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# How a National Blue Ribbon Elementary School Negotiates the ELA PA Core

Todd Dishong

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HOW A NATIONAL BLUE RIBBON ELEMENTARY SCHOOL  
NEGOTIATES THE ELA PA CORE

A Dissertation

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

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May 2016

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Schools across America are faced with implementing new English Language Arts Standards due to the new standards reform movement that has swept across the nation with a current 42 state adoption rate. New standards often equate to new curriculum and instructional practices that are allegedly effective if the programs and practices are adhered to with fidelity. The purpose of this study was to examine a National Blue Ribbon elementary school recipient that has demonstrated consistent academic excellence and how it negotiated curriculum and instructional practice changes due to the new ELA Standards. Research findings from classroom teachers, support teachers, and administrators suggest that while some changes occurred in how they taught reading due to the increased rigor, their views and philosophies of reading did not. The findings also suggest that while curriculum, instruction, and professional development matter in education, it is the climate, culture, and relationships in working through a Professional Learning Community framework that supports them in achieving academic excellence.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Hundreds of books and studies have been written and researched on the change process and change theory. Stories abound about people and organizations that have fixed perceptions on change and eventually are left behind or go out of business for choosing not to change. Songs are written on change. Arguably one of the most well-known is “The Times They are A Changin’” by Bob Dylan. Just as many quotes abound about change in quick witty bursts that summarize its varied essence. “The art of life is a constant readjustment to our surroundings” (Okakura Kakuzo, n.d.) Nathaniel Branden (n.d.) said, “The first step toward change is awareness. The second step is acceptance”. “Change is inevitable, change is constant” were words spoken by Benjamin Disraeli. Reinhold Niebuhr stated, “Every time I find the meaning of life, they change it”. There are even prayers about change, probably the most popular and well known is also credited to Niebuhr: *God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; the courage to change the things I can and the wisdom to know the difference* (1937).

Schools, districts, administrators, and educators experience inevitable change on a regular basis and have to constantly readjust to new mandates, practices, and classes of students (who in themselves are developmentally changing physically and mentally) from year to year. Just when teachers think they have the *meaning of life*, or the “right” curriculum, practices, standards, *it changes*. With so many changes and mandates occurring over the years (The National Reading Panel report, scientifically researched-based programs, 21<sup>st</sup> century learning skills, No Child Left Behind and standards, PSSA tests/high stakes testing, accountability, never ending changing text books and “ways” to

teach, SAS [Standards Aligned System], the Danielson teacher effectiveness/evaluation model - to name a few), educators are faced with yet another change and a major shift in thinking: The English Language Arts Pennsylvania Core Standards.

According to the National Government Association (2015), 42 states in the union (the District of Columbia, four territories, and the Department of Defense Education) have adopted the Common Core State Standards (both ELA and Math) with Departments of Education in each state identifying deadlines for implementation. Pennsylvania adopted the Common Core in July of 2010, with official implementation to begin the 2013-2014 school year. However, the Pennsylvania English Language Arts (ELA) Common Core Standards were still in draft format on the state's Standard Aligned Systems website (SAS) in the spring of 2013. A new date was set for 2014-2015 after the newer adoption of the state's Title 22, Chapter 4, Academic Standards and Assessment on September 12, 2013.

### **Definition of the Problem**

This descriptive single case study will view how a high achieving elementary school understands, implements, negotiates, and makes meaning (Patton, 2002) of the mandated ELA PA Core. As identified in the introduction, change is inevitable, and the problem is to understand how teachers and administrators perceive, understand, and implement the new changes of new standards in English Language Arts. The experiences, perceptions, and concerns of teachers and administrators responsible for English Language Arts instruction in grades Kindergarten through fifth were examined in this qualitative study to seek an understanding of how the ELA PA Core Standards affected and impacted their curriculum and teaching of children across grade levels.

Although standards are nothing new, the Common Core is an historical phenomenon due to its nationalization. Never has agreed upon or “common” standards been accepted by a majority of states across the United States. The Common Core has been accepted and is impacting 42 states, including the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania where this problem is being studied. This study is not just about schools encountering, grappling, and moving through a change process, but a shift in ideology that is sweeping across the nation. It is about core beliefs that administrators and teachers have regarding the understanding, implementation, and teaching of ELA to our youngest learners. A disconnect between the expectations of the PA ELA standards, administrators’ and elementary teachers’ reading philosophies and their preparedness to teach children college and career standards is a conflict that will not only influence and impact students, but professional relationships amongst teachers and administrators across the United States (Berry, 2014).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this single case study is to understand how elementary teachers and administrators in a Blue Ribbon school are addressing, implementing, and perceiving the ELA PA Core Standards. In addition, it will seek to explore the interactions, collaboration, and perception of relationships with one another as teachers and administrators work within the structural framework of standards implementation. The PA Core ELA standards are in place and have been mandated, but will they actually change what teachers are doing at the elementary level with reading instruction and curriculum? The “Reading wars” have raged for decades and continue (Pearson, 2004; Strauss, 2013, 2014) to engage teachers and theorists alike with what is/was the “best” way to teach reading (phonics, whole language, basal, workshop, balanced reading, etc.)

Research abounds in reading instruction. Findings of the National Reading Panel (2000) (and many other federal reports found at [readingrockets.org](http://readingrockets.org)) have favored phonics-based instruction, while a plethora of other reading research on instruction and curriculum over the years support other viewpoints (Tucker, 2014). With all the research, do teachers change some or all of what they are doing and now adhere to the ELA PA Core?

Elementary teachers and administrators were the target participants for this case study because of the ELA PA Core's call to "climb the staircase of complexity" (Burkins & Yaris, 2015) beginning with our youngest learners. It is in the elementary school where children learn to read and begin reading to learn. Teaching children to read has been a controversial subject over the years and debate has ensued as to what is the best way to teach reading. Despite the ELA PA Core's call for higher expectations and preparing students to be college and career ready, the developers of the standards claim (<http://www.corestandards.org>) it does not tell teachers how to teach.

This research was narrowed to the English Language Arts standards because in order for anyone to learn any academic subject, one needs to learn to read, comprehend what they are reading, and be able to think, speak, and write critically across subjects, this understanding happens through reading instruction (Alber, 2014). The ultimate idea is to help students understand how to talk and write about reading using evidence (Hechinger, 2014). In addition, schools do not tackle all subjects, including math, when they are re-writing curriculum or changing instructional practices. Districts go through curriculum cycles that address specific subjects. Curriculum cycles for specific subjects can last from 2-3 years or more and require more than just curriculum guides sitting on a



shelf, but leadership, professional development, analysis, writing, review of relevant materials, and training (Mooney & Mausbach, 2008).

This research will attempt to uncover the *what*, *how*, and *why* (Worthington, 2013; Yin, 2014) of how the common core impacts the strategies that teachers employ in teaching reading through the adoption and implementation of the ELA PA Core. Concerns of administrators and teachers at the elementary level and how the beliefs they hold influence their perceptions and judgments in adopting and implementing the ELA PA Core will be investigated. The goal is to understand how a high achieving elementary school's teachers and administrators makes sense of their experiences and interactions (Merriam, 2009) with new ELA standards. Through investigating the process of how a high achieving school works through standards-based education reforms, this study may guide and support administrators in their roles as instructional leaders in providing respectful and meaningful professional development in regards to ELA PA Core standards, curriculum, and instructional practices.

### **Theoretical Framework**

In understanding the experiences of a school as they work through change in reading curriculum, instruction and in improving student outcomes, this study will investigate the process through the framework of Professional Learning Communities (PLC). DuFour and Eaker's (1998, 2005) framework of Professional Learning Communities emphasize shared mission, vision/values and collective collaboration and inquiry towards growth and improvement. Dufour (1998) researched professional development as a natural part of a teacher's work. Administrators and teachers identify areas that need improvement and then they collaborate, dialogue, reflect, and take action.

Acceptance of any new curriculum, practice, or broad sweeping standards reform is difficult. Schools often adopt something new; it doesn't work, and then something else is tried. A "this too shall pass" attitude begins to permeate the mentality of schools when new programs, practices, and standards are continuously being tried as the next best "thing". Change often requires the gaining of new skills while often adjusting one's attitudes and beliefs. As individual comfort level and competence with a new program increases, staff can move beyond their personal concerns to focus on the desired outcomes (Hall & Hord, 1987, 2006).

A problem that has occurred over the years has been the isolative nature of teaching (Lortie, 1975; Mirel & Goldin, 2012). Professional Learning Communities attempts to eliminate this isolation through establishing a school as a learning organization where high expectations and accountability is a norm as the organization learns together. Learning happens socially while people use forethought to envision the future, identify desired outcomes, and generate plans of action (Bandura, 1986; Schunk, 1990).

Professional Learning Communities are built on the idea of learning as inquiry (Dana, Burns, & Wolkenhauer, 2013) and rooted in constructivist theory about how people construct their own understanding and knowledge of the world through experiences and reflecting on those experiences (Vescio, Ross & Adams, 2008). PLCs support teachers and administrators inquiring together and engaging in the authentic learning and implementation of the ELA PA Core. Collaborative work through the phenomenon of standards reform together can impact teaching, learning, and student growth (Dana, Burns, & Wokenhaur, 2013).

## **Research Questions**

The primary questions this study seeks to answer are:

1. What are teacher and administrator perceptions and understandings of how the teaching of English Language Arts has changed as a result of the ELA PA Core Standards?
2. How do teachers and administrators perceive the implementation of ELA PA Core?
3. What instructional and curricular changes have occurred in teaching reading at the elementary level regarding the ELA PA Core Standards?
4. How has culture and climate impacted the ideology of learning and teaching through the ELA Common Core?

## **Operational Definitions and Terms**

1. **Common Core State Standards (CCSS):** The Common Core is a set of rigorous academic standards in mathematics and English language arts/literacy (ELA). These learning goals outline what a student should know and be able to do at the end of each grade. The standards were created to ensure that all students graduate from high school with the skills and knowledge necessary to succeed in college, career, and life, regardless of where they live. ([www.corestandards.org/about-the-standards/](http://www.corestandards.org/about-the-standards/)).

2. **National Blue Ribbon School:** The National Blue Ribbon Schools Program recognizes public and private elementary, middle, and high schools based on overall academic excellence or their progress in closing achievement gaps among student subgroups (<http://www2.ed.gov/programs/nclbbrs/index.html>)

3. **Pennsylvania English Language Arts Core (PA ELA Core):** The name of the Common Core State Standards changed to “PA Core” in Pennsylvania (or *PA ELA Core more specifically in this study*) but are closely aligned to the college and career ready Common Core, so close you can hardly tell the difference (Fulton, 2014). Chapter 2 will address the ideology of why many states have renamed “their” standards.

4. **Professional Learning Communities (PLCs):** PLCs are characterized by shared mission/vision/values, collective inquiry, collaborative teams, are action oriented, seek continuous improvement and are results oriented (Dufour & Eaker, 1998).

5. **Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA):** PSSAs are composed of assessments and the reporting associated with the results of those assessments. English Language Arts and Mathematics are assessed in grades 3-8 while Science is in grade 4 and 8. The assessed subjects include items with assessment anchors and eligible content aligned to the Pennsylvania Core Standards.

*\*A note to readers* – Within this research, the terms CCSS and PA ELA Core are interchanged at times. English Language Arts, as well as Mathematics, falls under the general title of CCSS, as well as it does for the PA Core. While the CCSS title is used to provide context to the study, the focus of this study is specifically on the PA ELA Core (Pennsylvania specific) which itself is a product of the broader CCSS (Nationally – across the United States). As noted, little is different between the two and an explanation of why many states have renamed the standards are discussed in Chapter 2.

### **The English Language Arts Common Core**

With a major shift in thinking and a national (42 states) educational standards based reform change, many often see the futility in the process and can easily get a

mindset of “this too shall pass.” However, with the academic standards expectations, teaching will have to be approached differently. In his 2006 book, *Standard Deviations*, James Spillane uses the analogy in regards to communication about the standards to the schools like the children’s game of telephone. The standards were whispered from the state capitol, to school districts, and then to classrooms, only to create a muddled message at the end of the line. However, with the momentum the CCSS has gained with a current 84% adoption rate, the common core does not look like it will be fizzling anytime soon (Rothman, 2013). In addition, changes to education are inevitable and necessary with the political and public outcry and mandates from *No Child Left Behind* to public record of America’s faltering condition, which includes its educational system. A pressing call to change education is growing louder due to the flattening of the world via technology (Friedman & Mandelbaum, 2012) and a belief that education is a key to helping the United States remain competitive in a global economy (known as neoliberalism). In *The World is Flat* (2005), Thomas Friedman states the case that America is not keeping up with the rest of the world and that we must learn how to learn, teaching ourselves to stay curious and innovative if we are to excel in a global economy. Other countries are no longer looking to be like the United States in education as many of them have surpassed us in math and reading scores. Experts are calling for the United States to look at other countries that outperform them such as Finland, Korea, and Singapore (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Students’ performance on the 2009 Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) which measures how well students from more than 70 economies are prepared to meet the challenges they may encounter ranked 15 year-old American students in 14<sup>th</sup> place in reading and literacy. The U.S. showed

effectively no improvement in reading since 2000 (Johnson, 2010). Could a potential reason to look to the Finnish educational system and their success connect to the fact that it is a nation that uses the same curriculum for all students? One shared curriculum may account for scores varying little from school to school (Sahlberg, 2011; Wilde, 2013).

Advocates of the Common Core State Standards believe this national standard movement to be a historic opportunity to boost the overall quality of education while other studies indicate that the Common Core initiative will have little or no effect on student achievement. Even high quality professional development and excellent curricular materials are also unlikely to boost the Common Core Standards slim chances of success (Loveless, 2013). Others believe these national standards simply narrow the curriculum and limit diversity in the curriculum, instructional practices, and assessment which takes away from building a collegial professional culture aimed at real teaching and learning (Brooks & Dietz, 2013). A case can certainly be made that the only people to benefit from these standards are companies who create standard aligned textbooks and assessments. Haberman (2010) seems to think so claiming in his study that the Common Core threatens to bring more rote learning, test preparation, and bad teaching brought about during the No Child Left Behind era.

While Haberman makes these claims and they may lead to what he states is “bad” teaching (2010), schools achieving the honor of attaining National Blue Ribbon status for academic excellence would disagree. Eligibility and performance criteria for this prestigious recognition are rigorous. Schools striving to obtain this honor must meet annual yearly progress at high levels across academic subjects with *all* students (disadvantaged backgrounds/sub groups included) for three consecutive years. The

National Blue Ribbon School flag over an entry or flying overhead is a widely recognized symbol of exemplary teaching and learning (<https://www2.ed.gov>).

Some argue that the National Blue Ribbon Schools award system is marred by mediocre schools getting recognized alongside high achieving schools due to how scoring puts lower income schools at a disadvantage (Loveless & Diperna, 2001). There are those who have worked tirelessly with a large team of teachers, parents, and community members in holding themselves accountable and completing the tedious application process to be honored for their commitment to educational excellence and their ability to overcome outstanding odds to properly educate their students (Chen, 2015).

This case study will research the ELA PA Core and the process and transition a National Blue Ribbon School has gone through during implementation of new ELA Standards, professional development, and how climate, culture, and relationships impact the process across grade levels and with teachers and administrators.

### **Research Design**

This study is an embedded-single case study that will focus on describing the *what*, *how*, and *why* of the lived experiences of teachers and administrators responsible for ELA instruction in grades K-5 at a high achieving elementary school that earned the National Blue Ribbon of Excellence. The phenomenon being studied focuses on the description of what participants have in common (or don't have in common) as they experience a phenomenon (Cresswell, 2007, p. 58). The phenomenon in this bounded case is that all of the participants have been involved in the implementation and professional development process of the ELA PA Core into their curriculum and

instructional practices. Data collections were done through interviews and document review (Blue Ribbon application, professional development sessions, curriculum documents). After all of the participants' stories were retold, clusters of meanings were developed through identification of issues and common themes that transcended from all of the participant's experiences (Cresswell, 2007; Yin, 2003).

### **Significance of the Study**

Controversy and confusions of the Common Core continue, as it has not been overwhelmingly accepted with 100% confidence in many districts and states evidenced by the lack of full acceptance (Makla, 2015). Divergent opinions and beliefs are ongoing due to human nature and differing ideology. Many argue that common core is losing ground as legislators debate whether to pass, reject, or repeal Common Core State Standards (Makla, 2015). Regardless of states, schools, and teachers adopting the ELA PA Core willingly or begrudgingly, the standards and ensuing testing that measures schools accountability and success are a reality for Pennsylvania Schools. The consequences of not adhering to standards reform are not known yet under the new standards reform movement as schools are now measured with School Performance Profile (SPP) scores with low scoring schools being compared to other schools publicly. SPP is designed to provide building level academic scores for educators as part of the Educator Effectiveness System required by Act 82. The rating system scores examine school performance on a standardized scale from 0-100 (<http://paschoolperformance.org/>). Act 82 was signed into law in 2012 that required the Secretary of Education to establish a new statewide rating system in Pennsylvania for evaluating teachers and principals. School and teacher "effectiveness" is dependent upon



observations, building and teacher data, and elective data, also known as SLOs (Student Learning Objectives) (Teacher Effectiveness, 2015).

Past consequences under No Child Left Behind categorized schools in various categories dependent upon a school's test scores. Schools not making Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) could be found in various categories such as warning, school improvement I and II, and corrective action I and II. Schools that repeatedly did not attain annual yearly progress could eventually face a "take over" from the Department of Education.

The significance of this study will support administrators, curriculum directors, teachers, and policy makers in addressing the types of instructional practices, professional development, and training those teachers need and want by understanding the various levels of concerns and experiences regarding the ongoing implementation of English Language Arts Pennsylvania Common Core Standards. Knowing the experiences and concerns along the journey of change can support administrators, curriculum directors, and other stakeholders in negotiating a change process. This knowledge may help mitigate the risk of teacher concerns from becoming a barrier to the implementation of the innovation (ELA PA Core Standards).

The study can be replicated and expanded upon in the future to further address levels of concern and use of the ELA PA Core to address appropriate and differentiated professional development and impact of curriculum and instruction for students.

### **Limitations**

Various challenges are inherent to single case studies. One limitation is their generalizability. A single case study will not always be representative of the population

at large. According to Wiley and Sons (2009), generalizations can be made by the researcher or reader. While the general lies in the particular, what we learn in a particular case can be transferred to similar situations argues Erickson (1986). Another limitation is the sensitivity and integrity of the investigator since the investigator is the primary instrument of data collection and analysis. The investigator is left to rely on his/her own instincts and abilities throughout much of the research effort (Merriam, 2009). These instincts can be transferrable though as Stake explains (2005) how this knowledge transfer works: case researchers "will, like others, pass along to readers some of their personal meanings of events and relationships--and fail to pass along others. They know that the reader, too, will add and subtract, invent and shape--reconstructing the knowledge in ways that leave it...more likely to be personally useful" (p. 455).

Despite the case studies limitations, this type of qualitative research can inform professional practice or evidence-informed decision making and allows researchers opportunities to explore or describe a phenomenon in context using a variety of data sources (Baxter & Jack, 2008). A case study's strengths outweigh its limitations, as it is a way of investigating complex units with multiple variables of a phenomenon. Case studies investigate real-life situations that result in rich and holistic accounts that offers insight and illuminates topics under investigation that can lead to further research and plays an important role in advancing a field's knowledge base (Merriman, 2009).

### **Summary**

One definition of *standard* is: basis for comparison, a reference point against which other matters and conditions can be evaluated. Some synonyms of *standard* are as follows: benchmark, criterion, gauge, measure, touchstone, and yardstick. There are

phrases related to standard such as, *raising the standard*, *raising the bar* or *moving the goalpost*. These words, phrases, sayings have promoted debate since the inception of public education to now will be discussed in Chapter 2 of this research. It would seem that those in political positions and those with money have the biggest voice (as will be seen in Pat Shannon's (2013) work, *Closer Readings of the Common Core*) as to how standards are birthed and mandated. It is important to know about how these new standards were "born," grew, and have become mandated almost nationwide. However, more importantly are the voices and experiences of those (teachers and administrators) who see them put into action either half heartedly, with blind fidelity, or whole heartedly holding to the spirit of *raising the standard* but seasoned with common sense. Chapter 3 will explain the research design, methodology, and procedures of this study with Chapter 4 reporting the findings of the participants. The last chapter (Chapter 5) will contain a summary of the findings, a discussion and conclusions drawn from the findings, and recommendations for further study.

As some experts and politicians cry out for reform in education due to low performing American schools compared to other nations, other experts respond with "not that type of reform!" Is raising the bar/standard really a bad idea? Shouldn't all educators and Americans want to raise the standard and move forward as Friedman and Mandelbaum (2012) have called us do in, *That Used to be Us?*

What is all the controversy about? What are the ELA-CCSS standards? What do the experts from differing camps voice, is explored in Chapter 2. Furthermore, a closer look at the theoretical framework will be addressed, as well as a discussion on Blue Ribbon Schools and the rigorous requirements for obtaining this recognition.

All of these issues surrounding the topic of the new English Language Arts standards and how to teach reading effectively truly gives educators a reason to be concerned about the national standards reform movement and implementation.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Change has arrived in districts and schools via state departments of education in the form of Common Core State Standards across the nation (Forbes, 2015). The new Pennsylvania standards (The PA Core) implementation in schools was mandated for the start of the 2013-2014 school year. This study seeks to understand the lived experiences of an elementary school regarding the adoption, implementation, and practice of the Pennsylvania English Language Arts Core Standards (PA ELA Core). Why is this important and why does it matter? A litany of reasons surrounds this problem. Issues include teachers and administrators working together in addressing concerns, providing professional development supporting the ELA PA Core, high stakes testing, who controls and dictates these types of changes, and who determines effective curriculum and instruction revolving around the teaching of literacy at the elementary level.

Chapter two views the English Language Arts Common Core State Standards (ELA-CCSS) from the broad sweeping stroke of standards reform change across the nation. The specifics of the study, however, will consider the case of the PA ELA Core at a National Blue Ribbon Award elementary school in Pennsylvania. After examining the lived experience through a high achieving school, it is the aim that this study can provide insight into how a standards change that revolves around relationships, communications, professional development and changes in curriculum and instruction can be done and instituted meaningfully to affect positive student growth.

This chapter will provide background and history of the Common Core and discuss other recent standards reform movements (NCLB). With the history, birth, and

growth of the CCSS come controversy and questions about local, state, and federal control, what is best for children when it comes to learning, curriculum and instruction (do the new standards favor some vs. others?), costs, and who benefits children, schools or text-book companies? With so much controversy and such a push and focus on the CCSS (Crawford, 2014), concerns of educators cannot be ignored. Schools, administrators, and Departments of Education cannot just say, “Teach these standards,” expect it to happen, and hope for the best.

This chapter will be divided into several sections beginning with an explanation and description of the ELA-CCSS from reading, writing, speaking, and listening and what prompted their creation followed by a brief history of reform since 1983. Questions, confusions, and conflicts will be addressed about the further prognosis of the ELA-CCSS from their educational and political implications and if there is a true need for these new rigorous standards. This chapter will then transition into what professional educational organizations and literacy experts say about the ELA-CCSS with a discussion on mind shift and implementation. Adult and social learning theory will be addressed through the frameworks of Professional Learning Communities. The chapter will end with reviewing what others have found in their research pertaining to the ELA-CCSS.

### **What Is the ELA-CCSS?**

For some, the words “Common Core Standards” evoke a range of emotions as will be seen from educators, politicians, political parties, and citizens alike. When the term *standards* is used, a variety of feelings are aroused in educators from anger or fear, to testing, to accountability, to here we go again, or we already do that to this too shall pass (Rochester, 2013). How do the English Language Arts Common Core State

Standards differ from other standards? Are they really the same and don't all teachers use them already (Resmovits, 2014)? Following these questions and topics, there will be a brief description (as well as key highlights) of the ELA Common Core as explained by the founders, the Common Core State Standards Initiative website, NPR, The National Governor's Association and other experts such as Lucy Calkins (2012) and Pat Shannon (2013).

Despite new ELA standards, they are not a curriculum. According to Marge Scherer (2013) editor of Educational Leadership magazine, "It is important to remember that the common core is not a curriculum but more of a framework, the CCSS specifies high-level capacities that describe what students should know and be able to do in the 21<sup>st</sup> century". Six shifts differentiate the common core ELA which include an increase in non-fiction text, content area literacy in Science, History/Social Studies, and technical subjects, focus on academic vocabulary, writing arguments with text based support, increased complexity of texts, and focus on text based questions.

The CCSS reading standards are organized in a type of grid that offers a set of skills for readers of every age for both fiction and informational texts. Whether you read the ten shared anchor standards for reading literature or those for reading informational texts, educators will encounter the same skill set. As one reads across the grades, the specific expectations for skills grow. Despite sharing the same ten anchor standards, there are individual grade level skills for reading literature and informational skills (Calkins, 2012; NGA, 2014; NPR, 2014).

The CCSS claim the goal is to increase rigor, critical thinking, and communication skills in classrooms across America and are designed to ensure that

students graduating from high school are prepared to enter credit bearing entry courses in two or four year college programs or enter the workforce (NGA, 2014). It is hard to argue against this ideology; however, controversy abounds from this type of thinking just being a restructuring of the NCLB Act and its cost, to government control, to all the “missing pieces” in the ELA-CCSS (Resmovits, 2014; Rochester, 2013). Many dispute too that these standards are nothing new and that it will not change teaching practices and curriculum but just create the same products, resources, and textbooks with different or new labels. Patrick Shannon (2013) states, “We lack a compelling evidentiary base for the idea of CCSS or the subsequent national alignment of curriculum and assessment” (p. 13). Determining “more of the same” or approaching standard implementation differently will depend on how schools view this reform.

### **A Closer Look at the Shift in Reading**

“*Close Reading*” is a part of the ELA Common Core which is defined as uncovering layers of meaning which leads to deeper comprehension. A more in depth explanation states:

Close, analytic reading stresses engaging with a text of sufficient complexity directly and examining meaning thoroughly and methodically, encouraging students to read and reread deliberately. Directing student attention on the text itself empowers students to reflect on the meanings of individual words and sentences; the order in which sentences unfold; and the development of ideas over the course of the text, which ultimately leads students to arrive at an understanding of the text as a whole. (PARCC, 2015)



## **Close Reading**

The emphasis is on reading, thinking, and responding grounded in the evidence from the text, both literary and informational. Close Reading can ask literal questions to check for understanding, but then goes beyond the literal and lower level questions to promote richer and deeper comprehension through speaking, thinking, and writing. When supporting an answer, thought, or idea, it must be proven with evidence from the text to support one's ideas, argument, or point of view. This type of comprehension is just not about the teacher asking and students answering questions, but about teachers and students grappling with the text and rereading (several times) to seek deeper discussion and understanding (Boyles, 2013; Dalton, 2013; Fisher & Frey, 2012).

Close Reading goes beyond making connections with the text (text to text, text to self, text to world) that began to be used regularly for the teaching and testing of comprehension (Zimmerman & Keene, 2013; Keene, 2010). According to Boyles (2013), making connections is not a poor practice, but certainly cannot be the only path to understanding. The "making connections" strategy often left readers with the idea that the text was simply grounds for their own musings and images that popped into their heads, as well as random questions that did little to enhance their understanding of the text itself. Close Reading brings a more focused intent to chunks of text with evidence based answers, thoughts, and ideas grounded in the specific piece of text that students are reading. David Coleman, architect of the ELA CCSS, claims that people don't give a care (care is a paraphrase for a vulgar word he used) about how one thinks or feels but that you can make an argument with some warrants for conclusions (as cited in Shannon, 2013). Not everyone agrees with this premise. Larson (2013) acknowledges that the

CCSS emphasizes that meaning is in the text and not in the interaction between the reader and text; but counters that this separation positions the reader as subservient to text and divorces them from personal engagement (Rosenblatt, 1978; Shannon, 2013). The premise for Christopher Lehman and Kate Robert's (2014) book, *Falling in Love with Close Reading*, claims it doesn't have to be a debate on opposing sides, but there is a way to achieve both goals.

### **Writing, Speaking, and Listening in the ELA-CCSS**

The CCSS claims it not only provides a more balanced approach with fiction and non-fiction through climbing the staircase of complexity through close reading, but that they are equally rigorous and important for writing. No Child Left Behind (NCLB) emphasized phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension with writing nowhere to be found. The ELA-CCSS refocuses the nation on students' proficiency as writers. Writing is seen as a reciprocal partner with reading and an avenue through which reading work and assessment will occur (Tyre, 2013).

### **Writing**

Three types of writing are emphasized, narrative, argument (persuasive), and informational (NGA, 2014) with ensuing genres falling under these three categories. Achieving the goals of the standards will require *teaching* writing across contents rather than just assigning it. This type of writing will need to be done through the writing process, writing workshop, and writing authentic pieces for a variety of purposes where students receive individual and explicit feedback, are research proven in obtaining results, and benefit students throughout their lives (Calkins, *et al.* 2012).

## **Speaking and Listening**

The ELA-CCSS call for closer reading, deeper analytical thinking, and text based answers through reading and writing. The ELA-CCSS claims this type of thinking will also come through rigorous standards in speaking and listening. The anchor standards for speaking and listening go beyond just giving a speech and “show and tell” type activities. As in the literacy and informational text standards, there are anchors (overall) and then progressive ones through the grade levels. The first three anchor standards address comprehension and collaboration in speaking and listening while the second three pertain to presentation of knowledge and ideas as noted below:

1. Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
2. Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.
3. Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric.
4. Present information, findings, and supporting evidence such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.
5. Make strategic use of digital media and visual displays of data to express information and enhance understanding of presentations.

6. Adapt speech to a variety of contexts and communicative tasks, demonstrating command of formal English when indicated or appropriate.  
(Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2015)

The ELA-CCSS offers instructional suggestions pertaining to speaking and listening where teachers assign debate-style discussions, students learn to evaluate a speaker's point of view, and there is a focus on oral presentations in the older grades through an argumentative format (NGA, 2010). Some researchers disagree and feel that this approach provides a narrow view of how teachers can support speaking and listening skills. They propose that discussion should be extended beyond formal debate and that students engage in natural discussions that cover a range of topics (Calkins, Ehrenworth, & Lehman, 2012; Zimmerman & Keene, 2013;).

These categories are the primary shifts within the ELA Standards, but how did these shifts become mandated in schools?

### **Catalysts for the CCSS**

*A Nation at Risk* (1983) fueled the fire for government intervention due to its claims that the United States' education system was failing to meet the national need for a competitive workforce. James J. Harvey, who synthesized the feedback from the commission, stated, "The educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people" and the statement, "If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war." Education became a major priority and put in the spotlight with following presidents bolstering federal involvement by creating the National

Education Goals Panel (George H. Bush). Building on these ideas (and other reports, *Becoming a Nation of Readers, Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children, and the National Reading Panel Report*) ([www.readingrockets.org](http://www.readingrockets.org)) was President Clinton signing into law the Goals 2000: Educate America Act on March 31, 1994, that congress appropriated \$105 million. In addition to this Act, Clinton reauthorized the ESEA under the guise of Improving American School Act of 1994. Funds were available to those who submitted the proper paperwork agreeing to the Act confines (Parks, 1994). George W. Bush greatly increased federal control with No Child Left Behind that mandated statewide testing, annual progress measurements, teacher qualifications, public school choice, and after-school tutoring.

The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act became law in 2001 and was established to close achievement gaps, promote rigorous accountability, and ensure that all students are on track to graduate college and be career ready. Millions of dollars have been spent on testing (Ravitch, 2014) and standards related materials, programs, and curriculum that made claims (of being scientifically-based research) to support teachers in helping students reach the state standards which would lead to better scores on high stakes tests. The NCLB Act required all students in all schools to be 100 percent proficient in 2013-2014. Schools not meeting annual yearly progress (AYP) were at the mercy to do as the government said or they would lose funding. On September 23, 2011, the Obama administration gave a flexible, but stringent, reprieve in being 100 proficient for states that could show they were transitioning students, teachers, and schools to a system aligned with college and career ready standards for all students, developing accountability systems, and undertaking reforms to support effective classroom

instruction and school leadership. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan stated, “One of my highest priorities is to help ensure that Federal laws and policies support the significant reforms underway in many States and school districts and do not hinder State and local innovation aimed at increasing the quality of instruction and improving student academic achievement” (Duncan, 2011).

Prior to this proclamation by the Obama administration in 2010, states across the country were in collaboration with teachers, researchers, and leading experts to design and develop the Common Core State Standards. The Common Core State Standards Initiative web page makes it clear that each state independently made the decision to adopt these standards and that the federal government was not involved in the development of the standards. Under the frequently asked questions section of the CCSS web page, it states that the nation’s governors and education commissioners, through their representative organizations the National Governors Association (NGA) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), led the development of the Common Core State Standards and continue to lead the initiative. Teachers, parents, school administrators, and experts from across the country, together with state leaders, provided input into the development of the standards (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). The Common Core State Standards make very similar claims as does NCLB (2001), but state the differences are in the claims of being “new and improved” by taking the best standards from each state and other high performing countries around the world. With consultation from experts, teachers, and parents, they were formulated to be realistic and practical for the classroom. The web page further shows how the CCSS are different from anything seen

and how essentially everyone is in agreement, and that these are landmark decisions that will change the face of education. This initiative, billed as being publicly driven, has also benefited greatly with a more than \$200 million dollar donation by Bill and Melinda Gates who was approached by David Coleman (Author of the ELA CCSS) and Gene Wilhoit (Director of a national group of state school chiefs) for the financial backing in 2008. The early meetings and financial support of Bill Gates credits him with pulling off the swift common core revolution (Layton, 2014). The Washington Post describes the breakdown of the monies and which organizations and educational institutions benefit from the financial donations and their relationship with the CCSS (Strauss, 2013).

### **A Troubled Beginning**

Even with this generous donation, funding the implementation ranks at the top of the biggest challenges for half the states that have made the adoption. Two institutes (Pioneer Institute and Thomas B. Fordham) have issued reports on costs for CCSS implementation from \$15.9 billion to more modest ranges of \$1.2 to \$8.2 billion, respectively, depending upon costs of materials, books, professional development, and technology (Rothman, 2013). The cost and administration of a new generation of assessments is questionable as two companies (Partnership for the Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers [PARCC] and the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium) were awarded grants of more than \$175 million by the U.S. Department of Education to measure individual student growth toward college and career readiness and provide data that can inform decisions regarding teaching and learning, program improvement, and educator effectiveness. As of May 2015, the first round of testing nearly five million students has taken place. Scores will most likely look different from

the past due to new standards and higher expectations. Schools should not compare past scores and tests to the current because of the differing expectations, but identify where growth needs to happen from current results (Slover, 2015).

Furthermore, in response to the CCSS initiative and the call for development of tools and resources for educators to use in adjusting their classroom practices and measurement of student progress through new assessments, the U.S. Department of Education launched the Race to the Top Assessment Program allocating \$362 million to support the development of new assessment systems and a range of related supports. Further questions remain about how often and frequent assessments will be administered, summative, diagnostic, mid year, or interim? Both PARCC and Smarter Balanced have different ideas on how this testing will happen (Doorey, 2013). The No Child Left Behind Act and its emphasis on accountability through high-stakes testing, has produced many negative results along with achievement gains which can certainly be attributed to “teaching to the test”. With all of the money being spent on assessments (Chingos, 2013), will anything change in this new era of standards reform? Research has shown that test-based accountability increases the time spent on test preparation rather than genuine instruction, saps teachers’ morale, and undercuts teachers’ professionalism (Nichols & Berliner, 2007).

