Teaching to the Core:
Practitioner perspectives about the intersection of teacher evaluation using the Danielson Framework for Teaching and Common Core State Standards

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Introduction
This research report is primarily written to inform Teaching the Core (TtC) project stakeholders of findings from the research, specifically to support the Danielson Group in making decisions about modifications to the Framework for Teaching (FfT) in order to incorporate Common Core State Standards (CCSS). This research was commissioned by the Danielson Group as part of the Teaching the Core project grant from the Helmsley Charitable Trust. This report may also be of interest to policymakers and practitioners.

With implementation of CCSS, the recognition that teacher evaluation systems need to support teachers to understand the new student learning standards and to improve their pedagogical and content knowledge is widely agreed upon. In a fall 2012 survey of 40 CCSS-adopting states conducted by the Center for Education Policy, 26 states reported currently modifying or creating evaluation systems or requirements that hold educators accountable for student mastery of the CCSS, and nine more reported that they plan to in the future (Rentner, 2013). Some reports link the failure of past standards directly to lack of alignment with teacher evaluation (Youngs, 2013). Despite the agreement in the potential importance of this task, there is widespread understanding that it is not easy to do well. Thirty-two states said that developing educator evaluation systems to hold teachers and principals accountable for student mastery of the CCSS is a major (21 states) or minor (11 states) challenge (Rentner, 2013).

For this project, the Danielson Group partnered with four US districts in four states (Connecticut (CT), Illinois (IL), New York (NY), and Nevada (NV); see Figure 1) to pilot the use of the Framework for Teaching Evaluation instrument (FfT) alongside the Student Achievement Partners Instructional Practice Guides (IPG) to observe Common Core State Standard (CCSS) instruction. The FfT is a comprehensive instrument for teacher evaluation and coaching made up of 22 components (with 76 embedded elements) meant to capture the complex activity of teaching and give practitioners a common language to describe practice (see http://danielsongroup.org). Empirical studies have correlated this instrument to promoting improved student learning (MET Project). The IPG are tools created by Student Achievement Partners to build understanding and help guide practitioners on what CCSS instruction looks like in the classroom. Specific guides were created for ELA, (including social studies and science), and Mathematics Common Core instruction across grade levels (see http://achievethecore.org).

Figure 1. Map marking four district locations.

The districts used the tools during the academic year 2013-14 to observe teaching to CCSS. Participants were asked to complete an average of three cycles of observation during the 2013-14 academic year. The cycle of observation included a pre-observation (planning) conference, classroom observation(s) with the two tools, and a post-observation (reflection) conference between the observer(s) and the teacher being observed. The goal of the research was to capture
and analyze the observations and reflections of the practitioners (teachers and administrators) as they engaged in this work.

This research effort was specifically tasked with exploring issues around aligning the Framework for Teaching (FfT) with Common Core State Standards (CCSS) from the bottom up, hearing directly from practitioners as they use instruments (FfT and IPG) in the current climate of widespread reform of student standards and teacher evaluation.

**Research questions**

Among the questions that we set out to answer in this work are:

- How are the goals of the two instruments (FfT and IPG) aligned with each other and how do these goals correspond to perspectives of what is important about CCSS to practitioners?
- What are practitioners struggling with in terms of adoption of and alignment with CCSS teaching and understanding?
- To what extents are the two instruments (FfT and IPG) capturing critical information around CCSS and what more is needed to capture all critical information?
- What are the general patterns of use of the instruments and observation practices? To what extent can the process for conducting teacher observations using the FfT be streamlined to allow for a more focused effort at measuring the core elements of instruction related to the CCSS?
- Are there differences in use, attitude, or suggestions by district, school level, or evaluation role (observer compared to teacher)?

**Methods**

The research draws on both quantitative and qualitative data to construct a broad view across 413 respondents and deeper understanding through small group workshops in each district and 16 focused case studies. Three particular approaches important to this study design include:

**Capturing multiple perspectives** by incorporating different stakeholder viewpoints in this research (see Figure 2). Within the districts, we invited research participation from district administrators who may or may not do formal evaluations as part of their job, school administrators, and teachers. We designed online surveys with display/skip logic to field certain questions to different types of participants and collected digital and paper artifacts of their evaluation work throughout the year. We also sat in on district training sessions with the IPG by Student Achievement Partners. We captured the evolving thinking of the lead project team through our presence at weekly meetings with Danielson Group district coordinators and the Teaching the Core (TtC) project team and two TtC advisory board meetings. We also conducted interviews with Danielson and a representative from SAP. In this way, we were able to learn about the different ecologies at play in the design, intention, and use of observation tools and look at data representative of these different perspectives.

**Using cases to deepen our understanding.** Qualitative research is a way to clarify differences or trends between and within communities that are difficult to identify in broader surveys. We
engaged in qualitative case studies of eight focal cases (two from each district) and eight audio cases (two from each district) over the course of the research year. All 16 cases were interviewed and the focal cases were shadowed through two full cycles of observations (including planning-conferences with teachers, classroom observations, reflection conferences, and debriefs), captured through field notes and collection of artifacts. Audio cases self-recorded their conferences and additional thoughts they had on the instruments. All audio of conversations and interviews were transcribed and coded using a process of grounded theory development (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), with the development of focal categories being an evolving and iterative process. From the data, case narratives were created.

Inviting participants as co-designers. Our research protocol used a variety of formats to capture data directly from the participants, focusing on our primary research questions. We designed these formats to offer different ways for respondents to share their viewpoints both individually and collectively, building on the ideas of others. We asked them to suggest questions for further iterations of surveys. We also conducted collaborative design workshops, one in each district held at a participating school, where we invited administrators and teachers to work together to build an evaluation tool to address issues that had emerged from survey responses and case shadowing. These design workshops were also focus groups where participants had the opportunity to discuss issues across grade levels and schools. These different formats of collaborative and iterative design provided participants agency in shaping the study, lines of inquiry, and outcomes.

