

# Common Core Discussion: 1<sup>st</sup> Meeting Summary

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Syosset Central School District, South Woods Library - 10/22/14

## In attendance:

### District Staff:

Angela Kozlowski	Math Coordinator	District-wide
Bridget Perlmutter	Kindergarten Tchr.	South Grove Elementary
Christian Harrigan	Admin. Asst.	HBT Middle
Tracy Capece	6 <sup>th</sup> Gr. ELA/Social Studies Inclusion Tchr.	South Woods Middle
Kimberly Dwyer	Math Teacher	Syosset High School
Marie Vasco	5 <sup>th</sup> Grade	South Grove Elementary
Michelle Burget	Principal	South Woods Middle
Philip Kaiser	6 <sup>th</sup> Grade Math	HBT Middle
Samantha Gordon	12 <sup>th</sup> Grade English	Syosset High School
Theresa Scrocco	Principal	South Grove Elementary

### Building/SEPTA representatives:

Randi Fogel	Baylis Elementary
David Locker	Berry Hill Elementary
Sandra Arroyo	Robbins Lane Elementary
Rizwan Alladin	South Grove Elementary
Pam Ginex	Village Elementary
Lauren Miller	Walt Whitman Elementary
Jeanine Celec	AP Willits Elementary
Trish Sergi	South Woods Middle School
Minfeng Lin	HBT Middle School
Lisa Appel	Syosset High School
Liza Rosen	SEPTA

## Genesis of the Discussion

In May 2014, the Syosset Board of Education directed the district administration to create an opportunity for parents and district staff to explore and discuss the Common Core Learning Standards (CCLS) and how Syosset in particular was adapting to them.

Three broad topics would be addressed by a staff presentation at a board of education meeting, followed by a discussion with the building representatives on a subsequent night:

<b>October</b>	Curriculum Changes
<b>November</b>	Assessment Issues
<b>December</b>	Other State Reforms (i.e. Teacher Evaluation)

## Opening Presentation

Dr. Rogers offered some introductory comments and set the context for the committee's work:

Adjusting instruction is always a work in progress. It is iterative and it is collaborative. Each year, we learn from what worked well and what can be further refined. We do not presume to have a perfect implementation of new curriculum aligned to the CCLS.

However, we engaged a wide variety of our faculty and subject matter specialists and they worked extensively over periods of months and even years to ensure a thoughtful, comprehensive, research-based approach was taken. That team continues to monitor and improve our work and we are open to comments, concerns and suggestions from members of the community that can help shape those refinements.

Then the main points from the original PowerPoint presentation to the Board of Education and community on 10/20/14 were summarized. That summary follows:

## Point 1: The standards periodically change

### Standards Continually Change

- Standards and Regulations (Part 100 of the Commissioner's regulations)
- They are constantly evolving:
  - 1950s - algebra, geometry, and trigonometry were merged into integrated mathematics.
  - 1960s - "New math".
  - 1984 - Regents Action Plan (require 22 credits to graduate)
  - 1991 - New Compact for Learning (increased difficulty)
  - 2005 - Learning Standards (eliminated local diploma)
  - 2011 – Common Core Learning Standards

Source: <http://www.regenb.nysed.gov/about/history-cmls.html>

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New York has gone through a number of revisions to its standards, never without controversy. Some significant milestones were:

- The Regents Action Plan of 1984, which required 22 credits to graduate;
- The New Standards of 2005, which eliminated the local (i.e. non-Regents) diploma and eventually eliminated the "low pass" (allowing students with disabilities to pass with a score of 55 on the 5 mandatory Regents exams, and
- The Common Core standards which are intended to be aligned to college-readiness standards.

With each increase in expectations, the standards were criticized as out of reach – and with the resources available at the time, they were. But over time, schools and teachers worked to adjust instruction and bring them within reach.

## Point 2: Review some terms to be clear on what the distinctions are.

### Review Definitions

#### Standards

- The list of things we expect students to know and be able to do at some milestone.

#### Curriculum

- The body of lessons, taken together that comprise a total course of study.

#### Assessments

- Measurements of how well students have mastered content and skills from the curriculum.