Hiebert and Pearson (2013) claim that ELA-CCSS does not overturn what was learned about effective reading pedagogy during NCLB, but is the next step on a journey toward close, critical reading, and powerful writing. Words such as *robust, relevant to the real world, rigorous, scaling the staircase of complexity, world knowledge, high quality, capacity, stamina, and college-career ready* are used quite a bit in conversation



about the ELA-CCSS to promote the “rich-ness” and aim of the initiative. While these may be powerful words, what about the ideas behind them that are being promoted such as neoliberal values (Johnson, 2014) and privatizing public education? Despite standards reform, they do not necessarily change that in many classrooms across America, powerful teaching was taking place, higher order thinking was happening, and 21<sup>st</sup> century skills were being taught before teaching ever became standardized. Brooks and Dietz (2013) share examples of this type of teaching and fear that diversity in teaching, curriculum, instructional practices, and assessment is on the verge of extinction due to the narrowing of education as the CCSS becomes the only lens that it is seen through and its wholesale standardization of the educational process. They further explain that the CCSS are not necessarily the problem but that its standardization of student outcome measures, teacher evaluation practices and curriculum materials. The initiative compartmentalizes thinking, benefits profit making companies, and narrows creativity and professionalism of teachers, and limits meaningful student learning (Shannon, 2013). Brooks and Dietz (2013) further question if standards can truly determine robust and “relevant to the real world experiences” in a classroom among teachers and students. Robust and relevant real world experiences take place between teachers and students who have different experiences, backgrounds, and schemas – not on some list of standards to follow. Haberman (2010) agrees that like NCLB, the CCSS do not promise much difference as they both help to eliminate opportunities for students to develop the skills and disposition associated with 21<sup>st</sup> century learning skills such as curiosity, exploration, perseverance, critical and creative thinking, and complex problem solving. As what happened with the older

standards, the new standards are likely to do the same, replace what they claim to want to do with test preparation curriculums.

### **Future Prognosis**

What are the chances of success? The most reasonable prediction is that the Common Core initiative will have little or no effect on student achievement (Loveless, 2013). Loveless explains that the advocates of the initiative are counting on two mechanisms – high quality professional development and improvements in curriculum. Loveless counters that there is little research on the topic of high-quality professional development and most only provide suggestions rather than prescriptive guidelines. As far as curriculum, the Common Core website (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2012) make it clear that the standards are not curriculum; it is up to local schools to tailor instruction to the individual needs of the students in their classrooms. Loveless (2010) makes the point about who then really decides which is the “better” curriculum. The standards could simply benefit textbook and curriculum companies who line up their texts and materials with the ELA-CCSS. According to Chingos and Whitehurst (2012), the research on effective curriculum is as thin as the research on professional development. Instructional programs can differ greatly in their effectiveness and currently there is no basis to measure the quality of materials.

### **State, Political, and Organizational Implications**

Lawmakers have responded to the CCSS by introducing legislation that would at least temporarily block standards including Indiana that have regressed from their full implementation and put the full adoption on hold. In Indiana, two moms, Heather

Crossin and Erin Tuttle (backed by Tea Party groups, Pioneer Institute, Hoover's Institution and Heritage Foundation) saw the homework their children were bringing home. They considered it to be lower level than what they were doing prior to CCSS related curriculum and this was their catalyst for turning the common core tide in Indiana. Their inquisitiveness and adamant pursuit in seeking clarification and understanding of the CCSS created such a stir that Governor Mike Pence signed a bill suspending the implementation (Wallsten & Layton, 2013). Several states who have adopted the CCSS are also having second thoughts with concerns about the CCSS such as weakening states already accepted standards, cost, and collection of certain student information (Associated Press, 2013). Some states, such as Pennsylvania, temporarily suspended full implementation and have websites (as well as most states) committed to stopping common core ([www.restoringpaeducation.org](http://www.restoringpaeducation.org)), claiming it needs stopped due to national control, cost (estimated at \$645 million), lowering expectations compared to other countries, massive federal student tracking, etc. (2015). Pennsylvania is now in "full swing" naming their standards the PA Core. Likewise, Florida made name changes to get away from the stigma that the term, *Common Core*, has created (Crawford, 2014). Currently, Indiana, North Carolina, South Carolina, Missouri, Nebraska, Texas, Oklahoma and Virginia, have not adopted the Common Core. Mary Fallin, Governor of Oklahoma, stated, "We cannot ignore the widespread concern of citizens, parents, educators and legislators who have expressed fear that adopting Common Core gives up local control of Oklahoma's public schools" (Strauss, 2014).

The back peddling of many states on their initial acceptance of the CCSS (and as more becomes known of the standards) has created strange relationships among liberals

and conservatives. Although the Republican National Committee declared its opposition to the Common Core due to its seemingly *one size fits all approach*, many well-known Republicans are strong advocates for it such as former Florida and Arkansas Governors Jeb Bush, Mike Huckabee, and Louisiana Governor Bobby Jindal (Baker, 2013).

Juxtapose these politicians with a cadre of other critics, such as conservative broadcaster Glenn Beck. He believes that the Common Core will invite greater and greater indoctrination and bias. Former U.S. Assistant Secretary of Education Diane Ravitch, (appointed to public office by both George H. Bush and Bill Clinton) opposes the CCSS and is troubled about the lack of field tests showing efficacy to these standards (Glaeser, 2013; Ravitch, 2013). There is also the mistrust of the many large corporations that support the standards (Baker, 2013). Republicans and conservatives are not the only ones questioning the Common Core. Many Democratic critics say the CCSS is not based on research and that parts of it ignore what is known about how students learn. Many of these critics also believe core-aligned standardized tests aren't all that better in assessing student achievement as former tests (Strauss, 2013). Even liberal political comedians are adding their witty commentary to the controversy. "Common Core testing prepares students for what they will face as adults: pointless stress and confusion" said Stephen Colbert from Comedy Central's: *The Colbert Report* (Soave, 2014).

The president of the nation's teachers union (NEA), Dennis Van Roekel, as well as Randi Weingarten (president of the American Federation of Teachers/AFT), called for a moratorium on the standards stating that teachers and schools need more time to be trained in implementation of the standards into classrooms with integrity. In addition, more time is needed to have the standards field-tested. Other concerns by these

organization's presidents are mandates of testing and student performance being tied into teacher evaluation (Baker, 2013; Resmovits, 2013).

What initially seemed to be a sweeping wave of reform that was accepted by almost all of the United States has now drawn a wave of magnified scrutiny (Thorner, 2015). Voices from Democrats, Republicans, conservatives, liberals, parents, and educators alike have concerns about the CCSS. Issues with testing, costs, narrowing of the curriculum, government control, and implementation have created controversial debates across the nation. Can there be any *good* with so many alleged *bad* and *ugly* aspects of the CCSS, who many consider to be one experimental big idea (Woodruff, 2012)? Despite talk of putting implementation on hold and backing off on original stances, many argue that the CCSS are the best reform that has happened to education in the United States (Ohanian, 2014).

### **The Need for the ELA-CCSS**

Regardless of the many questions, controversies, and uncertainties with the CCSS, what was the big draw that prompted so many states to jump on board with adopting it (Lewin, 2010) within such a short period? Aside from tracing it to the \$4.35 billion "Race to the Top" stimulus bill created by the federal Department of Education and the exemption from NCLB should states adopt Common Core (or Common Core like) standards (Pennsylvanians Against Common Core, 2015), what distinguishes them from other educational reform?

Compelling evidence namely suggests that when teachers deliver rich, deep, rigorous, orderly, well-sequenced content to children from all walks of life, they learn more (Tyre, 2013). Contrast Common Core to NCLB, which had these intentions, but

created a narrowing of the curriculum by teaching specific math and reading skills on which students were being tested. Instead of teaching a richer and deeper thinking curriculum, content was “dumbed down” and made as simple as possible to “make the grade” on the test (Pappas, 2010). The CCSS avoids the narrowing of curriculum by increasing complex materials throughout grades and grade levels (Tyre, 2013). In *Supporting Students’ Movement up the Staircase of Text Complexity*, Elfrieda Heibert (2012) talks of this “staircase” for which the ELA-CCSS calls and the instructional decisions that classroom teachers must take in advancing students from considering sentence length, vocabulary, rubrics, anchor texts, features of texts, etc. Moving students up the staircase of text complexity requires analysis and close scrutinizing of the types of reading students are being assigned.

The CCSS also emphasizes reaching goals (standards) by spending time and going deeper in curriculum and reading rather than scratching the surface on coverage of larger chunks of information (Billings & Roberts, 2013; Long, 2013). In addition, the Common Core claims equity for all students as opposed to “teaching to the middle.” Claims are made that no matter a person’s socio-cultural status, race, gender, zip code, or parent’s income, the Common Core addresses inequity by providing a wide set of standards which ensure a complete education for all students, increasing the likelihood that they will graduate from high school ready to succeed (NGA, 2010; Quay, 2010; Van Roekel, 2011; WestEd, 2013;). Pat Shannon and his cadre of contributors (2013) in *Closer Reading of the Common Core* disagree with this notion. Catherine Compton-Lilly and Kristopher Stewart argue that the logic behind the ELA-CCSS ignores the diversity of experiences and backgrounds that children bring to literacy learning (p. 63) and fails to

acknowledge cultural diversity (p. 69). Questions of diversity can only be stirred when U.S Education Secretary, Arne Duncan says, “I find it fascinating that some of the opposition to the Common Core State Standards has come from “white suburban moms who all of a sudden find their child isn’t as brilliant as they thought they were, and their school isn’t quite as good as they thought they were” (Strauss, 2013).

Currently in education, most states have standards in place, which in some cases are significantly different from one another. One feature of the CCSS is that a nation (The United States) will have common goals for all students to strive towards. For families with children in school, they are assured that if they are living in Texas and they move to Ohio, their children will have continuity in the education they are receiving (Long, 2013; Martinez, 2013; Quay, 2010; Tyre, 2013; WestEd, 2013).

### **Support for the ELA-CCCSS**

Politics or not, many well-known educational organizations and literacy experts support the Common Core. While some still have reservations pertaining to immediate implementation and certain components of the ELA-CCSS, most feel that this effort is the catalyst to ignite deeper learning. The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, International Literacy Association, and literacy experts have voiced their positions on the ELA PA Core.

### **Educational Organizations**

The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD), a global leader in education whose mission is developing and delivering innovative programs, products, and services to help educators learn, teach, and lead is a 140,000 plus members strong organization and is an endorsing member of the Common Core. The organization

formulated the CCSS Summit Report: *Fulfilling the Promise of the Common Core State Standards, Moving from Adoption to Implementation to Sustainability*. This report was funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation as part of a three-year grant to provide both teachers and school leaders with specific information about the Common Core State Standards and to develop and deliver technical assistance for purposes of successful implementation of the standards at the state, district, school, and classroom levels (ASCD, 2012). The report discusses the launch of the CCSS and its development and adoption and the problems that are occurring with the rapid adoption of many states. Gene Carter, ASCD Executive Director, spoke to the issue of rapid adoption and talks of the need to further investigate the standards to aid in the transition. He stated,

Rapid adoption of the Common Core standards has outstripped both professional and public understanding of the standards and their potential for changing the learning and teaching paradigm. It is essential that district and school leaders have the opportunity to learn about the standards and raise questions that will help guide their transition, implementation, and communication strategies (pp. 12-13).

In addition, the report surveyed and analyzed several states as ASCD looks further at educators' needs and the support needed they can provide as the CCSS moves forward towards what they believe is full implementation.

The International Literacy Association (ILA) sees great potential for the ELA Common Core and has written a position paper on implementation guidance for educators. They provide guidelines in addressing the various components of the ELA that the Common Core calls for such as use of challenging texts, comprehension, vocabulary, disciplinary (content) literacy, and diverse learners (IRA, 2012).



Although the National Education Association (NEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) feels more time and training is needed for Common Core implementation, they partnered with the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers, two of the primary organizations responsible for moving forward with national standards. The “official home” of the Common Core Standards is hosted and maintained by both organizations and provides all stakeholders information and resources (2015). In addition, other leading educational organizations such as the College Board, Achieve, and ACT backed the movement with the NEA, AFT, IRA, National Council of Mathematics (NCTM), and the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) served as review groups which helped to shape the standards as they are currently (NEA, 2010). The NEA further states in this policy brief about the characteristics that make these standards special and the accomplishments which can be made, given the proper time and resources (2010).

### **Literacy Experts**

Well-known experts in the field of literacy speak to the positive attributes of the ELA-CCSS and even refute the plausible stories that revolve around the complexities, challenges, and stories of the CCSS. One literary expert, Timothy Shanahan, a professor at the University of Illinois who has written over 150 books, articles, and chapters on reading education and has served on many panels and boards. In *The Common Core Ate My Baby and Other Urban Legends* (2013), Shanahan dismantles five “legends” to show what the ELA-CCSS really entail. The five ideas that Shanahan refutes are (a) the new standards prohibit teachers from setting purposes for reading or discussing prior knowledge; (b) teachers are no longer required to teach phonological awareness, phonics,

or fluency; (c) English teachers can no longer teach literature; (d) teachers must teach students at frustration levels, and (e) most schools are already teaching to the new standards. Going into detail, he speaks to false information that many educators misinterpreted:

Reading lessons will need to shift away from an emphasis on pre-reading to greater attention to rereading and follow up. Because texts will be considerably harder, teachers will not only need to become more adept at motivating students to read but also adept at teaching students the rigors of demanding text without telling them what the texts say. (Shanahan, Fisher, & Frey, 2012)

There is no ban on pre-reading, just a shift in how educators should go about it with more rereading. The ELA-CCSS has a section titled *Reading: Foundational Skills*, which provides a clear and substantial description of phonological awareness, phonics, and fluency that does not contradict any research from NCLB. English teachers need to continue teaching literacy but reading in general needs to have more of a balance with informational texts, as well as literature (Shanahan 2013). On teaching at frustration levels, Shanahan, along with Allington (DeWitt, 2012), use the analogy of a runner in training who needs a steady diet of various workouts (some easier and some more difficult), to improve and get stronger. Likewise, readers need the same throughout the grade levels and do not need a steady diet of easy reading but rather of varying complexity, some simple and more difficult. “The point is to get kids used to reading more difficult texts on their own.” Allington also adds, “Just remember that what you do with your kids before they read those harder texts will go a long way in determining how much difficulty they will have” (DeWitt, 2012).

David Coleman and Susan Pimental, lead authors of the English language arts and literacy standards, wrote a revision of the publisher's criteria where they directed suggestions to the publishing industry in developing standards-appropriate textbooks. Coleman had made suggestions about not delving into context of readings, but just to give the text to students to read. However, he eased off slightly after receiving much negative feedback to what many educators and researchers found to be an affront to current practices (Shanahan, 2013). The revision clearly states, "Student background knowledge and experiences can illuminate the reading..." (Coleman & Pimental, p. 7). Susan Sandler and Zaretta Hammond support that pre-reading is alive in the Common Core and state that the rumor of no pre-reading is a misrepresentation of the published standard criteria (2013). Students need to be able to draw on prior knowledge and be able to make connections to their reading, but not at the sake of being able to analyze, evaluate, and draw inferences from texts.

Although he has deep concerns and misgivings about the ELA-CCSS, David Pearson (another renown reading expert and professor of literacy education at UC Berkeley) supports the standards and the consistent message that every state will have, instead of 50 conflicting and confusing set of standards. Pearson also states that the CCSS has a flexible component to them which make them 'living standards' as opposed to others and thirdly he sees them as moving reading into deeper learning, greater accountability to careful reading and the use of evidence to support claims and reasoning in both reading and writing, and applying the fruits of our learning to improve the world beyond schooling and text (Pearson, in Press). Deeper learning and careful reading is something most experts agree upon when it comes to the ELA-CCSS. With such an

emphasis on using a wide range of texts and multimedia sources to learn important content from text and to make and defend arguments directly from texts, comprehension strategies take on increasing importance. Teaching specific comprehension strategies and deeper ELA-CCSS thinking with a variety of texts falls right in line with the work of Keene and Zimmerman (2013), as well as a considerable body of others research (Calkins, 2010; Gallagher, 2009; Harvey & Goudvis, 2013, 2007; Keen & Zimmerman, 2007; Miller, 2013).

In *Pathways to the Common Core* (Calkins, Ehrenworth, & Lehman, 2012), the authors introduce the book with addressing critiques and questions of the CCSS also. However, Lucy Calkins puts forth a challenge to educators to look at the standards in one of two ways. You can view them as a curmudgeon (miser, crusty, ill-tempered), as the worst standards reform in the world or they can be treated like gold and go on to provide support, guidance and directions to promote high level/complex reading and comprehension in both fiction and non-fiction texts. While acknowledging that the CCSS are daunting, they are achievable. Calkins, Ehrenworth, and Lehman (2012) lay out the following framework in their support of the ELA-CCSS - with new CCSS assessments on the horizon, accept the reality of them and let them inform instruction. They suggest to not implement too many new programs but rather rely on research and best practice, allow teachers to observe one another to share expertise, and implement reforms with fidelity so they are well thought out and create long-term success.

Others make no concessions or caveats to how the ELA-CCSS could be acceptable or work in schools and classrooms. Stephen Krashen (2014) feels there is no need or evidence that the common core will do kids any good and that it ignores the

actual problem in American education, which is poverty. Sandra Stotsky (2013) directs her attention to the standards themselves indicating that there are fatal flaws with the ELA-CCSS stating that they will only confuse struggling readers and writers further, not helping student become college and career ready which the standards claim to do.

### **Mindset Shift and Implementation**

With so much controversy and money being invested into the CCSS (Chingos, 2013) can schools and teachers effectively implement the ELA-CCSS? Because the standards are not curriculum but rather objectives to reach, the implication is clear, educators must translate the standards into an engaging and effective curriculum (McTighe & Wiggins, 2012). There would seem to be an agreement that the standards are important and worthwhile, seeing that 42 states have adopted them. Nowhere is there a *prescription* to get students to the goal. The Common Core calls for all students to reach these outcomes but good teachers know that it takes more than a “one size fits all” approach to get them there. Because students are at various academic levels, teachers need to do whatever is necessary to meet students where they are educationally. Teachers need to align (differentiate) their plans with student needs in moving toward the CCSS. This process begins with the environment where there is a growth mindset with the belief that all kids can learn. It is about developing a community of learners. Next, it is about “teaching up” and giving students a set target to shoot for by establishing KUD’s (Know, Understand, Do). What should students know, what should they understand, and what should students be able to do? Teachers need to use various forms of differentiated assessments to help guide their instruction with students and practice the real meaning of the Latin root for assessment, “assidere” which means “to sit beside, mentor, coach.” On

the way to the outcomes, teachers must be adjusting daily, planning for student differences and managing the whole process (Tomlinson, 2013). What does this mean for teaching and learning? It means by any and all means necessary, flexible grouping, student choice, student interest studies, access to more complex texts through multiple delivery systems, use of rubrics and various forms to assess, interactive lessons that make students think deeper about content, topics, and subjects vs. rote memorization and lecturing. What this requires though is a shift – a shift in mindset, thinking, teaching, questioning, and learning. For some, it will come easier than others and it will have to be done in explicit small increments as opposed to simply giving every teacher a copy of the CCSS and telling them to read them and then expect the transfer to magically happen. Educators must be ensured time and resources through more effective, sustained, and collaborative professional development, not just one-stop workshops (Walker, 2013).

The process of implementation will not happen overnight nor will it be easy (Calkins *et al.* 2012). Many suggest the best format for CCSS implementation is through professional learning communities and collegial experiences (Calkins et al. 2012; McLaughlin & Overturf, 2012; Neuman & Roskos, 2013;), which are characterized by shared leadership, collective creativity, shared values and vision, supportive conditions, and shared personal practice (Dufour, Eaker, & Baker, 1998). Teachers and principals sitting together in a collaborative way (McTighe & Wiggins, 2012) and delving into the standards, discussing and planning what fits where and the types of units and instructional practices that will benefit students best will be more beneficial than doing a power point and wishing everyone well. Johnna Weller, discusses *15 Wrong Ways to Implement the Common Core*. Several tie into with collaborative implementation such

as, don't empower the creative genius of teachers, go it alone, ignore professional development, and don't network outside your school. Weller further states the reasons one should do these to make CCSS a reality in schools and curriculum (2013).

The literature has much to say about what millionaires, politicians, state departments, authors of the CCSS, educational organizations and the experts feel regarding the ELA-CCSS, but what about those who interact and teach our 5-12 year old students on a day to day basis from year to year? Sandra Wilde (Shannon, 2014) makes a case that teachers are at the bottom of the delivery system when it comes to professional development system and poses the question, "What if, instead of placing teachers at the end of the delivery chain, school reform placed them in positions in which they could name the problems, develop alternative routes toward solutions, test them in their classroom, and talk about their successes and struggles with their peers – not just follow the sign that someone with more authority (but less experience) has posted?" (p. 77-78). Theories on adult learning seeks to look at how adult learners can better be supported as they are engaged in professional development

### **Community Lenses**

As many suggest, the best format for CCSS implementation is through professional learning communities and collegial experiences (Calkins *et al.* 2012; McLaughlin & Overturf, 2012; McTighe & Wiggins, 2012; Roskos & Neuman, 2013). What does the literature say about professional learning communities and communities of practice? PLCs are the lenses that this research views the implementation of the ELA-CCSS and is the theoretical framework for this study.

## **Professional Learning Communities**

Kotter (1996) talks of the changes which have helped some organizations “but in too many situations the improvements (changes) have been disappointing and the carnage has been appalling, with wasted resources and burned-out, scared, or frustrated employees” (p. 4). Many books have been written on educational reform and change. We all know that change is difficult (Dufour & Eaker, 1998) but Michael Fullan (1993) has said, “Conflict is essential to any successful change effort” (p. 27). Conflict is obviously present with the CCSS as noted earlier. So could the change or approach that is sought be as simple as involving the staff and transforming it into a Professional Learning Community (PLC)? “Simple” is a huge understatement, because by no means is it easy to develop any educational/school setting into a PLC. A Professional Learning Community is characterized by a shared mission, vision, and values; collective inquiry; collaborative teams; an orientation toward action and a willingness to experiment; commitment to continuous improvement; and a focus on results (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). A framework that claims to see the change in our schools where teachers are actively engaging their students, collaboratively sharing strategies and lessons, teachers leading professional development, teachers and administrators both holding one another accountable for good teaching and educational practices is through Professional Learning Communities. A place where teachers/administrators are not afraid to try different approaches for fear they might look bad and seen as not being effective (or feel like you're in a game of “gotcha”) than PLCs could be the way to go. PLCs are a place where dialogue and reflection is flowing, a collegial mentality, for the betterment of faculty,



staff, and students and where each department and the whole school are guided by a mission, vision, and value statements which are practiced daily.

Professional Learning Community (PLC) research supports how teachers and administrators can learn best. Drago-Severson's (2007) research on teacher learning also supports this ideology and adds that professional development needs to be embedded and derived from practice, should be ongoing (not one and done experiences), to be on-site/school based, focused on student achievement, integrated with school reform processes, *centered around teacher collaboration and sensitive to teachers' learning needs* (Hawley & Valli, 1999).

Can PLCs really make a difference? Louis, Kruse, and Raywid (1996) argue that when schools attempt significant reform, efforts to form a school wide professional community are critical. Schmoker (2006) says schools need to set goals and identify areas of weakness; arrangements should be made for teachers to work regularly in teams to share, prepare, assess, and adjust their teaching on the basis of formative assessment results, a virtual definition of a true professional learning community. These few, simple structures and practices act on levels of achievement because they directly affect the factor with the largest influence on learning: instruction. Instruction in this case directly pertains to the ELA-CCSS. Naysayers can complain that it is impossible to create PLCs with so many teachers with various agendas, personalities, opinions on standards, reading instruction and the ELA-CCSS. Most would agree that changing personalities and behavior is tough, comparably; changing a textbook is not so tough. Personality is hard to define but is assumed to be responsible for attitudes and behavior patterns that are fairly consistent with how a person feels, thinks and behaves (Camp, 2007; Papilia,

Sterns, Feldman). With this thought on adult learning in mind, adults over time tend to become entrenched in their way of thinking which often takes much persuasion and time to change. There is no doubt that Professional Learning Communities are a different way of thinking, and they are not necessarily led with one type of leadership style. The PLC model encompasses a truly differentiated leadership approach sharing various styles such as participative/democratic, coaching/team approach, delegative, transformational, and even situational. The differentiated approach to leadership addresses various personalities and is what many consider to be essential if schools are to be successful in the 21st century. Schmoker (2004) states in *The School Administrator*,

The concurrence among researchers and practitioners in support of this conclusion (continuous, structured teacher collaboration improves the quality of teaching, and pays big, often immediate dividends in student learning and professional morale in virtually any setting) is both stunning and underappreciated. Advocates for focused, structured teacher collaboration include Roland Barth, Emily Calhoun, Linda Darling-Hammond, Richard Elmore, Michael Fullan, Bruce Joyce, Judith Warren Little, Dan Lortie, Milbrey McLaughlin, Fred Newmann, Susan Rosenholtz, Rick Stiggins, James Stigler, Joan Talbert, Gary Wehlage, Grant Wiggins, Ronald Wolk, and numerous others.” (p. 48)

If we value public education, our profession, and see student achievement as our number one priority, then creating and developing professional learning communities in our schools is essential as Darling-Hammond (1996) states, “The commission recommends that schools be restructured to become genuine learning organizations for both students

and teachers; organizations that respect learning, honor teaching, and teach for understanding” (p. 198).

Peter Senge (1990) states, “You cannot have a learning organization without shared vision,” (p. 209) again; it essential that this is co-created by administration and staff so there is ownership. It is important to take some time to decide these and not in a “one and done” setting. This is something that needs communicated, lived and practiced daily. Dufour, Eaker, and Dufour (2005) state:

Teachers must not just be congenial or build camaraderie, but have professional dialogue that help build strategic teaching. Powerful collaboration that characterizes professional learning communities is a systematic process in which teachers work together to analyze and improve their classroom practices. Teachers work in teams, engaging in an ongoing cycle of questions that promote deep team learning. This process, in turn, leads to higher levels of student achievement” (p. 36).

Senge (1990) emphasizes the idea of “sharing in the process”, “co-creation”, and, “ownership”. Supporting this thinking and the framework of professional learning communities is also the theory of distributive leadership (Spillane, 2006). Schools and organizations do not grow without effective leadership, nor do professional learning communities thrive with an autocratic or authoritarian type of leader. A principal does not single handedly lead schools to greatness. School growth (and greatness) involves a variety of stakeholders involved in the process. Distributive leadership considers the *how* of school leadership – the daily performance of leadership routines, functions, and structures (Hallinger & Heck, 1996). Leadership practice centers not only on what

people do, but how and why they do it (Spillane, 2004). In order for a Professional Learning Community to work effectively, a principal cannot approach the position in an autocratic way but rather in a distributive way where the teachers and the principal are collaboratively working together through professional conversations, professional development and implementation of practices. Conversations are about learning for students and learning for the adults. Effective learning communities are democratic and participatory with shared authority and decision-making (Hord & Hirsh, 2009).

### **Communities of Practice**

Furthermore, other theories that are similar and support the idea of professional learning communities is Lave and Wenger's studies on *Communities of Practice* that support the idea of groups of people with similar interests and professions coming together to observe, discuss, and participate together in the task they are undertaking (1991).

Communities of practice are formed by people who engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavor: a tribe learning to survive, a band of artists seeking new forms of expression, a group of engineers working on similar problems, a clique of pupils defining their identity in the school, a network of surgeons exploring novel techniques, a gathering of first-time managers helping each other cope (Wenger, 2006). Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly.

Learners inevitably participate in communities of practitioners and the mastery of knowledge and skill that requires newcomers to move toward full participation in the sociocultural practices of a community.

Legitimate peripheral participation provides a way to speak about the relations between newcomers and old-timers, and about activities, identities, artifacts, and communities of knowledge and practice. A person's intentions to learn are engaged and the meaning of learning is configured through the process of becoming a full participant in a sociocultural practice. This social process, includes, indeed it subsumes, the learning of knowledgeable skills." (Lave & Wenger 1991, p. 29)

Learning is in the relationships between people, as McDermott states (in Murphy 1999, p. 17):

Learning traditionally gets measured as on the assumption that it is a possession of individuals that can be found inside their heads... [Here] learning is in the relationships between people. Learning is in the conditions that bring people together and organize a point of contact that allows for particular pieces of information to take on a relevance; without the points of contact, without the system of relevancies, there is not learning, and there is little memory. Learning does not belong to individual persons, but to the various conversations of which they are a part. (Smith, 2003, 2009)

In essence, being an educator is not a spectator sport. It means being involved in the game on the field and court. Actively participating in the process, sharing, talking, and learning together to improve our practice. No person in education is an island. Educators work so that people can become participants in communities of practice; they need to explore with people in communities how all may participate to the full. There is an intimate connection between knowledge and activity, most may not think of it that way

and it just happens somewhat naturally or routinely. However when learning is part of daily living and we shed light on it by purposefully thinking and talking about what we are doing, our practices are bound to improve. Solving problems and learning together is the norm rather than the exception in learning communities.

### **Climate and Culture**

Weather can vary from day to day or week to week in any geographical location. The climate of a geographical region however is a measure of how the weather “behaves” over time. This example can easily be applied to schools also. Every school across the nation has its own unique climate and culture. Within minutes, visitors get a sense of either a warm, welcoming place where they know their kids will be engaged in learning or vice versa. Climate and culture comes about by how people are greeted, the cleanliness of the building, the décor of the building/hallways, and student work displayed (or not), etc. (Brand, 2011; School Climate, 2015; What is School Climate? 2015).

Members of a school culture will shape one another and will evolve over time into a group of people who share similar characteristics (Gruenert & Whitaker, 2015). The culture of an organization is founded upon the assumptions, beliefs, values, and habits that constitute the norms for that organization (DuFour & Eaker, 1998, p. 131). Norms are the way that people think, feel, and act. Gruenert & Whitaker (2015) make further comparisons regarding culture and climate. Culture is the group’s personality while climate is the group’s attitude. Culture is based on values and beliefs with culture being based on perceptions. Most importantly, culture determines whether or not improvement is possible with climate being the first to improve when positive change is made.

Terrence Deal and Kent Peterson's (2009) work and book titled *Shaping School Culture* embraces the ideology of how *professional learning communities* are supported and work through a culture of schools having a shared sense of purpose, teacher involvement in decision making, collaborative work around instruction, norms of improvement, professional learning by staff, and a sense of joint responsibility for student learning. Deal and Peterson further collectively cite the multiple research that supports how culture fosters school effectiveness and productivity, improves collegiality, collaboration, communication, and problem solving practices. Their work explains how culture promotes innovation, school improvement, builds commitment, kindles motivation, and amplifies the energy and vitality of school staff, students, and community. Culture focuses attention on what is important and valued (pp. 12-14).

This single case study puts one high achieving elementary school under the lens to examine and understand how they have worked through the recent changes to English Language Arts Standards with the climate and culture that exists in the school. National Blue Ribbon Schools are defined next and give some insight into a school's culture and climate that promote such excellence.

### **National Blue Ribbon Schools**

Through the constructivist lens of Professional Learning Communities (Walmsley, 2012), this study is specifically studying a high performing school that has earned the recognition of being a National Blue Ribbon School. Achieving the status and recognition of being a Blue Ribbon school means meeting and maintaining high educational goals. Many studies have been done on Blue Ribbon Schools. Carney-Dalton (2001) studied teacher and principal perceptions on leadership proficiencies.

Vision, high expectations for quality performance, recognition and appreciation of the accomplishments of others, initiative, and enthusiasm were the top five frequently mentioned as leadership skills that supported Blue Ribbon academic excellence. Giffing (2010) also did a similar study on principal effectiveness in Blue Ribbon and non-Blue Ribbon schools and found that teachers perceive their principal as effective if the principal has good relations with them, employs and evaluates staff effectively, has high expectations, and does not exceedingly involve the community in the life of the school. A study conducted by Bernato (2001) investigated high-involvement behavior among decision teams in Blue Ribbon schools and non-Blue Ribbon schools and found three elements that emerged in Blue Ribbon schools. Organizational-Structure, communications, and school-community relationships were more strongly related to Blue Ribbon School vs. their counterparts. Many of the studies conducted on Blue Ribbon have similarities regarding perceptions of leadership roles and comparisons of Blue Ribbon and non-Blue Ribbon schools. Other studies investigate specific and unique sub-groups within Blue Ribbon schools such as use technology, library media, gifted students, Title One, physical educators, and more specifically studies geared toward middle and secondary schools. No study to date has investigated how a Blue Ribbon School negotiates the ELA Standards implementation process through the lenses of teachers and administrators. Specifically pertaining instructional practices, a narrative inquiry exploring instructional practices used during reading instruction in a Title One school was done in New Mexico (Kerney, 2010). Kerney's case study research investigated whether and how the use of particular instructional practices used during reading instruction contributed to student success in one school.



Schools receiving this distinction require educators and practices being aligned with a rigorous commitment to excellence and their ability to overcome outstanding odds to properly educate their students regardless of their background, ability, and location (Chen, 2015). The coveted National Blue Ribbon of Distinction (Fig 2.1) honors public and private K-12 schools that are either academically superior in their state or that demonstrate dramatic gains in student achievement. The emblem displayed at a school signifies a learning organization that has exemplary teaching and learning. Schools who receive this award have several key characteristics: they have administrators and teachers who are dedicated to high standards of learning for all students, they engage in data collection and analysis to determine the efficacy of instruction and assessment, they have students who demonstrate academic excellence, and they undertake professional development to stay at the forefront of best practices (Chen 2015).



*Figure 1.* National Blue Ribbon emblem.

The Department of Education (2014) further defines and specifies eligibility of schools for this award determined by Chief State School Officers (CSSOs). A portion (one-third) of the schools nominated must have enrollments that include at least 40

percent of their students from disadvantage backgrounds. All nominated schools must meet their Annual Measurable Objectives in reading (English Language Arts) and Mathematics or make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) in both reading and math in each of the two years prior to nomination and must do the same for the year which they are nominated. Other requirements pertain to one of two categories, the first being considered an *exemplary high performing school* that falls within the top 15 percent compared to other schools on state assessments. Subgroups must also be within the top 40 percent in the state on state assessments. The second category is considered an *exemplary improving school* that is recognized for closing the achievement gap within subgroups on state tests within specific percentage ranges (<http://www2.ed.gov/programs/nclbbrs/eligibility>).

### **New Phenomenon**

Although “standards” themselves are not new, the Common Core Standards are a relatively new phenomenon in the history and study of education with its increased emphasis on rigor and accountability. The NCLB era brought about many studies on its impact on education, standards, and accountability. With still much being worked out and finalized with the new CCSS, very little has been studied at the elementary level. A few pre-implementation and early studies on the Common Core State Standards have sought to explore reasons behind states’ adoption behaviors (LaVenía, 2010), as well as principal and parent perceptions on the adoption of the CCSS (Heil, 2012). Teacher efficacy has also been explored through the implementation of math (Rimbey, 2013) that provides an evidence base for a professional development model designed to promote effective implementation of the CCSS for Mathematics. Rimbey also addresses ways to impact and measure teachers' knowledge of curriculum in addition to their mathematical

content knowledge. Tufaro (2013) looks more specifically at the ELA-CCSS at the secondary level and challenges faced with alleviating English teachers from bearing the burden of teaching literacy in isolation and expecting content teachers to be reading teachers of their content. Stearns-Pfeiffer (2012) investigates the new standards in a similar vein researching the interpretation and implementation of the ELA-CCSS and expectation in secondary classrooms.

Melissa Adams-Budde (2014) conducted a qualitative study surveying 158 elementary teachers in two school districts. The purpose of her study was to examine elementary literacy teachers' perceptions of their preparedness to implement English Language Arts Common Core State Standards. The study sought to understand teachers' perceived levels of knowledge of the standards and its components; efficacy to implement changes; and actual changes to their instructional practices. Findings from the study documented the nature of professional development and where more opportunities for it were necessary. It was also found that teachers needed more time and supports as they deal with the challenges of standard reform change and implementation.