Data was collected from August 2013 through June 2014.

**References**


Key findings and suggestions

1. Practitioners consider the fundamental ideas in the Framework for Teaching to be aligned with teaching to Common Core State Standards, but want more specificity and obvious connections to be highlighted.

Eighty one percent of survey respondents report that they want alignment between teacher evaluation and expectations of the Common Core State Standards. The vast majority believe this alignment would benefit both teachers (86% agree) and administrators (88% agree).

Ninety one percent of respondents believe the Framework for Teaching is effective in evaluating overall teaching practice. On both survey and qualitative measures, participants report that they see the Common Core in the Framework and speak about how fundamental ideas behind the Framework for Teaching mirror Common Core practices. Aspects of Common Core teaching that are widely considered embedded in the current Framework include student collaborative work, student-led discourse, and critical thinking enhanced through questioning.

Despite clear connections between the existing Framework for Teaching and the Common Core, 87% of participants believe the Framework needs to change to better reflect the new standards. At this stage in the rollout of the Common Core, participants want more specificity about how and where Common Core practices are found in the Framework for Teaching, making it easier for teachers and observers to make the connections for purposes of evaluation, coaching, and practice. (See Suggestions 3.3 and 3.4 for more details).

“I really don’t know how you reach a Danielson excellent or even a proficient if you’re not going to follow Common Core, if you’re not going to follow ideas about Common Core and getting to that rigor. It’s almost like—[the Core] is going to give an opportunity to improve teaching through new curriculum that’s being written.”

—IL, middle school assistant principal

“I think in the Framework for Teaching there could be some more explicit Common Core language. If you’re not Common Core savvy or using Common Core and you look at just questioning—a proficient level is teacher uses open-ended questions. There is a level there and it’s not very explicit.”

—NV, middle school principal
2. The Instructional Practice Guides are useful for teacher planning and as a reference, especially in districts not as familiar with the Common Core State Standards and for lower grade levels.

Seventy-eight percent of survey respondents believe the Instructional Practice Guides are a good representation of teaching practices necessary for the Common Core State Standards, and there were no significant differences in opinion between districts. Project participants may have been predisposed to connect the instrument with Common Core Standards, as most were part of a multi-day professional development training led by Student Achievement Partners focused on using the Instructional Practice Guides to look at Common Core teaching.

The majority of respondents who had used the IPG for specific subjects plan to continue use, however this was less true for subjects other than English language arts (ELA) and mathematics (71% of those who used the ELA guide plan to continue; 67% math; 51% social studies; and 43% science). Of those who want to continue to use the tools, 75% envision use for teacher planning. This was apparent in case studies, as teachers discussed using the tools to plan and review their lessons, and observers promoted them as teacher planning instruments. Observers also used the tools as a quick reference for Common Core that was easier than going to a website or looking through a comprehensive publication. Case observers appreciated the brevity of the guides and the focus on what they described as an enhanced lens to look at Common Core specifically in Domain 3 of the Framework for Teaching.

Participants in NY were significantly less likely than other districts to report positive changes in their Common Core understanding or teaching/observing practice as a result of using the Instructional Practice Guides. Qualitative data suggested that prior knowledge and experience with Common Core as one factor. NY participants report that developing Common Core erudition and fluency necessitates a return to the actual Common Core State Standards documentation.

Participants working at the elementary school level were significantly more likely to report planning to continue use of the Instructional Practice Guides beyond the scope of the project than those at the high school level.

“In looking at the [IPG] questions, there are things that we, as experienced teachers, do instinctually. To actually look at it and put it into words, and have the reminders of making sure you’re focusing on the Standard and how you’re meeting the needs at all levels, it was powerful to put it into words to make sure I was actually following all those steps.”

—NV, elementary school teacher

“Two of my teachers [not in the project] asked if they could have copies of the IPG. They are thinking about instruction. If this is going to help them think about what Common Core instruction should look like, of course they want to look at it as they’re developing their lessons…they’re using it to help themselves think and plan for instruction.”

—IL, elementary school principal

“We have been focusing on Common Core alignment for several years, and I’m not convinced that our work with this project was that influential. It was more of a supplement to other work and projects in which we were involved.”

—NY, high school principal

Plans to use the IPG. Percentage of respondents who plan to use the IPG after the project, by school level.
3. Practitioners appreciate the comprehensive nature of the Framework for Teaching. They do not want separate versions for different content areas and grades levels, yet would want digitally mediated, stratified examples.

The Common Core State Standards identify what students should learn and be able to do in ELA and mathematics. Close on its heels are the Next Generation Science Standards, doing the same for science education. Although both teachers and administrators are searching for teaching materials aligned to these new standards and examples of what successful instruction looks like, qualitative data from case studies and collaborative design workshops reveal that participants do not want multiple tools to sort through and different frameworks to understand as the paperwork feels cumbersome to participants. They appreciate the content and grade level independence of the Framework for Teaching; a structure they feel brings the interconnecting practices and patterns of good teaching to the forefront.

However, when participants were asked if they are interested in a digital Framework for Teaching that is customizable by subject and grade level, the majority (70%) agree. While there was much qualitative evidence to support the fact that participants did not want multiple versions of the Framework itself, there were elements of specificity that they could imagine: especially expansion of “possible examples” that are easily searchable and sortable.

The need for good Common-Core-State-Standards-aligned teaching materials and examples of best practices is evident across districts and grade levels, and by administrators and teachers. “Examples” are the most uniformly suggested and agreed upon ideas for redesign of the existing Framework: 84% want video examples; 83% want examples across subjects and grade levels; 83% want annotated lesson plan examples; and 81% want examples of student moves across different levels of proficiency.

