

WHAT IS THE CENTRAL, BURNING QUESTION OF THE COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS?

CHAPTER

1

I teach a secondary education methods class at a local college, and one of the first things I tell my undergrads is that, as a class, we will be a group of people driven by burning questions: big, complex, meaningful questions that we constantly find ourselves working on through our reading, writing, and conversations with others. I stress our cultivation of burning questions because, at the very outset of our semester together, I want my pre-service teachers to think less in terms of what assignments are due and more in terms of who they will be as teachers.

I desire this for them because burning questions spur us on. They make us work long after the contract says we can go home; they keep a notepad on our nightstand. They help us orient our mind to teaching as a calling, as a lifelong pursuit, rather than as a job or a means of gaining a

pension. They are a secret strand that unites rising stars and established gurus in every field; they add a spark to the best writing we read, and they tend to create interesting lives.

But unless these questions have one central question to which they are subordinate, they can actually lead to a variety of pathologies, including this book's nemesis: the freak out.

So stop for a moment and consider this question:

If you had to create a single, central, driving question that spurs on all of your most fulfilling and intriguing work as a teacher, what would it be?

My central, burning question, which took years to land on but has held up for years more, is simply this: How do I most effectively promote the long-term

flourishing of my students? When I've got my head on straight, this question guides every decision I make in the classroom, and its answer trumps my opinions, philosophies, emotions, and ego. It's taken me years to even formulate this question, but I find that it's the only one broad enough to include all of my students and deep enough to challenge me year after year.

The reason I bring this up is that the easiest way for you to understand me as a teacher is for you to know my central, burning question. But more to the point of this book, the easiest way for you likewise to understand the Common Core is to grasp the central, burning question the standards aim to answer:

What literacy skills does a high school graduate need to have to be college and career ready?

That's it. Not too wild of a question, right?

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) answer this question with the 32 anchor standards. In all, there are 10

anchors in reading, 10 in writing, 6 in speaking and listening, and 6 in language. The simplest way to envision these is as a list of 32 literacy skills that college- and career-ready people possess. It's interesting to note that the CCSS lay responsibility for the reading and writing standards at the feet of not just English language arts (ELA) teachers but also teachers of history, social studies, science, and technical subjects. This is *not* to say that these non-ELA subjects should be reduced to mere literacy classes—as we'll discuss in the next chapter, a content-rich curriculum is critical for college and career readiness, according to the CCSS—but rather that literacy skills should be taught and developed in all the disciplines.

WHAT'S AN ANCHOR STANDARD?

When I first sat down to begin learning what the CCSS entailed, I had a hard time determining how to organize the task. After all, it's a sixty-six-page document with an eighteen-word title¹—how

1. The title, in full, is *Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects*. Though the standards are available in an online format at www.corestandards.org, throughout this book I will be citing from the actual standards document, which is available for download as a free PDF file at www.corestandards.org/wp-content/uploads/ELA_Standards.pdf.

do you turn that into something manageable, searchable, teachable, and perhaps even embraceable?

The key is the anchor standards. Remember how the CCSS were made to describe what a college- and career-ready person needs to be able to do? Anchor standards are simply descriptions of college and career readiness skills. Thus, there are ten descriptions of what a college- and career-ready person can do in reading, ten of what she can do in writing, six of what he can do in speaking and listening, and six of what she can do in language.

WHY CALL THEM “ANCHORS”?

Because the CCSS are all about determining what a college- and career-ready person can do, college and career readiness skills are what the CCSS want every grade level to be “anchored” to. Postsecondary life is the bedrock the CCSS authors have planted the anchor in, hoping to keep the ship steadily pulling in to a bright shore along the rope of a K–12 education (see Figure 1.1).

Put another way, the anchor standards are general descriptions of what a K–12 education aims at under the CCSS. Whether you teach kindergarten

or twelfth grade, the anchor standards are the ultimate destination.

WHY NOT JUST USE THE GRADE-SPECIFIC STANDARDS?

Because K–12 schooling is complex, the CCSS document gets increasingly complicated once you dive deeper than the anchor standards. For example, from kindergarten through grade 5, the anchor standards in reading are broken into the categories of literature, informational texts, and foundational skills. From grades 6 through 12, however, those same reading anchor standards are broken into the categories of ELA and “literacy in history/social studies, science, and technical subjects.” All of this complexity is simply for the purpose of translating the broad anchor standards into specific, appropriate, end-of-grade expectations.