### **Summary**

Chapter two has provided the rationale, birth, and ensuing growth of the national standards reform movement with all of its controversy and descriptions of the various stakeholders that have taken sides for or against the standards. This study will distance itself from the prevalent controversy of the Common Core and not treat it as a curmudgeon (Calkins, *et al.* 2012). This research will study a single elementary school that has been acknowledged as a National Blue Ribbon School and their negotiation of ELA-PA Core into curriculum and instructions. With all of the controversy on a national

scale, the focus is narrowed to a single elementary school in Pennsylvania to see how the standards can be viewed as a value-laden, open project in continuous development – just waiting for teachers to step forward to negotiate their design as well as their enactment in classrooms (Shannon, 2013, p. 29).

## CHAPTER III

### METHDOLOGY

This embedded-single case study is designed to focus on the adoption and implementation of the ELA PA Core and understand and describe the meanings of an elementary school's lived experiences in regards to the rollout, implementation, and practice of these standards. It calls into question concerns, attitudes, and feelings about implementation, communication, and collaboration between administrators and teachers, as well as the understandings of the new standards and changes that need to take place in practices, instruction, and curriculum. A national achieving Blue Ribbon School will be researched regarding the experiences they lived through as they negotiated the changes required by ELA PA Core mandate. In this chapter, research methods and design, the participants (and methods employed to protect those who participate in this study), and the instruments used in this study are described. Data analysis is discussed in relation to the instruments used in this study and to the research questions that guide this research.

#### **Research Questions**

Moustakas (1994) presents two broad, general questions when studying a phenomenon. Questions that focus attention on gathering data that will lead to a textural and structural description of the events that provides an understanding of the common experiences shared by the participants will be used. The two questions are: What have you experienced in terms of the phenomenon and what contexts or situations have typically influenced or affected your experiences of the phenomenon? Other open-ended questions can also be asked (Creswell, 2007). The study seeks to explore these two broad, general questions through the following research questions:

1. What are teacher and administrator perceptions and understandings of how the teaching of English Language Arts has changed as a result of the ELA PA Core Standards?
2. How do teachers and administrators perceive the implementation of ELA PA Core?
3. What instructional and curricular changes have occurred in teaching reading at the elementary level regarding the ELA PA Core Standards?
4. How has culture and climate impacted the ideology of learning and teaching through the ELA Common Core?

### **Research Design**

Qualitative methods were used to collect data during this study that included classroom teacher, support teacher, and administrative interviews along with supporting documents such as the Blue Ribbon Application and curricular documents pertaining the ELA PA Core. Segments of the Blue Ribbon application pertaining curriculum and instruction, professional development, and academic progress was investigated, as well as literacy statements and explanations of district data collection.

Case study is defined as an in-depth exploration of a bounded case (activity, event, process, individuals separated for research in terms of time, place, or some physical boundaries) based on extensive data collection (Creswell, 2012, p. 465). A case study approach was used as the procedure of inquiry (Merriman, 1998) to investigate the contemporary phenomenon of the PA ELA Core standards and how a high achieving elementary school worked through the process of rollout, implementation, and practice of the standards. This embedded case study design approach was selected to identify the rich

details, experiences, and, environment from the viewpoint of the participants by using multiple sources of data (Stake, 1995, 2005) and subunits of analysis within, between, and across this single case to further illuminate the purpose of the study (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Yin (1984) states an embedded design can serve as an important device for focusing a case study inquiry (p. 45). Interviewing teachers at different grade levels, as well as administrators, also supported corroboration of evidence. Interviewing sub-units of analysis coupled with data collection from multiple sources was used to triangulate the data to build reliability of the findings, as well as the internal validity (Cresswell, 2012; Merriam, 1998, p. 207).

Magnifying this high-achieving Pennsylvania elementary school through teacher/administrator interviews and examining their interactions with one another or through professional development that has been experienced, curriculum changes made, different instructional practices employed, and their experiences with the ELA PA Core can impact how other schools and educators can approach or revamp standards reform. Yin (1984) states that single case studies can represent a significant contribution to knowledge and theory building and can even help refocus future investigations in an entire field (p. 43). Data generated within case studies can resonate experientially with a broad cross-section of readers (schools and educators), thereby facilitating a greater understanding of the phenomenon (Stake, 1995).

### **Setting**

*Community Elementary* (Part of Upper Community School District/pseudonyms in both cases) is one of six elementary schools located in a suburban area in Pennsylvania and within a community noted for its rich history, natural beauty, outstanding schools and

colleges, stately architecture, numerous parks, and myriad of cultural resources. The area has nearly 20 business and civic associations with two respected hospitals, convenient shopping, an extensive transportation system and dining establishments within its borders.

*Community Elementary* is a nationally recognized Blue Ribbon School of Excellence with an enrollment of close to 550 students kindergarten through fifth grades. The school has also received other distinguished honors along with winning a Presidential Award for Excellence in Mathematics and Science Teaching. The student body consists of 26% minority students (2% African-American, 15% Asian/Asian American, 9% Latino/Hispanic) and an approximate total student body make-up of 47% male to 53% female ratio. The staff is composed of 86 individuals with 50 instructional staff, 23 of whom are classroom teachers. This teacher population has stayed relatively consistent over the past five years. Additional staff in the area of special education, gifted support, art, music, library, and physical education supports the total educational program. A full-time counselor and two literacy specialists are also on staff and serve as a resource for children, staff, and parents. Students in grades two through five participate in weekly Spanish instruction with one of two world language teachers. Technology is also fully integrated into the elementary curriculum. Students have many opportunities to use wireless technology in the classroom and have access to the computer lab.

Extracurricular activities are available for students in grades four and five. Activities consist of band, orchestra, chorus, and after school sports from fall through spring. In addition, an active group of parents meet monthly to support the school and community collaboratively.



## Data Collection Procedures

Yin (1984) suggests six sources from which to collect data, with interviewing being one of the most important for case study (p. 82). The *interview* was the primary method that data were collected within this research with the use of other information (documents, records, agendas) to support interviewee responses. Interview groups (classroom teachers, support teachers, and administrators) were triangulated to validate and make the process reliable and to assure *quality control* (Yin, 1984). The data collection circle, according to Creswell (2007), includes a number of steps that can be entered at differing points in a series of activities such as locating a site, gaining access, purposefully sampling, collecting data, recording information, resolving field issues, and, storing data.

A series of procedures and steps took place prior to interviewing teachers and administrators from *Community Elementary*. First, to ensure protection of all the participants' rights in this study, an application to the Indiana University of Pennsylvania Institutional Review Board was submitted for review and approval. Next, a search was conducted to find National Blue Ribbon Schools at the elementary level. Most recent recipients of the Blue Ribbon were noted (within the past two years) and contacted via email about the probability of conducting research surrounding their high standards and negotiation of the ELA PA Core Standards. Recent Blue Ribbon recipient, Community Elementary School (In Upper Community School District) showed an interest and willingness to participate in this study.

After approval was obtained by district administration (Appendix A documents the letter used to seek administrator permission), teachers at the K-5 grade level and

administrators (who agreed to participate) within Community Elementary were e-mailed the informed consent and contact information for reaching the researcher if the participants had any questions, concerns or wanted to withdraw from the study. All participants were informed that their responses would be kept confidential via a password-protected computer.

### **Purposeful Sampling**

A National Blue Ribbon Elementary School was purposefully sampled for this study. The National Blue Ribbon of Distinction serves a number of different purposes. First, it identifies the highest achieving schools in the country, using standards that correctly interpret student performance and improvement. Second, the program makes criteria available to all schools to help them evaluate their current quality status and find appropriate places for improvement. In addition, the National Blue Ribbon program facilitates the exchange of information between the award-winning schools and those looking for solutions to their own obstacles. The recognition some schools receive stimulates the efforts of other schools to achieve the high standards, as well. Because proven programs are shared among all schools, lower achieving institutions have models to help them raise their own bar and vie for the award in subsequent academic years (<http://www2.ed.gov/programs/nclbbrs/index.html>).

Over a five-year period, Community Elementary students demonstrated consistently high levels of achievement on the state assessments (PSSA) in Reading and Mathematics. All grades measured exceeded adequate yearly progress goals in each of the last five years. For the 2008-2009 school year in reading achievement, 94% of third graders, 95% of fourth graders, and 95% of fifth graders scored in the

proficient/advanced categories. Ninety-seven percent (97%) of third grade students scored in the proficient/advanced categories on the 2013 PSSA, while fourth grade students showed a slight increase and scores for fifth grade students decreased slightly to 93%. Community Elementary had a significant increase in the number of students receiving special education services in the fifth grade cohort during the 2013 year, which is a contributing factor to the slight decrease in scores for that grade level.

A focus on student performance among subgroups was at the forefront of Community Elementary data analysis. Overall, students who participated in special education programs demonstrated positive growth in math and reading in grades three and five. However, in reading and math, most recent PSSA results indicate a gap of more than ten percentage points between the scores of all fourth grade students and those in the same grade with an IEP (Reading-95 % proficiency for all compared to 71% proficiency for students with IEPs; Math-94% proficiency for all compared to 71% proficiency for students with IEPs).

One of the primary limitations identified in case study is the generalizability and transferability of the case to other schools. However, any school (rural, suburban, urban) across the state of Pennsylvania and the nation are all possible candidates to obtain a Blue Ribbon if the requirements are met. Also, through the rich, thick, detailed description of this case (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam 1988), the research can enable readers to transfer this case to their own context. Other educators and elementary schools can see how a high achieving school negotiates the process of negotiation the ELA PA Core due to the shared characteristics of going through standards reform.

## **Participants**

Once final Internal Review Board (IRB) permission was granted and communication was established with the building principal via email and phone, participant criteria was established. The principal emailed all teachers (K-5, learning/gifted support, literacy specialists) who had taught at least three years within the district regarding the study. Years of experience in the district were important for this study as it sought those educators who had history within the district and have experience in previous standards (Legacy Standards) and the current changes that the new standards have brought forth. In addition, the teachers with at least 3 years of experience within the district have been through the process and rigorous requirements that needed to be met through the National Blue Ribbon process. Overall, this was a purposeful sample, as the case study requirement was the elementary school must have obtained a National Blue Ribbon (one was selected within the past three years due to the standard transitions that have occurred) and teachers who instruct at grades K-5 must have at least a three year history and experience within the district with past standards and current implementation and practice of the ELA PA Core. Teachers who did not have three years experience in the district were also not included due to the overwhelming enormity of learning the profession and building such as building relationships, classroom management, learning curriculum, and learning the trade in general (Irish, 2013). Teachers were contacted via email to seek their willingness to participate in the study. Table 1 provides a list of the participants (pseudonyms) with demographic information identified from Community Elementary.

Table 1

*Participant's Position and Years of Experience*

<b>Name</b>	<b>Grade Level</b>	<b>Years in District</b>	<b>Total Years of Experience</b>
Mrs. Moran	1	27	27
Mrs. Blazer	1	20	24
Mrs. Lorie	2	25	30
Mrs. Isabella	3	20	22
Mrs. Raeman	3	4	6
Mrs. Door	4	12	12
Mrs. Kopco	4	19	19
Mrs. Doyler	5	6	6
Mrs. Highlander	5	20	20
Mrs. Lawler	5	19	29
Mrs. Edy	K-2 Literacy Specialist	11	11
Mrs. Philly	3-5 Literacy Specialist	20	25
Mrs. Raznor	Gifted Support	21	26
Mrs. Comet	Learning Support	21	30
Ms. Heffner	Principal	19	31
Dr. Rose	K-5 District Curriculum Director	8	43
Dr. Patrick	Director of Elementary Education	3	30

**Interview Questions and Pilot**

Teacher/principal interviews were conducted individually and lasted in the 30 to 45 minute range. Interviews were recorded and transcribed following the one-on-one sessions with each teacher and administrator. Member checking was used to have participants review, clarify, and verify informant (Creswell, 2012; Yin, 1984) answers to support accuracy of their accounts. Interview questions seeking an understanding of the primary research questions are located in Table 2. The questions pertained to the process participants have gone through regarding their perceptions of the ELA PA Core, their

philosophy of teaching reading, types of professional development, experiences with implementation, and the culture, climate, and collaboration that exists in their school. The primary research questions are listed with the corresponding interview questions. The questions were open-ended to allow the participants to best voice their experiences unconstrained by any perspectives of the researcher or past research findings (Creswell, 2012 p. 218). The interview protocol was used with each participant while allowing for additional probing questions to point out to respondents what additional information was needed and to motivate informants to provide that information (Gorden, 1992). Administrators and teachers were asked same or similar questions. Two separate interview protocols are listed, one for teachers and one for administrators. Research Questions and Corresponding Interview Questions for Teachers are found in Table 2 and 3.

Table 2

*Teacher Interview Protocol*

Research Question(s)	Corresponding Interview Questions
1. What are teacher perceptions and understandings of how the teaching of reading has changed as a result of the ELA PA Core Standards?	<p><i>1a) Can you describe some of the changes that the ELA Standards have had on reading, writing, speaking, and listening? What are some similarities and differences in the common core and legacy standards?</i></p> <p><i>1b) Can you describe how the ELA Standards impact the teaching of reading as a ____ grade teacher?</i></p> <p><i>1c) What is your school's vision/philosophy regarding the teaching of reading?</i></p> <p><i>1d) Have you aligned/shifted your philosophy/thinking of teaching reading with what the standards are asking – from what you did in the past?</i></p>
2. How do teachers perceive the presentation implementation of ELA PA Core?	<p><i>2a) What concerns/uncertainties/wonderings do you have about the ELA PA Core Standards?</i></p> <p><i>2b) Please describe the professional development and training you've received to prepare you for the changes related to the ELA PA Core?</i></p> <p><i>2c) Please give some examples on how you were trained in the following ELA Core topics:</i>  <i>-Rigor, text complexity, and critical thinking</i>  <i>-Use of non-fiction</i>  <i>-Close Reading and Text Dependent Analysis</i>  <i>-Writing/Speaking/Listening</i></p> <p><i>2d) How would you describe administrator-teacher interaction with professional development?</i>  <i>-What is the principal's role?</i>  <i>-How would you describe the principal's leadership style?</i>  <i>-What are teachers' roles?</i></p> <p><i>2e) Would you please explain your level of confidence in how you were prepared regarding the ELA PA Core?</i></p>
3. What instructional and curricular changes have	<p><i>3a) Please describe anything you may be doing differently in English Language Arts instruction due to the ELA PA Core.</i></p>

<p>occurred in teaching reading at the elementary level due to the new ELA PA Core Standards?</p>	<p><i>3b) Please explain about any changes that occurred with the ____ grade-English Language Arts curriculum because of the ELA PA Core?</i></p> <p><i>3c) Would you say the standards themselves, eligible content, or reading data and analysis guided any of the changes made to curriculum and instruction?</i></p> <p><i>Follow Up:</i>  <i>-Can you please share how grade level teachers (and across grades) interact to understand the vertical progression of reading and the standards?</i></p> <p><i>3d) The new ELA Standards claim they will develop deeper thinkers, 21<sup>st</sup> century learners, and college and career ready students – what are your thoughts?</i></p> <p><i>3e) How do you balance Blue Ribbon Status, teaching, curriculum and instruction with the idea of teaching to the test?</i></p>
<p>4. How has culture and climate impacted ideology of learning and teaching through the ELA Common Core?</p>	<p><i>4a) Aside from academic excellence – what makes Community Elementary a “Blue Ribbon School?”</i></p> <p><i>4b) In your own words, what is Community Elementary School’s mission statement?</i>  <i>Follow ups:</i>  <i>-Would you say you inquire and collaborate together (teachers and administrators)?</i>  <i>-Are all voices heard and valued?</i>  <i>- How would you describe relationships across the school?</i></p> <p><i>4c) How do you improve from the National Blue Ribbon of excellence status?</i></p> <p><i>4d) Regarding the ELA Standards, curriculum and instruction, climate and culture – what would say is the biggest glow and grow of the whole ELA implementation process?</i></p>

Questions in Table 3 have subtle changes asked of the administrators pertaining to the interview questions asked of the teachers related to the primary research questions.



Table 3

*Administrator Interview Protocol*

Research Question(s)	Corresponding Interview Questions
<p>1. What are administrator perceptions and understandings of how the teaching of reading has changed as a result of the ELA PA Core Standards?</p>	<p><i>1a) Can you describe some of the changes that the ELA Standards have had on reading, writing, speaking, and listening? What are some similarities and differences in the common core and legacy standards?</i></p> <p><i>1b) Can you describe how the ELA Standards have impacted you as the administrator (Principal, Literacy Supervisor, Curriculum Director, Superintendent?)</i></p> <p><i>1c) What is your school's vision/philosophy regarding the teaching of reading?</i></p> <p><i>1d) Have you aligned/shifted your philosophy/thinking of teaching reading with what the standards are asking from what you did in the past?</i></p>
<p>2. How do administrators perceive the implementation of ELA PA Core?</p>	<p><i>2a) What concerns/uncertainties/wonderings do you have about the ELA PA Core Standards?</i></p> <p><i>2b) Please share how professional development works in your school/district – what opportunities are provided within/without the district?</i></p> <p><i>2c) Can you please describe the professional development that's been provided to prepare the school/district for the changes related to the ELA PA Core?</i></p> <p><i>2d) Relating to the ELA Standards, please tell how you implemented:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>-Rigor, text complexity, and critical thinking</i></li> <li><i>-Use of non-fiction</i></li> <li><i>-Close Reading and Text Dependent Analysis</i></li> <li><i>-Writing/Speaking/Listening</i></li> </ul> <p><i>2e) How would you describe the administrator-teacher interaction with professional development?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>-What is your role in professional development?</i></li> <li><i>-How would you describe your leadership style?</i></li> <li><i>-What are teachers' roles?</i></li> </ul> <p><i>2f) Would you explain your level of confidence in how you</i></p>

	<p><i>were prepared regarding the ELA PA Core and how you prepared others?</i></p>
<p>3. What instructional and curricular changes have occurred in teaching reading at the elementary level regarding the new ELA PA Core Standards?</p>	<p><i>3a) Please describe any changes you know are happening differently in English Language Arts instruction due to the ELA PA CORE at Community Elementary.</i></p> <p><i>3b) Please explain about any changes made to the English Language Arts curriculum at Community Elementary because of the ELA PA Core?</i></p> <p><i>3c) Would you say the standards, eligible content, or reading data and analysis guided any of the changes made to curriculum and instruction?</i></p> <p><i>Follow Up:</i>  <i>-Can you please share how grade level teachers (and across grades) interact to understand the vertical progression of reading and the standards?</i></p> <p><i>3d) The new ELA Standards claim they will develop deeper thinkers, 21<sup>st</sup> century learners, and college and career ready students – what are your thoughts?</i></p> <p><i>3e) How do you balance Blue Ribbon Status, teaching, curriculum and instruction with the idea of teaching to the test?</i></p>
<p>4. How has culture and climate impacted ideology of learning and teaching through the ELA Common Core?</p>	<p><i>4a) Aside from academic excellence – what makes Community Elementary a “Blue Ribbon School?”</i></p> <p><i>4b) In your own words, what is Community Elementary School’s mission statement?</i>  <i>Follow ups:</i>  <i>-Would you say you inquire and collaborate together (teachers and administrators)?</i>  <i>-Are all voices heard and valued?</i>  <i>- How would you describe relationships across the school?</i></p> <p><i>4c) How do you improve from the status National Blue Ribbon excellence?</i></p> <p><i>4d) Regarding the ELA Standards, curriculum and instruction, climate and culture – what would say is the biggest glow and grow of the whole ELA implementation process?</i></p>

An expert panel of 17 participants piloted the interview questions. Eight of the 17 member panel had been involved or part of past schools that have received the Blue Ribbon of Excellence. The expert panel consisted of 8 administrators/curriculum directors, 7 teachers, a school psychologist, and an educational consultant from a local intermediate unit who has experience working with Blue Ribbon Schools. The entire expert panel has also been involved in the process of ELA PA Core standards implementation in their varied professional roles. Panel members were used to help determine if there were flaws, limitations, or other weaknesses within the interview design (Kvale as cited in Turner 2010). Pilot testing is a procedure in which a researcher makes changes in an instrument based on feedback from a small number of individuals who complete and evaluate the instrument (Creswell, 2012 p. 390). Participants were asked to report what they experienced and what they were thinking about when they read or were asked the open-ended questions.

The pilot group was asked to mark/discuss any problems with the questions (are they poorly worded) that did not make sense or were unclear. Based upon the group's verbal and written feedback after interview sessions (where extensive notes were taken and compared) and via email, questions were modified or changed reflecting the concerns and feedback of the panel to improve internal validity. Several questions were re-worded and deleted after the pilot process took place. In addition, after the first 3 interviews, a specific question about the Blue Ribbon application process was deleted due to the fact that not everyone interviewed was involved with the application process. Other changes prompted a richer description of explanations. One addition in section 4 was to ask

participants to “Describe in your own words the mission statement of Community Elementary”. While the district had an overall mission, this question helped interviewees to get to the *heart* of what was truly important through the process of ELA standards reform and in a sense summed up their purpose. Question 4a was also added after the pilot (Aside from academics, what makes Community Elementary a Blue Ribbon School?) that allowed teachers to explain their feelings about relationships, climate/culture, and teaching/learning. Other changes are noted in Appendix E.

### **Analysis of Data**

Data analysis in qualitative research consist of preparing and organizing the data for analysis, then reducing the data into themes through coding and representing the data through figures, tables, or discussion (Creswell, 2007, p. 148). This research used participant interview group stakeholders (classroom teachers, support teachers, and administrators to corroborate the research data collected.

A document review was also used to support and triangulate participant experiences. Documents were examined and interpreted in order to elicit meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) in order to seek convergence and corroboration with what participants shared through the interviews (Yin, 1994). Stake (1995) and Yin (1994) both see document analysis particularly applicable to qualitative case studies and support intensive studies producing rich descriptions of a single phenomenon, event, organization, or program.

Documents serve various purposes from establishing context to corroborate evidence (Bowen, 2009). Documents (professional development, ELA Curriculum, Blue Ribbon application, etc.) were collected first to provide context and historical background

to the case and research. Secondly, these documents supported interview and follow up questions to be asked during participant interviews for clarification surrounding the process of rollout, implementation, and practices pertaining to the ELA PA Core Standards. The document review also provided supplementary research data that added to the knowledge base of the case. The documents were used as a visual to see the progression of the changes and development that occurred as standards were implemented. Overall, documents were used to support findings.

The collected documents (obtained primarily through email from the principal and curriculum director) involved reading the information to gain an overall interpretation. The documents were primarily used to build history and context to verify the current experiences that teachers and the principal share through the process of standards reform change in the English Language Arts. Furthermore, the documents were used to establish questions within the interview (purpose and reason of documents, author of the documents, transfer of information from documents into practice/curriculum) (Bowen, 2009). Primary documents used were the U.S. Department of Education National Blue Ribbon Schools Program application, which included information on the schools curriculum, professional development and ELA academic statistical data. Other narrative curriculum documents are included in the appendices obtained from the district.

After document review occurred and provided context to the case, interviews were the next primary source of data collected and analyzed. Stake (1995) points out that collecting or recording data just to have a record of it is not the reasoning for doing so, but to get to the meaning of what is being shared. Interviews were used to obtain the interpretations, descriptions, and unique stories/experiences that each respondent has to

share (Stake, 1995). Interviews were done with teachers and administrators in the school conference room. Interviews were recorded with some notes taken throughout the question protocol. Overarching big ideas were written down immediately after the interview. Recordings were transcribed by a transcriptionist and subsequently coded as the data analysis spiral ensued.

Creswell (2007) explains the data analysis spiral that was adhered to in this study and analysis of data that began with a transcribing of the primary source of data, (interviews), following the question and answer dialogue that this researcher had with participants. Transcripts were read several times in their entirety with notes being taken about key ideas and concepts that occurred asking the question “What is this person talking about?” (Creswell, 2012).

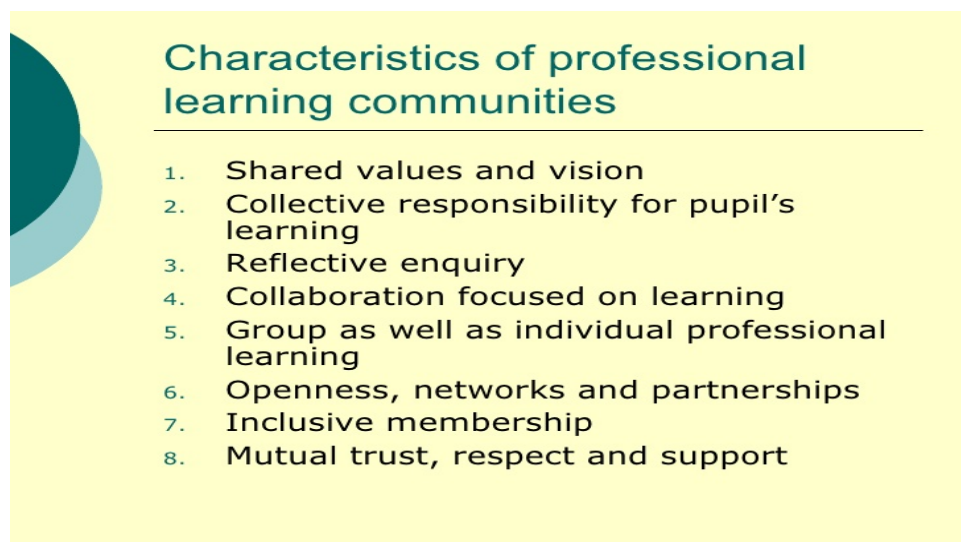
The data spiral went deeper from reading and note taking into describing, classifying, and the interpreting loop (Creswell, 2007). This part of the spiral is where the coding and categorizing of data then began using graphs, charts, and note cards (and other graphic organizers/concept maps) within the context of the setting of the person, place, and, event (p. 151). Coding was the process where data was segmented and labeled to form descriptions and broad themes in the data (Creswell, 2007, p. 243). Data were compared and contrasted (using phrases and coded identifiers mentioned below) from the participants at each stakeholder category to identify commonalities and differences in perceptions and understandings of the ELA PA Core, the changes that have occurred from past standards and expectations, and how it impacts them in their specific roles. A comparison table/matrix (Trochim, 2006; Yin, 1984) was used to support this

analysis in determining major and minor themes (layered and interconnected) and contrary (contradictory) evidence that do not support the themes (Creswell, 2012).

After open coding and note taking initially took place upon reception of the transcripts. The model for Professional Learning Communities served as the framework through which coding began.

1. Shared Mission, Vision, and Values = SMVV
2. Collective Inquiry = CI
3. Collaborative Teams = CT
4. Action Orientation and Experimentation = AOE
5. Continuous Improvement = CIM
6. Results Orientation = RO

Figure 3 below (Marian College, 2009) was also used to support the coding process that initially took place with the transcripts.



*Figure 2.* Characteristics of professional learning communities.

Additional data were coded according to the following categories/identifiers: professional development, confidence level with the new standards, instructional changes, curricular changes, and culture and climate impact. After each participant's information was coded, similar coding and grouping was done across all participants as similarities, redundancies, and differences were grouped and organized into themes (categories) that emerged across the case. Findings from each participant group (classroom teachers, support teachers, administrators) will be reported separately, but more importantly, will be converged to understand the overall case (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

After the data were aggregated into the overarching themes that the research questions sought to answer, a description of the people, places, and events were described in a narrative discussion (Creswell, 2012) to develop generalizations about the case in terms of themes and how they compare with the literature and theoretical framework (Yin, 2003). Based upon the interpretation of the data a determination was made on what makes sense and what are the lessons learned (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) of this account that will illuminate this phenomenon and play an important role in advancing knowledge in the field of education (Merriman, 2009).

### **Validity and Reliability**

Qualitative researchers are the primary instruments for data, collection and analysis and interpretations of reality are accessed directly through observations and interviews. Because of the potential "one-sided" approach to interpretation, validity and reliability is a concern that needs strengthened (Merriam, 2002) and addressed to ensure accurate results in order to have any effect upon educational theory or educational



practice. Educational research studies must be rigorous and present results that are acceptable to other educators and researchers (Merriam, 1998).

Researchers have argued for the use of alternative criteria in judging research quality (Creswell, 1998; Trochim, 2006) between quantitative and qualitative research. Guba and Lincoln (1985) propose terms in lieu of validity and reliability: credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability. Credibility is synonymous with internal validity and refers to finding results that are believable or credible from a participant's perspective (Trochim, 2006). Paralleling the term "external validity" is transferability, the idea of a case being generalized or transferred to other contexts or settings. Despite "generalization/transfer" being one of the noted limitations, the transferability is very generalizable due to all elementary schools are going through the process of implementing and practicing the ELA PA Core standards, as well as all schools have the option or possibility of attempting to meet the National Blue Ribbon Standards. Any school in Pennsylvania or the nation can apply or be selected to go through the Blue Ribbon Standards of Excellence process.

Quantitative researchers refer to the ability of research results to be replicated and repeated (Creswell, 2012) and is based upon the assumption of the existence of a single reality. Merriman (1998) states that qualitative research focuses on understanding and explaining the world as others have experienced it, which means many realities exist and can't be repeated because there is no benchmark measure of "repeatability". Others state that dependability is similar to reliability (Guba & Lincoln, 1985; Trochim, 2006) and that rather than the study being able to be repeated or replicated, the purpose is to have others agree that the findings make sense (are sensible) and consistent with the data

collected (Merriam, 1998). Trochim (2006) sees dependability as the researcher making aware to others that ever-changing context within which the research occurs.

Conformability is similar to dependability; others should be able to confirm the results.

Creswell (2007) recommends selecting at least two ways (out of numerous techniques) to validate any given study in qualitative research to ensure validation of findings and maintaining accuracy and credibility. Three techniques were used to establish credibility, transferability, and dependability in this research: triangulation, member checking, and rich, thick description. Triangulation is using multiple sources and methods for collecting data (Creswell, 2012; Merriam, 1998). In addition to the primary interview data, other sources of data were used to enhance the accuracy of the study.

The methodology for this study involved triangulating grade/support teacher and administrative interviews, interview notes, and documents to corroborate the data in supporting themes, research questions, and theoretical framework for accuracy and credibility. Triangulation and comparison of the data sources established cohesion between the participant responses and documents using the Professional Learning Community Characteristics Model (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). The comparison across classroom teachers, support teachers, and administrators provided separate points to look for similar themes to support how a Blue Ribbon School negotiated the Pennsylvania English Language Arts Core Standards.

Member checking was also used to ensure credibility. A member check involves sharing the researcher's data obtained from the various sources with the participant's involved to determine if they feel that the results are credible. The rough drafts, analysis, and, their conclusions were taken back to the participants so they can judge the accuracy

and credibility of the account. Stake (1995) states that participants should play a major role in directing as well as acting in the case study. Clarifications on the meaning and understanding of the experiences and alternative language that should be used were areas of verification. Member checking helps to ensure if the researchers interpretations are fair and representative (Creswell, 2012). The last technique used was rich, thick description, which involves writing out detailed descriptions of the participants and setting under study (Creswell, 1998). The intent of rich, description affords readers to determine if the results of the study can be transferred to other contexts.

### **Summary**

Athletes and sport teams look to exemplars to get better. They watch and study game tapes of other teams, what they do, how they move, what they eat, why they do what they do. They attempt to get into the head and understand the mentality of a champion and their attitude of excellence. This case study research does this with looking at how a National Blue Ribbon School of Excellence has worked through the experience of adopting and implementing the PA ELA Core.

As explained in Chapter 2, learning to read has been politicized, canned into research-based programs and textbook companies create standards based texts that claim if followed with fidelity, scores on tests will grow. Most realize that it is not that simple. Rather than looking at broad, sweeping statistics and generalizations of reading curriculum and instructional standards, this study will narrow the focus to a single case. A high achieving elementary school was purposely chosen to explore more than just the textbooks or programs that were used, but the mindset and experience of how a high

achieving elementary school negotiates reading instruction, practice and the interaction and collaboration they went through in a national standards reform environment.

## CHAPTER IV

### DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

The purpose of this case study was to investigate how a nationally recognized Blue Ribbon School of academic excellence rolled out and implemented the English Language Arts Common Core Standards. Teachers and Administrators responsible for instruction of students in grades K-5 were interviewed to understand their perceptions and understandings of how ELA standards have impacted grade level curriculum and instructional practices. The study was addressed through the framework of Professional Learning Communities and its characteristics of shared mission, vision, values, collective inquiry, collaborative teams, an orientation toward action and willingness to experiment, commitment to continuous improvement, and a focus on results.

The findings were a result of transcribed teacher and administrator interviews that were conducted over a two-day period in early June of 2015. Two additional phone interviews were conducted a month later with the Director of the Upper Community Elementary Schools (Assistant Superintendent) and the Principal of Community Elementary.

The interviews were categorized (classroom teachers, support teachers, and administration) and coded using the Professional Learning Community model. The categories of interviews were triangulated with one another, as well as the Community Elementary U.S. Department of Education 2014 National Blue Ribbon Schools Program Application and curriculum documents.

The set of interview questions asked sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What are teacher and administrator perceptions and understandings of how the teaching of English Language Arts has changed as a result of the ELA PA Core Standards?
2. How do teachers and administrators perceive the implementation of ELA PA Core?
3. What instructional and curricular changes have occurred in teaching reading at the elementary level regarding the ELA PA Core Standards?
4. How has culture and climate impacted the ideology of learning and teaching through the ELA Common Core?

### **Description of the Sample and Methodology Applied**

Seventeen participants volunteered for this study, all of which met the study's criteria of being employed and involved with Community Elementary for at least three years. The participants ranged from 3 to 27 years of experience within the school/district. Total years of experience in the field of education for all participants ranged from 6 to 43 years overall. Most of the teachers and administrators served in various roles/positions/grade levels throughout their careers and tenure. Three of the interviewees/teachers served their full tenure at one specific grade level at Community Elementary.

Each participant was interviewed utilizing an interview protocol (Appendix C/teacher and D/administrator) administered in a semi-structured format. Each participant interview was conducted and audiotaped by the researcher with notes taken during the interview. After interviews were transcribed (via a transcriptionist) they were sent back to participants for the purpose of member checking. Four of the seventeen

informants reported back with clarifications of what they intended to say. The other interviewees were satisfied with what they originally stated.

A data reduction process was used to reveal categories and themes, which began with open coding as the interviews were first read. A combination of qualifications that were considered part of the Professional Learning Community (PLC) Framework, as well as other terms that frequently showed up through the coding process were used to support theme development. According to DuFour and Eaker (1998) the following qualifications are considered a part of PLC's:

1. Shared Mission, Vision, and Values
2. Collective Inquiry
3. Collaborative Teams
4. Action Orientation and Experimentation
5. Continuous Improvement
6. Results Orientated

Other codes used through the coding process were: High Expectations (HE), Confidence (CON), Leadership (L), Student-Centered (SC), Flexibility (Flex), Good Teaching (GT), Relationships/Peer to Peer and Teacher to Student (RPP/RTS). Many of the codes were transferred to themes as the codes repeated themselves throughout the analysis of each interview. Thematic analysis was used to inform the research questions. Thematic analysis is seen as an adaptable method that identifies, analyzes, and reports patterns within the data (Boyatzis, 1998; Stake, 1995).

The findings were reported through a narrative combination of analysis and direct quotations from the participants in the study. The direct segments of quotations provided

evidence and support in understanding the perceptions, feelings, insights, and processes that Community Elementary School educators experienced through the PA ELA Core Standards implementation.

