

Sheri Rodman, New York Educator Voice Fellowship, America Achieves

I grew up in Buffalo and attended suburban public schools from kindergarten through 12th grade. I often excelled in my math classes, tutored other math students in high school, and applied to college hoping to become a math teacher. In Calculus 2 during my first semester of my freshman year at the University of Michigan, I earned my first “C.” I graduated from one of the best high schools in New York State, was consistently on the honor roll, earned a 4 on the AP Calculus exam, but I wasn’t prepared to compete in a college-level math class. Simply, I wasn’t college-ready. During my junior year, I learned about alternate route certification programs like Teach For America and Teaching Fellows and I fell in love with the idea of teaching in a high need community where students needed hardworking and effective teachers. In 2007 I moved to Washington, D.C. and became a high school math teacher. My school had a block schedule, so by the start of my second year, I had already taught two full years worth of content. I was beginning to get the hang of it and started to reflect on and improve my practice. I oftentimes caught myself comparing what I was teaching and what my students were learning to what my teachers, in Williamsville, had taught me and what I learned in my high school math classes. I was blown away by the vast differences. I already knew that I didn’t feel prepared for college, and I didn’t understand why my students were expected to learn less, and why what I was teaching was less rigorous than what I remembered learning, which, in my opinion, wasn’t good enough. I began to think how great would it be if students in D.C. and New York and Michigan were all held to the same, high bar. During this time, the writers of the Common Core were in the process of writing the standards, and although I was no longer teaching when they were revealed, I was certainly an early supporter from outside the classroom. In August 2015, I moved back to my hometown of Buffalo and helped launch the New York Educator Voice Fellowship at America Achieves. Over the last 16 months, I have had the honor of working with 100 outstanding teachers and principals across the state who were selected for the Fellowship. I’ve visited many of their classrooms and have oftentimes been blown away by the incredible teaching and learning that takes place; sometimes I wish that I were a student today, so that I could experience the Common Core. In my role, I’ve supported these educators to share their expertise with the public. Below are excerpts from articles they’ve written or been interviewed for while in the Fellowship. I hope that New York’s education leaders and the public will hear and consider the many excellent teachers and principals across the state who wholeheartedly support the Common Core and believe the standards are good for kids.

“When just 40 percent of New York’s students are graduating high school ready for college, according to one recent analysis, it tells us we need to up our game. And Common Core, with its focus on higher-level critical thinking and problem solving skills, has the potential to improve teaching and learning across New York and the nation. What’s more, three years into the Common Core, teachers are noticing a difference in the quality and level of thinking of the students in their classrooms.” - Amanda Barney, English Teacher, Mattituck (Lohud, October 2014).

“The Common Core provides exactly what students need—high standards that are pushing educators and students to excellence every single day. I want schools that will allow all children to discover their passion, give them the tools to follow that passion and help them succeed in 21st century colleges and careers.” - Pat Sprinkle, Social Studies Teacher, Manhattan (Educators 4 Excellence blog, November 2014).

“As an educator who works in a high-poverty school district, I've seen first-hand the benefits of high standards, and I've seen the need for strong leadership in implementing the Common Core.” - Amy Williams, English Teacher, Unadilla Valley (Times Union, December 2014)

“As a high school math teacher, I have found that my students do better in lessons that meet the standards. In a Common Core lesson, students develop a simple mathematical model that connects abstract expression with concrete concepts like area. They not only can explain why the model works but also apply it to solve more complicated problems that they could not have solved just by using a rule.” - Bobson Wong, Math Teacher, Queens (Queens Tribune, December 2014)

“We finally have standards that are uniform across the country. If I have a kid come from New Mexico, I know that they're working on multiplication. I know that they know what close reading is. I know that they're looking at vocabulary in depth.” - Tiffany Kwas, 3rd Grade Teacher, Eden (Buffalo News, January 2015).

“Most critically, the new commissioner must keep the higher standards in our schools moving forward so that every New York child has an equal shot at college and career readiness. That's absolutely critical to employers, who know that in the next five years 70 percent of all new jobs here will require a college degree.” - Sal Fernandez, Executive Director of School Achievement, New York City Public Schools (Times Union, January 2015)

“Higher standards are starting to work for students. Educators like me, from communities like ours, were a part of developing these new standards to fit the needs of our kids, not bureaucrats. The state invested \$10 million to make sure that teachers are getting the support they need to implement the new curriculum. That support is now paying off, graduation rates across the state are up since Common Core was introduced. Higher standards will better prepare my students to succeed in their careers and a global economy and that's what we should really care about.” - Dawn Thompson, Special Education Teacher, Webster (The Citizen, January 2015)

“I went to college and got a degree in English literature. I spent four years reading, talking, and writing about books. I wanted to spend the rest of my adult life teaching kids to do the same.

