

SCHOOL LEADER'S

GUIDE TO

*Achieving Results
Through Rigor
and
Relevance*

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The Shift to the Common Core

Transitioning or Transforming Your School

Innovation is fostered by information gathered from new connections; from insights gained by journeys into other disciplines or places; from active, collegial networks and fluid, open boundaries. Innovation arises from ongoing circles of exchange, where information is not just accumulated or stored, but created. Knowledge is generated anew from connections that weren't there before.

—Margaret J. Wheatley

“What are you doing out there, Leonardo?” the young boy asked.

“I’m searching for answers to things I do not understand,” da Vinci answered.

“That doesn’t make any sense.”

“True, but it may. It is very important that I ask,” the inventor responded. “When I asked why a bird sustains itself in the air, I engineered a way to fly; when I investigated the mystery of the circles a stone makes when dropped in a pond, I comprehended force; when I questioned why thunder is slower and lasts longer than lightning, I understood the speed of sound. My life has been given to asking important questions and finding deeper meaning in the answers.”

Leonardo da Vinci is the quintessential model of the innovative thinker. He constantly searched for answers to troubling problems, always turning what he discovered into new knowledge that hadn’t been there before. His discoveries had a practical bent as he conceived of new and sustainable tools, products, and ways of working. His plethora of inventions—the parachute, armored car, helicopter, robots, double-hulled boats, single-span bridges, and the viola organista—show his range of creative powers that allowed others to accomplish tasks they previously could not complete.

Leaders Drive Innovation

So what do da Vinci and his innovative thinking have to do with the 21st century principal who is faced with answering the question, How do I help the teachers in

this school integrate this newly mandated change for Common Core State Standards for English language arts / literacy and mathematics into daily practice? Da Vinci provides a model, perhaps not just for *managing* operations in a 21st century school, but for solving difficult problems that are required when *leading* a highly effective school and confronting a tsunami of day-to-day challenges—mandates, conflicts, crises, dilemmas, and predicaments including dealing with the kid who missed the school bus. More than ever, the 21st century brings a multitude of willy-nilly daily snags and glitches that threaten to obstruct any attempts to prepare students for their lives in a global, technology-heavy society. In short, the actions of the great inventor who painted the smiling *Mona Lisa* provide the clues to the mindset that separates the 21st century's strongest school leaders from others who inadvertently become mired in minutiae.

Many imagine innovative thinkers as persons like the big inventors who transformed the world by creating the assembly line (Henry Ford and Ransom Olds), by curing diseases (Marie Curie and Patricia Bath), by flying (the Wright Brothers), or by improving revolutionary communication tools (Alexander Graham Bell and Tim Berners-Lee). A different definition of innovator suggests a richer interpretation highly applicable to the 21st century school leader: one who produces practical solutions to existing problems that others can implement to improve the quality of their work and their lives.

Innovation is a preeminent attribute of 21st century school leaders. What other qualities that drive innovation should we look for in these leaders? Figure 1.1 provides some guidance for identifying innovative leadership qualities. The questionnaire asks the school leader to rate himself or herself on such skills as problem analysis, decision making, ability to get others involved in solving problems, and sensitivity to others' problems. Open-ended questions ask for amplification of these attributes, all pointing to the heavy value placed on the school leader as a problem solver.

Another example of leadership qualities is taken from the responses of an informal phone survey in which Jim Bellanca asks twenty principals to identify those characteristics that best define the 21st century principal. The characteristic "problem solver" received the highest rating. One principal reports, "It's a problem a minute. If I don't have to find the solution, teacher teams do the work with me." Another respondent notes, "The day is a sequence of problems to solve. One minute, it's an angry parent. The next, two students start the day with a fight. Then come the bigger things: the latest mandate from the feds, a planning committee to critique teachers' project planning, or an individualized education program [IEP] meeting. It's constantly making lemonade from lemons, so I can be free to do the important stuff—planning how to get our kids ready for their next year's schooling, college, and careers in the fastest-changing world ever. If I don't have a mindset for solving problems—and that

Name: _____ Date: _____

Rank your qualities on a scale of zero (lowest) to five (highest).

Leadership Qualities	Rating Scale
1. Delegating	0 1 2 3 4 5
2. Facilitating collaborative teams	0 1 2 3 4 5
3. Communicating the school mission	0 1 2 3 4 5
4. Making big-picture plans	0 1 2 3 4 5
5. Solving problems	0 1 2 3 4 5
6. Evaluating teacher performance	0 1 2 3 4 5
7. Sharing knowledge of Common Core State Standards	0 1 2 3 4 5
8. Thinking outside the box	0 1 2 3 4 5
My three strongest qualities in order are:	
1.	
2.	
3.	

Figure 1.1: A self-assessment of leadership qualities.

Visit go.hbe.com.au for a reproducible version of this figure.

means helping others solve problems—I shouldn't be principal . . . and by the way, tomorrow there's a blizzard predicted."

Mandates command a lot of a principal's time and attention. Some come from the central office; others come from the state department of education or the federal department of education. Through whatever channel, these mandates tell the principal the wind never stops blowing. Keep your problem-solving hat on tight, because it is you who will have to figure out how to implement the newest change of direction. In the case of the CCSS, the change portends lots of work, lots of creative thinking, and undoubtedly lots of new challenges.

What Is the Driving Question for School Leaders?

By shifting the implementation of the CCSS from a mandate to a creative challenge, principals can construct a collaborative approach. By creating a driving question that engages their faculties in a problem-solving process, principals are more likely to garner support not only for the planning process but for a full commitment to implement a plan that focuses on teaching for effective learning.

When principals ask successful guiding questions, they will take a faculty immediately into the heart of the matter. Such a question as, What features of our best

practice can we retain with the least amount of disruption as we implement the CCSS?

Following exploration of the primary driving question, teachers should answer three additional *clarifying* questions. In this fashion, the driving question guides the entire inquiry process from start to finish. The driving question will remain as the roadside mile marker against which the school team can measure progress. At any time in the planning and implementation processes that a check is needed, the team will answer “How does this help us answer the driving question?” to push the process forward. By referring to the given exemplar and developing their own support questions as markers, principals can guide their teachers forward.

First, the school team needs to ask and answer a *what* question such as, “*What* are the Common Core State Standards?” The team members do this so they can build a simple, precise, and shared language with common understandings. This common vocabulary will ease subsequent discussions. In the unlikely condition that there is no one on the staff with knowledge of these terms, the principal can refer all to the Common Core website (www.corestandards.org) and conduct a guided tour.

Second, the team will ask a *why* question such as, “*Why* are the CCSS important?” The answers to this question will not only deepen the faculty's understanding of the standards but also lay the groundwork to answer the *why* that parents, community members, and students are likely to pose.

Third, the team will turn to the most important question: “*How* will our school embrace the CCSS?” This question will help most when it is specific to classroom practice. Its answers are most important for teachers and students in determining the impact on what happens each day in the classroom. With that *how* comes the criteria that keep teachers' responses simple without complicating their teaching load.

By developing their own criteria, teachers avoid making light of what they are asked to do by reacting superficially with “this too will pass” comments. If principals form teachers into collaborative teams, organized within the school's professional learning community with commitment to a shared goal, they will lighten the burden for all. By adopting a common framework for implementing the CCSS, these collaborative teams have a friendly tool to guide them (see the reproducible “A Common Core Planning Framework” on page 39 and online at go.hbe.com.au).

The framework can be adapted to fit different situations. For example, instead of the school's driving question, the collaborative team may opt to consider any topic in the book including creating a focus for the school's professional learning community.