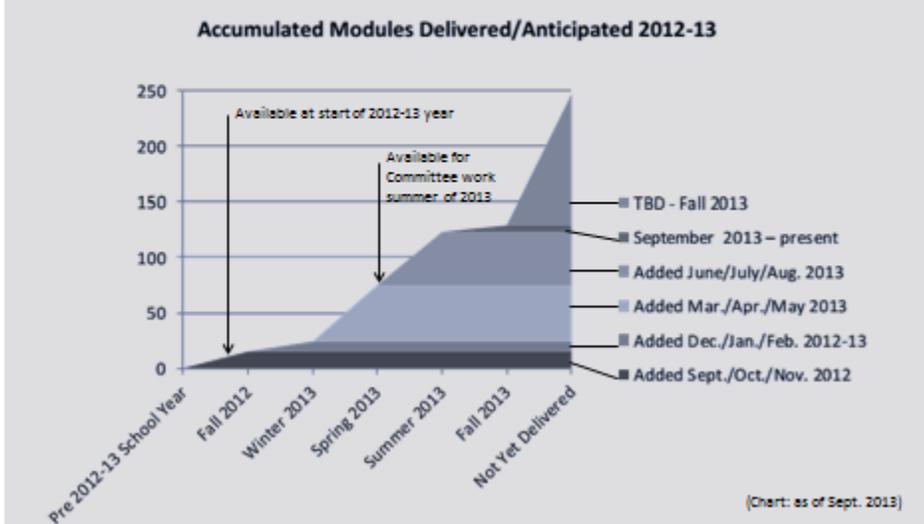
The amount of jargon in education can sometimes be overwhelming. So before examining if and how the Common Core learning standards have changed instruction at Syosset, it is important to have common definitions of terms.

The standards are themselves not curriculum, they are a set of expectations. The curriculum itself is a set of lessons which are grouped into units, which are grouped into grades. The assessments can take the form of state tests, but can also be quizzes and other measures of student progress.

The curriculum is decided by the district, although the State did make some optional lesson plans available in the form of "modules" which were posted on the state's website: EngageNY.org.

**Point 3: The state was slow in delivering curriculum “modules”.**

## Few Modules Were Available



The State made a number of curriculum “modules” available to school districts. Many districts did not develop extensive local curriculum aligned to the CCLS – thinking it would be a redundant use of resources since the state was already doing so. However, the pace at which they were developed fell behind the expectations of both districts and the state.

By summer of 2012, barely 20 of 250 modules were complete to be considered for the 2012-13 school year. Fortunately, Syosset’s curriculum was already quite strong, and the faculty had decided to only pilot the modules by using one at each grade level in ELA. Still, they only had a few dozen to choose from instead of the full 250.

By summer of 2013, some 75 modules were complete, but the full set was not final until early in 2014.

**Point 4: Standards are a progression**

## Standards Are A Progression

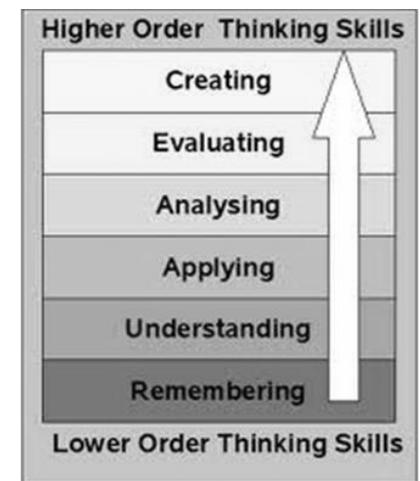
**Strand –**  
Reading: Literature

**Learning Targets:**  
Standard 1

- 1<sup>st</sup>
  - I can ask questions about important details in a text.
- 4<sup>th</sup>
  - I can draw inferences from a text and refer to details and examples in the text when explaining my inferences.
- 8<sup>th</sup>
  - I can cite textual evidence that strongly supports my inferences and analysis of the text.
- 11/12<sup>th</sup>
  - I can cite strong and thorough textual evidence that supports my inferences and analysis of the text.

Part of the emphasis in the CCLS is to focus on higher order thinking skills. Bloom’s Taxonomy (chart below) is often used to illustrate how the simplest skills (mimicry and recall) build toward more complex mental skills (like applying a skill in an unfamiliar situation, or creating something completely new).<sup>i</sup>

Each standard is designed to build in difficulty and sophistication as students progress through the grade levels. This illustration above shows how Reading standard R1 evolves in complexity from 1<sup>st</sup> grade through 11<sup>th</sup>/12<sup>th</sup> grade—the tasks become increasingly difficult and more abstract as the learner matures.