Specific suggestions

3.1. Define scope of responsibility. An important question for this work is the degree to which the Framework for Teaching is responsible for providing the examples of teaching that the rollout of the Common Core demands. While examples are a way to supplement the existing Framework in a way that does not change the fundamental ideas, a scope of responsibility needs to be

“I feel like the Danielson Framework is written so broadly, but in a good way. There’s still specificity within that broadness, but it doesn’t tailor itself to one specific method. It really is still focusing, I feel like, on the outcomes and student learning,”
—IL, middle school assistant principal

“I would think then if you add [content-specificity], you make it even harder to pin down what tool to use for which teacher. Granted, my elementary teachers teach all of the core subjects themselves. When you get to secondary and they switch for subjects, if you don’t use a common Framework and you try and differentiate too much, I think you get lost in the miniscule.”
—IL, elementary school principal

“To have one for science, because if you’re going to do it for ELA and math, then you’ve got to do it for all other content areas. I just feel like that could be a little much. ...The only thing is this Framework can’t be like 50,000 pages either, because what’s going to happen; people aren’t going to read it. They’re not.”
—CT, elementary school principal

Expanding possible examples. Percentage of respondents who agree with the inclusion of different types of examples to help align evaluation with CCSS.
defined to keep the redesign focused and manageable, and appropriate for long-term use as opposed to the current climate of adjustment.

3.2. Engage experts to collaborate on good examples. One approach is to create examples in collaboration and user testing from practitioners who are highly knowledgeable and experienced with Common Core implementation, in effect designing for the future when teachers and observers have more experience and resources including vetted curricula and models of best practices that have been developed nationally. Creating good but short “possible examples” is no easy task. The examples need to be detailed but clear, and authentic. One case study observer found current examples to be overly simplified.

3.3 Integrate Common-Core-specific language throughout. Although this work was begun with the modifications to the 2013 version of the Framework for Teaching, participants believe there is more to do—83% of practitioners were interested in incorporating the language of the Common Core State Standards into Framework descriptions, examples, and critical attributes. Cross-disciplinary inter-connected practices across grade levels are woven throughout the new ELA, math, and science standards and have implications for other subjects such as art, technology, and social studies. For Common Core, this specifically includes the eight Standards for Mathematical Practice and the College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Reading, Writing, Language, and Speaking and Listening.

An example of the idea of enhanced common language, is to modify language in the FfT critical attributes and possible examples within 3b. Using questioning and discussion techniques to clearly reference the ELA key idea #1 that students “cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.” In the 2013 version of the Framework, this idea is only suggested in the fifth possible example at the proficient level and is not identified in any of the critical attributes.

3.4 Highlight connections. Broad ideas of Common Core State Standards and specific language could be highlighted in the Framework for Teaching. Of course, this would have to be carefully chosen to avoid being too intricate and overwhelming, but big ideas and themes could be called out using visual cues, such as symbols or text boxes, that are found throughout the Framework text where Common Core elements are particularly connected.

3.5. Annotate Teaching the Core videos with Framework for Teaching components. The concurrent effort of the Teaching the Core project was the collection of video examples of exemplar moments of teaching to Common Core State Standards. These examples are currently being annotated with connections to the core indicators identified in the Instructional Practice Guides. Because this video has already been captured, and is linked to one set of guidelines relating to Common Core State Standards, a clear next step is connecting those same video segments to the Framework for Teaching, identifying components and specifically tying those components to elements of Common Core.

### PROFICIENT • LEVEL 3

While the teacher may use some low-level questions, he poses questions designed to promote student thinking and understanding. The teacher creates a genuine discussion among students, providing adequate time for students to respond and stepping aside when doing so is appropriate. The teacher challenges students to justify their thinking and successfully engages most students in the discussion, employing a range of strategies to ensure that most students are heard.

- The teacher uses open-ended questions, inviting students to think and/or offer multiple possible answers.
- The teacher makes effective use of wait time.
- Discussions enable students to talk to one another without ongoing mediation by teacher.
- The teacher calls on most students, even those who don’t initially volunteer.
- Many students actively engage in the discussion.
- The teacher asks students to justify their reasoning, and most attempt to do so.

- The teacher asks, “What might have happened if the colonists had not prevailed in the American war for independence?”
- The teacher uses the plural form in asking questions, such as “What are some things you think might contribute to...?”
- The teacher asks, “Maria, can you comment on Ian’s idea?” and Maria responds directly to Ian.
- The teacher poses a question, asking every student to write a brief response and then share it with a partner, before inviting a few to offer their ideas to the entire class.
- The teacher asks students when they have formulated an answer to the question ‘‘Why do you think Huck Fint did...?’’ to find the reason in the text and to explain their thinking to a neighbor.
- And others...
4. **Participants connect Common Core State Standards mostly to Domain 1 and 3 of the Framework for Teaching and call for revisions to “possible examples” and “critical attributes.”**

Participants are most likely to consider Domains 1 and 3 relevant to observing Common Core practices. At least half of both teachers and observers believe the following components highly important to look at Common Core teaching: 3c. *Engaging students in learning* (79% overall); 3b. *Using questioning and discussion techniques* (71%); 1c. *Designing coherent instruction* (61%); 1b. *Setting instructional outcomes* (53%); 2b. *Establishing a culture for learning* (51%); and 1a. *Demonstrating knowledge of content and pedagogy* (50%).

These components are revealed to have different frequencies of review within actual participant observation practices. Components 3c. *Engaging students in learning* and 3b. *Using questioning and discussion techniques* are also the top two components that observers consistently look at during an observation cycle (93% and 91%, respectively). Component 2b. *Establishing a culture for learning* is regularly observed by 87% of observers. Domain 1 components are less regularly observed.

As indicated in Finding 3, respondents express the desire for incorporation of Common Core into the Framework for Teaching through language alignment and more specific possible examples. Critical attributes are another highly agreed upon location for Common Core inclusion (79% were in agreement). Observers are significantly more likely than teachers to request this modification (87% compared to 74%); our case study observers, in particular, pay close, detailed attention to the critical attributes when selecting placement of evidence along the scale of proficiency.