Table 4 (below) was used to support analysis throughout each research question and the interview protocol. The table is a combination of DuFour and Eaker's PLC Framework (1998) and DuFour, DuFour, and Many's Learning by Doing: A Handbook for Professional Learning (2006). Many of the codes were placed under the PLC themes. Leadership was placed under shared mission/vision/values, as well as given it's own category. Relationships were originally placed under Collective Inquiry and Collaborative Teams but also given it's own category. While Collaborative Teams pertains to relationships, collaborative teaming pertains more directly to people who are working together to learn from one another in continuing to look for ways to improve. *Relationships* or team building is based more upon courteousness, communication, and getting along with one another. Due to the amount of times relationships was coded throughout the process, it was also considered under the Culture/Climate/Relationships category. Another term that continued to be implied throughout the process was *confidence* and was placed under Action Oriented and Experimentation. While *confidence* is not given its own category, it is important to note its presence throughout the process and will be discussed further in chapter 5 with it being a potential result of those who practice and "live" through a Professional Communities Framework.



Table 4

*Professional Learning Community Framework*

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY		
<p>1. Shared Mission Vision Values</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Student Centered</li> <li>• Support</li> <li>• Leadership</li> <li>• High Expectations</li> <li>• Focus on Student Learning</li> <li>• Commitment</li> <li>• ELA Beliefs</li> <li>• Work Ethic</li> </ul>	<p>2. Collective Inquiry and Collaborative Teams</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Professional Learning</li> <li>• Professional Development</li> <li>• Grade Level Teams</li> <li>• Across Grade levels</li> <li>• Seeking Collaboration</li> </ul>	<p>3. Action Oriented and Experimentation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learning by doing</li> <li>• Integration</li> <li>• Professional Flexibility</li> <li>• Professional Decision Making</li> <li>• Flexibility</li> <li>• Instructional Practices</li> <li>• Confidence</li> </ul>
<p>4. Continued Improvement-Results Oriented</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Data Analysis</li> <li>• Growth</li> <li>• Progress</li> <li>• Benchmark</li> <li>• Instructor Best Practices</li> <li>• Integration</li> </ul>	<p>5. Leadership</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lead through Shared Vision and Values</li> <li>• Shared decision making</li> <li>• Model Vision &amp; Values</li> </ul>	<p>6. Culture/Climate/Relationships</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Student Centered</li> <li>• Peer to Peer</li> <li>• Peer to Administration</li> <li>• Professional to Student</li> </ul>

**Description of the Document Review**

The Principal and Curriculum Director were asked to provide documents relating to the research questions during the ELA Core Standards implementation process. The Blue Ribbon application could be found online while the Principal and Curriculum Director referred to their website for some other general documents they felt would provide information. Documents that could be accessed for this study were informational summaries of the ELA Curriculum and resource (Appendix F), district data and assessment explanation (Appendix G), and a vertical progression sample of what

kindergarten through fifth grade students would learn through the ELA Standards at Upper Community School District. Grade three is included as a sample (Appendix H). Segments of the 29 page Blue Ribbon Application completed by the Community Elementary School Blue Ribbon Application Team are found in Appendices I, J, K and include descriptive narratives pertaining a holistic look (includes an explanation of all subjects) at Community Elementary School, Indicators of Academic Success, Curriculum and Instruction, and Professional Development. Appendix L is a list of ELA Professional Learning experiences (sent via a word document from Curriculum Director, Dr. Rose) that were offered through 2014-2015.

Each of the appendices (F-K) provide an additional descriptive insight into how English Language Arts was taught, assessed, and analyzed to inform instruction, and how culture, climate, and leadership have supported the school in obtaining a Blue Ribbon while negotiating the changes that have been brought about by the ELA PA Core Standards. Appendix M cross checks, which documents support or pertain to the research questions while Appendix N indicate the documents that support the PLC framework characteristics. When terms or a theme surfaced in the documents or the PLC framework, an “X” was given that showed support to the given questions or category.

### **Staff and Professional Learning**

Thirteen of the 17 interviewees had between 19 and 43 years experience in education with four educators ranging from 4 to 12 years. Veteran staff experienced numerous changes in educational philosophies and standards reform over the years from whole language to various structured programs. Many experienced great autonomy to more restrictive structures and programs from the legacy standards to the current ELA

PA Core due to national standards reform. Nonetheless, a confidence resonated from younger teachers to more senior members as will be found in the data analysis.

A question on professional development (Can you talk about how professional development works in your school/district?) was deleted from the original interview protocol due to the set format of professional development universally across the district, but is still considered a valuable part of the analysis. Upper Community School District was limited on number of professional learning days throughout the school year that could be offered, like any district. A venue created to support further professional learning has been through a process named Professional Responsibility Profiles (PRPs). Contractually, teachers are required to take an additional 21 hours of professional development. PRPs are offered through a menu of choices that are conducted by both teachers and administrators. These offerings range from content and subject related topics to classroom management. Teachers choose the learning experiences they feel appropriate for their specific needs. Educators may also conduct sessions depending on levels of expertise. In addition, monthly faculty meetings have been utilized as professional learning sessions where teachers were asked and encouraged to share instructional practices. Furthermore, a train the trainer model (“turn-arounds”) has also been used. Grade level representatives have been asked to attend a session on a topic and then report back to their peers on what was learned

### **Data Analysis and Reduction**

The majority of the chapter provides an analysis of classroom teacher, support teachers, and administrator responses. Each question is addressed and broken down by what teachers and administrators voiced via selected “script-like” dialogue, bullets,

embedded quotes, and block quotes. Themes are derived from the narrative analysis that is intertwined throughout the respondent answers. Summaries of each group's responses and identified themes follow each primary research question discussion and analysis. The chapter ends with further data reduction of key phrases. Triangulation across the three groups, followed by a narrative discussion on commonalities and differences with classroom and support teachers and administrators are provided to support validity to the findings (Creswell, 2012, p. 259)

### **Classroom Teachers**

#### **Classroom Teacher Analysis and Themes of Research Question One**

- 1. What are teacher and administrator perceptions and understandings of how the teaching of English Language Arts has changed as a result of the ELA PA Core Standards?*

Research question one sought to understand teacher and administrator perceptions of how the teaching of English Language Arts has changed as the result of the ELA PA Core through a series of interview questions. The questions surrounded the description of the overall changes as well as grade/role level specific changes. Teachers and administrators were asked to explain what they felt was the school's vision/philosophy regarding the teaching of reading. This question segued into respondents identifying if they aligned or shifted their thinking due to the new standards, from what they did or believed.

A majority of the teachers reported that they did not see any major changes with the new ELA Standards compared to the Legacy Standards. The biggest idea noted regarding their perception of the change was related to the term "rigor" which arose

repeatedly throughout the interviews. In probing further, writing and written response, grammar, text dependent analysis questions/analysis, and critical thinking/reading skills were identified as changes in needing adaptation. Many of the classroom teachers also reported that their primary reading resource, *Journeys* (Basal reading series purchased in 2010 in response to the new standards), was aligned with the standards and incorporated into what they did daily. Pertaining to overall changes, teachers reported the following:

Mrs. Moran: Our new reading series has it built in. So I sort of see the changes but it's not something that's been so significant to me.

Mrs. Blazer: We have a newer reading series. When common core came to our attention and we were in the process of adopting the reading series, common core was incorporated in the program. It was part of our learning process. It didn't really stick out as, Oh, this is common core, but, it was what we what we learning and this is how we used it.

Mrs. Lorie: It's interesting here when I was reading your notes and you said, how do we roll it out or how do we implement the core standards and I had to really think about it because I don't think of it as a roll out, I think of it as not much change has happened.

Mrs. Raeman: I think that because our curriculum was already aligned to the standards, that it didn't change that drastically.

Mrs. Door: I don't know that kids are any more literate because of it. I don't know that their literacy skills are any better in my classroom, school, and this district than they were before the standards. I think there's just more of an awareness of focus areas we need to address. It's just a matter of when things get introduced and what things they have to master by a certain time.

Mrs. Doyler: It's been interesting to see because we just adopted our literacy curriculum a couple of years ago. So it's been interesting to see how we've had to kind of tweak that to meet the new standards. I feel like the common core in general has just added a lot more rigor.

Mrs. Lawler: You know what? I'm going to be honest with you. I don't know that they're a whole lot different for me. You know as someone with experience and Ann (Principal) and I talked about my evaluation this morning. I don't know that I'm a whole lot different from what I was when I started. It's just sort of who I am and how I do things and how I see things and how I ask questions and how I can prompt children into looking at things in deeper levels, wider levels..."

Mrs. Moran used the analogy of how the whole process seemed like building a plane in the air. While that may or may not be the case, many teachers did comment on raised expectations and some had concerns as to having all kids reach expectations at the same time.

While teachers admitted to the rigor and some of the changes that have come along with the new standards, most exhibited a casual, confident approach to the changes as they talked about what they do and how they may or may not have made shifts in their thinking due to the new standards. Several teachers' told stories of when they had an "open classroom" and didn't really have to give grades and follow standards, they could pretty much do as they wanted and were able to create exciting lesson plans. Several teachers talked about how they do try to fit everything in through integrating subject and skills through their current reading program.

Mrs. Moran: We're constantly evaluating what first graders need. You're constantly looking at where your children are and what guidelines are coming in. So I think it has made an impact. It's sort of made the curriculum a little broader, you're hitting more areas rather than just specific skills.

Mrs. Lorie: I come from the seventy's when I had an open classroom and no grades, three teachers for like ninety kids and we did whatever we wanted, so we had no standards. Also coming from that and how I teach in a very open and integrated way, I needed to make it work for me. So, I know the standards, I know the curriculum, I know what I need to teach and I do it. I try to do it in a fun way and integrate it into different subjects to make it fun for the kids...

Mrs. Isabella: Yes, it's a lot more boring for the kids and for the teacher. We used to take great pride in having the freedom to teach. As long as we taught what we needed to teach we were permitted to do it any way we wanted. The pendulum is swinging as it did with Whole Language. I have Ann (The Principal), she's amazing and she allows me that freedom as long as I can objectively show that the kids are getting what they need, but I don't think that every principal is probably like that.

Mrs. Kopco: We were always taught you teach the kids to think and they'll do great on the test. And I really do believe that. So my whole goal in my classroom is to teach the kids to think. They can have an alternative view but they have to be able to back it up. They can't just make a statement without backing it up. So thinking is really the skill that I do teach my kids. So I don't think there's much that's changed in terms of that.

Mrs. Doyler: We've always taught the writing in a specific way in order to make sure that they were ready for the essay. So in that sense I felt more prepared. But it was

interesting too because with this text dependent analysis, that's a whole different kind of writing. It's not the prompt style writing. It's more analytical and it's definitely not something that can be achieved from just writing and packets. It's something that has to be kind of woven in throughout the year through discussions and really teaching the kids how to dig deep.

Mrs. Highlander: I think that we're really focused on how to get the students to read more in depth, I mean we have high standards here at Community and in all Upper Community School District, so that's not unusual, but really pushing them for more and to prove it and to really become much higher level critical thinkers.

Mrs. Lawler: Well you're not just using the typical standard approach to check listing whether the kid understood the story. You want specifics, you want details, and you want more documentation the kid really understood the depth and the breadth of the story by citing examples.

At no time did teachers come across feeling overwhelmed by the standards but something they took in stride and adapted to. Teachers further talked about the depth of the curriculum and teaching kids to be critical thinkers and how the standards broadened the curriculum. While one teacher did comment that teaching wasn't as "free" as it was at one time, she felt supported by her principal.

Teachers were next asked to share what the school's reading philosophy was and if they aligned or shifted their thinking as a result of the ELA PA Core Standards. While the Journeys program used is considered an inclusive reading package from whole group and small group (guided readers) that covers skills, vocabulary, spelling, and writing; the



district uses another writing resource and most of the teachers talked about how they have been able to use other resources.

Participants explained how they conducted their Language Arts block, and while they did differ from primary through the intermediate grades; all of the teachers were very student centered and growth (results oriented) minded in their response regarding their philosophy of teaching reading.

Mrs. Moran explained,

I feel our school looks at the whole reading experience. I mean there's not a time when I'm not sitting in a meeting that the principal and the reading teacher get together and we talk about the whole reading experience with the child.

Mrs. Blazer commented, "I would say the vision of reading is that all students should make a year's growth from the level they are currently tested on in the beginning of the year." Mrs. Lorie and Mrs. Isabella echoed these sentiments, "We expect kids to be reading at grade level and if not, our goal is to get them there." Mrs. Isabella said, "I think the philosophy or at least the goal is to make sure that every single student can make progress, a year's progress at least in being able to read fluently and understand what they're reading and to be able to use reading to learn not just to learn to read. These thoughts reflect on student centeredness and growth which are hallmarks of the PLC framework. Teachers also spoke about teaching students to be critical thinkers and lovers of reading and the connectedness of reading and writing and further connectedness with literacy across the curriculum. Mrs. Raeman stated:

I think it is for students to become critical thinkers, not taking reading at face value but seeing how it relates to other text or the real world, to be able to

analyze, make judgments, generalizations, inferences, and understand the main idea.

Mrs. Door added, “I want children to grow to be lovers of reading and to be very skilled at reading for information and for that to be easy so that they’re not struggling to find the information when they read. I think it’s making sure that students have access to the right books that they’re leveled appropriately and differentiated so that they all get there.”

Mrs. Doyler shared her thinking the reciprocity of reading and writing and curriculum connectedness,

I feel like we all try to really incorporate the reading and the writing together to try to enrich kids and not just with straight on specific reading, to do a lot more cultural types of activities, to incorporate it into our science and social studies curriculum, to really build in those skills from an early age.

Mrs. Highlander shared similar thinking in her reading philosophy, “For them (students) to be critical thinkers, for them to take ownership, use background knowledge to make connections and draw conclusions, being engaged and taking charge, being involved, and in depth readers.”

Mrs. Lawler talked from her experiences of how the standards has helped broaden the curriculum, has given principals a license to expect more from teachers,

I think it has given license to expand the expectations, to demand more from kids. If you have a limited curriculum, a lot of it’s limited, a lot of it is very narrow, it can be very narrow and very non-specific in the questions that they require kids to answer. You can’t be satisfied with that. I think it has given principals the license to expect more and to expect more from teachers, to expect more from kids. And

I think that's where school districts are weak where they could use some bolstering to expect more. These kids are so capable in this building. I don't think a lot of us realize how capable they really are...

Regarding whether they shifted their philosophy in teaching reading due the ELA Standards, teachers generally did not think so aside from that it has "bumped up the expectations" and "broadened the curriculum". Several teachers appreciated the challenge of the rigor and praised the standards while talking about progress for all kids, leadership, engaging and aligning curriculum, being given leeway, a laser focus, and cutting out frivolous teaching.

Mrs. Blazer spoke of teaching every child and their needs,

Every year is different because you get new students and they all have different needs. I think that common core did something good for education. Common core and adequate yearly progress made us as a school district not just look at those kids who had IEPs or who had gifted IEPs but we looked at every kid now. I think before those kids in the middle didn't get the same fair shake as the kids who had IEPs, who are getting exactly what they needed or those kids at the top who were getting exactly what they needed. Now every student is looked at and we are checking how he or she is progressing.

Mrs. Lorie talked about leadership support that focused on student learning,

So I just shifted the way I did things. The thing about this school is our principal Ann (Principal) is pretty flexible so, if you're teaching the skills and the kids are learning, she's okay with you changing it and making it your way, which is really important to me.

Feeling the ELA Common Core has opened the door to more creative thinking, Mrs. Raeman shared, “I think the shift now in the district is kind of to get back to more creative thinking and outside the box, innovative lessons to still meet the common core standards, but to do in a more engaging way, not just use the curriculum.” Admitting she has tried to avoid a mind shift, Mrs. Door talked of aligning what they’re doing to the standards,

I have tried avoiding having a mind shift, does that sound closed-minded? I feel I’ve tried not to get weighed down in some of the minutia because I feel that’s what a lot of it is. I don’t know that we’re going to be better teachers because you’re getting stressed or you’re getting bogged down or tied up in some of the ways they’re just now aligning things. Guided reading is a little different because we used to do novel study.

Mrs. Doyler reported, “So it’s been nice that we’ve had a little bit more leeway because sometimes if you want to go two weeks on one lesson you have that flexibility now” with Mrs. Highlander noting, “I’ve always had high standards so this just has given me a different focus, or a laser in on my focus. It hasn’t been a challenging shift for me it’s been sinuous.” Mrs. Lawler confidently stated, “I don’t know that they’re a whole lot different from what I used to do because I think I always went beyond what was required of me which often took a lot more time which left less time for frivolous things.”

### **Classroom Teacher Summary of Research Question One**

The reoccurring change that teachers reported pertaining the ELA standards (aside from the rigor) was writing, grammar, and critical thinking. The text dependent analysis

also came up frequently with the fourth and fifth grade teachers, which is part of close reading and analyzing and writing in response to what students have read.

While most did not report having major shifts in their thinking pertaining to philosophy, they saw integration of the skills as important. Throughout the strand of questions under Research Question One, three ideas surfaced significantly from the coding process. Teachers repeatedly were very student-centered and looking for them to improve academically (which also supported continuous improvement). They did not just think about themselves and how the changes impacted them, but how they could address the standards to support students in showing growth and progress. One of the Professional Learning Community Framework Characteristics, action oriented and experimentation, also regularly surfaced throughout the first strand of questioning. While *Journeys* was the primary district resource (which teachers felt was fairly aligned with the ELA Standards), teachers were given leeway to experiment with other resources and integration. Confidence was the third area that showed itself through the teacher responses. Teachers seemed to feel confident in what they were doing and what was expected of them. Confidence also translated into good teaching/instruction. Teachers felt if they were providing instruction that challenged student thinking and held them accountable, that curriculum, standards, and test scores would take care of themselves. This topic will also show up further in the analysis under Research Question Two.

## **Classroom Teacher Analysis and Themes of Research Question Two**

### *2. How do teachers and administrators perceive the implementation of ELA PA Core?*

Strand two of the interview protocol addressed concerns and uncertainties that teachers had with the new standards as well as the professional development process and what types they received in response to PA ELA Core. They were also each asked about their confidence level regarding preparation.

As explained previously, professional development days are limited throughout the year as is with any district. One way the district supports additional opportunities with professional learning is through the PRPs (Professional Responsibility Profiles) where teachers have choice in selecting what they need or want to learn about. Teachers also mentioned in this section of questioning that sometimes grade level representatives go to a training and then come back and share the learning with their team or staff during grade level meetings or faculty meetings. Most teachers also mentioned that the principal supported sharing of learning and successful instructional practices at faculty meetings.

Teachers retold of how a new reading series was purchased at the elementary level and in 2010 the whole district had a meeting in an auditorium and were addressed about some of the key changes that were coming along due to the new standards. Administrators were all on hand to support any questions that teachers had during and after the meeting. Teachers also received a grade level binder from the curriculum department that had standards, eligible content, and test related items. Several teachers mentioned this binder. Teachers were mixed on their feelings regarding the binder as to how much it helped guide their teaching versus it giving them more of an awareness of

the standards and expectations. Initially, teachers reported that they did not really receive much professional development regarding the new standards, but as the discussion continued, it became apparent how learning experiences were embedded throughout the year(s) (See Appendix L) with an emphasis on writing (scoring/rubrics, TDA's/written response). The primary concerns that teachers had was regarding resources (needing/wanting more), time (did they have enough to prepare students), and wondering when the next change would occur (how long will it be until new standards come along?). Overall, confidence resounded as a focus on students and good teaching were shared. The following comments are evidence of the "concerns/wonderings" and the confidence in educational practices.

Mrs. Moran: Will they stay around? That's my biggest fear because I feel we spend a great deal of time getting to know a program and really understanding it and supplementing it... And do I have enough time in the academic year? Will I have enough time to significantly give enough time to these skills? Not just cursory skills.

Mrs. Blazer: In short I wonder if ELA Common Core standards will still be here in a few years. What new Ideas will take hold and if the powers that be realize that not all schools and students are ready to teach and learn the same material. More resources have to be invested into education.

Mrs. Lorie: I personally don't have concerns because I don't have problems teaching this and getting it in. I think it's a good thing.

Mrs. Raeman's thinking reflected appreciativeness for how administrators gave them say in how to figure things out,

I feel like it was, 'Okay this is what you are doing'. Here is this big binder. Our reading specialist gave us a huge binder four inches with all these different dividers. Like, here are the standards; here are the samples of PSSA questions... I don't know if it was addressed really at all and then we were also given some of the common core books. Like, here you go; you could try this with your class to address common core, so I think that was something that was really nice, that the administrators and the reading specialists kind of left it to us to figure out things. I think in a way it is appreciated to say okay, you guys are the experts; you know what you are doing.

Mrs. Isabella: I don't really have concerns about it because I'm not one of the people who worry about the scores. I don't worry about their scores. As long as I know that I really did my best at helping those kids learn then whatever they score they score. I just worry about good teaching.

Mrs. Door's comments reflect a confidence in where the school is at in regards to instruction and the standards,

If you already have a pretty strong starting point those (standards) shouldn't really have much of an impact on because you should have already been doing most of that. I feel like it's an outline of what not to miss and what to make sure you hit. I think when you've been in one grade level for a while you've really nailed that age group in that range, I don't think it should be as cumbersome as people are making it.

Mrs. Kopco: I know that my colleagues have expressed concerns whether kids at the younger grades could be able to do some of the skills that are expected in the ELA



Pennsylvania standards. But having taught first grade I think that they are not unrealistic. I think that we just have to be more clear in making the children aware of what's expected of them and hold them accountable for them.

Mrs. Doyler: I think my only kind of frustration is it seemed like it was rolled out so quickly and we were struggling to find resources. And when I say we, it even seemed like the district was even struggling to find resources to help us match what the expectations would be for testing, not that we teach to the test. I feel like they don't seem so far off from what we were already doing.

Mrs. Highlander: My biggest concern is I didn't have enough time to be rigorous in giving them lots of practice on how to look, hunt and be real detectives with that kind of sophisticated question. I mean it was really quite sophisticated. I wonder if it's almost too much for fifth grade, it'll be interesting.

Mrs. Lawler: Actually they don't worry me. I'm really not worried about them unless they become more intrusive.

When teachers were asked if they received any professional development pertaining the PA ELA Core – most felt that not much was done overall and spoke about the PRP's and some of the beginning of the year type sessions:

Mrs. Moran: I don't know if there was a great deal done by the district in that area. I feel more it might have been when you're in a small group with an administrator or you're with a group of teachers and they start talking about the program and then we sort of get ideas and we have a deeper understanding of it.

Mrs. Lorie: There's occasional visiting authors or teachers or workshops offered and summer workshops offered, but not I haven't taken anything in a while, I mean in the

beginning of the year they give us some information, but there hasn't really been a lot of training unless I missed something? Yeah we have a binder, we have materials sent to us periodically like extra materials saying this was for the core standards. We received some new literature books, so more nonfiction books this year.

Mrs. Isabella: Well, I don't really think I received any real training for it, I mean I was told that it was coming. I was given like binders of practice things and I was given like what the eligible content was.

Mrs. Doyler: So I know Lorraine (Elementary Curriculum Director) has been offering some PRPs where she is trying to get together certain curricular supplements in order to you know to make sure that we have as many resources available as possible.

Mrs. Lawler: I would say it was minimal. I don't think it was somewhat more than we're trained with anything else and frankly it comes and it goes. So I looked at it and I said what's new about this? For others it was overwhelming and I think it took some shifting in the way they think, the way they were thinking to make it work for them. But I wasn't threatened by it.

Upon further probing with questions surrounding fiction vs. non-fiction, text complexity, close reading, text dependent analysis, and writing/speaking/listening, the following comments provided evidence as to how professional development was embedded throughout the grade levels regarding guided reading, grammar, writing, curriculum resources, and text dependent analysis. Some teachers also expressed how they took the initiative to find out more on the standards themselves and through their colleagues.

Mrs. Moran expressed a confidence at first grade in how she approached some of the new expectations and touched upon the idea of integration again,

I think maybe a little more deeper understanding of what exactly... where common core, where they go from where I am... I feel comfortable teaching them. I feel the reading is more integrated. So I'm a little bit more comfortable because I know it's coming and I'm able to sort of figure out how to do it. I'm a big believer in whenever I teach, after I teach a lesson I always say oh how did that go? Can I meet . . . how do I have to change it for next year? And over the years I feel as if I've been able to figure out how the reading standards come in and where they're going.

Mrs. Blazer: We have non-fiction in our writing program. We read a book and we talk about it and then they write non-fiction. We have many non-fiction stories in our reading series and in the guided reading books that come with the program. Text dependent analysis is done in whole group reading, guided reading, during independent work – answering questions about the text in writing...

Mrs. Lorie: We had a workshop on reading workshop last year. Yeah, so periodically the district offers workshops and some are like mandatory and others are you can fill your PRP, you have to have a certain amount of hours in a year of extra training, so you can choose where you want to have that training. I think it's just my experience and has something to do with my comfort I think. I just kind of know what I have to do and teach it the way I want to teach it so that kids learn it. But I don't think it's been much of a change, I think we didn't feel a change. We are given some more things to do and things to read, but it wasn't like overpowering or like really different just kind of this gradual

integration into the curriculum and the thing is we're used to change here because our curriculum changes a lot.

Mrs. Raeman: Our third grade representative went to a writing session and presented to us. I feel like after this year, seeing the writing, expectations, this level and this rigor will help me for next year to know exactly right off the bat in September where we're going to need to be.

Mrs. Isabella: The school district did not provide staff development for text dependent analysis for the third grade, but they did for the fourth and fifth grade teachers. Any close reading or text analysis training was based on PRP's. I took a workshop on Close Reading.

Mrs. Door: There was an in-service around one afternoon I guess this past fall. Yeah, I think grade three through five were in that one in the afternoon. So that was a PD session, we broke off into groups and had to come up with some text dependent questions. There have been some grade level discussions about non-fiction, materials provided to us. Text dependent analysis is really big... In regards to writing: Yeah, well writing has been a push for a while. There's been a lot of support for that..."

Mrs. Kopco: We have done some work with writing this year. A lot more work with writing. It was more directed towards good writing practices. Close Reading - It's tied in with the TDAs. It was their way of really allowing the kids to find the support for their developing thoughts. We did do a development on that.

Mrs. Doyler: We've done some professional development on grading the text dependent analysis, which is a little bit of a bump up from the constructed response that used to be

on PSSA. So our curriculum, we've had some professional development on how to expand or extend our curriculum in order to match the new standards.

Mrs. Doyler further commented on her colleagues and district support regarding professional learning,

But it was really a team effort. I mean my grade level team, is phenomenal and we just have a lot of support from the district as far as you know whatever we need. They gave us all kinds of resources and books to share and you know things to pass around to really try their best to make sure that you know we felt like we were preparing the kids. Ann was also great. We, we've been working with Andy Fishman (consultant) who is one of the writing gurus. Ann actually brought in subs for us so we could spend an afternoon with her. She works with the Pennsylvania state assessment, the writing rubric, and how to interpret that and how we should be helping our students to interpret that as well. And she's wonderful. So that was nice to have.

Mrs. Highlander: I know we had Andy Fishman, she met with each grade level here at school over a two day period and that was invaluable. She was doing the text dependent analysis, the reading, the writing, the ELA and then we had at our in-service days at the beginning of the school year and even during the school year one half day was reading. I think this year's focus was reading. The reading and writing was so intense, and they worried it was a big change, so we had several in-service days with reading.

Mrs. Lawler: I rely on Time For Kids magazines and National Geographic magazine, which I think are both great vehicles for that sort of thing but it's tough, it really is difficult to come up with good non-fiction that's interesting. But they still have to

understand the formatting of it and how it's different from fiction. We had Andy Fishman who came here and we've read and talked about it but more as a grade level. But I know that's the emphasis these days and that's why I'm saying for me that's not a big adjustment. For me that was not a big shift because that's how I approach reading anyway, by expecting them to find proof.

Pertaining to speaking and listening, teachers all agreed that it was just a part of what they already did within their classrooms. Through the analysis of text, close reading, and writing, speaking and listening occurred naturally throughout the day with students having opportunities to talk about what they've read and written. Students are encouraged to ask questions and present their findings throughout the day in the various classes and subjects. While more non-fiction has been included in their primary reading resource, teachers are continuing to search for more resources surrounding non-fiction.

Throughout the documented dialogue, no one felt burdened by the professional development and were able to share specifics of what they have worked on through the standards reform change this past year and in the past. Teachers spoke about getting what they needed and how they were able to support one another and their grade level peer teachers through the process, which is discussed further in the following interview question.

The next interview question under Research Question 2 was having teachers describe their relationship, interaction and roles throughout the process of professional development. Teachers for the most part talked about the shared responsibility in professional learning and that they did have a voice and "say" in things (which is further addressed in Research Question 4) and had the opportunity to lead professional

development sessions through PRP's and at grade level or faculty meetings. One teacher had a dissenting view on this collaboration. She said, "I think she's (referring to the Curriculum Director) probably the one who does it all like 99% of the training - I don't think there's much collaboration there. That's my opinion." She further commented on teacher voice in the professional development process, "We try, we don't get very far. Sometimes you're pooh poohed. They say some people will listen and then they don't really hear what you're saying though." Two of the teachers mentioned a curriculum committee where representatives from across the district meet to talk about what is needed for training. Mrs. Kopco talked about how she appreciated the curriculum directors, "I really do respect both our math curriculum coordinator and our language arts one, Lorraine, which I believe you met. She's always open to ideas and thoughts from both the principal level and the staff level. Although they direct the staff development, they are open to ideas and thoughts and what works well for you and your classroom. Mrs. Lawler had mixed reviews of professional development, "Is professional development worthwhile? Sometimes it is and sometimes it's filler.

This question was followed up with teachers describing the principal's leadership style and their level of confidence with the standards. Teachers across grade levels were unequivocal in their perceptions on leadership within their building with the following evidence:

Mrs. Moran: I think her leadership style is – you're a professional and this is what your expected to do. She is there to support you and gives us as much information as she can. I think there is a good back and forth. It's not just like okay this is the way we do it, sometimes it is, but everyone comes to the table and we ask, how can we solve this

problem and get this information out? Or how can we help a child make gains academically?

Mrs. Blazer: Well I think if we really want something, Anne will get it for us. I think she's very receptive and if we want something or need additional time to score something, she does her best to accommodate the teachers. I think Ann is a strong leader. She knows we would do anything for her.

Mrs. Lorie: It's very supportive – she's very involved. She actually just sets the whole environment here the way she knows every single kid's name, she knows all the parents. She knows what you're doing; I mean she really knows her school. She knows when parents are going through something difficult. It's unbelievable she knows every kids first name and last name and the parents, and who goes with who. I can't really keep track of twenty, I mean that's so impressive, but she, it's just that she makes her presence known – she attends after school activities. She's always so pleasant and so welcoming. She makes time for parents. Ann makes the school the way it is – so welcoming and a very supportive principal.

Mrs. Raeman: She is incredible. She is unbelievable. She is so supportive of teachers. She has our back 100%. She knows every single child, every single parent, and every family. I can't say enough positive things about her. She is collaborative, absolutely. I'll give you a specific example. So, the *WIN* (addressed under Research Question #3) that we're doing is a district wide thing for the elementary level - Some principals said this is what you're going to do on this day but she formed a committee to meet over the summer to talk about some strengths about it, different options. She had representative from each grade level and support teachers was here as well to kind of go through everything, hash



out the details and then present it to the staff, so I think that kind of symbolizes her leadership. She takes everyone's opinion into account and then makes a decision from there.

Mrs. Isabella: I think that Ann does a good job because she tries to provide sharing time in faculty meetings so that we know what works - sort of in the faculty meetings she tries to do little tid bits of activities so we have an idea what's coming down the pipe. I would say she likes to know what's going on and she does not want to be blindsided. She's perfect for me, because I don't feel guilty telling her what I think. It's not annoying to her. She wants to be "in the know", in addition, she knows every child. She knows their names she knows things about them that is just impressive.

Mrs. Kopco: They (administration) are open to ideas and thoughts and what works well for you and your classroom. Ann met with us over the summer to ask our input and our ideas for how to roll out WIN. We did give some suggestions and one of the suggestions was that we need more peer time for us to collaborate on how to get this WIN moving. And so at least once a month she gave us an extra half hour where the specialist teachers (gym, music, art) came into our morning meeting class. So they held morning meeting while we got a chance to meet.

Mrs. Doyler: Well she's the only principal I've ever worked under and I never want her to leave because she's incredible. I mean she's so approachable. She's very down to earth. She's extremely professional, but can also make you know, I feel like if you just walk into the building I don't know if you've had this experience, but you just feel very welcome and very warm and it's just a very friendly and social kind of environment.

Mrs. Highlander: It's great, yesterday I had my end of year exit meeting with Ann, so it's very, I mean Ann's fabulous, she's been our principal for a while, she hired me. She's not threatening she's really positive and gives you good feedback. Positive in what you can work on, you know, Ann's fabulous and the districts really pretty good about it too. She definitely takes input from people, I mean she makes the final decision, but she tries to get a consensus. We have faculty advisory, six times a year where each grade level comes in and special areas and special Ed and we go through concerns that the building might have to head off any problems. She's definitely approachable.

Mrs. Lawler: Ann makes a big difference because she really cares about what we say and she's never too busy to hear what we're talking about or give us an ear. Whether she changes anything or whether she has the time, that's another question but the remarks that other staff make about their principals is just amazing on how that nobody gets along and how people argue. Nobody's perfect, we could all come up with something that Ann may or may not do and tell her but she's the best of the best. So for that reason that helps a tremendous amount.

The evidence presented through the teacher voice certainly indicates the power of the principal and how he or she is perceived. Teachers not only felt supported by the principal but also felt she played an important role in the community and culture of the school in how she built relationships, cared, and knew students, family, faculty, and staff.

The last interview question under Research Question 2 gauged teacher's level of confidence pertaining the ELA PA Core in regards to the professional development they received. Most teachers stated they felt pretty comfortable and talked about how *good teaching* is what matters as well as the hard work of the staff. Comments were made not

only about confidence in one another, but also the students. The confidence questions could be summed up in Mrs. Raeman's comments:

I'm confident because I'm confident in the school and the staff and everyone's desire to support kids, I mean it doesn't change your wanting to be a great teacher so I don't know that the outcomes would really be different.

### **Classroom Teacher Summary of Research Question Two**

As teachers talked about professional development and what they did receive through scheduled days in the district, PRP's, at faculty or grade level meetings, or on their own, other themes surfaced through the coding process. Continuous Improvement (part of the PLC Characteristics Framework) was evident as teachers collectively and individually attempted improving themselves professionally. Supporting continuous improvement were other themes that are characteristics of the PLC Framework, Collaborative Teams and Inquiry. Many teachers spoke of how they operated as a team within their grade levels and across the school (Research Question 3 and 4 will discuss this more). Classroom teacher drive for continued improvement through teaming, inquiry, and being action oriented once again focused on students and good teaching practices. These practices were also all supported by another theme that all of teachers voiced that surrounded leadership. As teachers spoke about leadership and their roles with one another and administration, relationships was also noted as an essential component of what happens at Community Elementary (Peer to Peer and Student to Teacher). Relationships become very evident under analysis of Research Question 4 pertaining to culture and climate. Research Question 3 further confirms Community Elementary

School's student-centered approach and confidence in how they conduct educational practices through the ELA PA Core.

### **Classroom Teacher Analysis and Themes of Research Question Three**

3. *What instructional and curricular changes have occurred in teaching reading at the elementary level regarding the ELA PA Core Standards?*

The next line of questioning led into changes that took place in their classroom surrounding curriculum and instruction and from the professional learning opportunities they were involved in over time with the standards. Teachers further offered their thoughts on whether or not they perceived the standards creating deeper thinkers, 21<sup>st</sup> century learners and career and college ready students and their thoughts on “teaching to the test.”

