

Turning the State Regulations into Opportunity

In school districts across New York the new state regulations are leaving people feeling overwhelmed, anxious, and confused. APPR, the Student Learning Objectives, the Common Core. The prevailing view is that the State Education Department's requirements are complicated and intrusive. It doesn't have to be that way. Here's the good news - the state is interested in the right thing - data driven instruction. But here's the bad news - the state is not good at how to pull it off. So, we need to figure it out. Lemonade out of lemons.

The District Perspective: How do we develop a practical path through the complexity? How do we turn the regulations to our advantage by folding the state's reform agenda into a system that supports teaching and learning and gets the results we want? We need to push past the perception of so many changes and take on the expectations we know we can obtain. Every challenge can be an opportunity. Our actions/behaviors will turn our beliefs from "oh no," to "yes we can."

The Results System: Let's remember six short phrases as we approach this monumental, but doable task: Stretch and focus, Keep it simple, Just do it, Ready - fire - aim, Whatever it takes, and Learn as you go. Let's design our system in a way that unifies action at the classroom, school, and district levels to lift student performance. All our behavior becomes intentional to achieving the results.

The State Agenda: Here is an approach for converting state requirements into a simple, do-able, integrated system for greater student success.

APPR - Recognizing that increased student achievement begins with ambitious targets we need to challenge ourselves to aim high. The attitude is we're all in this together. Push hard. Don't worry about falling short, no blame. We'll learn together as we go. Teamwork and collegial coaching are key. We need to support and listen to each other and respect the concerns each of us have about handling the regulations and work together to find answers. We don't need a grand plan. We will submit what's required to the state and constantly adjust during the year. Whatever it takes.

SLO's - Why waste a lot of effort figuring out who has to do student learning objectives and who doesn't? Let's have everyone set SLO's. Every teacher and administrator can develop a specific project to improve student performance. We call them targets, how to increase student success in everything we do. I say SLO's are nothing more than targets on steroids, and are a way to reassure us by the gains we make. Let's use the SLO requirement to unify action around a top school priority, for example, all teachers develop objectives to advance literacy. Can we make our APPR scoring rubric support teacher teammates who are reinforcing each others' efforts.

Student Growth: To accelerate student growth on the 3-8 assessments and Regents exams let us concentrate on the few areas of skill deficiency that most inhibit student performance rather than trying to second guess what kind of changes in content the state is going to come up with next. After all, academic skills are what college and career readiness is all about.

Common Core: While the Common Core is a significant source of assistance there's a lot to incorporate. Shall we concentrate on the assessment side - developing quick, frequent assessments aligned with the state tests? Continuous feedback on student performance enables us to constantly ask the right questions about our instruction. What's working? What isn't? Why? What next? These questions form the basis for collegial coaching.

60 Point Measures: You can't give good attention to the zillion of items in the various approved rubrics. Yet the state's observation requirements for APPR provide districts the opportunity to focus on what's most essential in outstanding instruction. Let us identify only a handful of the instructional and learner attributes most critical to student success. For instance if new year we focus only on active engagement, or clarity of the lesson's objectives (SLO's for the day), another year we focus on frequent checking for student understanding, differentiated instruction, and aim high expectations, we will build both individual and collective capacity. What would be your top five? Can we make a building top five, a district top five? Then we make those attributes the areas of greatest emphasis in observations. This is a powerful way to unify the focus on improved instruction across the district and keep our professional development focused as well. It is also nice for everyone to know where the emphasis lies.

Principal Evaluation: We need to continue to develop results leaders. To attain greater student success leaders need to spend their time and energy differently. I want our administrators performance to be assessed on the evidence which demonstrates that the leaders' number one priority is greater achievement. My challenge to administrators and myself is that we add value toward improved student learning in every interaction. All grade level, department, and faculty meetings center on questions regarding student performance data and which actions make the biggest difference for accelerated achievement.

Turning the State Regulations into Opportunity: The state is providing us a great opportunity. The capacity for far higher student achievement resides right within our own classrooms. This is our work. We will make it work for us and for our students. We can and we will. The best solutions are right here in C-A.