**Specific suggestions**

4.1. **Encourage process models that regularly attend to Common Core-related components in Domain 1.** Not all observers in all districts find the time to conduct a planning conference, and even when they are scheduled, many are rushed (see more in Findings 6 & 8). This may contribute to less regular observation of Domain 1 components, as these are often addressed during planning conferences. Suggestions to distribute responsibility of evidence collection between observers and teachers and expand details of planning and

**Administrator:** The planning conference helps with [understanding teacher content and pedagogical knowledge]. It is a good start at that conversation. That could get more specific even. Maybe this could be where the changes happen to get more at Common Core.

**Teacher:** You could add something about how you use planning to add… talk about how you are addressing Common Core State Standards.

—IL design workshop, math group

“Domain 1 we talk about a lot. Our professional development stuff ties into that; whether or not it’s a part of an evaluation but we spend a lot of time looking at standards, looking at coming curricular changes, looking at resources, talking across grade levels, because some materials that might have been previously done in this grade level are now in this grade level and they need to have a chance to talk about what stays where.”

—IL elementary school principal
4.2. **Refine and expand possible examples and critical attributes.** This suggestion is tightly connected to the suggestion to define the scope of responsibility for the Framework for Teaching in terms of providing examples for Common Core Teaching and the suggestion to do more integration of specific Common Core language throughout the Framework (see Finding #3).

- **Build up critical attributes from level 1 through level 4.** There was a feeling that critical attributes should align or build across levels of proficiency. If a few core attributes are identified for that component, what does that look like at each level.

- **Integrating more student descriptors within examples and critical attributes.** 81% expressed the need for examples of student moves across at different levels of proficiency. Some respondents expressed frustration with the fact that examples of what students were doing were primarily found at the “distinguished” level of teaching in the current Framework for Teaching. One idea is to separate the possible examples and critical attributes into two sections each: what this looks like for teachers and what this looks like for students.

“Our findings were when saying is this person proficient or excellent, the rubrics don’t match. So here I am comparing critical attributes, but there is nothing over there that matches how it looks at proficient.”

—**IL design workshop conversation, math group participant**

“[Observers would] really look at what the students are truly doing and really then start saying, ‘wait a minute, is that really distinguished?’ Instead of well, the students were doing it. It’s kind of like 3c. Engagement. Everyone’s working. That’s not really engagement, that’s compliance. But if what students are doing is included throughout the rubric, I think it’s going to call everyone to even look deeper. Sometimes I think people will just say students are doing it, so it’s at the distinguished level.”

—**CT, elementary school principal**
5. Teachers and administrators are not yet certain what practices lead to Common Core alignment, and often selected practices to incorporate into the Framework for Teaching that they found most challenging.

The Common Core State Standards are clear about their scope, “The standards define what all students are expected to know and be able to do, not how teachers should teach.” Although 87% of respondents want to modify the Framework for Teaching to better reflect Common Core, they were, as of yet, unsure what practices look like that lead to Common Core learning in their classrooms, so were, not surprisingly, unsure of exactly what they want added into the Framework for Teaching. There were few clear trends for or against any of the Common Core additions specifically queried in surveys, or even patterns for different districts or grade levels, suggesting that people are becoming knowledgeable about the Common Core but are currently lacking the uniform vision, language, and understanding that is one objective of the initiative.

The Common Core ideas that were suggested for addition into the Framework for Teaching by a majority of respondents often overlapped with what they found most complex or daunting about implementation of the Common Core. There was also some indication that some of these practices or ideas that were suggested for inclusion by a majority of participants reflected those things that were particularly stressed by the Student Achievement Partners during Instructional Practice Guide trainings. These patterns suggest that participants were contributing their perspectives on this work while at the same time were very much in the process of comprehensive understanding of teaching Common Core in the classroom.

Specific suggestions

The ideas that were more commonly highlighted for inclusion (meaning selected by close to half of both teachers and observers) from IPG concepts and other Common Core-related suggestions include primary ideas that can be framed as practices that cut across different content areas:

5.1. Students develop deep conceptual understanding. Teachers pursuing conceptual understanding as well as procedural fluency was selected as one of the top three math challenges by over a third of respondents (34%). 56% wanted to add the concept of Math IPG-1c. The

“[Teacher’s] essential question is, “how will we successfully implement Common Core?” Along the way what they’re having to do is go through those pieces of perseverance, struggle, and working at a very high level of DOK4 [Depth of Knowledge, level 4] where they’ve got these plans and they’re constantly adjusting them and refining them, and it’s over time. [Teachers are a] prime example of why we are moving to Common Core for our students, because that is what they will be doing in the future. They will be presented with these problems that have no right or wrong answer, (or multiple correct answers), at this time.”

—NV, elementary school assistant principal

“I think having children ask questions, that’s a big piece. I was just having a conversation with a teacher just now, third grade teacher, and she’s worried that the types of questions that they’re going to ask aren’t going to be text-dependent. They’re going to be sort of these random questions. As much as you teach into it, it’s challenging for kids to ask really thoughtful questions. I think teaching kids that speaking and listening standard, where it goes to, ‘You say something. Now I have to piggyback off of you’—it’s hard, especially in kindergarten. Even up through third grade, it’s like, ‘What?’ What does that look like in kindergarten, you know? You’re going to be facilitating more.”

—CT, elementary school principal

“[Teachers] want to make sure that the kids are able to do all of these things, so sometimes I have to tell them take a step back and let’s think about how we’re going to get there.”

