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Do classroom assignments reflect today's higher standards?

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September 02, 2015

Most of the sturm und drang over Common Core has centered on the politics of the standards' creation and adoption. The bigger problem—*much* bigger—was always going to be implementation. This new brief from the Education Trust offers a glimpse of how it's going. Alas, the answer is not very well.

An analysis of middle school classroom assignments finds that most “do not reflect the high-level goals” set by Common Core. This, the report suggests, demonstrates where teachers are in their understanding of the higher standards. Among the sobering data points: A mere 6 percent of the assignment fell into the high range of Education Trust's analysis framework, and fewer than 40 percent of assignments were aligned with grade-appropriate standards at all. “It's time for an honest conversation about where we are in implementing the standards,” the report concludes.

Hear, hear—but some important caveats must be noted. The study was conducted at six middle schools spread across two urban districts in two states. Given Education Trust's focus on equity and the achievement gap, this is not surprising; however, it may not be representative of K–12 education at large. It's also interesting that more than half of the assignments reviewed came from science and social studies classes, and only one-third from English language arts. While 55 percent of assignments were connected to a text (a good thing, from the author's perspective) “only 16 percent of assignments required students to use a text for citing evidence as support for a position or claim.” That sounds alarming, but Common Core takes pains to stress the importance of adopting curriculum “intentionally and coherently structured to develop rich content knowledge within and across grades.” In other words, reading assignments aimed at “mere” factual recall and knowledge development are not necessarily a flaw; they could be a feature of *good* CCSS implementation. Is this what's happening in the six urban schools the researchers examined? Probably not, but we should be cautious before dismissing as inadequate and unaligned text-based questions that “ask for recalling or retelling of basic facts rather than prompting for inferences, structural analysis, or author critiques.” Yes, Common Core famously valorizes close reading. But it does not follow that *every* reading has to be a close reading. A much deeper dive into the context of each assignment (a very heavy research lift) would be needed to separate cognitively enriching wheat from busywork chaff.

Those caveats aside, it is likely that what Education Trust has surfaced is evidence that standards are a lot easier to change than the habits and practices of teachers. The prevalence of “short chunks of text,” graphic organizers, and note-taking devices leads the authors to conclude that “these structures appeared to be highly valued by teachers across all schools, grade levels, and content areas.” They are therefore quite right to wonder if this indicates that schools are “abandoning the need for students to engage over longer periods with whole novels and extended nonfiction,” as Common Core demands. The available evidence, however limited, certainly suggests that it will take more than the adoption of higher standards to drive a stake through the heart of the skills-driven, paint-by-numbers approach to literacy instruction. Old habits die hard.

SOURCE: ["Checking In: Do Classroom Assignments Reflect Today's Higher Standards? \(http://1k9gl1yevnfp2lpq1dhrqe17.wpengine.netdna-cdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/CheckingIn_TheEducationTrust_Sept2015.pdf\)"](http://1k9gl1yevnfp2lpq1dhrqe17.wpengine.netdna-cdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/CheckingIn_TheEducationTrust_Sept2015.pdf), *The Education Trust (September 2015)*.