Five Myths About the Common Core ELA Standards
(Originally titled “The Common Core Ate My Baby and Other Urban Legends”)

In this important *Educational Leadership* article, literacy expert Timothy Shanahan (University of Illinois/Chicago) debunks five myths about the common core literacy standards:

- **Myth #1:** The new standards prohibit teachers from setting purposes for reading or discussing prior knowledge. True, the original publishers’ criteria written by lead authors David Coleman and Susan Pimentel in 2011 suggested deemphasizing the common practice of spending time building up students’ background knowledge, establishing the purpose for reading a passage, and asking for students’ predictions. Facing a storm of protest, Coleman and Pimentel retreated and issued an April 2012 revision that eliminated admonitions against pre-teaching. “So to clarify, there simply is no ban on pre-reading in the Common Core State Standards,” says Shanahan. But there are significant changes – close reading and re-reading – which suggest that it’s a good idea to get students to plunge into texts without a lot of prior teaching. “The benefit of the pre-reading controversy,” says Shanahan, “is that it’s getting educators to take a hard look at how best to send students into a book – and this rethinking can help us clear up our pre-reading act... Preparing students to read a text... should be brief and should focus on providing students with the tools they need to make sense of the text on their own.”

- **Myth #2:** Teachers are no longer required to teach phonological awareness, phonics, or fluency. Not true, says Shanahan. The common-core standards are strong on phonological awareness K-1, phonics K-3, and fluency K-5. So how did this myth get started? Perhaps because the new literacy standards began with comprehension, which is the reverse of the sequence in many previous standards documents.

- **Myth #3:** English teachers can no longer teach literature in literature classes. Nonsense, says Shanahan. What the new standards do is give informational texts equal billing with novels, stories, poems, and plays in the elementary grades and 30 percent of classroom time in the upper grades – but that includes science and social studies. English teachers can continue to teach literature, as they have always done.

- **Myth #4:** Teachers must teach students at frustration levels. It’s true that the common-core standards call for students to work with more-challenging material at each grade level than has been typical in basal readers in recent years. This is based on research showing that students make less progress when they read easier texts – and the urgent need to prepare students for the literacy demands of college and the workplace. But the higher reading levels in the new standards should not lead primary-grade teachers to push students beyond what is required by the common-core (which is similar to previous expectations) in order to prepare them for more-demanding grade 2 standards. And all teachers should give their students a mix of reading material – more-demanding material for close reading and direct instruction, easier material for fun reading.

- **Myth #5:** Most schools are already teaching to the new standards. Baloney, says Shanahan: “We are going to have to make some real changes in our practices.” These include (a) less emphasis on pre-reading and more on close reading, re-reading, and follow-up; (b) building students’ skills and motivation to tackle difficult texts without telling them what the texts say; (c) an increase in critical analysis and synthesis of information from multiple texts; (d) a greater emphasis on informational texts in upper-grade social studies and science classes; and (e) more student writing about the ideas from texts than personal thoughts.

“Each one of these changes is considerable and will require better and more appropriate professional development, instructional materials, and supervision,” says Shanahan. “Educators who shrug off these changes will face a harsh reality.” The fact is that 40 percent of students who currently meet state standards need remediation when they
get to college and many fail to graduate. The new standards are in line with what students need to know and be able to do to succeed in college and careers. Shanahan believes they will give teachers, students, and parents a much more accurate picture of where students stand, and what they need to succeed.

“The Common Core Ate My Baby and Other Urban Legends” by Timothy Shanahan in Educational Leadership, December 2012 (Vol. 70, #4, p. 10-16), www.ascd.org; Shanahan can be reached at shanahan@uic.edu.

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