—NY, middle school principal
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5.2. **Students persist over time through cycles of work and revision.** Providing time for students to grapple with tasks was most commonly selected as a top challenge (47%) of Math Common Core implementation. 51% of respondents wanted to add the concept of Math IPG-2c. *The teacher provides time for students to work with and practice grade-level problems and exercises. 58% of respondents wanted to add the idea that students have time to grapple with math problems. 60% wanted to add the idea that students work through cycles of planning, writing, and revision. 60% wanted to add the concept of ELA IPG-1a. The majority of time is spent reading, listening to, speaking, or writing about texts(s).*

5.3. **Teacher selection of class materials, including complex texts and problems.** Over one third of participants (35%) chose using rich, problem-based tasks as a top challenge of Math Common Core implementation and 40% chose selecting complex texts as a challenge for ELA, the second most agreed upon from a list of ten. 58% of respondents wanted to add the concept of ELA IPG-1c. *The text(s) exhibit exceptional craft and thought and/or provide useful information. 54% wanted to add the idea of use of diverse texts and 52% use of texts that build knowledge, gain insight, explore possibilities, and broaden perspectives. 61% of respondents wanted to add the mathematics ideas of students using math to analyze empirical situations and 57% to students applying math to authentic problems.*

5.4. **Teachers and students developing questions that lead to deeper learning.** Asking higher-order text-dependent questions that requires students to respond with precision and evidence was considered a top challenge for Math Common Core implementation by 39% of participants. 62% wanted to add the concept of ELA IPG-2d. *Questions are sequenced to guide students in delving deeper into text and graphics and 57% wanted to add the concepts of ELA IPG-2a. Questions and tasks address text by attending to its particular structure, concepts, ideas, events, and details.*

5.5. **Students use evidence to construct arguments.** 37% of participants thought that offering opportunities for students to construct viable arguments was a top challenge for Math Common Core implementation (second most agreed upon challenge out of 12). 39% believed that asking higher order text-dependent questions that require students to respond with precision and evidence was considered a top ELA challenge by 39% of participants. 56% were interested in adding the concept of ELA IPG-2b. *Questions and tasks require students to use details from text to demonstrate understanding and to support their ideas about the text. 52% wanted to add the concept that students construct logical arguments.*

5.6. **Student practice with and development of academic language.** 33% of respondents selected that offering students regular practice with complex texts and their academic language was a top challenge for ELA Common Core implementation. 51% want to add the concept of Math IPG-3d. *The teacher connects students’ informal language to precise mathematical language appropriate to their grade. 52% want to add the concepts of ELA IPG-2c. Questions and tasks attend to the academic language (i.e., vocabulary and syntax) in the text.*

5.7. **Student independence.** Developing student independence in reading complex texts and writing and speaking about them was the most agreed upon major challenge of ELA Common Core implementation (46% agreement). 48% of participants wanted to incorporate the ideas that students make their own decisions about approaches in math and 56% wanted to incorporate that idea that students conduct research.
6. **Common Core State Standards foreground the need for strong teacher content knowledge, but current evaluation practices may not fully capture or recognize this critical dimension.**

The Common Core State Standards lay out demanding expectations for students including conceptual understanding of mathematics topics and the ability to engage in critical thinking and argumentation. Supporting students to develop these types of skills and understandings requires that teachers themselves have both strong content knowledge as well as deep conceptual understanding in order to ask questions that can draw out and push thinking to the next level. There is not a particular approach to teaching or learning that will be right for each subject in each location, or a text book (at least not at this moment in implementation) that will contain all of this material, but rather a greater reliance on teachers themselves.

In this study, although 94% of observers felt that the Framework for Teaching was effective at capturing overall teaching performance, only 60% believed it effectively captured teacher subject matter knowledge. However, when asked if they thought teacher subject matter knowledge needed to be enhanced in the Framework to better reflect Common Core State Standards, only 21% responded affirmatively.

A combination of different perceptions seem to be at play: some observers do not consider teacher content knowledge something they need to regularly observe, some believe that they have their own methods to evaluate it that are sufficient, and some don’t believe deep accurate assessment of this dimension is possible from a general administrator.

A third of the observers reported that they do not regularly look at component 1a. Teacher content and pedagogical knowledge during an observation, and 21% stop observing this component altogether when they believe that a teacher has reached a level of proficiency. Additionally, if anything is omitted from the cycle of observation, it is the planning conference (see NV and NY), which often is where Domain 1 content-relevant components are explored.

Both teachers and administrators voiced concerns about accurate evaluation of teacher content and pedagogical knowledge in their discipline if the observer is not highly fluent in that area, especially for higher-level STEM topics.

“I think, as you are well aware, the challenge is in having the content (not just the shifts and mathematical practices) matter in the evaluation and feedback. I think we need to carefully consider who is doing the observation and giving the feedback. I think peer observation and inter-visitation is essential.” —NY, district instructional coach

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**Frequency of evaluation of teacher content knowledge.** Percentage of observers who do not look at content knowledge regularly (33%), choose to look at content knowledge...

**Regularity of observation conferences.** Percentage of observers who reported always conducting conferences during an observation.

“I worry about my ability to rate the teachers accurately. Content knowledge is not solid enough.” —CT, school administrator

“How can you evaluate [a teacher’s] feedback/communication with students if you are unfamiliar with the content? … Knowing about instruction is not enough. [It is] hard to determine if the teaching is correct even though it may be good.” —CT, elementary school principal
**Specific suggestions**

6.1. **Add questions and strategies to get at content-knowledge during conferences.** Since much of Domain 1 and the planning conference are around elements of CCSS teaching (content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, lesson planning, etc.), and some districts were shown to complete the planning conference less than 75% of the time and all districts were shown to have limited time to consistently conduct reflective planning conferences, the reflection conference questions could be redesigned to integrate parts of Domain 1 so it does not get lost in implementation, and the planning conference questions can be strengthened to help both the observer and teacher share content knowledge and alignment of Common Core to that content knowledge.