## Point 5: The CCLS contains 6 instructional shifts for ELA and Math

### Instructional Shifts for The Common Core

#### Six Shifts in ELA/Literacy

1. Balancing Informational and Literary Text
2. Building Knowledge in the Disciplines
3. Staircase of Complexity
4. Text-Based Answers
5. Writing From Sources
6. Academic Vocabulary

#### Six Shifts in Math

1. Focus
2. Coherence
3. Fluency
4. Deep Understanding
5. Applications
6. Dual Intensity

The new Common Core State Standards make several important changes to current standards. These changes are called shifts.

#### ELA Shifts

At the October Board Meeting, a more detailed explanation of these shifts was given. However, in order to build a wider repertoire of student skills, the shifts expect more challenging vocabulary and the incorporation of more non-fiction.

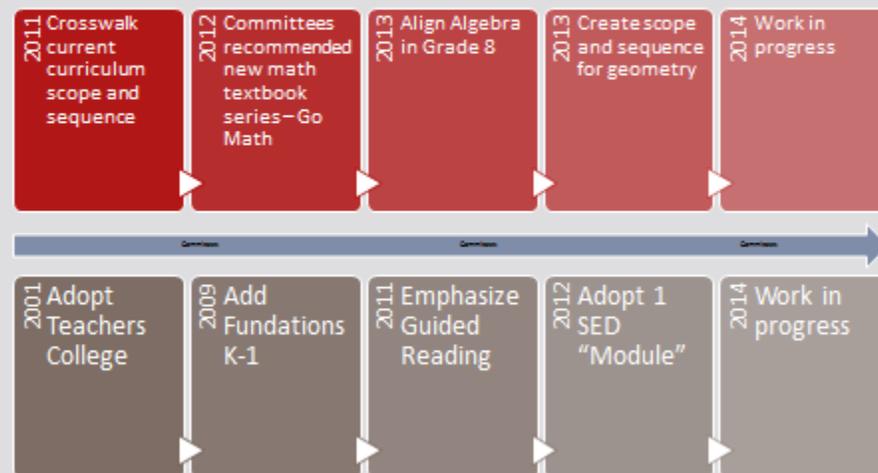
Since Syosset had already been using the Teachers College curriculum for some time, these shifts were already underway.

#### Math Shifts

To accommodate these shifts in math, the district adopted a new textbook series – Go Math – which met the goals for further improving the math curriculum and ensuring that students were well prepared to address the Common Core standards.

## Point 6: Syosset uses extensive committee work on curriculum

### Our Curriculum Progressions



The process by which Syosset aligned its curriculum to the expectations of the CCLS placed a heavy emphasis on involving appropriate faculty and content area specialists in review committees that met over a period of multiple months and years.

The ELA curriculum (Teachers College) has been in place since 2001. Recent revisions added support for slowly emerging readers (Wilson - 2001) and (Foundations – 2008). The CCLS-specific changes included piloting one state “module” per grade.

The math curriculum underwent a more significant transition as the district went through the process of adopting a new textbook series. The committee ultimately selected the Go Math series for its emphasis on conceptual math, having multiple approaches to meet the needs of different learning styles, and rich on-line supports for teachers and parents.

## Summary of the Discussion

After introductions of the staff and attendees representing each of the buildings and SEPTA, audience members (including 4 members of the Board of Education) introduced themselves.

A discussion ensued for the next 2 hours with Dr. Rogers serving as moderator. Periodically, the discussion would be summarized to ensure the summary was not missing any elements of the conversation. If the summary was satisfactory, the discussion would progress to another topic.

From that conversation, 3 categories of issues, comments, and suggestions emerged.

- **“Parking Lot”** Issues, which represented larger issues of policy or substance that would not lend themselves to a “quick fix” but which deserved further exploration and discussion;
- **“Take-aways”** that the administration and staff could use to begin to refine the district’s implementation of new curriculum, or to continue supporting parents beyond the initial rollout; and
- **“State Issues”** where criticism or suggestions were out of the district’s control and more appropriately directed at the State.

