

Investing in Our Teachers: Investing in Our Future

New York Senate Testimony

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Summary

One of the most significant challenges and opportunities we face is how to best to prepare our students for a rapidly changing technology driven, globalized world. To do so, we need to broaden our view of student achievement to include greater emphasis on the higher order skills necessary for developing global citizens who are ready for the world beyond school. The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) with the focus on career and college readiness, address this need for increased rigor by significantly raising expectations for students.

These standards represent qualitatively different expectations and their success will require significant shifts in educational practice. Changes this significant are unlikely to occur without equally significant investments in the knowledge and skills of educators along with necessary material support.

It is an exciting time in education, and New York State is well along the way of aligning the education systems with the CCSS in support of the goal for all students to graduate ready for college, careers, and life. The standards have been rolled out, excellent supporting resources and curriculum provided on EngageNY, and new and more rigorous assessments implemented. The recent grade 3-8 State Test results, however, further highlight that we have a long way to go, and we believe that the excellence New York is striving for will need significant investment in human capital.

We believe that teachers need substantially more professional development around the Common Core, not just in understanding what the new standards include and how they differ from states' old standards, but also to fill the gaps in instructional strategies that will be needed for students to succeed.

Introduction

Generation Ready was formed in late 2012, combining the expertise and resources of two long-renowned education organizations – Editure/AUSSIE Professional Development based in New York and JBHM Education Group in Mississippi. Today, we are one of the largest providers of professional development and school improvement services in the country, partnering with districts, schools, and state departments of education to raise student achievement. We believe that to raise student achievement the professional development needs to target the teachers that work with them every day.

Generation Ready has worked in New York for nearly twenty years and currently works with 300 city schools and a number of school districts in the rest of the state.

I am the Chief Academic Officer of Generation Ready and work with the New York City Department of Education as the Senior Literacy Advisor for the Middle School Quality Initiative.

The Challenge

The current crisis in student achievement is well documented. Students entering our schools today will live in a world where the literacy and technology demands are increasing in diversity and complexity in ways that are hard for us to imagine. More than ever before, students need effective teaching if they are to

develop the higher order thinking skills they need to be career and college ready when they graduate. The CCSS address this need by defining grade level expectations that will help prepare our students to enter college and the workforce successfully.

Over the years, various approaches have come in and out of favor. In an effort to raise achievement we have tried tighter curricula specifications, prescribed structures for math and literacy blocks, scripts for teaching, and increased accountability. All have had minimal impact on the learning outcomes for students. They have failed to take into account that it is the quality of the teacher that has the greatest impact on student learning.

The Common Core offers us a chance to get it right. These standards address the need for change and reflect the best of international standards. We have an opportunity to ensure that all students develop the skills and understandings necessary to succeed in a highly literate world. It is also a time of challenge. The standards demand more from students and far more from teachers.

Meeting the raised expectations of the standards will require teachers to teach in profoundly different ways and for principals to lead this change. We need to think about where and how teachers get access to the kinds of demanding pedagogical understandings and skills they need to address the issues they face when implementing the instructional shifts required by the CCSS.

This means the need for effective professional development for schools and teachers is critical.

Raising Expectations for Our Teachers

Classrooms today are complex, dynamic learning environments, and identifying the range of factors that impact positively on student achievement has been a major focus of research. We can be confident about both the degree of the teachers' influence and also about what it is that they do that raises student learning outcomes.

We know that teachers make a difference in their students' learning when they understand that their students have differing learning needs, strengths, interests, and have high expectations for them as learners. They base their classroom practices on research, see assessment as an integral part of teaching, diagnose gaps, and tailor their instruction to meet the specific learning needs of their students, all while creating an organized and stimulating learning environment. Effective teachers do not work alone but see themselves as part of a team that is committed to supporting every student's achievement. In short, if we want to dramatically change the trajectory for many of our students we need highly skilled teachers and leaders.