6.2. **Underscore the importance of lifelong learning around content and pedagogical knowledge.** Although this is certainly a tenet of the existing Framework for Teaching, the idea of content and pedagogical knowledge as evolving and growing over time as opposed to static is one that could potentially be enhanced in components 1a. *Demonstrating knowledge of content and pedagogy,* 4a. *Reflecting on teaching,* and/or 4e. *Growing and developing professionally.* While 4e includes the idea of continuing to learn and improve teaching practice, it does not specify that ongoing engagement with content knowledge is essential. In addition to formal professional development and related teacher education conferences, more personal connections to engagement with content areas should also be mentioned, including informal learning opportunities, (see Finding #9 suggestion on peer conversations), and connections to the discipline on their own time such as participation in local citizen science efforts, or membership in a Shakespeare festival.

6.3. **Share different practices for capturing content knowledge.** Even if no approach is perfect, sharing potential ways to tap into content knowledge expertise may be helpful for districts and observers and teachers as they struggle with this issue, or at least confirm the potential difficulty. Survey results suggested observers frequently use observation, student work, and itemized lists of teacher professional activities/memberships to assess content knowledge. These strategies were visible for our case study observers as well, and we also learned how they recruit content area experts, including departmental peers and/or administration with particular expertise; dive deep into specific conversation around lesson plans and teaching goals during the planning conference; and specialize within a school to decide that different administrators learn specific standards and content at a range of levels, and split up the observations accordingly.

“Info about content can be discussed in [planning] conference. Also where you have been and where you’re going. Best practices span across content areas. If you, as the observer, can understand the lesson, then teacher’s understanding and delivery of content is effective. Should we add in something to show the role of the observer in finding out content info beforehand? Maybe in the [planning] conference form?”

—CT design workshop, ELA group

“I think you have to have more content knowledge to be able to be more strategic about what [instruction] looks like. I think you can look at a lesson in isolation and not know that much about the content itself, and be able to go through the process of evaluating. As you look at the bigger picture and how it works in terms of scope of the sequence and then just the big understandings and the big ideas, I think it can get kind of dicey if you don’t know what you’re looking for.”

—NV, elementary school assistant principal

**Methods to assess content knowledge.**
Percentage of observers who use particular methods to assess content knowledge.
7. **There is a critical need for more specific guidance and support for Mathematics Common Core implementation at all levels, including district personnel, administrators, and teachers.**

Success teaching Mathematics Common Core State Standards is a concern of both teachers and administrators. There were less obvious patterns of what people want to add into the Framework for Teaching for Math Common Core, indicating less commonality of understanding about what it was and what was important to capture, even in districts that have been working with Common Core longer.

Participants began the project reporting less familiarity with Math Common Core than ELA, and did not significantly increase their math familiarity over the course of the project. In contrast, self-reported familiarity with ELA Common Core State Standards for all districts and all levels increased significantly over the course of the project. Some case studies actually found that the project focus on Common Core made them more aware of what they did not know or understand clearly in terms of Math Common Core State Standards.

Most administrators that were shadowed for this project had more expertise and teaching background in ELA subjects, including English, foreign language, and social studies (six of the eight). These administrators voiced concerns about what they considered ambiguity in the Math Common Core descriptions (for example, what does rigor look like?) and the preparedness of teachers to teach conceptual understanding, if they don’t have it themselves and have not been taught that way. Observers were significantly more likely than teachers to believe that teacher mathematical content knowledge (42% compared to 26%) and teaching conceptual understanding (46% compared to 30%) were top challenges to successful roll out of Math Common Core.

There were similar fears about the transition to Common Core math for students. While ELA also demands shifts in practice, people recognized these shifts as the way “good teachers have always taught” and saw clear evidence of students making moves toward productive and collaborative discussions. For math, both teachers and administrators voiced concern about students who come from the grade prior without the necessary skills and understandings. They worry that the gap of misunderstanding will grow at each level, and that this will be even more pronounced in communities that have traditionally been underserved.