As teachers talked through the process of standards reform and change, a part of their (school's) history came up for many of the teachers who had been there for several years. Whole Language, whole class, and novel study were prevalent at one time in the district with teachers given full liberty to do as they thought best. One administrator commented, “We have some independent contractors” referring to getting more teachers on board with current practices. If there was any tension between teachers and administration, it surrounded the idea of balance with changes, expectations, and common practice in curriculum and instruction.

Mrs. Kopco commented:

Having been here for so long we weren't really basal oriented or book oriented in the past. You could use them but didn't have to use them. Some people did more novel studies in the upper grades. But I would say it's been a while that they were

really pushing Journeys. And we were told we had to do journeys and it was really like kind of imposed upon you especially with the guided reading groups and everything. They said this is what you should be doing and on Monday you should be doing this and on Tuesday - that kind of thing.

Mrs. Lawler echoed the same sentiment:

Well some things have happened concurrent with the new standards and that is, when we were first introduced to this reading program we were told five days one story, each day do the story, move to the next story the next Monday, even if you're not finished with all the skills in the first week. And it really disturbed a lot of us who didn't see the value in the stories we were supposed to be covering. And we had other valuable things that we knew were important to the kids, each kid's growth and preparation for the next year. So it took us a long time to be freed up from the expectation that we had to do this in lock step method. And we finally, after my complaining to my boss and my supervisor for years that you can't teach kids like that. If you yourself don't see the value in the materials you're using and we didn't. So now we are given permission to step out of the textbook and use what we think is important, what will help create more well rounded students.

Mrs. Highlander also mentioned the formatted pacing:

We weaned away from lesson by lesson. In the past we got a new curriculum Journeys and when we first got it, we pretty much had to go lesson by lesson and now we're just pulling out the ones that we like that we can make the most out of, that will be the most interesting to the kids pertaining to history or science, the

stories, the topic... When all the new curriculums first came in I mean, if we weren't all on the same level that was not a good day, but thank God they gave us back our professional intuition, our knowledge of what to do and how to motivate the kids.

Mrs. Doyler added,

It's interesting because throughout the past I think we've had the Journeys program for four years now. We first started off very lockstep and you had to be at this lesson at this time and it was very sequential. And you had to go in a specific order. Over the years we've been given a little bit more freedom to kind of go out of order if we need to or really just use our professional opinion as far as if there is a specific skill that we feel like we need to go back and review and if that falls at a certain time we've been given a little bit more leeway in that sense to make those kinds of decisions.

Second grade teacher, Mrs. Lorie also shared about the shift from whole class and whole language teaching,

We had a shift from whole language. Now we pull out four groups a day in reading instruction so the kids get more one on one time and formal instruction and they get what they need and these are flexible groups so they change depending on what kids need.

Some specific curriculum and instruction changes that occurred within the classroom were the teaching of more grammar and writing skills. Critical thinking questions were mentioned as the use of sticky notes and photo copying non-fiction articles for kids to be able to "talk to the text" (a strategy where students are able to either write directly in the

margins with a piece reading or on the sticky notes). Teachers mentioned that there were specific purposes given at times for talking to the text, which could be asking questions, jotting down wonderings, or thoughts about what they were reading. This strategy supports close reading as well as Text Dependent Analysis. Reader response logs were used to support TDA's. Mrs. Door felt that the TDA's were the biggest change that she encountered surrounding the ELA Standards. Mrs. Highlander talked about creating more rigorous rubrics. Teachers at all grade levels mentioned small groups/guided reading group (versus the whole group). Some other direct evidence is noted below.

Mrs. Moran: There are more skills to be taught. There's more that's expected in the program itself. The day is packed with things to do. There's phonics, there's high frequency words, there's language development, there's grammar, there's quite more put into the program than ever before.

Mrs. Blazer: I think that in the curriculum, the level has been upped. Exposing the kids to adjectives, to nouns, to verbs and using the specific names. Previously, we would instruct about adjectives but we might call them describing words, now they're adjectives. I think I spend a lot more time on writing.

Mrs. Lorie: Our standards this week was working on contractions, and so I tried to do morning meeting and know about responsive classroom, so the morning meeting we'll do contractions and so I try to use it throughout the day, not just let's do language arts.

Mrs. Isabella: Yes, I'm teaching more grammar and specific writing skills than I ever taught before.

Mrs. Door: Yeah with the Journeys they supplemented it to go with some of those stories, some more text dependent type questions.

Mrs. Doyler: I like kids to have a book in hand and be reading. I am all about the questions but even right now with what I'm using little post-its that they stick in their novel. And then we come together and we just have a discussion. So there's guiding questions, but we're also working on having them create their own questions too because that's another skill that I feel can be really valuable for them with, especially the close reading.

The conversations and concerns around change stemmed from concern about students. Once again, supporting the theme of student centeredness. Teachers expressed a concern about how can they could continue to get students to where they need to be due to the new standards through meeting students where they are and differentiating with small groups with the curriculum and instruction (tying in with continuous improvement and results oriented).

All teachers mentioned another change, W.I.N. Time, which also occurred due to the new standards. Mrs. Raeman stated, "So, I think the big thing for us is the win time, which is new this year to address the common core." W.I.N. stands for *What I Need* and came up with the questions about data analysis, eligible content, and vertical progression. The district uses a program called *Performance Tracker* to keep track of benchmark testing, PSSA's, and other types of assessment. While teachers do not get as much time as they would like to speak with colleagues above and below their grade level, they will do so informally and at times are provided opportunities during the day. Mrs. Doyler commented:



We have had time and we've had discussion, and Ann has been pretty good, especially this year with blocking off some time for us to have even a writing discussion between third, fourth, and fifth grade teachers. So that was a very eye opening experience for everybody this year.

Most of the collaboration and discussion on data, teaching practices do occur at the grade levels (both formally and informally). W.I.N. Time is designed for teachers at each grade level to look at data pertaining to students across specific grade levels, find areas of strengths and improvement and then group students accordingly based upon needs of specific skills or instructional practices twice per week for approximately 40 minutes. W.I.N. times not only included classroom teachers, but also support teachers as well as specialist teachers (music, art, etc.) W.I.N. received mixed reviews. Some commented that students do get what they need and others appreciated the time it allowed for collaborating with their colleagues, while others stated they are holding judgment, as it is a new initiative. Regardless of the reviews, it seemed that teachers put forth the effort to address individual and small group needs and further supported, differentiation/student centeredness, action oriented and experimentation, and collaborative teaming and inquiry. Some of the following comments are evidence that addresses data analysis.

Mrs. Moran: We definitely have used data and have been trying to have more discussions on it. Using W.I.N. we've been looking at the data. Unfortunately, I think we're still novices looking at the data. But yeah, that's a learning curve for us I feel. I think we're getting to it but I think we need some more time on that.

Mrs. Blazer: We have grade level meetings, every other week. We discuss things that have to do with our grade level, plus we have to put in five additional hours as a grade

level where we score writing and we discuss and implement a program. This year we reviewed student performance data to group For WIN - What I Need groups.

Mrs. Lorie: I feel like we are giving a lot more assessments, so definitely we do use data to drive instruction. Sometimes there's workshops or days given just to do look at data in the grade level meeting and I do it myself for my own teaching but it's the program we use I think it's hard to use; Performance Tracker is not user friendly.

Mrs. Isabella: Well I'm really into data analysis; anyway I love analyzing their data, the kid's data analysis if that's what you mean like their performance record. The eligible content drives my instruction within the curriculum I am given by my school district. Data analysis is a big part of how I design the very flexible groups for instruction, but that also has not changed from before the ELA

Mrs. Door: Yeah we do get some time for that - more would probably be helpful to look at some more of the reports and understand them. Accessing them isn't that easy until you've really played around with it for a while. But I like how it breaks it down by standards so you can see how a child does. Questions are broken down by standard. You can see how the child did on certain ones missed, what standards that would go back to.

Mrs. Kopco: I've always been data driven. I always look at the data when the kids take tests. I like to look at it right away. I analyze how many got this question right, how many got this, because I'm looking to see what overall gaps were not covered. What were the gaps that they need some more help in? When we have our time to look at our data at our once a month meeting that kind of helped because we were all on the same page. We looked at the grade versus just your class. Our WIN is where we did a lot of the close reading and that's what we decided to focus on. And time was given to us as a

grade to collaborate and figure out who needed what in terms of the kids and how we would split them up. We spoke at the beginning of the year with the third grade teachers and the fifth grade teachers to kind of give them a heads up or an idea of this is something you should know helps out a child. The third grade teachers could tell us what worked and fifth, we could tell the fifth grade teachers what we found that helped.

The next interview question under Research Question Three asked teachers to share their feelings on if they felt the new standards would create college and career students. Most teachers felt that is what they have always done and that the standards did not change their high expectations. Mrs. Highlander stated:

I think the rigor is good. I don't think all of the student's success is measured by these tests. I think it is cooperation, working together; there is so much more than just these standards and test. Looking at the whole child, can they work in a group, can they solve problems and I don't necessarily think this is the only answer to it.

Mrs. Kopco echoed what many teachers said in her comment:

I do think that I've always valued the kids' ability to think, their ability to process what they've learned and take it and combine it with what they've previously learned and to make assumptions or to make judgments to evaluate things. I don't think that's changed with ELA. I'm not feeling like they're pushing that. I feel like it was always a focus at Community Elementary.

Mrs. Lorie (second grade) summed up what many expressed throughout the interviews pertaining to the changes, data, and student growth that all the teachers are working through:

Yeah well last year we had a workshop, which was really great where we met with the team below us, the second grade teachers we met with the first grade teachers and we looked through their curriculum just so we knew where the kids were coming from, what they had learned before they got to second grade and it was just really helpful and that was through the district, so they provided that time, but informally we all I mean I touch base with the first grade teachers a lot and third, and third grade teachers will come to me and say did you have trouble with this child working on this skill, and I'm like yeah what did you do and so we help each other like its another thing that makes the school the way it is, it's the collaboration between the teachers and we're always all of us are really welcoming, I mean we're just so welcoming to answer questions and help each other in anyway with past students, with students coming in their classes. It's just really nice, we collaborate a lot.

Along with the standard changes and being a school identified for academic excellence, teachers were asked how they deal with the idea of “teaching to the test”. Through the coding and analysis of this question, “good teaching” (curriculum and instruction) surfaced as the most important thing. While most said they try not to worry or think about the test, they also realize that it is something that is a reality. Most agreed that if you were instructionally sound in your practices and teaching students to think, the test would take care of itself. Academic Excellence has obviously been evident at Community Elementary through their Blue Ribbon status and the following comments support the theme of “curriculum and instruction matters” as well as student-centeredness (student growth) and being results oriented.

Mrs. Blazer: I do understand that the skills I teach help build for the future skills that the students will need in later years. I take ownership of their growth from the beginning of the year to the end of the year.

Mrs. Lorie: If you teach the curriculum the test will be no problem you don't have to teach to the tests. So, if you cover everything you don't need to teach to the tests, it's already covered.

Mrs. Raeman: Honestly every year our kids do great on the test and I don't really think about it that much. I mean there are certain things that we have to do. For me it's more about student growth.

Mrs. Isabella: I don't want to teach to the test, but I do teach what I know they need for the test. Is that teaching to the test? Teaching the eligible content within what you have to teach. I don't think that's teaching to the test. I think that's good teaching, that's just backwards design when, you know what you need to do you make sure that those kids are able to do it and, they know that they've come a huge way and they feel great about themselves.

Mrs. Door: It's hard to insist that you don't do that but I really honestly don't. You just need to begin with the end in mind, you need to know where you're heading and if part of that is knowing what they're going to be tested on then maybe you're teaching to the test but you're not. When everything is aligned and you're doing what you're supposed to be doing anyway it seems like you're not teaching to the test, you're teaching what they need to know.

Mrs. Kopco: You teach them to think and they'll do fine. Tell them what's important to you. I refused to think for the kids. They have to think. I do value their thinking. I want them to be passionate about learning.

Mrs. Doyler: I would prefer to not really think about the test. I know it's now being tied in with our evaluations. I try not to think about that because just like the students, we are more than a data point. I try not to mention it. I focus on are they really learning? Are they having fun? Are they making growth? Do they see the growth in themselves? I mean we use the standards but I try, I would like to think that I can adapt to them and mold them to what I feel like my students need.

Mrs. Highlander: I say to the kids I want you to be stronger students than when you came in here, I want to make sure you have a tool box of strategies, ways to handle challenges that you face, ways to feel good about yourself.

Mrs. Lawler: Well if you're doing a good job and you're teaching kids how to write and you're teaching kids how to look at stories from various angles, if you teach kids to think about what was the purpose of their writing. You teach them to look at things with a different scope they begin to be thinkers. That thinking process takes a new turn and they actually feel empowered. It sounds corny but that's how they feel, that they can handle it, that they can really do it. It's about having kids believe that you believe in what they can do.

### **Classroom Teacher Summary of Research Question Three**

Most teachers admitted changes have occurred to curriculum and instruction (primarily through writing, grammar, TDA's, critical thinking), but it came down to good teaching practices in their rooms and the freedom and leeway they have been given to

make instructional decisions in the classroom. Student centeredness and growth continued to be a focus of teachers as they analyzed data for W.I.N., to individualize learning, and on a day-to-day basis within their classrooms. The “freedom and leeway” (within curriculum/instruction and with W.I.N.) that teachers mentioned, further supported the theme of action oriented and experimentation as well as results oriented with teacher focus on student growth. Teachers further emphasized their thinking on student growth when asked about the idea of teaching to the test. While they knew “the test” was a reality, it was about meeting individual student needs and seeing each child improve in their reading abilities and skills.

#### **Classroom Teacher Analysis and Themes of Research Question Four**

4. *How has culture and climate impacted the ideology of learning and teaching through the ELA Common Core?*

Other hallmarks of the Professional Learning Communities Characteristics Framework pertain to Shared Mission, Vision, and Values as well as Collaborative Teams. Collaborative teaming (as well as collective inquiry) surfaced throughout the interview protocol under the three primary research questions. Ideas that surrounded Shared Mission, Vision, and Values (as well as Collaborative Teaming) came up regularly under this last series of questions with teachers. Another strong theme that appeared regularly in Research Question Four was the idea of relationships.

The interview protocol asked teachers about what made them a Blue Ribbon school aside from academic excellence and to state in their own words what was the mission statement of Community Elementary. At times, follow up questions were asked if they (teachers) felt their voices were heard and about collaboration and relationships.

This was followed with how do they improve from their current status and for them to name what they felt was the biggest glow (highlight) and grow (area of improvement).

Also to preface this section, the term “*School Families*” came up several times and is worthy of note and provides insight into how the whole school helps build relationships amongst students and teachers. Students across grades are assigned to a teacher to spend time together throughout the year and throughout the length of a student’s time at the elementary level. Mrs. Raeman explained:

We do school families, which are all the kids are split up between different teachers and we do team building activities once a month, so that’s really special, I don’t think any other school does this. So, there are kids from every grade level. It’s really nice for the kindergarteners and first graders. They have an older person in their school family that they relate to and greet in the hallway and fifth graders they are really comfortable and then they get the special sendoff from the little kids in their school family. That’s really special.

Each teacher echoed what made Community Elementary school a Blue Ribbon school aside from academic excellence.

Mrs. Moran: I really think it’s the willingness of the staff to sort of work together. What I love about this school is the willingness to sort of jump in and try to figure out something. When we were asked to do WIN you know Ms. Heffner said let’s try it, let’s try it this way and see how it works and see what we can do. So all of us said okay. You know we each had our own way of looking at the WIN. But we still all did it. So I did it a little bit differently than someone else. But you know that seems to work for me and I felt like I was also meeting the needs of the students when I did it.



Mrs. Blazer: I think that we're a close-knit school. A lot of the teachers get together socially. I think we care, I think there is a core group of teachers that really put in the extra time either at home or at school. They care about the kids. They care about their personal life; they care about their growth. I think we're a caring community. And not that you want to be every kid's friend but we know what it's like to care about a kid and to make them feel like they had a good day. And I think a lot of us really have that personal connection that we want these kids to be like our own kids and do the best that they can do.

Mrs. Lorie: It's definitely the climate here. The friendliness, the openness, the parents who want to help, who are involved, the community is very involved. It's just the way it feels. I wouldn't want to be in any other school than Community Elementary. Even when you go in to eat lunch, and I eat lunch in the lunch room with my grade level and just being able to talk about kids and talk about what your doing that works, what doesn't work in collaboration all the time and everyone's just willing to help each other and cover for each other, so if I had a bad day and I have migraine and I'm talking to a teacher at lunch, the teacher will say you bring you class over, give yourself a break because you can't teach your class like that, so we are just there for each other and it's just such a positive place to be.

Mrs. Raeman: School families, team building, celebrating togetherness, and community service/fundraising. We raised money for the victims in Nepal and we do a huge food drive every year. Something that's amazing is that sometimes the students initiate these things themselves. For the tsunami last year or the year before, the students were talking about it in morning meeting, oh what can we do to help and they decided to make

rainbow loom bracelets and sell them at lunch and recess and they made thousands of dollars and its just so special to have the sense of humanity where the students initiate a project like that on their own.

Mrs. Isabella: We have families who are supportive on the whole. We have great kids. We have great leadership; we have teachers who if you even see someone who looks like there's something's wrong we're supportive to each other. We help each other out. It's an amazing school; I mean this school... if this was a private school people would pay 50 thousand dollars so send their kids here. I mean teachers are working till five, six o'clock every night. Their cars are here and people are really invested. My grade level and I spend a lot of time texting each other and especially the three younger girls and I we really text each other a lot and we talk outside of school. We spend a lot of time at trying to help each other.

Mrs. Door: I want to say the cohesiveness among the faculty and the culture and the setting and everyone's kind of willingness to share and question and did anyone try this as opposed to I think a lot of places are working in isolation in their rooms and there's not a lot of collaboration.

Mrs. Kopco: It is our culture that makes it . . . we have a wonderful principal who is open to ideas who gets information from us. Yes, sometimes decisions are made from top down but usually she wants our input. We have a great staff that shares ideas. At faculty meetings sometimes Ann will ask us to share one thing that's working in our rooms. What's one thing that you do that you're doing great in your class that you can share with everyone else? And I think those little things add up to a whole lot. We're very welcoming here.

Mrs. Doyler: It's just a very positive kind of environment. I feel like the kids pick up on that and I feel like that can be what has also helped us too. It's all about the relationships that you have with colleagues. I mean of course you always have people that you know personalities clash but I feel like as a whole our staff really works together and comes together to do whatever we need to do for the students. I feel like the students really pick up on that. Like I said we have a great outreach program and then vice versa. The parents are great with supporting us. I just feel like we have such a great community feel here. And that just sets the tone for the kids to feel comfortable and to feel safe. And you know if you can establish that, that learning environment I feel like that's when the real learning can take place is because they know when they come here you know they feel comfortable with their classmates and they feel excited to learn and, and they're ready to just kind of take on any kind of challenges that come their way. So I feel like it's all about setting up that environment from the beginning, and a lot of that does have to do with Ann. Like I said, she's phenomenal.

Mrs. Highlander: I think our people say that our staff, our school is like a private school. I think it is and having sent my own children to private school, the caring that the staff has, the professionalism, you know, the work ethic, there's quite a strong work ethic, there's someone here at school from seven in the morning till eight, nine at night. People work hard here and they care about the students and they care about doing their best and sometimes Ann has to say to us relax, you know, go home. We're a caring staff, we have a great leadership and, you know, it's just, I mean everyone says when they come here like when subs come here like this is a fun school we'd laugh, we play hard, we work, we have good laughs and yeah it's a great place to work.

Mrs. Lawler: Actually in the district we're probably the best functioning school and that's based on a lot of people's opinions that we're a friendly school and that when you see a stranger, you speak to them but it doesn't happen in every school. Does that come from having a more mature staff? I don't know - there's very little in-house arguing.

In further supporting evidence and themes that have arisen, it is important to note what teachers say is the mission statement of Community Elementary School. Below is a collection of teacher's first impression when asked what Community's mission statement was in their own words:

- We accept every student, to try to help them you know, see the strengths that they have, work on weaknesses. I enjoy coming to Community Elementary School and working with students everyday. You know it's about seeing the children... and just them you know, make progress, feel happy at the end of the day, feel valued, feel connected to the staff and connected to the school.
- To make every kid feel good about themselves and to leave first grade as a more confident learner. I begin the year telling the students that I only get the smart kids. Every student in our class is smart and we're going to work on finding what their best skills are and what they're smartest at and work from there. Each year is an adventure. The curriculum may be the same but you may have to adapt it to the need of your students
- Definitely the love of learning and definitely respect others that's big here and to serve
- Community, collaboration, support – To prepare critical thinkers, to be leaders in the world when they grow up.

- To be the village that helps each and every child who comes through our village. Learn, grow and be happy.
- We need to continue to strive for excellence through collaboration with ourselves and teaming with parents and understanding children so that they all grow, they all become confident learners, lovers of learning.
- Helping the kids see their own successes and to really keep in mind that you know the goal of learning is just for the, for each individual student no matter where they are because they are all different to, for each student to make growth every year. And for them to be able to see their growth and to be proud of it.
- That we're going to work hard, we're going to have high expectations for you and we want you to be the best that you can be where ever you start, we want you to grow.
- To make sure each kid leaves this building feeling that he's reached his full potential.

When teachers were asked where they go from here and how do they improve from their current status, most stated that they continue moving forward and trying to improve. One teacher commented, "I didn't even know that the process of getting the award, which is fine. You know. And then we were I was like wow that's a nice distinction. But that doesn't mean we can sort of just stop. We have to just keep going and move on." The focus remained on students as another teacher said, "So we're just going to keep doing what our kids need." Mrs. Doyler stated,

We've set some very high expectations for ourselves. So I guess just again to keep doing what we're doing and you know although it's great to be honored if by

chance things do happen to take a slip this year I think just embracing that and realizing that you know as long as we're doing everything that we can be doing to make sure that you know everybody is like I said growing and learning then that's all we can really expect and hope for ourselves.

"Where do go from here?" was also evident in teacher's reporting on what needed improvement (what they felt was their biggest "grow") indicating that none of them felt they "arrived" as a result of obtaining a Blue Ribbon for academic excellence. Some of the things that teachers felt needed improved were more time with the standards, K-2 needing more versed in the standards, more work with data analysis, more ways to be creative without the standards and curriculum being confining, strengthening advanced students, not allowing testing to take over teaching, and a stronger curriculum alignment with reading program.

The "glows" or things that they were doing well, confirmed key ideas and themes identified throughout the coding of the interview protocol and the evidence that has been presented through the teacher interviews. Table 5 was created for the classroom teacher group due to the number of responses and indicates what teachers shared as "glows" or things they believe were going well. The second column matched the related key idea/theme.

Table 5

*Classroom Teacher Glows and Related Themes*

<b>Glows (What is Going Well)</b>	<b>Related Key Idea/Theme</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collaboration between teachers</li> <li>• Training we received</li> <li>• Blued Ribbon itself that represents hard work</li> <li>• Student progress/growth in writing</li> <li>• Writing instruction</li> <li>• Just the feel here – people are happy, optimistic, not much complaining</li> <li>• When you see that magic moment when kids get it</li> <li>• Students feeling good about themselves</li> <li>• Focus on writing and students becoming stronger writers</li> <li>• Our staff and our building and how much we want the children to do well and the little things we do to help all of the kids</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collaborative Teams</li> <li>• Professional Learning/Improvement</li> <li>• Shared values/Work Ethic/High Expectations</li> <li>• Continuous Improvement/Growth</li> <li>• Instruction/Good Teaching</li> <li>• Culture and Climate</li> <li>• Student Centered</li> <li>• Instruction/Continuous Improvement</li> <li>• Culture and Climate/Student Centered</li> <li>• Student Growth/Continuous Improvement</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Challenge and fun of TDA with kids and their improvement – to see what they can do, it's impressive</li> <li>• District support/Professional Development</li> <li>• Advanced writing</li> <li>• Sharing of ideas</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Leadership/Support/Improvement</li> <li>• Growth/Improvement/Instruction</li> <li>• Collaborative Teams and Inquiry</li> </ul>
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#### **Classroom Teacher Summary of Research Question Four**

The evidence strongly indicates the power of community, culture, and relationships. All teachers expressed how the positive environment at Community Elementary made it a great school aside from academic excellence. Not only did teachers express an appreciation for working at Community Elementary, but also their years of service to the district and school suggest a satisfaction with their work. A comment by Mrs. Lawler encompasses and sums up the thought of shared mission and values, high expectations, growth, academic success, and student centeredness when she stated, “There’s nothing kids can’t do. We have to expect more from kids and then they won’t have enough blue ribbons for us if we do. We’ll be wearing them and tying them around trees.” Teachers echoed the power of their culture and collaboration throughout the interview protocol in answering interview questions pertaining Research Question Four. All classroom teachers reported that climate, culture, and relationships were what made Community Elementary a Blue Ribbon School.



Despite the Blue Ribbon status the school has achieved academically and how teachers use the term to describe their culture, they still do not feel they have arrived and mentioned numerous ways they can improve (stated previously). Their mentality of continuing to move forward/continuous improvement, looking for better ways to align the standards, collaborating, and focusing on student growth, speak volumes about how they see themselves operating within a Professional Learning Community.

### **Support Teacher Analysis**

The support teachers who volunteered to be part of the study consisted of two Literacy Specialists (K-2 and 3-5 grade level), a Gifted/Challenge Support Teacher, and a Learning Support Teacher. Following is the evidence and analysis from the teachers who support general education teachers and the students who need additional help our challenge. The same interview protocol was administered and sought to understand teacher perceptions of how a Blue Ribbon school negotiated the ELA standards. The same coding process was used with support teachers.

The first research question surrounded the description of the overall changes as well as grade/role level specific changes. Teachers were asked to explain what they felt was the school's vision/philosophy was regarding the teaching of reading to help shape their thinking to identify if they aligned or shifted their thinking due to the new standards. While the support teachers approached teaching from a different lens, not specifically working with the general education population, they had similar perspectives on the ELA PA Core through their various roles. Three of the four support teachers are working with struggling readers and writers while the gifted support teacher works to challenge and enrich students who have demonstrated a distinguished strength in reading and writing.

## **Support Teacher Analysis and Themes of Research Question One**

- 1. What are teacher and administrator perceptions and understandings of how the teaching of English Language Arts has changed as a result of the ELA PA Core Standards?*

Similar to the classroom teachers, the support teachers brought up descriptors regarding their perceptions and understandings in the ELA Standards as rigorous, gotten harder, much higher, taking it to another level, and going deeper. They also spoke how much of the alignment with the standards were embedded in their resource Journeys.

K-2 Literacy Specialist, Mrs. Edy admitted that her depth of knowledge with the whole ELA Common Core is not as expansive of those who deal with it on a day to day basis but her primary experience with it and awareness of it is with:

...the adoption of our Journeys reading program several years ago, that was one of the benefits that a lot of it seemed already to be aligned to what the core standards were, so we therefore went through it afterward and kind of saw what lessons were actually aligned to make sure that we were covering the common core throughout the program...

Mrs. Edy further went on to say, "Some teachers are assuming the standards they need to teach are embedded in Journeys." Grades 3-5 Literacy Specialist mentioned the binder that teachers received regarding the standards. The Curriculum Director (Mrs. Rose) helped to emphasize some of the changes. Learning Support Teacher, Mrs. Haley stated, "There's greater pressure with the core standards to have data to back up our curriculum." She also commented "This is my bias, but there seems to be... we seem to be teaching more towards testing.

The gifted support teacher also spoke about the curriculum and program alignment with *Journeys* but in her role she talked in depth about how she is learning the standards and delving into the Standards Alignment Systems (SAS) website and seeking resources to support the learner who is academically above grade level. She also commented on how she feels the gifted program in general has a strong grasp on the standards as they create units for gifted students, and in doing so, they must align the units they create to the new standards:

I get a little nerdy about it and excited cause it's how I'm wired. I will go right into that SAS web site and eligible content . . . I was just doing this for fourth grade, I'm looking at mapping out a big unit and breaking down the lessons. If each lesson is not hitting a standard, we're not doing it.

Regarding the school's vision/philosophy of reading and if they shifted their thinking Mrs. Edy stated "We do a balanced literacy approach" and went on to explain how it is a combination of whole group and guided reading while trying to reach students at their individual levels. When asked if she has shifted due the ELA Core Standards, she responded with saying, "I think we're changing, but I don't know if the changes are all due to the ELA Core Standards. I think a lot of them are about encouraging good teaching". Mrs. Edy went on to talk about some guided reading professional learning she received to help further the growth of kids. Mrs. Philly said the same thing regarding philosophy of reading, "Yeah, I mean we've always been like a balanced literacy approach. We really believe in taking kids where they are and making sure they're reading at the right levels and guiding them to be independent readers and at the same time remediating any places where kids need remediation." She further went on to say,

“There’s a whole class piece and then there’s definitely small groups and guided reading and so overall I think that the premise is really just to get kids to be independent readers and thinkers.” Mrs. Philly did say that she has shifted her thinking along with the expectations:

My thinking has just shifted from, I used to be really happy if they could identify answers and go back to the text, but I think it’s a huge job ahead of me to find what these struggling readers can possibly become... I think they can over time depending on what their needs are, which is to become deep thinkers and really reading critically, analyzing, and evaluating.

Mrs. Philly also spoke about how it somewhat feels like starting over again with teaching and resources,

I feel like we’re starting all over again like where do we teach, what resources do we have, we’ve been given some resources that are in line with PA Core and this year it’s sort of been like try them out, see what you think, lets look through them and see what works.

In both cases with Mrs. Edy and Philly, they were student centered and focused on the growth of their students. Mrs. Philly also spoke about the support of administration and the focus on good teaching opposed to a program or resource. The following quote also supports the theme of student centeredness with kids being the focus and determining what works for them:

Our supervisor said really you’re the teacher, the program doesn’t teach the kids you do, you need to really find what you think the kids need and you can bring in resources that you feel like you need to use as well to support the curriculum.

Mrs. Haley talked about how it is their job to teach kids to read and be on grade level and to support those who are not on grade level. Regarding her shift in philosophy she commented, “Probably the difference and, and this is just general, we don’t do as many fun type activities as we used to.”

Mrs. Raznor likened her philosophy to a race, that reading is a marathon and not a sprint. She further states, “In student life and beyond as an adult, you are able to apply that to your career, citizenship, your own personal and professional goals as adulthood. But first we have to learn how to read, and then reading to learn—how to apply that.” When asked if she shifted her philosophy due to the standards, she talked about how she structures the assignments differently to support and challenge students. She also talked about how she has combined more fiction and non-fiction reading into assignments and explained in detail an example she used within a unit. She commented on some changes:

In the past there wasn’t the emphasis on kids needing half their reading instruction in literature and about half in informational text, which is really sort of the message we get with PA core. I think historically elementary schools did a great job with literature and the information nonfiction text was maybe until the older grades—upper elementary—there was less emphasis on that. There’s a lot in narrative, and the same with writing. So now I see a shift away from that old thinking and now more deliberate effort at balancing the two.

Mrs. Raznor explained how she does a variety of reading and writing combined with debate about topics while pulling in social studies and science (integration) to support multiple areas in the ELA Core Standards.

### **Support Teacher Summary of Research Question One**

Similar to classroom teachers, support teachers also talked about the rigor of the new standards, not just for the students but for them as teachers also as they have had to re-think instructional practices. While their philosophy of how they taught reading did not necessarily change, they have had to make adjustments at their specific position (action oriented) and structure assignments or instructional practices to meet student needs (student centered) and get them to where they need to be academically (results oriented). Each respondent did mention the adoption of *Journeys* that they felt had the standards embedded within.

It was mentioned that the primary grade might need more versed in the specificity of the ELA Standards. In addition, while support teachers did talk about “experimenting” with new resources, the importance of good teaching is what they felt impacted student growth, not necessarily the programs or resources. There was also no mistaking that while they have been identified as a Blue Ribbon School, working through the new standards was a marathon and not a sprint.

### **Support Teacher Analysis and Themes of Research Question Two**

#### *2. How do teachers and administrators perceive the implementation of ELA PA Core?*

Strand two of the interview protocol addressed concerns and uncertainties that teachers had with the new standards as well as the professional development process and what types they received in response to PA ELA Core. They were also each asked about their confidence level regarding preparation in delivering the new standards.

Concerns and wonderings that support teachers had surrounded students and getting all the professional learning that is needed. Mrs. Lewis talked about the balance of the rigor and being sure that it is appropriate for individual students and their personal development. She talked about how some kids come in reading at first grade while others don't know letter and sounds yet.

That was unusual (speaking of a student reading Harry Potter in first grade) on the other end, so to be able to give everyone the opportunity of learning and to feel good about their learning and not always having to feel like they're failing, to have that rigor, but at the same time not too rigorous so that the developmental growth of children is also considered.

Mrs. Raznor echoed Mrs. Lewis's comments about student differences in learning, "I don't know how someone could expect that in a heterogeneous classroom of 25 plus kids that every student will arrive at a standard at the same time as the PSSA assessments assume will happen." She further explained her comments by speaking about the school having a variety of students who are identified with specific needs, English as second language students, and special needs. Learning support teacher, Mrs. Haley said, "I'm upset about the fact that we're spending so much time on a test." She talked further about how so much time is taken in these testing situations, how it is contrived and not truly a representation of how teaching takes place or what we expect of students.

We have writing communities and I think that's best practice. That the kids talk about what it is they're going to write. They have a variety of prompts from which they can choose to write so that they have a chance to figure it out. We read the prompts to them. I mean whenever we're writing we talk about what are

we going to write about. We talk about that and then say okay go to it. Pick a side and do it. Then they write a first draft, they talk it over with a peer, they figure out all of this. And yet on this test that's supposed to measure the standards accomplishment they're given (they can't talk it over). It is contrived. It doesn't even match up with the way we're teaching. And when you think about it in the real world, who does anything in a vacuum like this?

Mrs. Philly (3-5 Literacy Specialist) was concerned about the need for more hands-on and involved professional learning. She did say they had some training and resources provided and that you can't do everything all at one time. "I feel a little more comfortable with close reading, but I think every year you can kind of focus on a few things and get to where you need to be, but to do it in one year is a big job.

This segued into the types of professional development they received to support the ELA Core Standards. Each Literacy Specialist spoke about their *Journeys* resource and how it has the standards embedded within them. Mrs. Edy didn't feel they received a whole lot of professional development, "I don't really think we've had a whole lot of professional development on ELA itself, it's maybe been embedded a little bit in with the Journeys." She did mention about a guided reading session that her and classroom teachers attended in the fall. Mrs. Philly talked about the PRP's and the choices that people had ranging from writing instruction to assessment to dealing with difficult students. Her words revealed inquiry, collaboration and action when Mrs. Philly stated:

Last summer the other reading specialist and I got together and we decided to put this together because we knew these resources were there and it's standards related, it's the eligible content, conventions content like a glossary then the



samples basically from the PSSA and the alignment with journeys is in here too to make sure that our reading curriculum does follow PA Core so you can see where the lessons cover the different standards. We decided to put this together for teachers because we felt like we wanted something in our hands.

Mrs. Raznor praised the district for the amount of professional learning provided, “I’m lucky to work in a district with a lot of resources. And Upper Community really does a great job in so many ways providing professional growth. And they’re very attentive to that.” She also talked about how the resources they receive may be aligned with the standards but mentioned,

I’m not a consumer. As a teacher of the gifted I’m not a consumer of text materials that someone else developed that I can trust. Oh yeah they’re aligned. I know they are. It says it on the cover. And every lesson shows the standard. I don’t have those resources. So I had to be more of a producer as I said, I’m so familiar with them, I’m a bit of a nerd and I . . . because I am one of the few teachers lucky enough to still design units I need to know. I want to know. Am I hitting standards? I’m in and out of SAS a lot. I do have the binders the district gave me. But it’s just as easy for me to be in and out electronically.

