

LEFT BEHIND

HIGH-NEED LEARNERS AND THE COMMON CORE STANDARDS

By ADAM JANOS



bar to international benchmarks through language-intensive learning in all subject matter—ELLs and other high-need students face the daunting task of keeping pace with more linguistically rigorous testing at a time when many students without such obstacles are already struggling to stay up to speed.

Unlike some previous educational models, the Common Core standards aim to deepen critical thinking through more direct student engagement with reading and writing.

Students will “learn to be precise, to argue from evidence, to reason abstractly,” said Lee, who is involved in a similar effort developing new science standards. “There is such emphasis on practices, not just learning about the core ideas. And here is the kicker—the means for doing those practices is language.”

Whether that raised bar will cause ELLs to thrive or falter in city schools is a matter

of debate. Complaints of inadequate professional development and a sink-or-swim approach to implementation has some advocates concerned about the future for children whose academic prospects—including where they can attend school—will depend in part on these high-stakes tests.

“We want to make sure that parents are sufficiently informed about any changes to curriculum,” said Jose Davila, the Hispanic Federation’s vice president for policy and government relations. “Equally important is to make sure that, from the curriculum side and on the assessment side, ELLs are centered to any changes and reforms, and that there’s a unique look at how to craft appropriate curricula. That’s always been a challenge for New York schools.”

Davila argues that the difficulties have grown more severe in the past 12 years, as a result of a fundamental shift in New York City to a small-school model. Whereas in the past larger schools had more flexibility and demand for full-time bilingual educational programs, Davila argues that smaller schools have rendered that model impractical, and that bilingual staffing has been slashed citywide.

“So many ELLs fall through the cracks as far as school closures, school reforms and school reconfigurations go,” he said.

In a recent report the Hispanic Federation called for more bilingual schools, as well as community schools, which would combine a schoolhouse with social work services under one roof to provide a more holistic approach to low-income, first-generation students.

Shael Polakow-Suransky, New York City’s chief academic officer, acknowledged the obstacles facing students who don’t speak English as their first language, and said that more rigorous standards would increase those challenges.

“We have to work with the state and the federal government to make sure that the testing requirements are realistic. The Feds have a rule that ELL kids have to be tested after they’ve been in the country for one year,” he said. “Because of the rigor of the readings on these exams, if you’re a brand-new English-language learner and you just started to talk, and now you’re expected to read really sophisticated stuff and answer questions in English, it’s not going to go well.”

Polakow-Suransky said that the spirit of that federal requirement, which was introduced in 2009, was that more rigorous ELL testing would ensure that second-language learners did not get left behind by way of lowered expectations. However, he supports state action to introduce a waiver on exams for recent immigrants

“because it would allow teachers to really focus on what kids need at the beginning, which is language development.”

At the same time, special-education students have seen the reduction of isolated, specialized instruction paired with more stringent demands. Much as the small-school model ended bilingual education, New York City’s “Shared Path to Success” program has moved more high-need special-education students into general education classes at the same time that Common Core standards have put greater academic demand on the student body as a whole.

That shift has been a big mistake, said Carmen Alvarez, vice president in charge of special-education issues at the United Federation of Teachers.

“One of the misconceptions that’s in the system is that kids with disabilities will fare better in general education, so people actually believe if you’re placed in general education, you’ll get it,” Alvarez said. “They’ve forgotten what special education is about.”

Problems with standardized curriculum pacing—and a lack of flexibility in teaching methodology to accommodate individualized programs for special-education learners—has Alvarez worried that Common Core could leave special-education students in the dust. According to the UFT, the numbers back up this dismal assessment. In 2013 only 5.7 percent of special-education students passed state testing modeled on Common Core Standards, down from 15.8 percent on the old test in 2012. Even compared with the dip in general education numbers between the tests (54.1 percent to 31.3 percent), those numbers are grim.

“They want to work with the kids who can,” Alvarez said. “And the ones who can’t? Goodbye.”

Still, Lee believes there is a chance Common Core can eventually close the gap between learners, not increase it.

“This is what we’re really trying to stress: If the English-language learners and special-education students have the access to quality instruction, when it’s done well, according to the spirit of Common Core and Next Generation Science Standards that involve student-oriented practices, and kids are doing things and making meaning and constructing meaning, then it certainly has—absolutely has—opportunities.”

“These practices involve doing things,” Lee continued. “Students are solving a problem, engaging the material. That’s the whole point. The kids will develop the understanding, and then learn language at the same time.”

In New York City, four in 10 public school students come from families that speak a language other than English at home.

“Typically we think of minority students in terms of race and English-language learners and poverty and all that ... but the ELL [English-language learner] population, it’s growing tremendously in New York,” said Okhee Lee, a professor of childhood education at New York University.

Now, with the rollout of Common Core—a nationwide education initiative aimed at standardizing and raising the



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