

# The Common Core State Standards in the Ballston Spa Central School District

## Shifting in Our Schools: The 12 Instructional Shifts and How They Enrich Our Practice

The integration of the Common Core Standards into the classroom presents 12 instructional shifts for teachers, six in English Language Arts and six in Mathematics. Below, please find details on what the shifts are, how they benefit students, and examples of how they are demonstrated in the classroom. In addition, the parent resources section of the district website provides families with information on the Common Core Standards, how these are exemplified in classroom learning and ways to assist students at home.

Our district's Coordinator of Common Core Standards Valarie Karas describes the instructional shifts taking place in classrooms (below) and how teachers have found innovative ways to weave the Common Core Standards into their instruction. At several grade levels, teachers have worked together to make new units which focus on teaching and assessing the standards. At other grade levels, teachers have revamped areas of their instruction (writing, for example) to better meet the demands of the standards.

### English Language Arts/Literacy Shifts

**1. Balancing Informational and Literary Text** This shift asks that students read a "true balance" of fiction and nonfiction text throughout the school day. An effective way some teachers do this is through "paired text". This is essentially the practice of reading fiction and nonfiction texts which are related by theme or topic. There are many benefits to this approach. It enables teachers to expose students to a topic or theme from more than one perspective which deepens student understanding and their engagement with both the topic and the texts. It also provides a wealth of related vocabulary from a variety of sources. Using paired texts in this way builds background knowledge and allows students to learn from the readings and translate that learning to other school experiences.

**2. Knowledge in the Disciplines** The second ELA/Literacy shift asks that students learn about content and disciplines through reading. Therefore, the emphasis is on student research, using evidence from readings, and explaining what was learned from text. Teachers use a strategy called anticipation guides and ask students interesting, text-based questions before they read a piece of literature. This technique not only gets students thinking about the topic, but can spark their curiosity and motivate them to read and learn from text.

**3. Staircase of Complexity** This strategy suggests that text should be rich and challenging but also appropriate for the students and any task they are completing in relation to the text. While this is a balance for teachers when it comes to choosing text, there is guidance in determining how to create a staircase of complexity for students. Teachers complete discussions on the qualitative measures of text complexity, or how text structure, vocabulary, prior knowledge demands, meaning, and even grammar contribute to how challenging a text is for students. This has allowed them to discuss text beyond a specified reading level and analyze how our students might approach a certain reading.

**4. Text-Based Evidence** The shift of using text-based evidence is demonstrated in the classroom by students making assertions about what they have read and using information from the text to create powerful arguments and supporting their conclusions. In a third grade classroom, students engaged in literacy centers use a Venn diagram to compare and contrast two different but related texts. This paired text activity promoted a balance of fiction and nonfiction reading and also required the students to use text-based evidence to support their thinking. Students explained how the texts were similar by citing exact page numbers and quotes from the text. Others referenced their notes on the readings to recall what they had read and then turned to the text for specific details.

**5. Writing from Sources** The shift toward using writing from sources requires students to cite evidence from text in their writing. Students are encouraged to use a variety of sources and wield what they have learned from these sources to make their own powerful arguments or informational pieces. For students, this shift not only builds a foundation for research, but also for organizing, expressing, and supporting their thoughts in writing. It also creates a connected literacy experience for students. In the classroom, students learn about topics through reading, write about what they have read, and use their writing to present knowledge, information, or opinions.

**6. Academic Vocabulary** Teachers are encouraged to emphasize words that will be critical to students' understanding of all disciplines. Understanding these terms prepares students to comprehend the texts they read. There are a number of strategies teachers employ to support this shift. For example, prior to reading, teachers often review and explain the academic vocabulary students will encounter in a text.



*Several teachers in our district were chosen to have their classrooms and lessons videotaped by the New York State Education Department and used as examples of exemplary aligned instruction. Middle School and Elementary teachers were filmed earlier this semester, including Milton Terrace North Elementary School 1st grade teacher Michelle Greco for ELA instruction in her classroom.*

### Mathematical Shifts

**1. Focus** This shift in Mathematics requires classroom teachers to narrow and deepen their math instruction. Students learn fewer concepts in any given school year but are expected to focus on those concepts, deeply understand the thinking process behind the math, and be able to apply their learning. This shift is most clearly seen in the pacing of the curriculum throughout the year, which is structured to prioritize certain concepts in each grade and allow time for true understanding and application of that learning.

**2. Coherence** The implementation of the math curriculum should be connected from year to year and the progression of learning should build upon students' prior knowledge. Teachers now connect previous learning to current learning and employ familiar strategies to teach new concepts. For example, an area model can be used to promote an understanding of multiplication, division and the distributive property.

**3. Fluency** While rote memorization has been greatly replaced with an emphasis on truly understanding math processes, the fluency shift requires students to memorize basic facts. If students can solve basic arithmetic quickly, accurately, and with automaticity, they are better poised to tackle more complex algorithms. Teachers often use sprints or mad minutes for fluency practice and to determine how well students understand the foundational expectations for their grade level.

**4. Deep Understanding** The focus on deep understanding ensures that students are thinking mathematically and that they not only know what they are doing, but why they are doing it. Teachers show students more than one way to solve a problem. They often integrate visuals or math models to give students a variety of experiences with the math. This enables students to approach a problem from more than one angle and, as some teachers describe this, puts more tools in their toolbox.

**5. Application** Students should use math to solve real-world problems so teachers apply math learning across content areas. For example, students may use statistics in Social Studies and equations in Science. Math is also easily connected to real-world experiences through word problems.

**6. Dual Intensity** This shift echoes the importance of the other math shifts. Students should be immersed in practicing and understanding math. It is important for them to practice and become fluent in simple calculations and just as important that they be able to apply this knowledge to more complex tasks. For example, a fifth grade lesson focused on the place value of decimals and during a fluency activity, students practiced quickly and accurately multiplying decimals. They were then guided to a deeper understanding of place value by writing numbers in various forms, such as standard, expanded, and word. It is an excellent example of how the teacher can provide opportunity for related practice and deeper understanding of a concept.

Looking for more information about ways to assist students at home? Please check the district website for a list of helpful resources, or for ways that families and students can discuss what they are reading at home, please see <http://www.readingrockets.org/article/58939/>.

Please visit the district website for additional resources on how to assist a student with mathematics, or check these helpful resources:

For valuable grade and content specific activities for parents:  
[www.HelpingWithMath.com](http://www.HelpingWithMath.com)

For fluency practice at home:  
[www.Xtramath.org](http://www.Xtramath.org)

If you have specific questions or concerns, please contact your child's teacher or principal, or Mrs. Valarie Karas, Coordinator of Common Core Standards at [vkaras@bscsd.org](mailto:vkaras@bscsd.org), 884-7210 ext. 3459, or follow her on Twitter @ValarieJKaras.