The Common Core State Standards do not include a silver bullet or a treasure map with a neatly drawn path to the X that marks college- and career-ready students. It sets goals and lets each state, district, and building determine the best path. As school librarians, we can choose to be reactive or proactive, but we should never choose "not active." We all have questions, but we should not forget that we are also answers. We may not be able to cure all ills or redress all wrongs, but there is no question that we are a key to promoting and achieving the CCSS principles. We slay the dragons of ignorance and lack of imagination; we teach and model critical thinking skills as well as the path to citizenship. There is no area we cannot and do not touch because we nurture the future, albeit in and around the trends, fads, successes, and failures of our education system.

State superintendents formulated the Common Core, but understanding the rationale behind them is helpful. At this time, the CCSS are largely untried; we have much information to digest, to disaggregate, and about which to speculate. But without data or extensive experience to share about the implementation framework and processes in our states, districts, and buildings, we are in an information-seeking and brainstorming stage during which theory begins to move into practice. When I was asked to guest-edit this issue I immediately thought this issue represented an opportunity to gather more information from the outside looking in on our perceived value.

At first glance the articles may look somewhat eclectic, but they represent a montage of current thinking and viewpoints from multiple stakeholders such as staff of public instruction offices, curriculum developers, school administrators, program administrators, critics, and teachers—new grist from many mills for our consideration. What do these stakeholders expect from us? What do they have to offer? This issue spans viewpoints, experiences, tools, applications, and suggestions. In the process of working on this issue, several authors commented that they thought this would be easy writing only to discover they really had to stop and analyze where and how we could best contribute and support achieving the CCSS goals of college- and career-ready graduates. I wasn’t certain whether to be delighted they took the time to think or appalled they had to think that hard.

Whether or not we work in an adopting state, I firmly believe the shift in underlying educational philosophies expressed in the CCSS will create positive ripples throughout all of education. For so many years education has been focused largely on the lowest level of Bloom’s taxonomy, and rigor has been defined by how much information a student could process and retain. A fundamental disconnection existed between knowing and using. Critical thinking and problem solving are skills that previously have been a fiat of education. The underlying premise was that students would magically be able to convert information into skills. We know differently because we see that disconnect in practice every day.

The democracy on which our country is founded presumes that all citizens not only understand the vital need for information, critical thinking, and civil discourse but also understand and act on the need to have those skills embedded in future generations. 

Common Core from the Outside Looking In

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The shift in focus is an overdue move toward developing skills we librarians have long and consistently advocated as necessary to advance our society. The democracy on which our country is founded presumes that all citizens not only understand the vital need for information, critical thinking, and civil discourse but also understand and act on the need to have those skills embedded in future generations. The creation and acceptance of the CCSS have started an incremental process toward that goal. Base knowledge is not the primary goal, but a tool students can use in demonstrating what can be done with that knowledge.

Being able to think critically, find appropriate and accurate information, solve problems, and effectively communicate outcomes are now in the spotlight. This focus on using information effectively is a profound shift. Teachers may have to retool their training and seek help from experts—us. Some may have been teaching these skills in the past, but the new goal is to give all students equal access to that level of teaching. I believe, conversely, that all teachers should have equal access to us, the experts.

And no, I have not “drunk the CCSS Kool-Aid.” The CCSS are receiving criticism, a fact dramatically underscored by the number of states in which legislation has been introduced to withdraw from the CCSS Initiative or to block implementation funding. Faced with declining educational performance and employer frustrations with insufficiently educated workforces, Congress entered the education arena with a testing battle cry named Adequate Yearly Progress that was thinly disguised as No Child Left Behind.

The testing battle cry will linger with CCSS implementation. Regardless of programs or paradigms, the need for assessment and data to judge efficacy is inescapable. We may decry the methods of data gathering, but we are in the infancy of online testing; the road ahead is bound to be fraught with bumps. We should continue the discussions and trust experience to clarify where the balance between over-testing and adequate testing resides.

Some downsides of the proposed testing are the costs—both to budgets and to student learning time—and concerns about the validity and the reliability of such tests. One might wonder what is being assessed by a computer-scored essay in a critical-thinking environment. Also unfortunate is the move in some states to evaluate teachers according to scoring outcomes. Will this move lead some to believe that, because school librarians do not have rosters of students to be tested in our areas of expertise, we—as the Los Angeles district has posited—are not really teachers and, therefore, are an extraneous expense? How are our salaries evaluated in a system of performance incentives? These issues are individual to states and districts, but need to be on our radar of concerns as a profession.

People who express frustration with the outcomes of public education perceive testing as a path to achieving accountability. But in their frustration, they may forget that education is about people, and people are not widgets. In business, if one can control the quality of the materials used in production, one can expect a better product. We in education know reality isn’t that simple. We cannot “bid out” for a better economy, stable home lives, more motivated education partners, better student health and then replace those deficits that interfere with a successful learning process. We understand that without consistent effort across all deficit areas the “widget” will suffer, as will test results, which are affected by far more than academic ability, teaching methods, and curriculum.

In an ideal world, test results should be used as formative assessments by which congressional and business decision makers—in partnership with educators—identify and prioritize changes necessary for achieving the desired successes. For our students to develop all the skills required to be ready for college and careers, happy and productive citizens, our decision makers must become members of that “whole village” touted as necessary to raise successful students.

One of the outcomes I desired from this issue of KQ is not just new grist but a view into what might be strong advocacy opportunities or damage-control triage realities. Forewarned is foreshadowed. I know that the editing process provided me with both wake-up calls and pleasant surprises. I hope you, too, find these articles helpful in our discovery and planning processes. The goal is to explore, provoke discussions, and help us move into a new era of possibilities that feature our skills as integral to developing students who are successful college- and career-ready young adults well on their way to becoming thoughtful and active citizens.

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