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**Change in self-reported familiarity with Common Core.** Average participant feelings of familiarity from 1 (not at all familiar) to 4 (very familiar) with Math and ELA CCSS at the beginning and end of the focal year.

```
4
3
2
1
0
pre post
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Math
ELA

“There’s just this lack of critical thinking in math. It’s just so—this is the way I’ve been taught, so procedural…. The whole purpose of math was supposed to be to make sense of things around us, and have a different way of thinking about it and explaining it. Real mathematicians are working on problems that are not solvable, at least right now. We don’t think about math that way. We think about the answers in the back of the book.”

—IL, middle school assistant principal

“I think there’s going to be a shift when it comes to math, because . . . The teachers who are teaching the higher level math, if you’re spending a lot of time to get every kid where you need them to be, you’re constantly differentiating, so that’s where they’re going to struggle. If you don’t get to that content, you’re always going to be behind the eight ball.”

—CT, high school principal
8. **Time for reflection is critical.** Teachers have little time to focus on conceptual changes in practice as they are faced with immediate needs of Common Core classroom implementation.

When asked about their needs to better align teaching with Common Core, teachers are overwhelmingly looking for time to plan and collaborate with their colleagues (91%) and access to Common Core aligned curriculum and assessments (84%) as they are faced with immediate implementation and classrooms full of students who are also transitioning their learning to the pending standards. Less than half (48%) of teachers, meanwhile, reported that having more information about how the Common Core requires they change their practice would help them to align.

Lack of time to reflect on practice and the immediacy of implementation is a situation that may impede success for all teachers in rolling out the new standards. Teachers and administrators were especially aware of the need for time to really understand their students and where they were with CCSS and the needs, sometime extreme, that youth will have moving forward with CC learning and corresponding assessments. The Teaching the Core project highlighted the benefits of having dedicated time for reflective conversations around Common Core. Over the course of the project teachers and observers significantly increased their self-reported understanding of ELA Common Core and how prepared they were to teach/help teachers aligned to the new standards.

**Specific suggestions**

8.1. **Distribute responsibility of evidence collection between observers and teachers.** In CT and IL, teachers take on more ownership of the evaluation process by providing the first pass at evidence for Domain 1, *Planning and preparation,* and Domain 4, *Professional responsibilities.* This strategy helps to illuminate content knowledge, reduces the cognitive load on observers to gather evidence for 22 components, and offers teachers time and opportunity to reflect in order to build their case and more time for observers to listen to teachers as opposed to seeking evidence.

8.2. **Reconsider treatment of component 4a, Reflecting on Teaching.** If teachers take on responsibility for Domains 1 and 4, the work to develop their case for these components and elements is a type of portfolio, in effect, reflections on their own teaching. This component could

“We’re moving so fast, so quick we’re just touching bases…Even after an ‘Aha’ moment around teaching happened, the bad thing is, when the teacher left the room, now she’s out in the hallway and the kids are like, ‘did you get my paper graded?’ or ‘hey, I tried to come to you…’ It’s all gone. Now you’re back in the rat race again. To me it’s like how do you do this? This deep study of practices and standards and how they fit, and how do you get into the life of the teacher that is just constantly going?”

—IL, high school principal

**Perceptions of needs to better align teaching with Common Core State Standards.** Percentage of teachers who felt the following would better prepare them to teach to the Common Core.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Need</th>
<th>Percentage of Teachers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>More planning and collaboration time</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access to curriculum and assessments aligned to CCSS</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Info about how CCSS require I change my practice</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“It’s all about growing teachers and administrators—and administrators, not just teachers. An administrator has to coach a teacher. That is one of our—it is our biggest job, I think. ...We need to frame our conversations so that we’re all growing, not just teachers.”

—CT, elementary school principal

**Change in self-reported preparedness to align teaching with Common Core.** Average teacher feelings of preparedness from 1 (not at all) to 4 (very) at the beginning and end of the focal year.
potentially be re-envisioned as rather an integral part of the evaluation process.

8.3. Build in more specifics about the critical nature of the reflection conference. 96% of participants cited the reflection conference as important to accurate and productive evaluation. The reflection conference was the time to discuss and debrief the observation and plan for the future, and was highly commended as a part of this project. Some more specific dimensions of what this conversation should look like, how long it should take, and enhanced questions around Common Core specific elements would be beneficial. This suggestion is tightly linked to the suggestion to “Encourage process models that regularly attend to Common Core-related components in Domain 1” from Finding #4 and “Add questions and strategies to get at content-knowledge during conferences” from Finding #6.

8.4. Co-observe as a way to get deeper discussions about Common Core teaching. 87% of observers said they wanted to continue to do co-observations as a way to enhance dialogue and learn from multiple perspectives. Although this finding highlights the need for teacher reflection, observer reflection was also identified as a critical aspect of this work by observers and was thought to be enhanced by observing with others. This connects to the suggestion “Underscore the importance of lifelong learning around content and pedagogical knowledge” in Finding #6.

“[My co-observer] saw things that I didn’t see. I saw things that she didn’t see. We compared notes. It really helped me to get a better understanding of what fit where. I thought that was really good. ...You’re really working off each other. The teachers that we spoke with, they were comfortable enough with us to have really good conversations about what happened in the lesson. The reflections were really high quality, and it allowed us to give feedback that we hope is going to help them in the future.”

—CT, high school principal
9. **There are barriers to consistently conducting evaluations as a form of coaching, with focus on growth and professional development as opposed to final ratings.**

Although it was not initially a focus of this research, quantitative reports and case studies suggest that evaluation as coaching was a primary goal for observers but one that was sometimes difficult to achieve. One issue is simply that the tool is so connected to evaluation. Despite obvious appreciation for the Framework for Teaching instrument itself, 63% of respondents feel teachers in their school had less than positive attitudes about the process of teacher evaluation. Significantly more participants in NY felt this was true (83%) than CT (49%), highlighting the additional pressures of larger and highly heterogeneous districts.

Some case observers felt it was easier to have productive reflection conversations that encouraged growth with those teachers who were at least proficient, and that these types of coaching conversations during evaluation were more difficult for teachers who were struggling because they focused on the negative rating as opposed to the potential for development and learning.

Difficulties inherent in achieving good coaching practices embedded in observation is also related to the observer content-knowledge issue shared in Finding #6, and lack of time for solid implementation of all process elements of the observation cycle shared in Finding #8.

Despite difficulties using one tool for dual purposes, it was clearly voiced by the practitioners and the project advisory board that the evaluation and coaching needed to be strongly connected to encourage focus on the things that are professed to matter. The majority of observers (86%) in all districts and at all school levels use the Framework for Teaching for purposes beyond formal evaluation, including informal observations, walkthroughs, professional development, and coaching conversations. Districts in NY and CT both have formal district practices to use the Framework for coaching and weekly faculty meetings.