Mrs. Haley reported, “nearly every in-service that we’ve had, and we have a lot of half day in-services too in the afternoons, those were geared towards the core standards.”

She also talked about how much of the training was focused around writing and some of the PRP’s she chose to take on grammar and reader’s notebooks.

When asked about more specifics about the ELA PA Core and professional learning, the Literacy Specialists talked about the conversations they had with classroom teachers and the balance that *Journeys* did bring to fiction and non-fiction. Mrs. Edy stated:

It was really fiction heavy prior to ELA Core, and that's been a real deliberate, a benefit of Journeys also because it was part of it also, but it really has been pushed to make sure there's more non-fiction, included in both guided reading and in whole group reading. So, that has actually been a significant change.

Mrs. Edy also mentioned that text dependent analysis is something they are "Playing with a little bit. So, we have been working with the younger grade teachers on starting that process with the kids." Mrs. Philly spoke to the TDA's, close reading, and writing, "I know we've done more on TDA because in the upper grades that's been new and emphasized." She also added, "Yes close reading, I know other reading specialists went out of the district for close reading workshops or seminars. Writing is the big focus, I think writing's been bigger than reading." She talked about the many opportunities to work with a presenter the curriculum director brought in several times this past year. Mrs. Raznor excitedly explained how she took a session on close reading but how it's not a one and done experience, "You know I look for things that I can apply in my situation. And I . . . then for me those kinds of things are not a once and done. I, I'm the kind of learner . . . I then go home and I dig a little deeper." Mrs. Haley also mentioned about the focus on writing but said she did not receive much regarding TDA's as her caseload is more at the primary level.

The next interview question within Research Question Two surrounded their role in professional development and their views on administration's role and approach in the process. Each of the four support teachers agreed that professional development was a shared process and overall they felt they had a say in providing feedback to administration. Mrs. Edy commented, "Our department heads plan in service, sometimes the principals have been asked to facilitate groups of different sections depending on what the topic is, but usually I've been involved in planning some with Mrs. Rose (ELA Curriculum Director)." Mrs. Philly said, "Mrs. Rose definitely asks us, I imagine she gets inputs from principals and teachers and kind of runs with it, so I think the needs do come from the teachers..." Referring to PRP's Mrs. Philly added, "You can choose what you need, if you feel like you need something there are offerings there where you can learn about what you need." Mrs. Raznor felt at times that professional development days within the school year can be somewhat compartmentalized and would like to see more collaboration at times but added, "I mean the good thing is we're all completely dedicated professionals who are going to make the most of that time." Mrs. Haley shared that she also likes the PRP's but her challenge is attending all the various sessions due to covering many grades as a learning support teacher, "The difficulty that I have as a special education teacher is that because I am across grades it's difficult for me to get to all of them. So I go to as many as I can on grade levels I teach."

Similar to classroom teachers, the support teachers reported positively about their principal's leadership approach. One (Mrs. Philly) did feel she "micro-managed" but also added she still felt she was great.

Mrs. Philly: Oh, she's great. She's great, she really is, likes to micro-manage but she kind of puts everybody at ease right away, and makes them think that these changes they were making, were their ideas kind of... So, she's very aware of the culture of the building and can make changes and support people, I don't know I think she does a great job.

Mrs. Edy: She is amazing in her leadership I think everyone really does feel supported and can kind of voice what they need.

Mrs. Raznor: She is a people first kind of leader. She invests a lot of energy in a really sincere way in making sure that everyone feels comfortable and welcome and that goes from students, parents, families, and staff. It doesn't matter who you are. Once she starts digging in and really establishing professional expectations and student achievement expectations and building culture expectations I think people really respond to what she's trying to do and want to circle the wagons and, and be part of that effort. She's a detail-oriented person, which impacts her leadership style. She forgets nothing. She knows everyone's first name, parents, and kids, there's a warmth about her that makes you feel really safe and cared for. People feel like they can take risks and try something she wants you to. She does not want anyone to feel like this is a stressful environment where the assessments mean everything. And we know what they mean. You know but she puts kids, families and staff first.

Mrs. Comet: I think that she's encouraging, she wants you to do the job that you were hired to do. But she allows you enough free rein that you feel like it's really your classroom, which you have the opportunity to do some different things and explore some different ways as long as you get, as you do what you're supposed to.

In response to professional development and leadership, support teachers were asked about their level of confidence with the PA Core Standards and the changes they have brought about. Overall, the support teachers felt they were in a good district and school. They seemed to take things in stride as Mrs. Edy stated, “I probably didn’t get as worked up about it as I should. I’m aware of it and probably should learn more and be more versed in it than I am, so I didn’t let it get me too ruffled.” Mrs. Raznor talked about confidence in her peers and the trusting relationships she has built and said “...There isn’t any one of them who I couldn’t have a, a really meaningful, professional conversation with, pose some questions, get some information back, have something to take away.”

### **Support Teacher Summary of Research Question Two**

Support Teacher concerns were the balancing of the rigor with what was developmentally appropriate teaching at each grade level. In addition, they felt a concern was the expectation of having each student (student centeredness) reach standards all at a given date (PSSA), which to them seemed unrealistic. Testing was a concern and how it seemed to be more contrived versus the actual teaching and learning that occurred on a day-to-day basis in a classroom. Similar to classroom teachers, the first impression was that there was not much PD in the ELA Core, but upon further probing it is noted that they did receive a variety of experiences (continuous improvement/learning) in guided reading, writing/grammar, and close reading. They also felt that PD was a shared experience between teacher and administrators and their voices were heard. Comments on the principles positive leadership also resonated with each of the support teachers.

The series of interview questions within primary Research Question Two supported numerous themes within the Professional Learning Communities Framework as support teachers shared their thinking. Student centeredness resonated among the support teachers as they spoke about meeting individual needs with the enhanced rigor of the standards. While primary literacy teacher Mrs. Edy felt that the primary level could be better versed in the standards, each of the support teachers spoke about continuous improvement, as they were both recipients and providers of professional development. Leadership was another conclusive theme that was addressed and spoke about in a favorable manner by the support teachers, which they felt added to the collaborative nature of their school and professional development.

### **Support Teacher Analysis and Themes of Research Question Three**

3. *What instructional and curricular changes have occurred in teaching reading at the elementary level regarding the ELA PA Core Standards?*

The next line of questioning led into changes that took place in their work surrounding curriculum and instruction and from the professional learning opportunities that pertained to the standards. Thoughts were also shared on how data and analysis has played a part in the standard changes. Support teachers further offered their thoughts on whether or not they perceived the standards creating deeper thinkers, 21<sup>st</sup> century learners and career and college ready students and their further thinking on teaching to the test.

This series of questioning allowed teachers to think through how their school has worked through changes in reading curriculum and instruction due to the standards. Their answers revealed more common themes related to the Professional Learning Communities Framework.

Mrs. Edy spoke about how some things changed pertaining writing and how there has been more of a focus on this subject in the primary grades as well as interconnectedness with writing, speaking, and reading. She went on further to explain her thinking with supplementing the *Journeys* program with more leveled books for guided reading. She also mentioned that most did not feel that the writing component to the Journeys was meeting the standards needs and the district secured another resource they felt supported the ELA standards. “Journeys has a writing program, but that didn’t match, the standards at all, or not as well, so that’s why we adopted *Being A Writer* to fit into the writing piece.” Mrs. Philly (3-5 Reading Specialist) again alluded to the alignment of the curriculum with the standards with the *Journeys* resource. As she continued to work through the question her thinking unfolded into how leadership support went from being stricter in following the program to providing more resources and then to allowing teachers more leeway in making professional decisions:

When you really look at these lessons in Journeys for instance sometimes I know we were feeling like does that really cover everything. Mrs. Rose (Curriculum Director) has tried to find some resources for us to use, she’s really tried to focus on that TDA question and helping teacher’s feel a little more comfortable with teaching that, but in terms of our curriculum changing yet, I don’t think its changed yet. I think we’ve really just tried to take some of the ideas and she’s given teachers a little bit of leeway, you kind of adapt to what you need.

Mrs. Philly further explained about how when teachers had some experience with the resource, Mrs. Rose told teachers to adapt and modify to meet student needs. She did add some thoughts too regarding curriculum changes about the work that she has done with

other teachers and the Curriculum Director. She felt it has been an ongoing process that maybe everyone doesn't always look at aside from an email to check in on the curriculum changes, "It's a very small group of teachers who kind of look at the curriculum and make changes, then there might be an email that says check the curriculum changes. She further added about how more things are released things will continue to change, "As time goes on and there's more information released things will change again, it's like constantly changing its hard to keep up with truthfully.

Mrs. Raznor commented on how they did change things as they created the new units for the gifted program through the SAS system. She seemed to like the idea of delving into the SAS site and combining and integrating the reading, writing, speaking, and listening stating, "Yeah, I geek out on the opportunity to create these units".

Mrs. Haley spoke about the pressure of the changes and how she feels there is a push for more to accomplish with curriculum and instruction with kids she talked about how the students she works with are often a year behind or further and her frustration with the push to do more, "It's been tough to balance what's best for these kids and the pace that we have to maintain in order to try to have them not feel so utterly frustrated." She also added that they have had leeway in supplementing curriculum as needed to support students.

Student centeredness remained a focus through these questions as well as the idea of flexibility and how leadership supported this through the changes in curriculum and instruction. Being given the "leeway" to adjust what students needed also supported action oriented thinking and inquiry into what works best for students, adapting and



modifying to meet needs. The idea of integration also surfaced as support teachers talked about connecting reading and writing within what they were already doing.

Pertaining to data and the opportunity to work with other teachers within or across grade levels within the structure of the new standards, the support teachers had the following insights to share. Mrs. Edy spoke about how data focus and collection “Is definitely light years away from when I first started here.” She talked about benchmarking throughout the year and how data was collected within a program called Performance Tracker. She also talked about achievement teams and “data buddies” that have been used to support student achievement:

We had our achievement team, made up of myself, and the counselor and the gifted teacher, the other reading specialist, the psychologist, our IST teacher, we had a data buddy in the older grades, it was only three four and five, where we’d meet with them, every six weeks or so to kind of look at their data and see if there are any trends or any kid’s that they were worried about to help them come up with ideas or see if there’s any resources or other avenues they can pursue to help that achievement of that particular student and area, I had another thought, getting, using that data to inform instruction is some teachers do better than others and I think and may need some guidance in how to actually look at some of that stuff to see where those instructional needs are.

Mrs. Edy did comment also on how she needs to be more well versed in what the “next level” was doing so she can be informed and prepare kids as they move on to third grade. “The second graders, we need to start, we have started being a little more aware of what they need to know, so that when they go into third grade.” She use the term “scaffold the

learning” as kids progressed through the grades. Mrs. Philly shared some of the same thoughts regarding data and benchmarking, also commenting on achievement teams and data buddies and time provided to review data, she said, “It’s a little different every year, but teachers have always been given time to look at their data, they’ve been expected to set goals to see where their class is and where they should be taking them.” Mrs. Philly also spoke to the changes regarding W.I.N and how data had driven this:

We’ve kind of changed it up this year to be set by grade level. So, grade level teams now look at their own data group kids accordingly and have some freedom there too to group kids as they wish depending on what they’re working on, but that’s kind of taken over data buddies because they can look at their data and then plan from there so I think everything’s really driven by data here.

Mrs. Raznor spoke about how teachers get together a lot to support student achievement, data, etc. “We do work together a lot. But it might not always be during dedicated professional development time because they might get pulled out in one direction or I might be assigned and pulled another direction.

Mrs. Haley expressed that she felt the standards didn’t necessarily change the data process, but “That we’re assessing it seems to me much more frequently than we used to. She also spoke to being given time to discuss data:

Yes we do have time on some of those half days. There are opportunities for us to get together as a grade level. Or across the grade levels to talk about how is that data that we have, how does that change how we approach things. So if we’re finding that these kids are falling down say in cause and effect relationships, then our emphasis is going to be more on that.

From the evidence shared, the support teachers all agreed that data collection and sharing was a part of what took place at Community Elementary. Again, the focus seemed to be directed toward student improvement. Teachers not only were given time to analyze data and what students needed (W.I.N) but they also met at other times as needed which was also echoed by classroom teachers.

Support teachers were next asked about their thoughts on if they felt the new standards felt they were going to live up to the claim that they are to develop deeper thinkers, 21<sup>st</sup> century learners, and college and career ready students. Some comments provided were “Not everybody’s going to go to college and I think that’s okay, but you do want to try to get kid’s to reach their potential” (Student Centeredness/Improvement). Another comment was, “ I think we have teachers here who already have high expectations” (High Expectations). Mrs. Haley shared her thinking, which supported the idea of good teaching:

I think our kids are going to be deeper thinkers because they’re, because we instruct them in ways that challenge them. And I don’t think the standards really make a difference one way or another. That they’re . . . I think if you present the instruction in such a way as these kids start to think outside the box . . . in fact actually I think if you go by those standards sometimes they’re boxing you in more than providing you the opportunity to think outside the box.

About the idea of teaching to the test – each support teacher felt it wasn’t the “end all be all” but a reality they did have to deal with. “Teaching to the test” came down to relationships with students, one another, and good teaching.

Mrs. Edy: My kids seem pretty happy here, so I think the teachers really do try to weave the fun in too. If you're in first grade and you don't like coming to school and you want to instill that love of learning, no matter what the rigor is, so finding that balance of giving them the information that they need to do well and also learn how, love to learn is the balance that I think everybody struggles with.

Mrs. Philly: The test is on our minds but I also think like teachers here are doing so many great things that I would almost hope that if we didn't even look at the tests that we would be producing these kinds of readers and writers anyway mostly. I know there are lots of teachers here that would say there's no way I'm teaching this test. That's not what matters to me.

The gifted support teacher (Mrs. Raznor) shared how she felt to the test and achievement came from the relationships and culture that was pervasive across the school:

Yeah there is an energy and a safety and a love here that's felt by people . . . when we have new staff, new families, we do everything we can to welcome people and make them feel like they are, they are part of this. From that everything else comes: achievement, risk taking, innovation. Try this. Who cares if it doesn't work? Or, and making mistakes and then you have to you know you feel more comfortable saying 'I screwed up.'

Mrs. Comet: I had this mindset that I'm not going to get sucked into this preparing for the test for my kids. I just wanted them to know the language and structure of the questions so they would understand. So truly I waited two weeks before the test and we

did PSSA preparation for that just so that they could understand what the questions were asking.

### **Support Teacher Summary of Research Question Three**

Support teachers did feel changes took place to curriculum and instruction as a result of the new ELA standards. While the resource *Journey's* was purchased in advance to be aligned with the PA Core and expected to follow it with fidelity initially, leeway was given to address student needs. Support teachers (like classroom teachers) were appreciative of the change from strict adherence to more flexibility. Further supporting this thinking was the “allowance” of supplemental materials in supporting the primary resource and the integration of reading and writing across how they support students. Teachers were able to address academics through the shared process of collecting and analyzing data by focusing not just on problems, but solutions (such as W.I.N.)

Throughout this line of questioning, support teachers supported the Mission/Vision and values of student centeredness, continuous growth and improvement, collaboration (working together on data and best practices), and action oriented and experimentation (being allotted the professional flexibility in best practices). Concerns were further expressed about the expectations associated with the standards and the pressure of growing struggling students. Despite these concerns, data analysis has seemed to provide more of a specific focus to student needs. In addition, leadership was mentioned in how they have been given the support needed for resources, flexibility, and being allowed, “to screw up” (take risks and fail) as Mrs. Raznor put it because of the culture and climate that has been developed over time.

Mrs. Haley summed up the whole idea of changes, teaching to the test, data, and 21<sup>st</sup> century learners. While she and the literacy specialists expressed concern of growing struggling students, confidence shined when she talked about good teaching practices and creating deeper thinkers by helping students to think outside the box, even beyond standards that can confine. “I think our kids are going to be deeper thinkers because we instruct them in ways that challenge them. And I don’t think the standards really make a difference one way or another.”

#### **Support Teacher Analysis and Themes of Research Question Four**

##### *4. How has culture and climate impacted the ideology of learning and teaching through the ELA Common Core?*

The last Research Question surrounded the topic of climate and culture. The interview protocol was designed to assess if teachers perceived if culture and climate had an impact on the implementation and roll out of the ELA PA Core (or vice versa). Interview Questions asked teachers about what made them a “Blue Ribbon” school aside from academic excellence and to state in their own words what was the mission statement of Community Elementary. At times, follow up questions were asked about if they (teachers) felt their voices are heard and about collaboration and relationships. This was followed with how do they improve from their current status and for them to name what they felt was the biggest glow (highlight) and grow (area of improvement). Support teachers (like classroom teachers) discussed “School Families” that added to the culture and climate of the school. Some teachers also alluded to the specialness of their school as the “Community Elementary Way”.

Both Mrs. Edy and Philly said, “We actually have the saying, we call it the Community Way, that we kind of just use it as a joke and joke around, but I think it really is true” regarding the culture and climate. The line of questioning beginning with, *What makes Community Elementary a “Blue Ribbon School” aside from academic excellence*, provides evidence to support leadership, culture and climate/relationships, Collaboration, Shared Mission/Vision and Values, and Student Centeredness. Mrs. Philly added:

Ann knows everybody’s name in this building and I always thought that was amazing, she can greet every child in the hall by name, she can greet every parent by name that comes by, it’s really kind of freaky. So, I think that means a lot when you know your principal knows who you are and knows what your name is and I think that’s kind of sets the tone for everybody, even though everyone wants to try their best and encourage kids to try their best, it still feels personal, you feel like people know who you are.

Mrs. Philly further went on to talk in depth about school families and explain how they worked and added:

You keep your school family through the child’s whole career at Community, so you see these first graders grow up to be fifth graders in your school family and sometimes it’s a lot when you have all these other things going on to have to stop what you’re doing to do school families, but it really does make a connection between the grades and between the kids and the people. So, I think, there is kind of a personal feeling here also.

Mrs. Edy: Just seeing how teachers work together and how they really care about kids and how they really support each other. Our principal is amazing in her leadership. I think everyone really does feel supported and can kind of voice what they need.

Mrs. Raznor: It is such a warm and welcoming place. That is our goal. That is... it's Ann's goal, it's our goal, if anyone in this building needs anything the wagons are circled so fast. And people will rally to help you. And it can be professional, it can be personal, it could be relating to a student. I cannot tell you the countless emails and just verbal requests and staff emails that go out by staff members and it could have to do with a lesson, it could have to do with field day, doesn't matter. There will be... or Ann could say 'Hey, I need some volunteers for a drill' and there'll be like 20 plus responses of I'll help. That is the culture of this school and it's pervasive. It, it seeps into everything. It is such a positive place to be.

Mrs. Haley: We have teachers who come early and stay late and work really hard to make sure that what they're teaching is what the kids really need to have. And some of it may not be on those standards, some of it may be teaching kindness and respect for one another. I think we teach kids how to be good citizens and the academics sort of filter in. I think that's what makes us a blue ribbon school.

Follow up questions regarding collaboration, voices being heard and valued and relationships across the school were answered with the following statements. Mrs. Edy shared:

I worked in a Maryland school before, it was more of an adversarial kind of climate, the support personnel are almost pitted against the teachers, it wasn't like everybody was working for the same common good, and here it does seem very



much that it's a team and everybody is working with each other. Voices are heard most of the time. Sometimes if Ann wants something done, it gets done even though you know, but for the most part, she is very open to everyone's suggestions and people do work well together. People want to do what's expected of them, but I think they also want to do what's best for the kids.

While Mrs. Philly did say, "There's plenty of grumbling that goes on here" she further added, "But we all kind of know we're in this together and we'll get through this and figure out what we need to do. People aren't afraid to ask questions or seek help. She continued:

It's just a very warm place. I think in general people would say that it does feel like a family everyone always likes to say, I mean aside from how important we think it is to teach and for the kids to learn, we really care about each other.

Mrs. Raznor shared the following:

Yeah, there is an energy and a safety and a love here that's felt by people... when we have new staff, new families, we do everything we can to welcome people and make them feel like they are part of this, from that everything else comes.

Mrs. Coment added about how Ms. Heffner can sometimes seem to micromanage, "I really do feel that voices are heard and people's opinions are, are valued. Ann is a really good principal. She sometimes has a tendency to micromanage and that's okay. You get used to it. Despite this, she did talk further about being part of one of the best faculties:

I actually think this is one of the best faculties that I have ever been associated with in my years of teaching. This school seems to draw to it people who care about each other, both in school and out of school. And we have a very active

social committee that tries really hard to take care of each other when we have needs. There was our orchestra instructor, who only comes here one, one day a week, her husband was undergoing cancer treatments and it was a really . . . it was a very difficult time and the call went out. Anybody can put together meals and she had meals for almost an entire month provided by the people in this building because that's just what they do. It's a really caring community of people.

The next to last question was for interviewees to state what Community Elementary Schools mission statement was in their own words and where do you go from here. The following thoughts were shared:

- To know your students and what they need
- We want to teach kids to be good citizen and then hopefully they'll fly
- We stay the course – respect what the state is asking us and then twist them into the “Community Way”
- You just keep doing what you're doing and teaching kids how to fly. We want to them (kids) to grow and as long as we're doing that, it doesn't matter whether we're blue ribbon. It just matters that we, that we give these kids what they need and we teach them how to grow and, and be good people.

The following comments were made when asked what they felt were there biggest glows (achievements) through the ELA PA Core process was as well as the grows (improvements). One support teacher stated that they felt their biggest glow was, focusing in on some key areas (TDA's) and really tackling that “Just jumping on board with it and really getting teachers on board.” Another shared the biggest glow was the

Blue Ribbon itself and what it stood for, “Yeah, how hard we work here for our kids.”

Yet another stated:

The fact that we have done so well for several years in the old standards and in the newer standards. We’ve been the number one elementary school in the state for the past two years, which is amazing, that’s huge.

The support teachers shared similar thinking to the classroom teachers found in Table 4. The key ideas/themes translated through their comments on “glows” represent good teaching, collaboration, shared mission/values, work ethic, growth, continuous improvement and student centeredness.

While teachers acknowledged their “glows” they also realized that they have much work to do and tackle the new standards as one teacher commented, “little by little”. The K-2 Literacy Specialist felt Kindergarten through Grade Two needed “To be a little more versed in actually what the ELA standards are instead of just always assuming that they’re part of the curriculum. Mrs. Comet talked about maintaining a balance, “I think we need to be able to balance maintaining that consistency and excellence and yet still be able to do the out of the box stuff that we need to do that’s not core standards dependent.”

#### **Support Teacher Summary of Research Question Four**

The idea of culture and climate impacting ideology of learning and teaching through the ELA Common Core was evident through the series of questions under Research Question 4. Support Teacher responses showed a positive perception to how they have approached the changes that the ELA Core Standards have brought about. Climate and culture appeared to be an unequivocally vital part of what made Community

Elementary a great place to work. Support teachers shared the notion they not only care about students but one another. They focus on the big picture, what counts and really matter aside from academics, citizenship, students enjoying the experience, and caring about others. It seemed evident that they did not change their ideology of culture and climate based on the standards, but vice versa. The culture and climate that they already had in place, allowed them to absorb the changes through collaboration, relationships, leadership, and the supportive environment at Community Elementary.

### **Administrator Question Analysis**

Three administrators volunteered their time to answer questions pertaining to *How a Blue Ribbon School Negotiates the ELA PA Core*. Mrs. Rose was able to meet with this researcher face to face while the interviews with Dr. Patrick (Director of Elementary Schools/Assistant Superintendent) and Ms. Heffner (Principal) were conducted via a phone interview. Dr. Patrick has been in Upper Community School District for 3 years with extensive experience in urban areas such as Philadelphia and Dallas. Mrs. Rose (Curriculum Director) has been teaching since 1972 and has been in Upper Community School District for 8 years. Ms. Heffner has 32 total years in education with 20 of those years as principal at Community Elementary.

A similar interview protocol was used (changing teacher verbiage to administrative language) and was coded the same way as the teacher interviews, utilizing the PLC Characteristics/Traits Framework. Below are the findings and analysis of the evidence of the administrator's perceptions of How a Blue Ribbon School Negotiates the PA ELA Core Standards.

## **Administrator Analysis and Themes of Research Question One**

- 1. What are teacher and administrator perceptions and understandings of how the teaching of English Language Arts has changed as a result of the ELA PA Core Standards?*

“The biggest change with the PA core standards is probably analysis. Writing in response to reading, what the state terms text dependent analysis TDA’s and the evidence based on selective response questions” is what Dr. Rose felt was the biggest change. She commented, “The reading itself has gotten more sophisticated and the reading complexity has increased.” Dr. Patrick also mentioned the writing in responses to reading and the balancing of fiction and non-fiction text and how the new standards were more complex, “What we did notice as well with the PA Core is the difference in the sense that questions could carry multiple standards whereas in the past it would be one standard per question.” Elementary Principal, Ms. Heffner spoke at length about the history of the school from 20 years ago when the philosophy was whole language and how they are really focusing on kids working at their instructional levels and critical thinking. Ms. Heffner also spoke about the *Journeys* program and how it was to be aligned to the standards. She spoke about the fidelity process initially when it was first adopted to allowing more flexibility as teachers expressed concerns:

That was the one thing I heard from teachers. They really have to find stuff to supplement for our higher-level kids because we look at growth and how we’re growing those advanced learners. I mean they’re advanced on the grade level curriculum, but so what? You know so what, what can we do to kind of take them a little bit further?

When asked how the standards impacted them in their various administrative roles, Dr. Rose stated, “I had to make sure our teachers had the information of the new format of the test, but also show them what they were already doing. They are preparing the students.” She added about how she did a workshop with the teachers regarding what they were already doing vs. what they needed to do differently in response to such things as TDA’s. She further commented on how they needed to adjust curriculum and instruction to reflect the changes identified and gave teachers voice and ownership in this process:

We just listed, made charts of what was similar and what was different and once the teachers saw the similarities between teaching their students how to write and support an opinion, it gave them the confidence that I have been teaching this, the students are going to write an opinion about the reading and support it with only text based, evidence based reasons or statements from the reading. We had to relook at our curriculum and put more emphasis on TDA’s. We used the publisher’s benchmark tests and we do three tests a year we call it Benchmark one, three and five. The beginning of the year, the mid-year and end of year and we had to take those benchmarks and create TDA’s we also had the teachers use their collective wisdom and knowledge and honor that knowledge to create TDA’s.

“I think it’s impacted my job on multiple levels”, stated Dr. Patrick. She talked about how she helped to communicate with families about changes and expectations. She also added that professional learning was key and ongoing with teachers:

The ongoing professional learning that had to occur and continues to occur with the teachers around the writing and around the rigor and the text dependent component. And really making sure that we've infused them into professional learning days and actually we've brought in additional consultants to meet with school teams and grade level teams throughout the course of the year, and through last year to really understand the scoring of writing, the component, the rigor in, in a way that we had not done before.

Ms. Heffner's approach to how it has impacted her role was mentioned in this comment:

I'm going to be really honest here. I try not to get bogged down too much in the verbiage of the standards. I think when we meet and we have grade level meetings and we're doing planning to talk about okay what's coming up? And I go into a classroom or I go into five classrooms to do walk-throughs and I look at the focus wall and I see what the target skill is and what the areas are that we're working on, I mean, you always have to kind of revisit and remind people like remember this is where we need to be. What do we need to do?

She talked about how she really relies on her Literacy Specialists and went on to also say, "I have a very professional staff who do what they need to do and who collaborate really well." While two teachers did mention that Mrs. Heffner can micromanage, Ms. Heffner said "I try not to micromanage too much." Summing up how it's impacted her role she stated:

Yeah. I don't wallow in like, oh my God it's common core. I know it's there, we attend to it but I'm not like every night reading up on stuff or every week reading up on stuff about it.

This comment was evident in how many teachers approached the process also. While they knew it needed addressed, it was not about being overwhelmed with the process and they handled it in chunks, taking on focus points such as writing, TDA's and grammar, versus the whole process. Mrs. Rose approached it similarly with focusing on a few things rather than "all of it" at once.

Administrators were next asked about the school's vision/philosophy of reading and if it has shifted due to the new ELA PA Core Standards. Director of Elementary Schools, Dr. Patrick talked about the reading and writing connection, "The connection between reading and writing is tightly bound" She also commented on programs, curriculum and philosophy saying "We realize that there's not one solid and true 100% way to teach reading for every student" she adds:

So knowing that's a fact, that you have some students go for the word work and the phonics first, and then it clicks. Other kids. . . they're intuitive. Like that's just something that they, they connected to, to language and then they're able to move forward as well. So philosophically the connection between reading and writing, taking children where they are and differentiating that, and then really looking at that shared, guided, and modeled reading and writing approach.

When asked if she has changed her philosophy due to the standards she said, no. Viewing her thinking over her 30 years in education, which she has viewed it through various lenses as a Reading Specialist and Principal she stated:



Philosophically there's been no shift. But I would say making sure that we go a little bit deeper in certain areas, you know in the course of my 30 years in this work might have been less exercised—the example being grammar. I think that with the shift in the PA core it brings that flashlight back on the importance of understanding grammar and then supporting teachers in the teaching of grammar because they had . . . might not have done this with consistency over the past number of years that they've taught.

Dr. Rose stated her philosophy while addressing the 21<sup>st</sup> century learner:

Definitely reading is comprehending, it doesn't matter if you are fluent reader and decode every word although those skills are important if you really didn't get the authors message and can't challenge the author if you disagree then you really aren't reading, that is truly creating a reader for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Thinking about, who wrote this, what is the author's background, what is the bias, what is the tone, what are the words that the author used to convey the message and how did they convey the message? That is truly being a reader in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. There are other foundational skills that are absolutely needed if you cannot decode, we absolutely look into that and then knowing how to listen carefully to someone else and to challenge their thinking in a very respectful manner, bringing them back to the text as support for your challenge.

When asked if her thoughts changed regarding philosophy and the standards, Dr. Rose shared her 43 year history with reading instruction and curriculum and how she had been fortunate to have so many rich learning experiences steeped in a tradition of “Knowing the importance of classroom dialogue and having students be accountable to

the text and their thinking.” She shared that she really feels students can rise to the occasion.

Principal Heffner talked about philosophy from her teacher’s standpoint while complementing them at the same time:

Teachers in this building want kids to develop a love and a passion for reading. Whether it’s fiction, nonfiction, you know whatever kind of text it is and they want kids to be able to leave here going to middle school being really solid or above solid readers. So that’s probably the overarching philosophy - fostering a love for reading and the written word, the spoken word. You know their reading and writing go kind of go hand-in-hand in this building. And some people love it cause it’s a craft. I mean I have so many teachers that use really good pieces of literature.

Ann also stated that all of her teachers, whether it is math, science or social studies, teach reading, “Everybody teaches reading no matter what you’re teaching.” She further complimented the teachers while continuing on with philosophy:

I think you know fluidity and flexibility is really key. I think if people love what they do it comes across. We have key people at every building that are very passionate about reading as a . . . not only as a skill but a life thing.

On changing her philosophy due the new standards, she commented, “I think next year we are going to be doing more running records within our guided reading and tweaking what we can fit into a guided reading lesson” She added, “Assessing in the moment during guided reading opposed to a post assessment.” Mrs. Heffner also talked about

how as a whole staff, they definitely want to look at strategies that are most effective with kids and seeing if what they are doing is growing kids.

### **Administrator Summary of Research Question One**

Administrators did not feel they have changed their views on the teaching of reading despite the increased expectations of the new standards. They seemed to agree to put a focus on the reciprocity of reading, writing, and speaking. Administrator responses were not only student centered in their answers under Research Question One, they were also very teacher centered in their comments expressed in their responses. Part of their jobs are to support teachers in supporting students to be sure they are getting what they need to grow students academically. Differentiating support for students and teachers were central to their message in negotiating the changes that the standards have brought about. Despite there being a standard, how to reach the standards was not a one size fits all approach. They were also essentially unified on their understandings of the changes and taking the whole process in “stride” versus creating a high stakes/pressure environment that supports and value a collaborative culture where teachers are valued. Giving teacher a voice and relationships also were supported themes that surfaced in the words of the administrators, which is also reflective on their approach to collaborative leadership.

### **Administrator Analysis and Themes of Research Question Two**

#### *2. How do teachers and administrators perceive the implementation of ELA PA Core?*

Administrators were next asked to share their concerns, uncertainties, and wonderings pertaining the ELA PA Core and what types of professional development had

been provided to address the concerns. This was followed by questions on leadership style and approach to delivering professional development. Dr. Rose's concern was surrounding the expectations of the TDA's:

Definitely writing and the response to reading. The essays, the TDA's I think it's a lot to ask a nine or ten year old to write an essay, I'm not sure the state gave us enough time to prepare the teachers to prepare the students. We spent last summer and the summer before just looking at the samples and saying what does the student need to be able to do, what do they need to know to answer these questions and what resources do we have that can help teachers teach students to do that?

Dr. Patrick didn't have concerns with the standards themselves but how it seems that one snapshot is the measurement of what students can or cannot do:

I have no concerns with the standards. Philosophically as a person and a reading specialist I support everything that they said they want our second through fourth graders to be able to do. Philosophically my struggle is, is that we're taking a snapshot of a couple of days to say whether students have met those measures. So you know I would want my children, my personal children and the children that I teach and serve, to be able to do everything that the standards, the PA standards, expect of them at each grade level. And I as a challenge would think that they're going to be able to do that, demonstrate that, on this particular day in March?

Mrs. Heffner's concern was similar to one of the teachers,

My thing with anything is like okay when are they going to change it? When are we going to get used to this and get it under our belt and then somebody will

come and say okay we're revising this again. The other question I have too is how do we ensure a school district's grade level team, principal, whoever that were really you know balancing the need for rigor and critical thinking with what's developmentally appropriate for young children? You don't want kids sitting crying if they're too hard for them. It's about knowing your kids and how much you can push them.

These answers supported student centeredness, concern for students as well as their growth. The next questions were regarding the types of professional development that has taken place to prepare teachers for the PA ELA Core Standards and the respective roles administrators and teachers had in the process. Dr. Rose's answer was very telling in several categories in the PLC Characteristics Framework that supported various themes of collaboration, inquiry, leadership, relationship, and action orientation. She talked how two years ago she invited teachers to come in and look at alignment of the standards and the Journeys resource, she commented, "We want our teachers to, we respect their collective wisdom and its extremely important that it's not top down, but collaboratively we were doing the work." She talked further about the TDA workshops they've had this past year and then added:

We encouraged teachers to go back and create their own materials and of course we gave them some samples and together we created text dependent analysis questions both to go with some of the lessons in our reading resource and definitely the benchmark test we give to students.

Dr. Rose made no mandates, but rather encouraged through togetherness. When asked about further specifics of the ELA Standards she talked about the balance of fiction and

non-fiction and providing the resources needed to balance out non-fiction texts across the district. She mentioned that Journeys did provide a nice balance of the two genres to begin with. She also talked about how they have been working on domain scoring of writing, “The more teachers understand what focus is and it’s a topic and a point that translates not only to writing, but also writing in response to reading this is the topic they are giving me what is the point I want to make.” The focus on writing is summed up in the following ideology:

The past few years have been devoted and we will continue to devote time to writing because if you can write about something that really shows you understand, your comprehension that is the epitome of understanding and that’s why we have dedicated so much time to it.

Dr. Rose also talked about how all the literacy/reading specialists were all trained in close reading and came back to their respective grade levels and did “turnarounds” (sharing/teaching their peers what they learned).

Regarding respective roles and administrator/teacher interaction with professional development, Dr. Rose said:

Professional learning comes from the teachers. If it were totally top down we wouldn’t have teacher buy-in so we look at what is coming and what the teachers do need and we hear from the teachers themselves and the teachers have PLC’s professional learning communities or grade groups they talk among themselves they talk to the reading specialists and when I meet with the reading specialists, which is every other month we talk about upcoming professional development and asking what they’re hearing that teachers need.