Common Core allows me to do exactly that—and more... There is nothing in the Common Core that says literature cannot be used. There is nothing that says there's no place for creativity and individual expression. In fact, after three years of using them in my classroom, I've found that the standards acknowledge that I am an English teacher

and that they trust me to do my job.” - Meaghan Freeman, English Teacher, Willsboro (The Atlantic, February 2015)

“Common Core Learning Standards have been adopted to help students become the best thinkers and problem solvers they can be, along with preparing all students in America for college and career-readiness and to equip them to be competitive in our global society. The math standards are specifically designed toward greater focus and coherence while the English Language Arts standards are designed as an integrated model where literacy is taught across the content areas.” - Susan Folkson, Principal, Carle Place (The Westbury Times, February 2015)

“The standards, which were first launched in 2009, are meant to be intellectually rigorous and challenge our students. The goal is to improve students' critical and analytical reading skills by infusing the curricula with classic literary and historical texts. School districts design the curricula, and teachers have free range in creating their own methods for instruction. That's what the standards do and the tests measure.” - Sarah Wasser, Library Media Specialist, Syosset (Newsday, March 2015)

“The common standards offer the promise of something different—a chance for teachers and students to dig deeply into mathematical concepts and develop reasoning and problem-solving skills.” - John McCrann, Math Teacher, Manhattan (Education Week, March 2015)

“The opt-out movement is having a snowball effect and it's impacting the rest of the school year—the 99 percent of the year that is not spent on state standardized testing. Unit testing is 40 percent of a student's overall grade for my class. Once we finish a topic of study, my students are then assessed on how well they know that topic. These are the same types of tests many of my students' parents and I took when we were in school. I see a generation of children who now believe that when a test is placed in front of them that is difficult, and has underlying consequences, they can opt out. They can refuse, or their parents can refuse it for them. Parents are balking at assessments that can identify struggling students who need extra services in math, reading, physical therapy or speech. Next year, will I have parents who receive their child's syllabus in September and decline to accept the terms I have set forth?” - Danielle Goedel, Math Teacher, Sherburne (Education Post, May 2015)

“Common Core increases my students' love of learning and has helped them reach their maximum potential in order to best prepare them for their future.” - Heidi Dull, Kindergarten Teacher, Manhattan (Education Post, May 2015)

“I'm going to come right out and say it: Common Core is working in my district... The higher standards incentivize a multi-disciplinary approach to problem solving, thinking and communicating. It allows teachers, even across multiple state lines, to identify where students need to be at the end of each year using a common set of standards.” - Kim Hardwick, Principal, East Moriches (The Seventy Four, August 2015)

“While change can be unsettling, I believe in a growth mindset for kids, teachers, parents and school systems. Turning away from Common Core now would ignore all of the good things it can do for students. We can grow in our understanding of teaching and learning to provide a better opportunity for all students. The Common Core standards provide us the framework within which to make those changes.” - Susan Yagielski, Math Teacher, Farnsworth (High Achievement New York, September 2015)

“As a Buffalo teacher I see children engaged in their learning. Basic addition is just that, it’s basic. Our children need to think for themselves and explain how they come up with an answer because they’ve previously only had to memorize facts. It is our job to help them be successful and reach their full potential.” - Lacey Mendola, 3rd Grade Teacher, Buffalo (Buffalo News, October 2015)

“These conceptual understandings become an integral part of the students' foundational skills. We don't learn multiplication by relying solely on rote memorization as we did years ago. Students are equipped with the skills needed to think critically and make visual drawings and diagrams to demonstrate understanding. Taking that further to application, the student has a repertoire of strategies rich in conceptual understandings that he or she can use to solve rigorous and challenging problems, a key focus of the Common Core learning standards. In addition, students now have the ability to demonstrate and defend their mathematical reasoning to others.” - Janice Killelea, 3rd Grade Teacher, Mineola (Politico, October 2015)

“Rigorous academic expectations defined by the Common Core lay the foundation for students to think critically in math and ELA - an essential attribute for success in college and career. High expectations in geometry and algebra give us the ability to push our scholars towards achievement in the later grades - including college coursework while they are still in high school.” - Kevin Rothman, Principal, Newburgh (Times-Herald Record, November 2015)

“Too often we simply taught kids to memorize algorithms instead of teaching them the structure of math. Deeper learning and critical thinking require a shift in how we write curriculum and plan lessons - the new standards provide a lens through which we can view this shift.” - Chris Dolgos, 6th Grade Teacher, Rochester (High Achievement New York, November 2015)