60% of observers and 67% of teachers expressed a desire for a streamlined version of the Framework for Teaching that directly addresses Common Core for non-formal evaluation practices such as coaching. Almost half of participants (48%) believed that the six-cluster version of the Framework they were shown quickly during the final survey would be easier to use for these types of practices than the 2013 version.

“The power of the Framework as a coaching tool has been diminished in its overuse as an evaluation/performance rating tool.”  — **IL, high school principal**

“I feel like what we assess is what teachers are really focusing in on…I would like it to be a dual…which I think is what Danielson originally wanted of the tool. It just gets mired in this idea of evaluation, and ‘my status hinges on it.’ It sometimes puts up a block for teachers to really be able to say, ‘what could I do differently?’”  — **IL, middle school assistant principal**

“If all of the feedback is constructive it would be better, however, it isn't always perceived as such. The other difficulty is when you are evaluated by an administrator who does not understand your subject matter. Often advice given to math teachers is not really practical and much of our PD centers around younger grades and non-math/science topics.”  — **CT, high school math teacher**

“I think, in the end, the most valuable piece is the coaching. Rating the teacher is, to me, my least favorite part of the whole process. I tell teachers that it’s my least favorite part. I feel like if we didn’t have to assign a summative grade to them that actually the process would be more productive, not having to put a value on it.”  — **NV, elementary school assistant principal**

**Observer first reaction to clustered Framework for coaching.** Percentage of observers who believe the six-cluster model of the Framework would be easier to more difficult to use for coaching compared to the 2013 version.
Specific suggestions

9.1. Streamline the Framework for Teaching for coaching. Streamlining a tool specifically for teacher coaching and professional development would maintain the familiarity to the Framework for Teaching used for formal evaluation, but the restructuring of components into overlapping clusters might offer a different perspective. This new perspective, one that many believed to be more teacher-focused, could relieve some of the tension between focus on ratings or growth. The benefits of the streamlined tool for evaluation as well is discussed in suggestions for Finding #10.

9.2. Advocate for or provide training for observers and evaluators on how to ask deep questions during reflection and planning conferences. Some districts have professional development for observers around question prototypes and discussion techniques for conferences so that dialogue with the teacher takes on a more effective coaching quality.

9.3. Encourage processes of peer-to-peer observation and coaching using the streamlined tool. Having informal conversations with colleagues was thought to be a useful way to learn about Common Core by almost all of the participants, observers and teachers (96%). Participants felt that peer-to-peer observations were helpful for both the teacher observer and the teacher being observed, especially in content-specific and departmental areas, strengthening the conversations around Common Core teaching and sharing practices in action. This suggestion is an extension of the suggestion in Finding #8 to encourage co-observation and Finding #6 to underscore the value of lifelong learning.

When teachers set goals for the PGP [professional growth plan], this [6-cluster model] would make the process easier in making connections. It would also allow the administrator to emphasize the cyclical FfT that defines good teaching.”

—NV, elementary school assistant principal

Teacher sources of learning about Common Core. Percentage of teachers who found each source useful or very useful in learning about Common Core State Standards.
10. Reduction in the number of components of focus during an observation is being made at the district, school, and individual level.

There is widespread appreciation for the usefulness of the Danielson Framework for Teaching. 85% of participants believe the Framework provides useful feedback for teachers, and 79% believe that it provides useful feedback for administrators, and these numbers were similar across districts and at different school levels.

Qualitative shadowing of teacher observations revealed realities of implementation, including difficulties for teachers and administrators to find sufficient time to consistently conduct the kind of evaluation they want to. Almost half of the observers surveyed (44%) want more time to dedicate to teacher evaluation.

Over one third of observers considered the Framework to be too time consuming (36%), said that they had to make modifications to the Framework to suit their needs (35%), and thought that there were too many components (34%). Ratings of all three were negatively correlated with years of experience using the Danielson tool to conduct teacher observations, suggesting that users learn how to manage the complexity of the tool with time in practice. But if over one third of projects participants, the majority of whom are from schools that are not particularly struggling and districts averaging over four years of experience with the Framework (73% of respondents), are still expressing challenges of the time consuming nature of the implementation process, this is an important issue to consider moving forward.

Districts were found to minimize the process and components in different ways: IL combines three sets of components for a final count of 19. NY is moving to focus on eight components in the coming year (2014-15). Observers in CT looks at two-to-three components during an observation, covering a set through multiple observations throughout the year, strongly believing that in order to give a teacher quality feedback and in order to coach a teacher effectively an observer has to be targeted in the observation.

Not unsurprisingly, participants were interested in a streamlined version of the Framework for Teaching as long as there was a way or process to drill down to details, retaining the complexity of the practice of teaching.

“I appreciate Charlotte’s attention to streamlining the document. It will be important not to lose the specificity of descriptions of student and teacher behavior that are clear strengths of the FfT in the interest of efficiency. Teacher evaluation is a heavy lift for principals given the number of teacher evaluated on an annual basis.”

—NV, district administrator

“I think that what they’re doing in terms of limiting [FfT] to 8 now is really great, because it helps to focus the work more, and then you’re not looking to just identify something for all 22. . . . With the ‘assessment of instruction,’ you’re looking at communicating with students. You’re looking at the questions that are being asked. You’re looking at the flexibility and responsiveness.”

—NY, middle school principal

Observer first reactions to clustered Framework for evaluation. Percentage of observers who believe the six-cluster model of the Framework would be easier to more difficult to use for teacher evaluation compared to the 2013 version.
Specific suggestions

10.1. Streamline the Framework for Teaching for evaluation. There is preliminary evidence to suggest that at first glance, observers were attracted to the six-cluster arrangement of components suggested by Danielson, the greatest percentage believing that the tool would be easier to use for evaluation (41%) compared to those who thought it would be the same (33%) or more difficult to use (26%). Many of those who believe it would be more difficult to use are concerned that such clustering might lead to more subjective ratings given the loss of specificity of individual components.

10.2. Suggest different frequencies of observation for different components. When participants were asked what the frequency of observation should be for components in different domains, participants were most likely to advocate for regular observation of those in Domain 3: Instruction, followed by Domain 1: Planning and Preparation, which are also the domains participants were most likely to identify with Common Core practices. Domain 4: Professional responsibilities (with the exception of 4a. Reflecting on teaching) and components 2e. Organizing physical space, and 1d. Demonstrating knowledge of resources were not as likely to be determined something that should be consistently observed, in particular, and also not as likely to be cited as important to look for Common Core instruction, making them candidates for less frequent cycles of observation.

“I see this as much more integrated and connected where as the original version is more discrete. Rather than calling this “easier,” I would suggest it is more comprehensive—connecting components that relate with one another. I would suggest that evaluators could only manage evaluating a cluster rather than individual components. It is not manageable to evaluate more than three individual components in one lesson.”

—CT, elementary school principal

Recommendations for frequency of observation. Percentage of participants who advocate for looking at each domain during every observation cycle.