Dr. Rose also spoke about a PRP that was offered regarding the teaching of grammar (without workbooks). This was based on the huge shift that the PA Core has put on grammar versus the legacy standards. While this was set up by the district as well as some other upcoming choices on mentor texts, Dr. Rose said, “So, that was one that we initiated saying teachers may need this, but a lot of our professional development suggestion do come from the teachers.”

Dr. Patrick expressed a positive-ness about the professional learning that takes place at Upper Community School District sharing about the traditional PD days embedded within the schedule as well as the PRP’s. She also commented on how Professional Learning Communities are being explored more fully at the elementary level.

We have celebrated professional learning communities here at Upper Community for a number of years at the high school level. We’ve now moved that down to the elementary level last year. This past year was our first year really focusing on professional learning communities at the elementary level and schools really had the opportunity to start with just one grade team this year. And the difference between professional learning communities and just great groups really is twofold. One is like intense focus on data analysis and looking at that at the grade level team, which many grade teams do. And then the second piece is you know hence the name of the professional learning community is really looking at teachers in that particular grade team need to have, to know, to do to get this work done at a higher level. Professional learning should be differentiated for the needs of that particular building.

Dr. Patrick talked further about how individual elementary schools are able to create their own action plans as to what they feel needs addressed versus a one size fits all approach. She also further echoed Dr. Rose's comments on some of the various professional learning that has taken place with writing (Domain Scoring), TDA's and grammar. Furthermore, Dr. Patrick talked about a district wide book study pertaining to the ELA PA Core that each school read and had professional discussions on throughout the year. She also commented on instructional leadership and how she has been really working on "...empowering our principals and assistant principals to be the instructional leaders in the building and to make sure that they are focused on turning around any information that we share with them in the most positive and collaborative way." On relationships and interactions with administration and teachers, Dr. Patrick commented,

I know it, it sounds silly but we actually have shifted from the language of professional development to professional learning. And so we really are intentional about using that language and that is ongoing learning and we really focus on learning by doing and collaborative learning and professional learning opportunities. So for the shift in language will really connect more to the level of the professional learning and it's clearly more than a sit and get at a session.

She also talked further on how teachers do have opportunities to present sessions through the PRP's as well as self-select through menu choices and how they are responsive to teacher requests:

So if we have a group of teachers you know usually I try to not have it for no less than four or five people. But if we have a group of teachers that say we would like to learn more about X, Y and Z then, then we connect with the supervisors in



that department and we, we develop a you know professional learning opportunity for them to meet their needs.

Ms. Heffner also echoed what Dr. Rose and Dr. Patrick shared on professional development. She first explained the process of embedded days and the PRP's. She talked about how Dr. Rose often coordinates with the Literacy Specialists and often will bring in outside consultants to facilitate various learning experiences such as the scoring domains in writing and grammar workshops. She added that there was a lot of opportunities and choice but the embedded days with the school year/days are planned at central office:

A good percentage of our professional development is planned at the central office level. And we have a K-5 literacy supervisor you know she's looking at the needs across the district. And so when Lorraine (Dr. Rose) will plan workshops and bring people in from the outside like Jan Richardson and Andi Fishman and Carolyn Gwynn and all these like really great people to do workshops for people she's looking at, she's looking at the big picture. And so I think she's, again she goes back to her literacy folks and says you know what are you hearing in the building? What do you see as a need? And really trying to design stuff around that.

Ms. Heffner further talked about their Curriculum Instruction Professional Development Committee (CIPD) that has representation from across the district at all levels where people get together to share thoughts, ideas, feelings, needs on embedded and PRP professional development. Ann mentioned, "Then there's also those day-to-day and week-to-week opportunities that teachers and specialist get an opportunity to kind of sit

down and collaborate about things they need to work on as well.” In addition she added about the use of faculty meetings:

We decided that we were going to pick one element from domain two and one elementary from domain three. And I had the staff vote on it. You know they had their little dots and they went around and put where they thought they wanted to focus on. And so throughout the school year our faculty meetings we took time to do activities that focused on the establishing respect and rapport and engaging students in learning. So I would do activities that I picked up from my professional reading or that you know collaboration from other principals, or from just being at other kinds of professional development for principals. I would bring things up and like kind of like let’s try . . . let’s have the staff try this activity first. See how it goes, and if it’s okay after they did it, let’s talk about implications. How could you use this with your kids tomorrow? And I had a lot of teachers come back to me with different things we did and say oh my God I tried that yesterday with the kids and they really loved it. And I would have never thought of doing that before. So we really try, or at least I try in this building, to try and not make the staff meetings the Charlie Brown ‘wah, wah’ you know.

These responses express a shared mission and vision pertaining professional development allowing for teacher choice and voice while also emphasizing leadership amongst teachers and administrators alike. In addition, the views on professional learning expressed a balance of responsiveness to what teacher’s wanted/needed as well as foresight from administration on possible school and district needs. Furthermore, action orientation and experimentation was evident through administrator responses in how

teachers were encouraged to take action (and risk) through their discussions and professional learning.

The next interview question under Research Question Two was regarding leadership style. Administrators were asked to reflect on their personal leadership style. Dr. Rose and Dr. Patrick were also asked what their perceptions of Ms. Heffner's leadership style was as the principal of Blue Ribbon School of Excellence, Community Elementary. The overall self-evaluation reflected the idea of collaboration and shared leadership.

Dr. Rose shared the following pertaining her leadership style:

Definitely collaborative it could not be anything else in this district and I really encourage teacher leadership and definitely leadership among my reading specialists.

Her perceptions of Ms. Heffner's leadership style was captured in this comment:

Ann will never tell you this, but the Blue Ribbon comes from a good leader. Ann is a great leader, she runs a tight ship, but she allows freedom with her teachers, there is such a rapport of respect Ann has for her teachers and the teachers for Ann. I think the teacher's would do anything for her. She insists on good teaching and Ann knows her teachers, her building, her students and that's the difference between being an instructional leader and a manager of a school. She is in the classrooms and knows the kids and families. There is such a great rapport in this school community.

Dr. Patrick shared the following leadership self analysis:

My personal leadership style, strength based for sure, and collaborative in nature, and really kind of you know that, that model of learning by doing. So it's really looking at the strengths of the people and looking at my own strengths and matching those strengths with what needs to be done and the areas for upgrade. And then being collaborative in nature and teaching.

In regards to Ms. Heffner, Dr. Patrick shared the following insights:

You know I think it's probably similar to mine. She's very collaborative, very collegial in nature and really builds a sense of team so that the school really feels they're a part of the Community team and they know that to be true. And then you get that sense of commitment and family community

Not really wanting to self reflect on her own leadership style, Ms. Heffner said:

I feel, well I hate talking about this kind of stuff because you know . . . I don't like doing the self-reflection. I think I'm pretty collaborative with people. I mean I think there are probably things where I feel like I don't want to open up to the whole group for because it's going to cause too much whatever and we'll never get closure on it. I'll be like guys we got to do this. This is the way we got to do it and like we do it. But I think overall I really like to get people's input. I value people's opinions. I feel like people, you know everybody has expertise in different areas. And I've always tried to kind of like tap into that.

It is also important to note that Ms. Heffner said she has gotten past the idea of trying to make everyone happy because it's not possible but still help to be a problem solver:

Not everybody's going to be happy with every decision that you make. And I really try hard to go back to how does this impact on the kid or the group of kids? But I'm also cognizant of the fact that teachers have emotions and feelings too. You have to kind of like, what can I do to help you? Like I'm here to help you, I'm here to problem solve with you.

### **Administrator Summary of Research Question Two**

Administrators once again exhibited a student and teacher centeredness in their responses as they shared their concerns about getting students where they needed to be academically and supporting teachers in their instructional practices through professional learning experiences. Considering the PLC Characteristic Framework, the evidence provided suggests a number of thematic areas stemming from leadership. Administrators all considered themselves collaborative in nature and promoted teacher voice and showed receptiveness to what teachers had to say regarding professional development and other related educational input. "Top-Down" was certainly not part of the administrative delivery or style at Community Elementary. This shared vision and mission of leadership from administration supports collective inquiry and collaboration, continued improvement through being action oriented and experimentation. This approach would also seem to support a collaborative climate that over time builds a responsive and collegial culture that helps to grow students through sound instructional practices and establish ongoing academic growth. The evidence provided would suggest that administrators perceive and have implemented the ELA PA Core through a Professional Learning Communities model by addressing certain focus areas of the standards (writing, TDA's, grammar) through a collaborative, professional learning environment.

### **Administrator Analysis and Themes of Research Question Three**

3. *What instructional and curricular changes have occurred in teaching reading at the elementary level regarding the ELA PA Core Standards?*

The interview questions pertaining to Research Question 3 asked about specific curriculum and instructional changes that have taken place due to the ELA PA Core. This question was then followed up with inquiries about data usage, across grade level discussions, and if they really felt these standards were going to achieve the claims they have made regarding college and career readiness in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The last interview question asked about the balancing of good instruction versus teaching to the test due to the new standards.

Dr. Rose re-emphasized the focus on writing that the district had taken at the elementary level and the changes that have taken place in the classrooms. She explained her rationale as to why they have decided to focus in on writing and TDA's more than any other area:

That (writing) is the biggest shift if students can express themselves well in writing there is that correlation between comprehension and understanding and comprehension another major shift was working with TDA's having children respond in writing to their reading more so there was more of an emphasis on that. She further added that teachers have been given the leeway to use resources to support this focus, "As I said before teachers have the opportunity to supplement and they do supplement with novels, they supplement with time for kids national geographic, whatever is the best resource to use to teach that standard." Dr. Rose added about using the core resource in their curriculum and supplementing as necessary, but turned her

attention to students, “It’s really about students understanding, not so much the resource.” She continued sharing her thoughts on supporting teachers with resources so they could focus in on instruction in the classroom. She then proceeded to talk about how they have used data to help drive instruction and the resources they use to support teachers and students and the vertical progression/alignment of what grades before and after are teaching and expecting as a result of the standards:

Data always has informed our instruction, but I think sometimes, some teachers give the assessments, but really don’t use it in a most thoughtful manner and that’s why we are going back and revisiting. The assessment anchors are a great guide for teachers. The assessment anchors actually break it down more for a teacher in saying this is what a child has to be able to do independently and that’s the biggest word and a major shift this year, more intentional teaching.

Dr. Rose turned her attention to more specifics of instructional practices and discussed her thoughts on close reading practice within the classroom and having students talk, grapple, and collaborate about what they are reading:

You have the students read and talk collaboratively, it’s amazing when you put students into groups and they’ll say, I can see that and another student is forcing them back into the text and that’s how you have your greatest discussion when it goes back into the text and nobody really has an answer, it’s just a discussion based on the evidence in the text and for a struggling reader, you support them, you scaffold them in reading it, but you allow them to be part of the literacy club, the discussions to make meaning from the text.

When asked if she felt the standards would achieve their college and career claims, she talked about how it will be a team effort with a lot of support from the state to families and more professional development within the schools for teachers. The last question pertained the idea of teaching to the test. Dr. Rose said, “This is a dirty word in Upper Community School District.” She went on to talk about good instruction and how they integrate and embed test-taking strategies into what they do, she commented, “It is good instruction and it is embedding a test taking strategy into what you are teaching.” She further added some other things they are doing such as W.I.N. time and how that has been a change as they focus on specific student needs whether it is areas that need strengthened or enriched.

Dr. Patrick focused in on quality instruction in her response to specific changes that have occurred in curriculum and instruction:

Quality instruction is quality instruction. I see the change in the standards as a change in the desired outcomes of what we will expect students to know and do. But you know we get the teaching and learning right for the most part, so I don’t see a need to change that. We do constantly reflect and try to find additional strategies for student engagement and additional ways to differentiate instruction, but I wouldn’t see shifting our practice of comprehensive literacy with the guided, the independent and the shared components because standards have changed.

A re-worded follow up question about specific changes had Dr. Patrick talk about how the elementary had focused on writing more so due the standards because writing, “has had much more rigor and bite to it than it had several years prior.” Dr. Patrick then talked for a little while on some of the ELA curriculum history where teachers had full



autonomy at one point. Curriculum teams were formed where they brought in Journeys as their primary resource. Dr. Patrick said, “There was a little bit more step-by-step to it to make sure that everybody understood the components . . .” She added, “after people got a sense of how that worked they then could individualize.” Pertaining vertical progression discussions about the standards, she mentioned that it happens within the schools but it is difficult since schools are K-5 to get fifth grade to meet up with sixth grade.

When asked if she felt the standards would achieve the claims they have made, Dr. Patrick expressed her celebration of the standards, “I celebrate the rigor in the standards, the more rigorous expectations for students across all grade levels.” She added that some feel we already do this at Upper Community School District but that “I can’t see these standards harming students in any other way than if we’re only going to measure them by a three or four day period in March (PSSA Testing).” Dr. Patrick further echoed the sentiments of Dr. Rose and many of the teachers regarding the idea of teaching to the test, “We really don’t emphasize... we don’t teach to the test.”

Ms. Heffner talked about curricular and instructional changes she has seen (or hasn’t seen) in the classroom from a “years of experience” perspective:

I think it’s like a function of looking at your staff and looking at where they’re at because I cannot tell you with 100% certainty that every single teacher across the board from K-5 has made significant overhauls to the way they’re delivering instruction. And even from just being in classes, when you do walk throughs you’re in there for you know you’re in there for eight minutes, ten minutes, fifteen minutes. I think what I do see though over the last couple years is that I think

teachers are really trying more to do more group work with kids, and to give kids an opportunity to engage more with their peers as opposed to always being like teacher directed.

Ann further commented on how many teachers are making attempts to have instruction be more student centered:

So I think when you combine the content you know the standards with the framework for teaching and how do we marry those two things, how do we get kids to have those skills and not always feel it has to be a top down like stand and deliver model? How do we get kids to take more ownership for their learning?

Ms. Heffner talked further about the balance of making change when some don't see there is a need for change due to how the school does academically overall. She focused her attention on student success as the parameter for change, not a data point:

It's like you know stepping away from the way you used to do things, redefining the way kids are being successful, and it's not just a data point. It's not a PSSA score. It's not a blue ribbon award. You know there are so many different things that go into having this one kid be successful that's not always measured by like a metric you know.

She also added her thoughts about standards and evaluation "We want to encourage teachers to take risks in improving instructional practices but many want to do what they have been doing due to the new evaluation system and how it is tied into teacher evaluation scores." Ann also shared the same thoughts in regards to not really having any major changes in the curriculum except for the focus on writing. She added that while

there is a resource they use, teacher do have leeway for supplementing what they are doing. She commented:

Yeah I have teachers in my building who I feel are really, really strong and get really good results at writing who don't necessarily like their program and they're adding their own stuff to it. And it's really hard to kind of like push back on somebody who is getting really good results with their writing.

Regarding "vertical progression" and discussion across grade levels pertaining standard expectations, Ann did admit, "I think we need to do a better job at knowing where kids leave off, what the expectation for the next grade level, you know and doing some vertical kinds of groupings where people have an opportunity to interact." Ann did add that they have had discussion about data within grade levels and teachers can access their data collection tool, Performance Tracker. She further talked about "data buddies" which some teachers also mentioned as well as W.I.N. time:

I gave my grade level teachers an opportunity once a month to sit down as a grade level team with the people that were supporting their team. Like the reading specialist, the learning support teacher and the special area people covered their classes from morning meeting and they basically sat down and looked at okay let's take a look at the last benchmark in journeys or the last dibbles assessment or whatever we're doing. And let's pick an area focus and let's divide these kids based on what they need. So that was kind of really our focus with WIN and we mixed up every grade level this year. So all the kids had an opportunity to be with different teachers for like a six-week period. Then we would bring data back, look at it, and then mix the kids up again.

When asked about the standard's claim of making student career and college ready, Ann responded with, "I didn't know that we weren't doing that before." She further commented on how not everyone is going to go to college and how all kids are so different with various backgrounds and ethnicities, etc. When asked the last question about teaching to the test Ann stated, "If we are doing what we need to do, okay, there should be no reason that we have to be doing test prep for kids."

### **Administrator Summary of Research Question Three**

Research Question Three sought to answer what types of changes were a Blue Ribbon School making instructionally and in curriculum because of the standards. In summary, writing has certainly been a big focus per administrators as well as students returning to the text, and more intentional teaching. However, seeing instruction and curriculum through a broader lens, it has been again about being student centered (about students understanding not so much the resource) and growing students from where they are based upon data and being responsive to that information and students through instruction and curriculum. It was about getting students to take ownership of their learning and seeing students as more than just a data point through realizing that more than a standard goes into making students successful. As expressed by administrators, it comes down to good instruction and the leeway given to teachers in a collaborative environment that changes have been made due to the ELA PA Core.

### **Administrator Analysis and Themes of Research Question Four**

#### *4. How has culture and climate impacted the ideology of learning and teaching through the ELA Common Core?*

Research Question Four sought to understand how and if climate and culture played a role in working through the new standards reform. Administrators were asked what made Community Elementary a Blue Ribbon School aside from academics with follow up questions on culture, climate, and stakeholder voices and stating what they feel is the mission statement of the school/district in their own words. Lastly, administrators were asked where they went from the current status and what they felt the biggest area of growth and improvement was through the process.

Dr. Rose stated that the thing that makes Community Elementary a Blue Ribbon School aside from academics is:

The camaraderie among the teachers themselves, the teachers are here eight o'clock at night, its not every night, but there is such dedication to the students and they will take a student and help them, they're in the community, you will see them at functions, so it's really a family its not a job for these teachers and they support one another, there is a sharing of ideas, not oh, I'm going to do this and my scores are going to go up, it is really a tight group and sharing information and just a wonderful community.

Dr. Rose further stated that it is not like this at all schools in the district and she attributed it to Ms. Heffner, "That comes from Ann, even at principals meetings, she just has a nice way of putting a thought out that everybody is thinking, but she has the courage to put it

out and she puts it out in very diplomatic way.” In addition, she added thoughts on mission:

Community, collaboration, dedication, professionalism the teachers are just so smart in this school and in all of Upper Community because we are fortunate, people want to teach at Upper Community so you are able to hire the cream of the crop so you see a higher caliber of professionalism and intelligence.

“Never becoming complacent and keep looking at what you need to do” was Dr. Rose’s response to, where do you go from here? This was an area improvement she mentioned as well, never losing that edge, “It is constantly growing what are the new strategies, what’s new out there.” She also added:

You are always as a team thinking about how are we going to solve that so there is a lot of problem solving not as an individual, but Ann will pull in supervisors, she will pull in her counselors, that’s collaborative thinking, because none of us is as smart as all of us and I think that is a philosophy that produces great success.

She named the teachers as the biggest glow and how they have taken on the task of growing students from the beginning of the year until the end. She bragged a little about an intermediate grade level debate team and their thirst for learning as well as how students can tell you why their writing is strong or where it needs improvement. Dr. Rose also further commended the teachers, which seemed to epitomize the leadership, action oriented and experimentation and good teaching:

I commend the teachers because I think it’s very hard in letting go of what you used to do because that’s what you knew and letting that go in place of and especially when you are a good teacher taking a risk to try something new,

because if I try something new I may not be the very best teacher anymore and that's what these teachers do and Ann supports them and that's why they are where they are because they are able to take a risk knowing they have the backing of their administrator.

Dr. Patrick stated that what make Community Elementary a Blue Ribbon School aside from academic excellence stems from leadership, family and community:

I think it goes back to that sense of family and community that we talked about with Ann's leadership style being key. And then we really have to realize that the community itself is very vibrant and community based. So you know parents are connected, both through the school community and through the, the actual community itself and through the school itself. The commitment and the passion of the parents and families to the district and to the work is really second to none.

"It really is a family community," said Dr. Patrick. "I mean teachers are really connected. Teachers don't leave. There are a lot of teacher that have been there for a while," she added. "There's no reason to leave. So people come in and stay until retirement." She further added about the culture:

That really builds that sense of family community cause you're working parallel with someone and you're both raising your families at the same time. And you're sharing those stories at lunch. You know you build those relationships with the people you work with in such an amazing way.

Regarding improvement, Dr. Patrick said she sees it more about maintaining because if you scored a 100 out of 100 already, how do you improve from that? She commented:

I think being current is number one. And really focusing on making sure that people don't get bored or complacent in their work. So how do you keep the teachers excited about teaching and projects and families? I think that's the role of the principal in encouraging that.

Dr. Rose stated that she felt the biggest glow about the whole ELA PA Core process has been the collaboration and the biggest grow would be to continue reviewing best practices and she added thoughts on addressing all students and taking a look at those who aren't achieving at grade level:

What are ways to meet the needs of every single student because you know even though Community won a Blue Ribbon and scores 100, I'm sure there's a handful of students that maybe didn't make growth in some area. And so what can we do to make sure we meet the needs of every student and that teachers stay current with the needs and for strategies.

Regarding climate and culture, Ms. Heffner did make it clear about things at Community Elementary. She said, "It's not Disneyland, everybody's not in love all the time." This comment was made after she talked how great Community Elementary was, as well as the district was as a whole and how people felt very fortunate to be in this district. Her comments on culture surrounded community, collaboration, and how people like it here so much they never leave. She also talked about the parent support, and while not everybody is always happy, most parents are very supportive. Below is a segment where Ms. Heffner talks about what makes Community Elementary a Blue Ribbon School aside from academic excellence:



I feel like that there is a very strong community component, community spirit, community collaboration. And when I say community I talk about inside the walls between the staff members who work here and, and from out to the parents. Now that's not to say that every parent loves us because that would be unrealistic cause I know right now there are quite a few who don't. But I think overall that the parent population in our community here is so supportive of what we do and really value education. And when we say we need or we want they're like what can we do for you? How can we make this happen? I also feel like it's a respect you know there's a tone and a climate here when substitutes come into the building and they say wow, we walk into the teacher's dining room people say come and sit and eat with us. Or you know when I'm subbing the person next door will come and say do you have what you need? Can I do anything for you? It's like a feel. You walk in the building and people . . . like I'm, I'm in it every day so I don't necessarily pay attention to it as much cause I'm in it. But when I go into other buildings and I tell my teachers this, when I go into other places, I come back, I go thank God I'm here because there's a . . . you know you get a different feel. And maybe cause I'm just so used to it from being here. But I do feel that it's the culture, it's the way people really care about the kids, it's the work ethic. There are a lot of people who really are here for the right reasons.

When asked where do you go from here? Ann stated semi-jokingly, "Well listen, there's only one place you can go. It's down" She used an old adage and stated:

Listen you know the whole expression is don't get too upset when you're on the bottom cause you won't stay there too long. And, and don't get upset when you fall from the top cause you're not going to stay there too long either.

About the Blue Ribbon, she did say it was a nice recognition and added, "It's certainly something to be proud of as a school community." Pertaining grows and glows, Ms. Heffner started with improvement by saying "I think the biggest grow that we need to work on and I refer to it a little bit is more about the articulation piece from grade level to grade level." She also mentioned about "pushing the envelope with kids more at the primary level" and supporting teachers in meeting kids at their individual levels in first and second grade in developing critical thinking skills. Ann said this because she says she often hears from primary teachers, "They're not ready for that. We can't do that. They won't be able to do that." Her response is "You go back and model it and frame it the right way and they can do it." Ann continued, "Like doing a better job of getting kids to where they need to get to. Not because it's on a piece of paper, because you want to grow those kids."

In reference to what has been the glow or positive of the whole ELA PA Core process so far, Ann shared insights on how a majority of her teachers have collectively been working on differentiating instruction to better meet student needs. She stated:

You know that maybe the things that they were used to doing is not necessarily about fixing the kids; it's about adjusting the way your instructing and about using materials that might get a kid to where they need to be on a particular standard or area whether it's reading or writing or speaking. I mean that's just I think that would be an area that I felt people made some movement in.

She also further added and emphasized the collaboration piece but also admitted she was working on having those “quiet” teachers who have great ideas share them out:

I feel like the majority of people are really want to work with each other, really want to collaborate, really benefit and appreciate from the professionalism of listening to other people’s ideas. And it’s getting some of those people who maybe have a lot but don’t . . . are not the forefront people to kind of speak up a little but want to share what they’re thinking. Sometimes people will let certain people take over in grade level meeting or team meeting. And there are other people in the room. It’s like how do we make sure like we do with the classroom of kids, how do we make sure those quiet listeners in the back that really might have a great idea are going to share what they have.

#### **Administrator Summary of Research Question Four**

Administrators seemed to agree that the positive climate and culture at Community Elementary had benefitted the ideology of learning and teaching through the ELA Common Core. Leadership, family, and community were words that were repeated numerous throughout this series of interview questions. Considering the PLC Characteristics Framework, numerous (and repetitive) themes and characteristics revealed themselves through the words of the administrators in their discussion on climate and culture. Leadership, collaboration, shared mission/vision/values, relationships, and student centeredness were all ideas that were discussed pertaining to how a Blue Ribbon School negotiates the new ELA standards through a supportive culture. Administrators talked about Community Elementary as not just being a place to work but rather a place where people like to come to because of the caring attitude that

the staff had for one another and the students. This topic could fit under shared mission/vision/values and ties into the idea of “work ethic” and people “liking what they do”. As Ms. Heffner put it, “It’s the culture, it’s the way people really care about the kids, and it’s the work ethic. There are a lot of people here who are really here for the right reason.”

### **Aggregate Results**

The remaining part of Chapter 4 will triangulate data by comparing and contrasting the thinking and viewpoints of classroom teachers, support teachers, and administrators. While each group may approach or view the new standards and implementation process through different lenses, the objective is not to generalize but understand the respondent groups perspective through the ELA PA Core change and implementation process (Taylor-Powell & Renner, 2003). Yet, as each group experienced the changes, rollout, and implementation similarly and differently from their perspective roles – responses will be viewed through the PLC Theoretical Framework of the study utilizing the Professional Learning Characteristics Framework.

### **Teacher and Administrator Analysis**

Classroom teachers, support teachers, and administrator interview responses were reduced and combined in tables 6-9 to analyze the similarities and differences for validation purposes. Each table addresses the four primary research questions and the interview protocol. Key phrases and vocabulary is used to look across the groups’ responses. A narrative discussion follows in analyzing the responses.

Considering the transcribed interviews of each group as well as the reduced data below in tables 6-9, it was apparent that all parties involved were aware of the ELA PA

Core and the types of professional development that was provided. While all respondents spoke to various professional learning experiences, administration seemed to be clearer as to the path professional learning is headed. It is also evident that all respondents spoke favorably regarding leadership, culture, and climate. In addition, levels of confidence seemed to be stronger amongst classroom teachers and administrators. Support teachers did not exhibit as high a sense of confidence throughout their protocol. This thinking could be perhaps due to that fact that 3 of the 4 teachers worked with students who exhibit lower academic performance. Regarding the PLC Characteristics Framework (Table 4) – each respondent throughout the interview protocol spoke of the various traits and characteristics either directly or indirectly evidenced by the quotes used in this study.

#### **Research Question One and Table 6 Group Comparisons**

Respondents, in Table 6, all expressed similar views on the overall changes citing words such as “rigor”. Most agreed that written response (TDA’s/along with grammar), critical thinking, and a balance of fiction and non-fiction were some of the overall changes that the ELA PA Core standards impacted. Each group also spoke about the alignment of their primary reading source with the standard. Some classroom and support teachers seem to take confidence in this, while one teacher mentioned that they need to go beyond just knowing that and have a stronger understanding of the alignment.

How the standards impacted their roles varied somewhat between the two teacher groups and administrators. While most did not feel that it impacted them greatly, they did state the need to address specific areas more in depth such as critical thinking, reading and writing. Many also spoke about the “leeway” they have been given to do this versus adhering to a strict pacing guide. The leeway afforded them opportunities to integrate

skills as opposed to teaching isolated ones. While teachers were “student-centered” throughout most of their conversations and responses, Administrators in this section were more “teacher-centered”. Administrators were impacted in a sense to be sure that teachers had what they needed (aligned information, training, and resources) to teach students through the ELA PA Core.

Respondent philosophies on reading surrounded the connectedness of reading and writing, balanced literacy, comprehension, creating a passion for literacy, and, creating independence and growth. No one respondent from any group admitted that they changed their views or philosophy of reading due to the new standards, but in most cases it did cause people to consider how they do things differently. One teacher from the classroom and support group felt it took away some of the “fun” things they used to do but felt that a shift was coming due to the leeway given them. One mentioned about a laser focus, which tied into the idea of doing less frivolous things. Dr. Rose mentioned at one point about the idea of “intentional teaching” which supports the idea of laser/focused teaching. Director of the Elementary School, Dr. Patrick’s comment on “no magic fix” is very telling about how most respondents were student-centered in meeting individual student needs. If there was a “major shift”, it would have been the shift in whole class teaching (and novels) to more small, guided groups which helps support differentiating instruction and reaching students where they are academically. As addressed during the specific interview analysis, this shift has happened over the years from “total freedom” to following program fidelity and back to a more balanced allowance of leeway (professional decision making) to utilize additional resources in the classroom aside from just the primary resource.

Table 6

*Research Question One Respondent Groups Data Summary*

Research Question One: Perception of Change due to ELA PA Core	Overall Changes	Role Impact	Reading Philosophy	Shift in Thinking
Classroom Teacher	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Awareness</li> <li>• Rigor</li> <li>• Writing/written response</li> <li>• Grammar</li> <li>• Text Dependent Analysis</li> <li>• Critical Thinking</li> <li>• Reading Skills</li> <li>• Alignment with Journeys</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• More Skills</li> <li>• More Integration</li> <li>• Freedom to be creative</li> <li>• More Analytical Writing</li> <li>• Focus on more in depth writing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Whole reading experience</li> <li>• Students make a year growth</li> <li>• Getting students to grade level</li> <li>• Develop critical thinkers</li> <li>• Every child makes progress</li> <li>• For students to become lovers of reading</li> <li>• Guiding students to success</li> <li>• Teach reading across curriculum</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Causes us to look at all needs of each student- Leeway/freedom to make standards our own</li> <li>• Shift from novel to guided reading</li> <li>• More laser focus</li> <li>• Less frivolous things</li> </ul>
Support Teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Awareness</li> <li>• Alignment with primary Journeys</li> <li>• Rigorous</li> <li>• Gotten harder</li> <li>• Taking it to another level</li> <li>• Going Deeper</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Always working toward better practices</li> <li>• Focus more on teaching critical analysis and evaluation</li> <li>• Adjusting to new resources</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Balanced Literacy</li> <li>• Whole class, small group, guided reading</li> <li>• Developing independent readers</li> <li>• Application of reading to life</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Balancing fiction and non-fiction</li> <li>• Not as many fun activities</li> <li>• Teachers teach students not programs</li> </ul>
Administrators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Writing in response to reading (TDA's)</li> <li>• Balance of fiction and non-fiction</li> <li>• Critical Thinking</li> <li>• Rigor</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Keeping teacher up to date with ELA PA Core Information</li> <li>• Curriculum Alignment</li> <li>• Informing parents of change</li> <li>• Professional learning alignment with standards</li> <li>• Maintaining "awareness" without overwhelming teachers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reading and writing are connected</li> <li>• Reading is comprehension</li> <li>• Dialoging and thinking about what you read with others is vital</li> <li>• Creating a passion for reading and writing</li> <li>• Having student see reading as just not a skill but a life long endeavor</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No "magic-fix", different practices work for different students</li> <li>• Going deeper</li> <li>• More focus on grammar</li> <li>• Adding running records, "assessing in the moment"</li> <li>• Continuing to seek most effective strategies</li> </ul>

## **Research Question Two and Table 7 Group Comparisons**

Table 7 looks at Research Question Two across the teachers and administrators. As respondents voiced any concerns, uncertainties, or wonderings, this led into types of trainings they received to support these wonderings. These thoughts then segued into the types of relationships, responsibilities, and leadership surrounding professional development, the school, and their level of confidence as a result of professional development, their own abilities, and leadership.

Expressed concerns were a need for more time, the wondering of when the next standards change would come, and the expectation of all students to learn certain standards by a given deadline (PSSA testing window). Two support teachers were concerned about finding the balance of rigor and addressing the standards through the various academic differences of all students. Some teachers did express a need for more resources and one support teacher wanted more hands-on professional learning. Aside from a desire for more resources and professional learning, all respondent answers were derived from their concern for students.

While most teachers felt they did not receive much professional development pertaining the ELA PA Core, as follow up questions were asked, they began talking about various sessions they attended. Administrators were able to talk about the specific types of professional development opportunities with less prompting, especially the curriculum director. Providing professional development was more connected to her role as well as the other administrators. Types of professional development received (or discussed) were fairly consistent across the groups, albeit that it did vary from primary to the intermediate level. Everyone across the district did receive an informational binder with standards,



eligible content, examples, and released PSSA items at a large district gathering. Writing sessions were scheduled for all and tailored for specific grade levels. TDA sessions were more geared toward fourth and fifth grade. Guided reading sessions were provided to primary grades. PRP's were available to all depending on choice and need as determined by the teacher (grammar, close reading). Teachers and the principal also talked about the informal day to day and week to week discussion and collaborating they did surrounding teaching and curriculum. Ms. Heffner (and teachers) talked about time allotted at monthly faculty meetings for mini-professional development sessions. While all did eventually voice that professional development did occur surrounding ELA PA Core Standards, it seemed that it was not done in a "high-pressure" situation as no one specifically stated the implementation process overwhelmed them. This also indicates how most agreed there was a focus on written response, TDA's, and grammar as opposed to all of the "new things" the standards brought with them.

Administrators stated that most professional learning and sessions provided come from teachers. Both Ms. Heffner and Dr. Rose talked about "buy-in" vs. a top down approach. They felt that it needed to come from teachers for it to be meaningful. Dr. Patrick mentioned that PD was based on need and differentiated per building. They also added that at times there are days planned that may not have all stakeholder input. One way stakeholder input is supported is through a Curriculum Committee where representatives come together across the district to discuss ideas and planning. Most agreed that the process was shared and collaborative. Only one teacher felt that their voice was not heard when it came to professional development. While some PD did come from central office, teachers agreed they had a voice in the process and could

choose types of PD they wanted through PRP's. Teachers could also lead sessions and often did through "turn-arounds". They would go to a session and come back and "in-service" grade levels on what they learned.

Views on leadership across the groups were conclusively positive. Aside from two teachers mentioning that Ms. Heffner could be micro-managing at times, they all shared that her leadership helped set the tone at Community Elementary across the board from collaboration, to knowing all the students and families, to being supportive and heard throughout the ELA PA Core process. Some commented that Ms. Heffner helped to put people at ease, which may also be the reason that most seem to feel relatively confident about changes due to the ELA PA Core. In addition, most felt that they always had high expectations and pushed students to think deeper. This also may be due in part to the trust and confidence that people had in one another as the challenge/gifted support teacher mentioned.

