements have matured. And each has often come under attack for undermining the status quo.

Those of us who have built and sustained high-quality charter schools understand the value of setting high expectations for students and the educators who teach them. We seek educational excellence for all of our students. The Common Core State Standards give us shared clarity about what students need to be ready for college and the world beyond high school.

The very rigor of the standards makes them a challenge to implement. Yet we enthusiastically embrace them. As we observe in classrooms where teachers are striving to reach this higher bar, it is so clear that students are benefiting.

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But in too many places, political opposition to the Common Core has grown. The politics are almost never about the substance of the standards, but rather about misinformation and the politics of adults who oppose the kind of hard educational changes we need across the country.

The two of us don't share a common approach to organizing schools, but we do share an extensive focus on excellent teaching that inspires, challenges and supports students. Our teams demonstrate every day

that all students can achieve at high levels regardless of poverty or race or geography. The 18,000 students in our 47 schools are almost all from urban, low-income families. Our students face similar urban challenges, but they also reflect the cultural differences of our opposite coasts; a school in Los Angeles feels palpably different from one in Brooklyn, New York, or Bridgeport, Connecticut.

The universities, however, that our students will eventually attend don't expect them to write or understand mathematics differently based on where they grew up. Algebra is not different in California or Connecticut, nor is successfully articulating an argument based on evidence. Universities expect sufficient academic capacity to succeed at the collegiate level without remediation. If we can help students master the Common Core State Standards, they will have with that capacity.

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The Common Core raises the academic bar to reflect what students need for life beyond high school in an internationally competitive world. And the higher bar is going to be uncomfortable. Our schools have significantly outperformed the traditional public schools that surround us on state tests. But as new tests that measure the higher standards come online, our scores will tumble, and even if we are better than our peers, it will expose that we are not yet good enough. We've already seen the testing changes at the Achievement First public charter schools in New York, which put tougher tests in place two years ago. Some students could not finish the reading portion of the test and were stressed. They did better the next year. We will ensure they do even better next year. And, frankly, we'd rather have our students face challenge now – and overcome it – than have them get to college and realize they aren't ready.

The pivot to the Common Core is not easy. We have had to fundamentally change our approach to instruction. Teachers are working hard to adjust their teaching. Our students are now reading more detailed and engaging materials; they are doing more critical thinking; they are writing with more sophistication; and, they are applying their mathematical understanding to solve more complex, real-world problems.

[[READ: A Guide to Common Core](#)]

We feel the difficulty of the Common Core, but we see the value. The payoff will be enormous for our students.

The movement to high standards has taken a couple of decades to get the standards right, to base them on evidence and to build them collaboratively. The charter movement also has taken time to build networks of high-performing schools and to tackle important issues of equity. And now the movements have begun to merge. Increasingly, we are working with each other and with our colleagues in traditional school districts to collaborate on what it takes to deliver the Common Core. We are learning together.

For those of us who believe our students are capable of world-class performance, these standards are exactly what we have been demanding.

TAGS: Common Core, education, education reform

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