

SNG-Nowlan-Education to change-3-10-14

Education in Illinois about to change

By Jim Nowlan

New Common Core State Standards and a revamped teacher evaluation process portend significant changes in Illinois education, for the better, I think.

I tried to learn more about the changes in a recent visit with Tessa Samuelsen, the Stark County (IL) Elementary School principal, in my home territory.

[I know conservatives who are adamantly opposed to the Common Core as well as conservatives who are passionately supportive of the new standards.

[Opponents feel, for example, that local control is being ceded to national decision-makers and that literary, Great Books reading is being supplanted in part by reading of “informational texts” that are about everyday topics.]

Proponents of the Common Core such as Jeff Mays, president of the Illinois Business Roundtable, applaud the higher, more rigorous standards, which can compare Illinois student achievement with that in other states as well as internationally.

But what are standards? What is rigor?

A “standard” is the target of each lesson, according to Samuelsen, a young, pert bundle of energy who was wearing a “Cat in a Hat” outfit the day I visited, in honor of Dr. Seuss’s birthday.

“Rigor” is the level of challenge in a lesson.

The Common Core, which is being implemented this year for math and English in 48 states, is supposed to have higher standards and greater rigor than in the past.

Samuelsen provided an example. Common Core Standard “CC.3.R.L.2” for English in 3<sup>rd</sup> Grade is to: “Recount stories, including fables, folktales, and myths from diverse cultures; determine the central message, lesson, or moral and explain how it is conveyed through key details in the text.”

The writing standard for this lesson is to: “Write an opinion piece on topics or texts, supporting a point of view with reasons.”

To support this standard, students are to read a Japanese version of “Little Red Riding Hood” as well as French and Russian versions, in the latter case, “Peter and the Wolf.” Students are expected to plot each story and compare and contrast their elements, and do more.

Samuelsen explained that in math students are expected not only to complete a problem but also to be able to explain how and why they did what they did. They are also to apply the lesson learned in everyday life, such as at the grocery store.

At Stark County each lesson comes with an “I can” statement such as, for the English standard above, “I can write to express and opinion.”

This is the last year for the Illinois Standards Achievement Test, which will be replaced next year with a PARCC (Partnership for Assessment for Readiness for College and Career) test. This new test is expected to be tougher than the ISAT exam.

[Samuelsen is enthusiastic about the Common Core and says, “It is amazing to be in a classroom and hear the students explain how they mastered a lesson.”]

In 2011, Illinois legislators enacted a new teacher evaluation process, which is also more rigorous and makes teacher nervous.

For decades, principals have gone into a classroom once a year, observed the teacher at work and then, on the spot, issued an evaluation that the teacher was excellent, satisfactory or unsatisfactory.

Most were judged excellent; rare was an unsatisfactory given. The evaluation provided little of usefulness.

Now schools are to use a detailed framework for teaching in their evaluation. The Charlotte Danielson Model is used by most schools. It breaks teaching into four domains: planning and preparation; classroom environment; instruction, and professional responsibilities.

During the year, the principal will make several classroom observation visits rather than one, and with detailed evaluation criteria in hand. In the spring, the principal will make a summary evaluation that the teacher is either excellent, proficient, needs improvement or unsatisfactory.

Teacher tenure protections are gone. Serial “needs improvement” ratings can lead to an unsatisfactory rating, which could lead to dismissal.

It is expected that excellent will be awarded rarely; proficient will become the evaluation for a very good teacher, and needs improvement will be accorded frequently.

This puts pressure on the principal to hold teachers to high standards. Otherwise, nothing will be gained.

The hope among educators is that those needing improvement will receive intensive professional development support so as to bring them up to proficient status. If that cannot be achieved, the teacher should realize that her or his career is probably not in the classroom.

Both the Common Core and new teacher evaluations hold promise for putting Illinois education onto a path to competitiveness with other developed nations. The keys lie in successful implementation.