

The Core Standards That Matter Most in My Classroom

By **Anthony S. Colucci**

You must welcome change as the rule but not as your ruler.

[← Back to Story](#)

I've been thinking a lot about author and productivity consultant Denis Waitley's words as the Common Core State Standards take hold.

When I began my teaching career in Florida, we aimed to help students master the Sunshine State Standards. Then we shifted to grappling with, analyzing, and digesting the Next Generation Standards and the FCAT 2.0 assessment. Now? The common core.

I'm not ready to dismiss the common-core standards. Like my TLN colleagues over at [Teaching Ahead](#), I think the common core holds promise—if implemented thoughtfully, with teachers' leadership. In particular, I hope we measure students' progress toward these new standards in high-quality, meaningful ways (not just with another set of multiple-choice tests).

But whatever happens with the common core, I feel confident about one thing. No set of standards is as important for my students as what I expect of myself in the classroom. Here are the standards to which I hold myself:

- **My class will be engaging.**

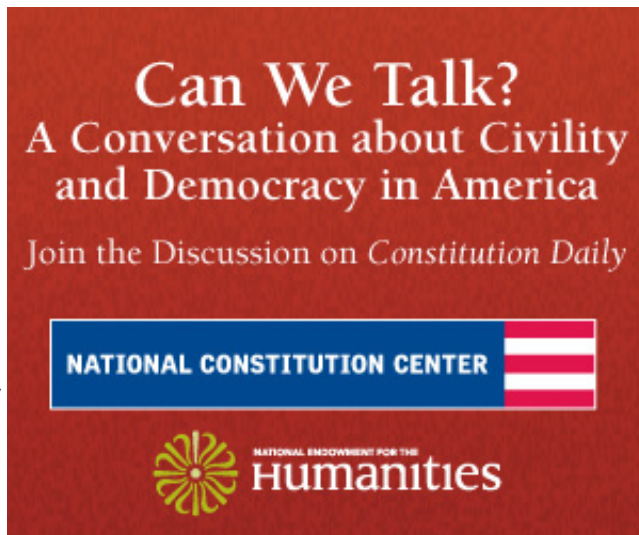
It's what we teachers expect of our professional development. And it's how we should approach our own instruction, too. Yes, some material just seems to lend itself to engaging presentation. But what about "the other stuff"? We must draw upon our expertise about what helps students learn—like project-based approaches, hands-on activities, and cross-curricular connections.

Years ago, after reflecting on how my U.S. geography unit had often been the low point of my course, I created "The Real World" project. This unit asks students to imagine they have just graduated from college and were preparing to move to another state.

Students learn about geography and conduct research on different locations. But they also explore careers; calculate loan amounts and salaries after taxes; write expository, narrative, and creative pieces; develop a budget for life in their new location; and use technology to present a product. This unit quickly became legendary—each year, my new students inquire about it on the first day of school.

- **I will stress the importance of hard work.**

The most ambitious set of standards cannot replace a strong work ethic. Students can aspire to be the next Bill Gates, but unless they understand the importance of hard work, their hopes will be dashed.



We can create a classroom environment in which students are expected to push themselves, to try new approaches, and to persevere. I model these expectations for my students each day. I share what it takes to be a full-time doctoral student and the effort that goes into endlessly revising papers and articles. Moreover, I admit my weaknesses to my students, so they can watch me push myself in the face of adversity. For instance, my 6th grade gifted students complete a unit of math games that rely heavily on visual-spatial skills, which is one of my weaknesses. Frankly, I often find myself on the losing end when competing against them. But eventually I usually manage to score a few wins, demonstrating that perseverance is a crucial life skill.

Educators can also explicitly highlight the qualities that lead to success. I often assign students to read biographies of successful individuals and to identify the personal qualities these men and women possess. I link the readings to students' experiences—when have they exemplified these characteristics in their own lives, or when do they plan and expect to do so?

- **I will teach my students what it means to be responsible citizens.**

When it comes to educational goals, I think becoming a responsible citizen should be at the top of the list. Not every student will be a rocket scientist, but all will be citizens!

That means they will need to know how to locate reliable information, as well as how to evaluate, make, and defend arguments. My classroom is a place where they gain practice in putting these skills to use.

I also make sure that students understand the importance of the basic duties of citizenship: voting, doing jury duty, serving their communities, paying taxes, and even defending the country. Service-learning projects are a great way to instill the importance of civic responsibility. This year, my students participated in "Writing Buddies": They wrote children's books for intellectually disabled students, then worked with those students to illustrate them. The intellectually disabled students enhanced their social skills and learned to identify the main characters of a story. My students improved their writing and leadership skills, and expressed eagerness to serve their communities in the future.

- **I will encourage my students to find careers they'll love.**

Ever noticed how many elementary school students want to be a veterinarian or a professional athlete when they grow up, even if they don't love animals or play any sports? We need to do a better job of exposing students to the many careers that exist in 21st-century America.

I try to help students understand how school—not just their classes, but also their electives—can prepare them for different paths. I want my students to know that they can make a living doing what they love, like taking photos, playing music, or designing clothes. I also want them to grasp that being a doctor is only one route into the medical field, just as being a writer may not mean working for a newspaper. I often prompt students to explore kids.gov, which offers kid-friendly resources on what it takes to become everything from a dee jay to a special agent.

- **I will treat my students with respect.**

When I misbehaved as a student, teachers told me that I was going to end up "dead in jail." As you can imagine, this did not lead me to behave more civilly toward my teachers.

That's why, as a teacher, I am committed to treating my own students with respect, regardless of their level of academic achievement or behavior. I know I may be the only person in some children's lives who consistently displays courteous behavior toward them.

Kids are not fully formed. They can change—and for the better—but they need adults like me to show them how. I want my students to respect others, so I model that respect on a daily basis. For example, if a student shouts at me, I might talk calmly with the student outside of the classroom or I might discuss it with him or her after class. What I would never do is shout back.

Perhaps the common-core standards will stick. I can't argue with the student skills they encourage us to build—and I'm excited about the opportunity to collaborate with other educators throughout the country.

But by the end of my career, my own standards for what happens in my classroom on a daily basis may be more influential than any set of mandated standards.

What standards make up *your* core?

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