Okay, so let’s not go there in this book. This is meant to guide you into starting with the CCSS, not to bury you (and me) in the specifics. But when you are ready to delve into the grade-specific standards, I recommend the user-friendly resource I use: Jim Burke’s *The Common Core Companion* (2013). Jim is a prolific teacher-author who has remained in the public

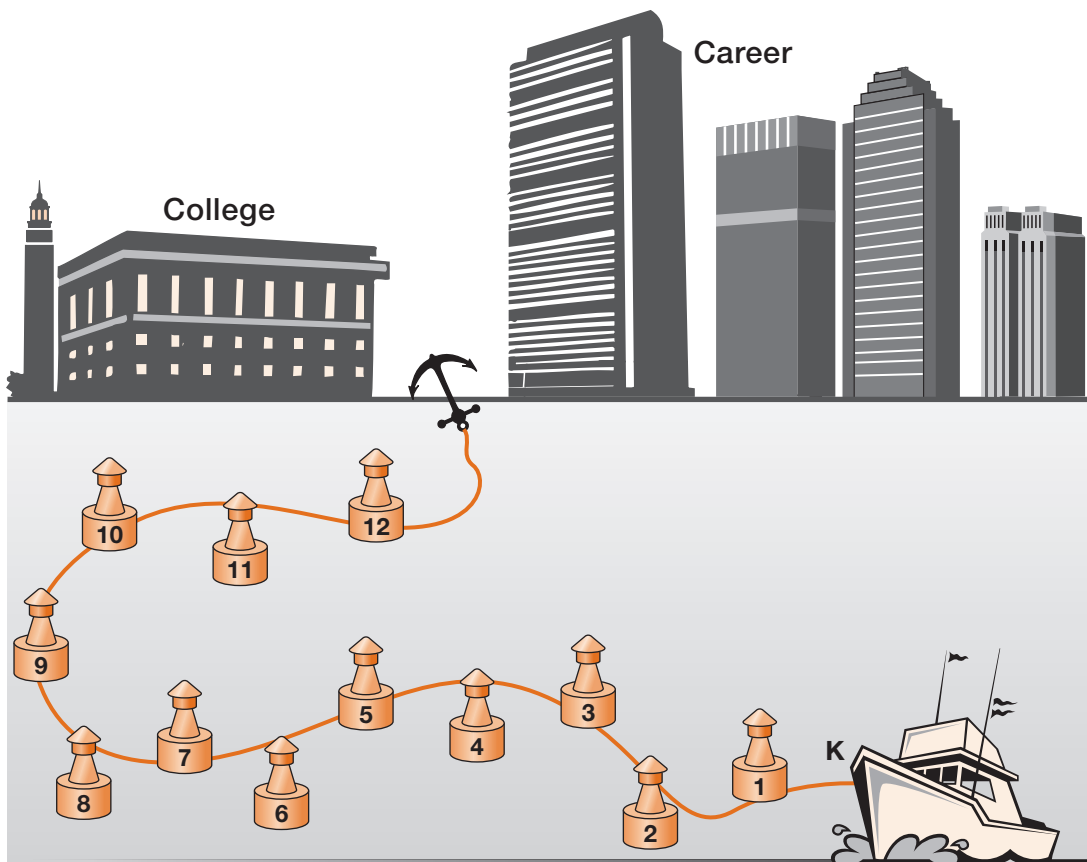


Figure 1.1 A Visual Representation of the Anchor Standards

school classroom for decades and still teaches there today; I cannot laud his work, or his Common Core resource, enough.

In this book, we'll focus on the anchor standards. Think about it: the anchor standards represent the fundamental skills that the CCSS believe students need to have when they graduate from our public schools. They are general enough to allow for the entre-

preneurial aspects of being a teaching professional (that is, they give us room to play), but they are also rigorous (which, I have found, kids can learn to appreciate), and they are aligned with what the majority of colleges and workplaces expect students to be able to do. These anchors are what can keep our kids from floating away sometime between their entry into kindergarten and the fateful tassel flip.