The reality is that the students living in the most challenging situations are those who need the most effective teachers. Most of our socially challenged students go to schools that have a high turnover of teaching staff. Much of Generation Ready's work is in low performing schools where the gap between the skill of the teachers and need of the students is huge. There is an assumption that teachers arrive ready to engage students in learning effectively—but we all know that is far from the reality. Many teachers do not have access to the high quality professional development throughout their career to keep up with shifts in teaching practice.

As we partner with schools across the state, we work in classrooms with many hard working teachers who are committed to the providing the best for their students, who are struggling to meet the demands of multiple initiatives and more rigorous standards. In many cases teachers do not have the confidence to make the professional judgments needed to ensure that their teaching reflects the needs of their students.

Schools improve by improving teaching, by investing thoughtfully and coherently in the knowledge and skill of educators. There are no policies or initiatives that can improve student outcomes unless the people working within them have access the knowledge and skills they need. For New York state to have the highly skilled teachers it needs to successfully implement the current initiatives, it needs to invest in stronger initial teacher preparation and ongoing professional development. This means creating the expectation that teachers will have access to high quality professional development throughout their professional life.

Professional Development

Generation Ready believes successful professional development is research-based, practical, and tied in meaningful ways to the New York's Common Core Learning Standards. We link the goals of the whole school and district to sustain improvement. We build on teachers' knowledge and understanding, by encouraging them to reflect on their current practice and increase their range of instructional strategies. Effective professional development includes opportunities for teachers to link their new learning to existing classroom practices. This involves trying out new strategies with their students, then sharing them with colleagues to give and receive support for their ongoing professional growth. This is an ongoing cycle. Very little of the professional development available to teachers meets this criteria.

In 2010, we partnered with the New York City Department of Education to lead one of their five Text Complexity Pilots for the implementation of the Common Core. The pilot involved 20 middle and high schools serving high need communities and focused on literacy and the challenge of increasing the complexity of texts students read. When working with the schools, we found:

- Teachers had low expectations for the students as readers
- There was no assessing of students' reading
- Teachers worked hard in ensuring students understood the content by:
 - Rewriting the texts
 - Reading the texts to students

We provided a combination of coaching support in schools and district-wide workshops where teachers were able to make the instructional shifts required to meet the increased rigor of the Common Core. As a result of the work, teachers were able to deepen their understanding around text complexity and change their instructional practice to ensure students had the strategies they needed to engage confidently with increasingly complex texts.

The Middle School Quality Initiative (MSQI) is the New York City Department of Education's focused effort to expand the number of middle schools that prepare students for college and career success. The schools are from the bottom 25% of city schools in terms of student achievement, are persistently low performing, and serve high poverty areas.

Generation Ready partnered with the Department to support schools in implementing a comprehensive literacy framework designed to significantly increase the number of students entering high school reading at grade level.

The initiative began in January 2012 with 24 schools and now serves 90 schools. Student progress is tracked through the Degrees of Reading Power (DRP) a nationally normed cloze comprehension assessment. The average student growth as measured by the DRP was nearly double the national average. What was even more important was the schools that also had school based professional development showed significantly more growth.

The Gates Foundation funded the Text Complexity Pilot and the MSQI was funded by the City Council. We believe that there needs to be significant funding allocated for the substantial professional development needed to bring about the shifts in practice required to implement the Common Core. The funding to do this important work should not be dependent on grantors.

The need to invest in teachers is a lesson that has been learned by countries that top the international educational rankings. The highest performing states, like North Carolina and Connecticut, have also invested heavily in their teachers and leaders, as well as in the creation of a more challenging curriculum and more thoughtful assessments. These systems prepare their teachers more extensively and provide them with both the time and funding for professional learning.

New York state is leading the way in making the substantial changes needed to improve the educational outcomes for its students. It has adopted and introduced more rigorous standards, aligned assessments to the standards, provided innovative and engaging curricula, along with resources on EngageNY, and implemented a teacher evaluation system. For these initiatives to have the desired positive impact on student achievement they need to be supported by investing heavily in the ongoing professional development of its leaders and teachers.

Thank you for the opportunity to present this testimonial. It is an exciting time to be working in education and we are proud to be supporting New York as it makes the changes necessary to prepare its students for the world beyond school.

Average student growth in DRP 6th Grade
October - February