The summary of that discussion follows:

### Parking Lot

1. Literacy Demands of New Math Approach – A major focus of the CCLS math standards is to move from “operational math”—the ability to solve a given problem through mimicry of a technique—to “conceptual math” where students possess a deeper understanding of why multiple techniques can be used to solve the same problem and are able to choose and apply those techniques to unfamiliar situations. Almost by definition, this move from mimicry to application requires problems that are described in language and not just symbols. At least 3 challenges result:

- a. Some students who were “operationally fluent mathematicians” (able to mimic a sequence of steps to solve a problem) found themselves frustrated and challenged when the same task was instead presented as a word problem.
  - b. Students with limited English proficiency, either because their language was slower to emerge, or because English was not a first language, had to overcome an additional barrier to math comprehension.
  - c. Students with disabilities would have the additional cognitive load of decoding both the language and the mathematics simultaneously.
2. Questions were raised about the developmental appropriateness of the standards, particularly for young learners.
  3. The additional emphasis on non-fiction implies an additional need for background knowledge.

### Staff Observations/Reactions:

During this discussion, staff members acknowledged the challenges as presented and indicated initial efforts to address them, as well as some context to expand the issues into larger policy considerations.

- The need for additional language acquisition in the development of math skills does present a challenge; however, we had already been concerned that one of the primary math skills our students were not developing early enough was math vocabulary. Building that vocabulary through word problems was important, even if the word problems themselves presented challenges.
- Students eventually encounter language challenges in math, especially when they reach geometry. Introducing math language earlier in the curriculum better prepares students for geometry, so the question of introducing math language is more a matter of “when” than “if.”
- A number of topics were removed from the early grade curriculum (statistics was removed from kindergarten, for example) in an effort to streamline the standards to make

them “fewer and deeper” rather than “a mile wide and an inch deep.”

- The on-line practice materials include buttons with a “speaker” icon. Pressing them will cause the computer to read a homework question aloud for students who are still emerging readers.
- ELA is no longer an “isolate.” Rather, the same “attack skills” students should be learning to tackle reading more difficult literary texts apply similarly to math texts and thus the two now reinforce one another.

### Take-aways

This summarizes both the concern raised by the committee in italics, followed by initial thoughts for how the district can address each concern in the near term:

1. *The features of the on-line materials are only useful if parents are aware of them and familiar with how to use them.* At the request of PTA, the district recently held a parent training on the parent portal and on-line homework platforms. Similarly, we could repeat the initial workshops we held to assist parents in understanding the features of the on-line portion of the Go Math curriculum.
2. *Not every family has access to similar levels of technology at home.* This is an issue that the district should assess as it will also have broader implications as technology inevitably comprises larger aspects of the school experience.
3. *Working toward higher order thinking skills is great, but typically students work on the simpler problems in class, leaving the harder problems for homework later when the teacher is not available and the parents are unfamiliar with the new techniques.* The district will explore the possibility of working through the more challenging problems together in class as examples, and assigning the less complex ones as homework.
4. *The pace of the curriculum sometimes means moving through skills before achieving mastery.* Both ELA and math are intended to spiral – to build on top of foundational skills, while circling back and deepening those skills. The district

does provide opportunities to differentiate because of the tutor model – both to remediate, and to enrich – through small group and individualized instruction. Perhaps an opportunity remains for us to be more explicit about the learning targets for the initial spirals so that interim advancement towards mastery is celebrated as progress, not characterized as failure.

5. *Go Math uses a several new methodologies for solving traditional types of multiplication and division problems. Were teachers adequately trained to teach these novel methods?* There was a considerable amount of professional development during the initial roll-out of the curriculum. Now that teachers are in their 3<sup>rd</sup> year, they are understandably more adept with the curriculum than they were in the first year. The district can explore where other professional development needs may remain.
6. *Given the challenges of teaching a new curriculum “on the fly” was it fair to students to introduce a new curriculum without adequate foundational skills in the previous grades?* During the change from the curriculum designed to achieve the 2005 standards to the Go Math program, there were a number of challenges to the “scope and sequence” of the curriculum. A number of topics were removed from the early grade curriculum that needed to be added back later to ensure they were not overlooked. Students during this transition may have had a somewhat more difficult time as additional topics may have needed to be taught or retaught. Now that we are in the 3<sup>rd</sup> year, most students have become comfortable with the new structure, and any remaining overlaps or gaps have been identified and rectified.
7. *Students are struggling with the stamina necessary to work through some of the assignments or to complete the assessments.* As students are becoming more fluent with the various methodologies for solving problems, they are requiring less time. However, we should continue to monitor this concern closely and ensure adequate supports.
8. *Some of the assignments seem like rote, or test prep.* It is impossible to say that there is no test prep occurring, and

some may even be defensible. However, a number of the practice exercises that may seem like drills are intended to develop “automaticity” – designed to help students remember complex math facts as easily as they do “2+2=4”. That automaticity will help them do more challenging math later by focusing on the new material, rather than getting distracted by a mis-remembered math fact.

9. *The more challenging material may be fine for the more capable students. Are the standards and pace reasonable for students who struggle or who have learning disabilities? With enough support, even students with learning disabilities are able to work successfully through more challenging materials. However, we need to think more about how we can help support these students and their parents.*
10. *On the one hand, the math seems to be moving up Bloom’s taxonomy, but on the other hand, ELA seems to be less abstract, with opportunities for exploration and discussion giving way to content coverage exercises. Some additional non-fiction reading materials and reading in the content areas has been increased to help build students’ higher order thinking skills.*

#### State Issues

1. *“Shotgun start” – In golf, a shotgun start is when everyone starts on a different hole, then plays 18 holes, but not necessarily in sequence from 1-18. This has the advantage of getting everyone started simultaneously and making sure every hole is in play from the beginning. But this works because there are no skills that need to be learned on the early holes to help you play the later ones. By contrast, starting CCLS at every grade simultaneously meant students in later grades were disadvantaged by not having developed skills from earlier grades that were presumed by CCLS.*

We’re now seeing students with multiple years of Go Math instruction making better progress, but students in these transition years will always have an additional challenge.

This decision was made at the state level. The district tried to

compensate for it through maintaining class sizes, providing for extra assistance, and using our tutor model to accommodate students at different points in their educational progress.

2. *“One Size (Does Not?) Fit All” – The increased difficulty of the CCLS may be attainable by our academically accomplished students. However, is it attainable for all students, particularly those with learning challenges? Might the state be raising the bar so high it ensures some cannot reach it?*

This remains an open question. While the district has very robust supports for challenged learners, we will need to monitor this group of students very closely.

#### Other Committee Suggestions

The parent members of the committee made a number of suggestions that the district is now exploring:

1. Ongoing information – The information being shared is very helpful, but not enough parents were reached by the district’s initial communications efforts. How do we ensure that this information reaches a broader group of parents in the future?
  - a. FAQ – Can we create an on-line “frequently asked questions” resource for parents?
  - b. Can there be an opportunity to meet with teachers prior to December?
  - c. Would it be possible at Open House nights to have a brief initial presentation on some of these topics?
  - d. Can we collect questions prior to a building’s PTA meeting?
  - e. Can the district make available a “suggestion box” for CCLS questions?
  - f. Would Facebook or other social media be a good dissemination strategy?
  - g. Can information be made specific to each grade level?

- h. Should we repeat some of the district's previous communications efforts (PTA meetings, EngageNY resources, NYS PTA resources)?
2. Flipped homework – can we have students work on more challenging material in class where they have the support of the teacher, and then reinforce that work through homework?
3. Pace and Pressure – It seems as though the pace is rushed and the coverage expectations have widened instead of deepened.
  - a. How do we make sure that these raised expectations don't squeeze out play and fun?
  - b. Is the stress of the pressure turning kids off? How do we (teachers and parents) manage the pressure on kids?
  - c. Go Math is designed for 60 minute blocks, but we allot 45 minutes. Teachers College is designed for 90 minute blocks and we allot 60 minutes. Can the pace be moderated? Do teachers have the autonomy to adjust as appropriate? Are there things that will be edited out of the curriculum over time?
4. Teacher Role – Some appreciation was expressed for teaching seemingly evolving into a more facilitative role.

## Conclusion

District staff remained after the meeting to answer any lingering questions and collect additional comments and suggestions. Requests for additional research were made and accommodated. The district committed to providing this summary, and briefly outlined how the remaining two meetings will be conducted.

The next meeting will focus on assessments (testing) and specifically the changes that the CCLS has made in testing. The final meeting will focus on other aspects of the State's reform efforts, including student achievement data analysis and teacher evaluations. The district will make similar summaries of those meetings available as well.

## Endnotes:

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<sup>i</sup> [http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bloom's\\_Taxonomy.png](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bloom's_Taxonomy.png)