Table 7

*Research Question Two Respondent Groups Data Summary*

Research Question Two: Perceptions of ELA PA Core Implementation	Concerns, Uncertainties, Wonderings	Types of Professional Development	Relationships and Interactions with Professional Development	Views on Leadership	Confidence Level
Classroom Teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Time (for professional learning, too quick of a roll out)</li> <li>• When will the standards change next?</li> <li>• The expectation of all students meeting standards at a pre-determined time (PSSA)</li> <li>• More resources</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Introductory/Information Binder</li> <li>• Grade level/small group w/administrator</li> <li>• Embedded within curriculum</li> <li>• PRP options (Choice)</li> <li>• Close Reading/TDA's</li> <li>• A gradual integration</li> <li>• Writing training (consultant)</li> <li>• Sharing at faculty meetings</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shared responsibility</li> <li>• Curriculum Committee</li> <li>• Administration open to ideas</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Supportive and welcoming</li> <li>• Collaborative</li> <li>• Receptive/open to input, suggestion</li> <li>• Very involved</li> <li>• Sets environment</li> <li>• Knows school, parents, kids, teachers (relationships)</li> <li>• Gathers consensus</li> <li>• Approachable</li> <li>• Non-threatening</li> <li>• Relational</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not far off from what we were doing</li> <li>• Already have high expectations</li> <li>• Standards are realistic expectations</li> <li>• It's about good teaching</li> <li>• Not worried or threatened</li> <li>• We all desire to do a good job despite standards</li> </ul>
Support Teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Balancing the rigor and differentiating for kids at various academic levels</li> <li>• Addressing differences of all learners from learning to gifted support</li> <li>• Real world application</li> <li>• More hands-on professional learning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Curriculum alignment with Journeys</li> <li>• Guided Reading Session</li> <li>• PRP choices</li> <li>• Grammar</li> <li>• "On my own" investigating</li> <li>• Writing (consultant and in-house)</li> <li>• TDA, non-fiction conversations</li> <li>• Close Reading</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shared process</li> <li>• Involved in planning</li> <li>• Our input is sought</li> <li>• Some challenges due to working with various grade levels</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High Expectations</li> <li>• Encouraging</li> <li>• Puts people at ease</li> <li>• Supports people</li> <li>• We can voice what we need</li> <li>• People first leader</li> <li>• Helps people feel comfortable</li> <li>• Knows everyone</li> <li>• Detail oriented</li> <li>• Encourages risk taking</li> <li>• Non-stressful</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I'm aware of it</li> <li>• Not ruffled</li> <li>• Confident in peers and relationships for support</li> </ul>
Administrators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• TDA Expectations for 9-10 year old students</li> <li>• That the standards and way they are measured (PSSA) are</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• TDA workshops</li> <li>• Mentor texts</li> <li>• Journeys Alignment</li> <li>• Writing (consultant and in-house)</li> <li>• Reading</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encourage teachers to take ownership</li> <li>• Professional learning comes from teachers</li> <li>• Grade level teams and reading</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collaborative</li> <li>• Strength based</li> <li>• Collegial</li> <li>• Commitment to building a family like community</li> <li>• Allows freedom</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Confidence was expressed in terms of their collaboration</li> <li>• Confidence in professional</li> </ul>

	seen as the whole child instead of just a snapshot • When we will see the next change	Specialist “Turn-arounds” • District wide book study • Daily and weekly conversation and faculty meeting sharing • PRP’s • Grammar	specialists bring back needs for planning • Designed around needs • Teachers can choose/create own PRP’s • Differentiated by building needs • PLC framework is being established to support professional learning	• Knows her kids, teachers, and families • Runs a tight ship expecting “good teaching” • Instructional leader (versus being a manager) • Great rapport • Likes to get input • Values opinions • Realizes people have different areas of expertise • Solve problems together	learning process • Confidence in high expectations
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### Research Question Three and Table 8 Group Comparisons

Research Question Three sought answers to what types of specific changes were taking place due to the new standards and from the professional development they received. Questions on data/analysis, vertical progression, if they felt the standards would achieve what they claimed and how they overcame the idea of teaching to the test prompted teachers and administrators to elaborate on their thinking about negotiating the changes. Across group analysis can be found in Table 8.

All respondents extended their thinking from the overall changes asked about in Research Question One. Again, most spoke about the curriculum alignment with the primary resource, *Journeys* as well as the latitude they had been given to use various resources aside from just maintaining fidelity to the prescribed program. Every teacher expressed an appreciation about the freedom given to them and the ability to make professional decisions based upon what they saw happening with children on a day-to-day basis. Most participants also mentioned the emphasis on the connectedness of

reading and writing. Some teachers talked about various strategies they were now doing to address TDA and written response as well as doing more integration. This was also supported by what administration shared in their thinking about the specific changes. Administrators also confirmed the leeway given to teachers about decisions and resources. Another “agreement” across respondents was the idea of “good teaching” and teaching kids to think. While most agreed that some specific changes (as noted) have occurred in what they are doing, most expressed a confidence in how they have been teaching and the high expectations that they have for children. This was also expressed in the question about 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learners – when asked if they felt that the new ELA Standards would achieve college and career ready students, some respondents felt that they were already doing that, we have high expectations, and it comes down to good instruction. Regardless of mandated standards, each group said they would have high standards and expectations.

Another specific change mentioned by classroom, support teachers and administrators was W.I.N. (What I Need), which was primarily a result of data, analysis and instruction. From benchmarking and other related assessments, data is gathered in a program that everyone uses called *Performance Tracker*. Based upon specific student needs, they are grouped and all teachers (support, specialists, classroom) take small groups of students two times per week for approximately 40 minutes to teach to specific student needs. Teacher and administrators agreed that they do have time to talk about data and plan accordingly. Regarding “across grade level discussions”, participants said that while it happens sometimes, it is not a regular thing that takes place like at specific grade levels. This is an area that administrators did say they would like to address in the

future. From the administration standpoint (central office), data and analysis is also used to consider what types of professional development and resources may be needed to support teachers and students.

On the issue of teaching to the test, one of the administrators commented, “Teaching to the test is a dirty word”. While teachers talked about the reality of the “test”, most said they tried not to make it an issue. The talk on “good teaching” again came up in this question. Most felt that if they followed the curriculum, addressed student needs through solid instruction; the test would take care of itself. This was echoed across the three groups. In addition, as one support teacher put it, “Our safe, welcoming culture and our inclusive relationships promote achievement, risk taking and innovation, not a test.

Table 8

*Research Question Three Respondent Groups Data Summary*

Research Question Three: Instructional and Curricular Changes made due to the ELA PA Core	Changes in Curriculum and Instruction due to ELA PA Core Standards	Data Analysis – grade level and across grades	21 <sup>st</sup> Century Learners	Standards vs. Teaching to the Test
Classroom Teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• New primary resource</li> <li>• Structure to more leeway/freedom</li> <li>• More professional decision making</li> <li>• Use of more supplementary materials</li> <li>• Small group/guided instruction</li> <li>• Less whole class novel study</li> <li>• Grammar, writing skills</li> <li>• More focus on critical thinking</li> <li>• TDA implementation</li> <li>• Integration of skills</li> <li>• W.I.N.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• W.I.N.</li> <li>• Performance Tracker</li> <li>• Grade level meetings</li> <li>• Time provided for analysis</li> <li>• Formal and informal discussions</li> <li>• Use of data to drive instruction</li> <li>• Collaboration</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Already aiming for deeper level thinkers</li> <li>• Standard may create better test takers vs. lifelong learners</li> <li>• Looking at whole child (not just college ready)</li> <li>• We've always focused on high expectations</li> <li>• Set high expectations and students will rise to occasion</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teach the curriculum and it's covered</li> <li>• It's about student growth</li> <li>• We teach students what they need</li> <li>• Good teaching matters (not the test)</li> <li>• Begin with the end in mind</li> <li>• Alignment and good teaching</li> <li>• Teach them to think</li> <li>• Teach a passion for learning</li> <li>• It's about growth</li> </ul>
Support Teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Writing</li> <li>• Connectedness of writing, speaking, and reading</li> <li>• More leveled books/guided reading</li> <li>• Separate writing program used aside from Journeys</li> <li>• Program/Journeys alignment</li> <li>• More leeway and resource use</li> <li>• TDA focus</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Benchmarking</li> <li>• Data Buddies</li> <li>• Achievement teams</li> <li>• Time is provided to analyze data</li> <li>• W.I.N. (based on data and student need)</li> <li>• Collaborate together</li> <li>• Assessing more than in past</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It's about students reaching their individual potential</li> <li>• We already have high expectations</li> <li>• It's about good teaching and instructing in ways that challenge students (regardless of standards)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Test is not the "end all be all"</li> <li>• Balancing fun, rigor, and test</li> <li>• Regardless of test, we expect to produce quality readers and writers</li> <li>• The test isn't what matters to me</li> <li>• Our safe, welcoming culture and our inclusive relationships promote achievement, risk</li> </ul>

				taking and innovation (not a test) • I don't get sucked up into test prep
Administrators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Writing</li> <li>• Teachers given leeway to support learning with additional resources</li> <li>• Collaborative discussions amongst students about what they've read</li> <li>• Quality instruction is quality instruction</li> <li>• More small group work</li> <li>• More student centered/student ownership</li> <li>• Always looking for best strategies to add</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Data used to support professional development and purchasing of resources across grade levels</li> <li>• Data informs instruction and supports intentional teaching</li> <li>• W.I.N.</li> <li>• Performance Tracker</li> <li>• Data Buddies</li> <li>• Kids aren't just a data point, we look at how to help the whole child succeed</li> <li>• Need to improve "across the grade level" discussions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It's a team effort to support college and career ready students</li> <li>• We have high standards (without 21<sup>st</sup> century expectations)</li> <li>• We have always been trying to get kids to be college and career ready</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teaching to the test is "Dirty Word"</li> <li>• Embed test taking strategies within instruction (not as separate)</li> <li>• If we provide good instruction, there's no need for test prep</li> </ul>

#### Research Question Four and Table 9 Group Comparisons

Not a difference could be found as all groups responded overwhelmingly positive and similarly in regards to the question that addressed the idea of climate and culture:

*What Makes You a Blue Ribbon School Aside from Academic Excellence?* What seemed to make one of the biggest differences as to why Community Elementary achieved the success it did was surrounding the idea of a welcoming, safe, collaborative, hard-working, and supportive mentality. This was a mentality that appeared to be practiced by faculty and staff every day and year after year. As noted by Dr. Patrick, teachers stay at Community Elementary because there is no reason to leave. Teachers echoed the same sentiments as evidenced by the years of service at Community Elementary. While Ms.



Heffner admitted that Community Elementary wasn't Disneyland everyday, she praised the collaborative nature of the school. A few teachers also admitted that squabbles and grumblings occur, but they wouldn't want to go to any other school because of the supportive culture and what many mentioned as the "Community Way". *Leadership* seemed to also be perceived as a key "ingredient" to success at Community Elementary and through the negotiation of the standards reforms in English Language Arts. Every teacher mentioned about Ann listening to them and how she knows everyone and helps support a welcoming and supportive environment. Dr. Rose directly stated that a big part of why Community Elementary is so successful is due to Ann.

No one mission statement (In your own words, what is the mission statement of Community Elementary) matched exactly but most all had a central idea in common, *students*. "Student-centered" thinking was prevalent throughout the interviews and across the three groups. The idea of "growth" also showed up in the mission statement question, not just academically, but the growth of the whole child.

Pertaining to the question about improving from Blue Ribbon status, teachers mentioned about continuing to move forward and doing what the students need. Some gave some specific examples of spending more time with the standards and data analysis and strengthening advanced learners. Support teachers essentially felt the same way, taking on the standards little by little while one mentioned that the primary level needed to spend some more time with the standards in order to improve. "Don't become complacent" was mentioned by administrators as well as addressing individual student needs. Ms. Heffner also felt that the primary grades needed some more time with the standards with the comment about K-2 teachers "pushing the envelope."

Table 9

*Research Question Four Respondent Groups Data Summary*

Research Question Four: Culture and Climate Impact	What Makes You a Blue Ribbon School Aside from Academic Excellence?	Mission Statement in Your Own Words	How Do You Improve from Blue Ribbon Status?
Classroom Teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• School Families</li> <li>• Working together</li> <li>• Everyone's willingness</li> <li>• Close-knit (relationships)</li> <li>• Personal connection with each other, students, families</li> <li>• Friendliness, welcoming</li> <li>• Togetherness – community</li> <li>• Support one another</li> <li>• Work ethic</li> <li>• Cohesiveness</li> <li>• Collaboration</li> <li>• Leadership</li> <li>• Relationships with colleagues</li> <li>• We care about each other, students, families</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We accept students and enjoy seeing them make progress and having them feel valued and happy at the end of the day as a result of their connection with the staff and school</li> <li>• Every child feels good about themselves</li> <li>• Instilling a love for learning, respect for others, and service</li> <li>• Community, Collaboration and support</li> <li>• To prepare critical thinkers to be leaders in the world</li> <li>• Striving for excellence through collaboration so kids grow to become confident lovers of learning</li> <li>• Helping kids succeed through meeting their individual needs to make growth</li> <li>• Hard work, high expectations and do your best to grow</li> <li>• To make sure each student leaves this building feeling they reached their full potential</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Keep growing and moving forward</li> <li>• Keep doing what our kids need</li> <li>• Keep growing and learning</li> <li>• More time with standards</li> <li>• Keep doing what our kids need</li> <li>• More professional learning with data analysis</li> <li>• Strengthening advanced students</li> </ul>
Support Teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The "Community Way"</li> <li>• Leadership (Welcoming and Supportive)</li> <li>• Principal knows every persons name</li> <li>• Welcoming</li> <li>• Everyone wants to try</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To know your students and what they need</li> <li>• We want to teach kids to be good citizens and then hopefully they'll fly</li> <li>• We stay the course – respect what the state is asking us and then</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We need more versed in the ELA Standards at the primary level</li> <li>• Balancing standards and out of the box type activities</li> <li>• We keep learning little by little</li> <li>• You just keep doing</li> </ul>

	<p>their best</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Personal feeling</li> <li>• School Families</li> <li>• Collaboration</li> <li>• We care about one another and kids</li> <li>• People feel supported</li> <li>• Volunteerism</li> <li>• Positive place to be</li> <li>• Work ethic</li> <li>• Kindness and respect</li> <li>• Citizenship</li> <li>• We're in this together</li> <li>• A warm place</li> <li>• Voices hear and opinions are valued</li> </ul>	<p>twist them into the "Community Way"</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To know your students and what they need.</li> <li>• Teach kids to be good citizens and hopefully they'll fly. We want our kids to grow</li> </ul>	<p>what you're doing and teaching kids how to fly. We want to support kids and as long as we're doing that, it doesn't matter whether we're blue ribbon. It just matters that we, that we give these kids what they need and we teach them how to grow and, and be good people.</p>
Administrators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Camaraderie amongst teachers</li> <li>• Work ethic</li> <li>• Dedication to students</li> <li>• It's a family, not a job</li> <li>• Sharing of ideas</li> <li>• Leadership</li> <li>• Able to take risks</li> <li>• Family feel</li> <li>• Community spirit</li> <li>• Community Collaboration</li> <li>• Teachers are connected</li> <li>• Teachers don't leave (longevity)</li> <li>• Relationships over time</li> <li>• Supportive families</li> <li>• Welcoming</li> <li>• Care about kids</li> <li>• Here for the right reasons</li> <li>• Respect</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Community, Collaboration, Dedication, Professionalism</li> <li>• A family community to support every student</li> <li>• A place where people really care about kids</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Never becoming complacent</li> <li>• Keep looking at what you need to do</li> <li>• Maintaining focus</li> <li>• Seeking to grow each and every individual student</li> <li>• Articulation across grade levels</li> <li>• "Pushing the envelope" more at the primary level</li> </ul>

## Summary

Blue Ribbon award winning Community Elementary teachers and administrators were asked a series of questions to express their understandings, perceptions and the process by which they have negotiated the PA ELA Core Standards reform movement in their school. The research studied an elementary school that demonstrated academic excellence over time and identified how they have worked through the ELA standard changes as a model for other elementary schools to consider. While no specific formula or program was identified or agreed upon as “the format” to follow, the consensus was that success lies within the characteristics and traits found within the framework of Professional Learning Communities. The consensus that seems to be Community Elementary Schools *secret to success* will be discussed further in Chapter 5 along with recommendations and suggestions for further study.

## CHAPTER V

### SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

The goal of the final chapter is to review the problem and purpose of the study and discuss the meaning of the findings of this qualitative research. Data were primarily conducted through interviews to seek answers to the research questions. Available documents are also included in the Appendix to support interviewee responses. The chapter ends with conclusions and recommendations for further research.

#### **Review of the Study's Problem, Purpose, and Research Questions**

While there have been studies conducted about Blue Ribbon Schools, Professional Learning Communities, and several emerging studies on the English Language Arts Common Core Standards, little research exists concerning how a Blue Ribbon School negotiates the PA ELA Core Standards. The problem being studied was the change process in how teachers and administrators work through mandated standards reform. The purpose of this study was to consider a model school that consistently exhibited academic excellence through the rigorous constructs of the United States Department of Education National Blue Ribbon Schools Program and how they worked through the process of implementing the ELA Standards into their school.

The primary questions this study sought to answer are:

1. What are teacher and administrator perceptions and understandings of how the teaching of English Language Arts has changed as a result of the ELA PA Core Standards?
2. How do teachers and administrators perceive the implementation of ELA PA Core?

3. What instructional and curricular changes have occurred in teaching reading at the elementary level regarding the ELA PA Core Standards?

4. How has culture and climate impacted the ideology of learning and teaching through the ELA Common Core?

### **Review of Theoretical Framework and Methodology**

This study contributes to the literature surrounding standards implementation, professional learning communities, and Blue Ribbon Schools. The data were analyzed through the PLC Characteristics Framework (DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker, 1998; Hord, 1997) that also emerged as the primary themes that are discussed below. The “Professional Learning Community” term is used in a variety of ways from small group or grade level work, to a coupling of individuals who share a common interest in education or even considered a program. While the term *Professional Learning Community* has been ambiguously used, Dufour et al, state that PLCs are an ongoing process in which educators work collaboratively in recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve (Langston, 2006).

The study’s primary data collection was conducted through seventeen educator interviews at various levels at Community Elementary School from K-5 teachers, support teachers, and administrators. A similar interview protocol was used for all the participants with slight variations within the questions for teachers and administrators (See Appendix C and D). Several documents were also used to support corroboration (See Appendix F-M) from the data found within the interviews.

## Discussion of Findings

The findings from the four primary research questions are first summarized narratively from the interview data. The summarized research question then moves into the primary question of the study “How Does a Blue Ribbon School Negotiate the ELA PA Core” through a discussion of the primary themes of Professional Learning Communities. Limitations, implications, recommendations, and a conclusion follow the findings.

Research Question 1: *What are teacher and administrator perceptions and understandings of how the teaching of English Language Arts has changed as a result of the ELA PA Core Standards?* Most respondents initially spoke in general terms of “rigor” in how the new standards are different from those in the past. Upon further questioning and discussion, writing, grammar, critical thinking, and TDA/close reading were topics that surfaced as some of the key changes they felt took place due to the new standards. Teachers and administrators all agreed that their reading philosophies in how reading was taught did not necessarily change but rather adjusted in some cases as a result of what is now being asked of elementary students. While most admitted they were trying to keep abreast of the rigorous changes, not much has changed in how they teach the whole child and the high expectations they have of themselves and the children. Many also saw the integration of standards and skills across subjects as an important way to address them opposed to an isolated approach of teaching individual standards. Teaching students to think and be accountable for their learning is something that hasn’t changed at Community Elementary, across teachers and administrators. Interviewees exhibited a confidence in the high expectations, instructional practices, and the primary

resources and supplements they used in order to support students in achieving the standards. Teachers and administrators were focused on students and their growth through utilizing their primary resources and supplementing with other materials, as needed.

Research Question 2: *How do teachers and administrators perceive the implementation of ELA PA Core?* There was no indication of teachers feeling overwhelmed or burdened by how the new ELA Standards were introduced and implemented. In fact, most reported initially they didn't receive much professional development pertaining the standards. Upon further questioning, numerous types of professional development were discussed during the interview and obviously embedded throughout the school year at faculty meetings, monthly grade level meetings, guest and in-house presenters, and their PRPs.

Administrators were more ready to respond with the various types of specific professional learning experiences that occurred throughout the year. However, teachers and administrators essentially didn't approach the standards implementation as a "high stakes" process that controlled everything they did. They focused on a few key components on an ongoing process. Most agreed that more professional learning experiences and time are needed, but a focus on good teaching practices and differentiating instruction is where student student needs are met. A concern that did arise through this segment of questioning was the expectation of all students meeting standards at a given time once per year (through a PSSA test in the Spring each year). Teachers and administrators did not feel a PSSA test was always realistic or a true measure, but growth overall, over time, was more accurate and what mattered most for



students.

Research Question 3: *What instructional and curricular changes have occurred in teaching reading at the elementary level regarding the ELA PA Core Standards?* Most participants referred to the types of professional learning in which they participated and the curricular and instructional changes they have made in the classroom. Grammar, writing, critical thinking, and TDA's/Close Reading were the topics that teachers focused during classroom instruction. *Journeys* (the districts primary reading resource) was mentioned consistently amongst teachers and administrators as something they felt helped support the alignment of curricular and instructional changes that have occurred in ELA. Despite a consistent message about *Journeys*, this resource was not the final authority on why they achieved academic success. Most spoke of the leeway (professional decision making) they had been granted to go beyond a program or text and use other resources to support student needs and growth. Community Elementary also spoke about how they used data analysis to meet student needs at and across grade levels to not only guide instruction but to also determine future professional learning sessions and the selection of instructional resources.

Research Question 4: *How has culture and climate impacted the ideology of learning and teaching through the ELA Common Core?* Out of the four research questions, Research Question 4 seemed to be the primary reason for success and how Community Elementary negotiated the ELA PA Core. All 17 participants equally talked about the positive importance of culture, climate, and relationships at Community Elementary School. It was not just about congeniality but also collegiality. Taking away “titles” of teachers and administrators, *people* valued students, one another, hard work,

the profession, and the purpose of their profession (learning and student growth). People were valued because of collaboration and inquiry about how to improve not only for the students, but also for themselves and peers. It would seem that Community Elementary certainly embodies the definition, meaning, and spirit of a community that not only cares about what they do, but also about one another. The “community” factor is further discussed in the next section.

### **The Community (Professional Learning) Factor**

Community Elementary had no one particular assessment, curriculum, professional development opportunity, or resource than any other school. Schools across the nation can purchase Journeys, Performance Tracker and other resources used as well as replicate the same types of professional development and not necessarily meet with the same success. The ways in which Community Elementary achieved consistent high academic achievement and obtained a National Blue Ribbon was by working through a framework of a shared mission/vision and values with a focus on learning for all students, creating and establishing a culture of collaboration and inquiry into best practices, exhibiting a willingness to take action “by doing”, and continually looking to improve by being results oriented (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). “Status Quo” was not accepted at Community Elementary. The evidence would indicate that by most accounts, teacher and administrators were committed and dedicated professionals who are in education to help develop students academically, socially, and emotionally. They not only liked their job, but also enjoyed being around and learning from one another through professional development and through daily and weekly interactions. It would also seem that the educators at Community Elementary not only had high expectations of the students they

served but also valued hard work and high expectations of themselves. They saw this mindset as the means to obtaining their goal of teaching children while striving for continuous improvement. Ms. Heffner commented, “This is not Disneyland”, and while it may not be, it is evident that it is a place that people like to work at due to the years of service of most faculty and staff. Despite this description sounding like some propagandistic commercial for education and an idyllic educational utopia, Community Elementary has the academic data (See Appendix K) to prove it as a result of their Blue Ribbon status. Supporting the academic success is a consistent message from teachers and administrators that the culture and climate, along with leadership, is a key to what makes Community Elementary a Blue Ribbon School and reason for their excellence.

Research questions 1-3 pertaining to perceptions of overall differences, implementation, and specific types of changes to curriculum and instruction revealed some general operational processes that occur at Community Elementary. Teachers and administrators talked of how professional development and learning takes place to how changes have occurred over the years from a whole language approach to strict adherence to curriculum fidelity. Yet, it was also mentioned how further changes have occurred around inquiring into balancing fidelity to a program and teacher voice and decisions in use of curricular resources. While these research questions did provide some insight into how the school operated over time, the respondent’s answers to research questions 1 through 3 supported and pointed to Research Question Four. This research reveals the way in which a school negotiated the changes through another ELA Standards reform movement, *Professional Learning Communities* and their key traits found at Community

Elementary School, as primary factors. Professional Learning Community Framework traits will now be discussed in detail and how they operate at Community Elementary.

### **Shared Mission, Vision and Values**

A learning community from an ordinary school is separated by their collective commitments to guiding principles that articulate what the people in the school believe and what they seek to create (DuFour et al, 1998, p. 25). An effective PLC strongly adheres to a vision that acts as a consistent guidepost in making decisions about teaching and learning (Hord, 1997). The results of the interviews suggested that Community Elementary educators and administrators have a shared mission, vision, and values. While the district has a specific mission statement, teachers and administrators alike were able to express in their own words their mission and what they value that could be condensed to a true concern for student growth and their wellbeing. The participants' goal (in this study) was to be sure that students were not just taught material, but that they learned the ELA standard essentials by student immersion into thinking and reading across the curriculum. They not only valued the students by having high expectations, but also emphasized supporting the "whole student" and their experience at Community Elementary. Teachers and administrators wanted children to come to school, feel welcomed, enjoy learning, and witness their growth while feeling good about themselves. Collaboration was key to support the student centeredness that teachers and administrators both valued. Collaboration was not just mentioned by one or two persons in the study, but was discussed by all as to how they do "business" at Community Elementary.

## **Collective Inquiry and Collaborative Teams**

Collaboration was identified as means to an end, not just the end itself. The “means to the end” was continuous improvement and student growth. Collaboration and Inquiry at Community Elementary seemed to be a systematic process where educators worked interdependently in order to impact their classroom practice for growth of the students as well as for their team (grade level) and school. Collaboration surrounded inquiry about best practices in teaching and learning which equated into shared responsibility for student learning (Shellard, 2002). Collective inquiry enables team members to develop new skills and capabilities that in turn lead to new experiences and awareness. Gradually, this inquiry-heightened awareness transforms into fundamental shifts in attitudes, beliefs, and habits, which, over time, transform the culture of the school (DuFour et al, 2006, p 2-4). This thinking appeared to be the case as veteran teachers spoke about shifts over time from whole language philosophy to a more structured program and the process of gaining additional “leeway” in using other resources (versus strict fidelity to a program), as teachers and administrators dialogue, question, and challenge ideas about what is best for students (Sparks, 2004). Another example of this process was W.I.N (What I Need). Teachers conversed across grade level with administration and inquired about assessment data and what students needed academically. Teachers responded accordingly (responsive teaching) by creating student groups based on what data suggested were areas that needed improvement or strengthened.

Collective Inquiry not only includes analysis of data and levels of student achievement but also additionally encompasses educators inquiring into best practice

through shared knowledge on lessons and effective instructional strategies (Langston, 2006). Administrator and teachers mostly agreed that educators are free to voice what they need as learners. Choices of learning opportunities were provided for all teachers through the districts PRPs. In addition, teachers were also given professional learning at monthly faculty meetings as well as grade level meetings.

### **Action Oriented and Experimentation**

Collaboration and collective inquiry has a means to an end, which is student growth. Neither students nor teams grow by just talking and inquiring together. The very reason that educators work together in teams and engage in collective inquiry is to serve as catalysts for action (DuFour et al, 2006, p 2-4) and PLC's are unwilling to tolerate inaction. Problems are solved and learning happens through application of new ideas and information that addresses student needs (Hord, 1997). Many teachers and administrators commented about the work ethic of their colleagues, as it was an expected "norm" (embedded within the culture) of what happened at Community Elementary. Educators also supported this premise as they discussed the climate and culture of the school. Hard work (coming in early and/or staying late, or doing what was necessary) was an expectation that was valued and shared by most interviewed. Also supporting the theme of action oriented and experimentation, teachers and administrators talked about the idea of integration and use of additional resources. While the standards are a change that they all agreed were rigorous, working through the standards reform was supported by integrating subjects/skills as a way for students to understand multiple skills at one time versus teaching skills in isolation. Educators also spoke about the option of trying various resources to supplement the primary reading resource. Action orientation and

experimentation is just not talking about best practices but learning by doing as they worked through curriculum and instructional practices together (Mitchell & Sackney, as cited in Huffman, Hipp, Pankake, & Moller, 2001, p. 1).

### **Continued Improvement-Results Oriented**

DuFour et al (2006) state five points that support the phases for learning teams that support continuous improvement driven by results which is another key part of what Community Elementary incorporates into their school:

- Gathering evidence of current levels of student learning
- Developing strategies and ideas to build on strengths and address weaknesses in that learning
- Implementing those strategies and ideas
- Analyzing the impact of the changes to discover what was effective and what was not
- Applying new knowledge in the next cycle of continuous improvement (pp. 2-4)

Teachers and administrators alike shared about the variety of assessments at the K-5 level and discussed how time was allotted for data analysis. Langston (2006) discusses the importance of sharing results among team members. After analysis, data was used to drive planning, instruction, purchasing of resources, and planning for future professional development. The W.I.N. initiative was an example of this as well as the use of Data Buddies and Achievement Teams. While some teachers mentioned they primarily collaborate in grade level teams, others mentioned that it does occur across grade levels, but not regularly. Administrators agreed that vertical grade level

collaboration needed to be planned for in the future. The principal and teachers did talk about how grade levels regularly shared at monthly faculty meetings, and how it also happened informally on a day-by-day and week-to-week basis.

Continuous improvement and being results oriented at Community Elementary was just not about completing a project or conducting a successful team meeting, or “best intentions”, but a way of conducting day-to-day business, *always*. This is not only evident by their consecutive years of growth and academic success but in their responses about improving from National Blue Ribbon success. This can be summed up in the response, “Keep growing and learning and doing what our kids need.”

The essential piece of a learning community is a focus and commitment to the learning of each student through members working together to clarify what each student must learn, monitoring student learning regularly, providing systematic interventions (such as W.I.N.) that support students receiving additional time and support for learning if they need help, and enriching learning when students may have mastered the intended outcomes (DuFour et al. 2006). In order for this to happen, continuous improvement must also entail educator growth where the adults of the organization are continually learning through professional development and learning. Community Elementary teachers and administrators spoke at length about the embedded professional learning experiences that have occurred (TDA’s, writing, guided reading, grammar) as well as about the choice driven PRP’s available to all faculty.

### **Supportive and Shared Leadership**

A principal’s leadership is critical in school improvement efforts and crucial to the creation of learning communities (DuFour et al, 1998, pp. 182-183). A strong



professional learning community has a leader who facilitates the learning of all staff members (Pedler, Burgoyne, & Boydell, as cited in Bierema, 1999, p. 51). Leadership was another category where there an overwhelming positive response from teachers and administrators on who/what helped with the success and culture of Community Elementary. Teachers spoke of the support they received from Principal Heffner and how she seeks consensus among the team through shared decision-making (Hord 1997). Trust, respect and openness (Kruse, Louis, & Bryk, 1994) were evident through the collected comments in Table 10.

Table 10

*Leadership and Support*

Classroom Teacher Views on Leadership	Support Teacher Views on Leadership	Administrator Views on Leadership
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Supportive and welcoming</li> <li>• Collaborative</li> <li>• Receptive/open to input, suggestion</li> <li>• Very involved</li> <li>• Sets environment</li> <li>• Knows school, parents, kids, teachers (relationships)</li> <li>• Gathers consensus</li> <li>• Approachable</li> <li>• Non-threatening</li> <li>• Relational</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High Expectations</li> <li>• Encouraging</li> <li>• Puts people at ease</li> <li>• Supports people</li> <li>• We can voice what we need</li> <li>• People first leader</li> <li>• Helps people feel comfortable</li> <li>• Knows everyone</li> <li>• Detail oriented</li> <li>• Encourages risk taking</li> <li>• Non-stressful</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collaborative</li> <li>• Strength based</li> <li>• Collegial</li> <li>• Commitment to building a family like community</li> <li>• Allows freedom</li> <li>• Knows her kids, teachers, and families</li> <li>• Runs a tight ship expecting “good teaching”</li> <li>• Instructional leader (versus being a manager)</li> <li>• Great rapport</li> <li>• Likes to get input</li> <li>• Values opinions</li> <li>• Realizes people have different areas of expertise</li> <li>• Solve problems together</li> </ul>

DuFour et al (1998) have a chapter (9) devoted to the role of the principal in a Professional Learning Community. Most of the key characteristics of how leadership plays out in PLC’s described in Chapter 9 (1998) can found in Table 9. One of the most important things a principal can do is support shared decision-making (Hord, 1997) and

empowering teachers to act on their ideas. Principals must recognize that leading is less about command and control and more learning and leading, less dictating and more orchestrating (DuFour et al. 1998, p. 184). Principals most also model and lead through shared mission, vision and values. All respondents commented on Principal Heffner's collaborative nature and her knowledge of all the children in the school as well as their families too. Leadership in a PLC is also focused on results and providing time for teachers to analyze and plan for improved student learning (Schmoker, 2006). Teachers agreed that Ms. Heffner did this in Chapter Four, Table 8, under Data Analysis.

Teachers also stated they feel as if they have a "voice" and are able to share their thinking. Many spoke of the "leeway" they have been afforded which is another characteristic of leading a PLC, leaders work hard at empowering others (King & Newmann, 2000).

### **Culture, Climate and Relationships**

The term "Community" is in the title of the framework (Professional Learning Communities) that this study was viewed through. The idea of *community* has a general positive connotation and DuFour (2004) talks of sustaining the PLC traits and principles until they become deeply embedded in the culture of the school. While *Culture, Climate, and Relationships* could be implied as part of learning communities, this category became it's own theme as all teachers and administrators positively supported their thinking as to what makes Community Elementary a great place to work. Culture, Climate, and Relationships could be arguably considered the most agreed upon topic that made the biggest difference in how things were done, why people did what they did, how

people got along, and the cause of how they obtained a National Blue Ribbon of Excellence – also called by many at Community Elementary, *The Community Way*.

Creating supportive structures, including collaborative environment, has been described as “the single most important factor” for successful school improvement and the “first order of business” for those seeking to strengthen the effectiveness of a school (Eastwood & Louis, 1992, p. 215). Studies have been conducted regarding congeniality versus collegiality (Lieberman & Miller, 2008; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001, 2006). The difference being congeniality is about relationships that are amiable and compatible, but more often than not, avoid conflict and risk. Collegial cultures develop bonds of trust and provide a forum for reflection and honest feedback, for challenging disagreement and for accepting responsibility without assigning blame (Lieberman & Miller, 2008, p. 18). Community Elementary school did not just obtain a Blue Ribbon by being friendly with one another, but being constructively critical of curriculum and instruction.

Distinguishing comments are found in Table 9 (p. 203) about congeniality and collegiality when teachers and administrators were asked what made Community Elementary a Blue Ribbon School aside from academic excellence. Table 11 (below) is a distilled look at what each interviewee group had to say about culture, climate, and, relationships. The commonalities validate the importance and strongly suggest the reason for success: climate, culture, and, relationships in schools. While evidence reflects more a sense of congeniality, elements of collegiality were addressed. Interviewees additionally commented throughout the study that they were able to raise questions, other possibilities, and share their concerns when it came to practices in the classroom amongst colleagues and administrators. One example is the “allowance of leeway” with

curriculum, instruction, and resource without strict adherence to a program or one specific resource. This change didn't come by people just being "nice" to one another, but through challenging what is best for students.

A case study conducted by Achenstein (2002) found that schools that leaned more toward just friendliness and social interactions were actually less far willing to question and push each other to improve; as a result, their students were not achieving at as high a level as those in other schools with similar demographics. Community Elementary was recognized for their academic excellence through the National Blue Ribbon Schools Program. Achinstein's study would suggest that Community Elementary is not just about congeniality but would also have various layers of collegiality embedded within the culture.

Table 11

*Climate, Culture, and Relationships*

Classroom Teacher Comments on Culture, Climate, and Relationships	Support Teacher Comments on Culture, Climate, and Relationships	Administrator Comments on Culture, Climate, and Relationships
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• School Families</li> <li>• Working together</li> <li>• Everyone's willingness</li> <li>• Close-knit (relationships)</li> <li>• Personal connection with each other, students, families</li> <li>• Friendliness, welcoming</li> <li>• Togetherness – community</li> <li>• Support one another</li> <li>• Work ethic</li> <li>• Cohesiveness</li> <li>• Collaboration</li> <li>• Leadership</li> <li>• Relationships with colleagues</li> <li>• We care about each other, students, families</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The “Community Way”</li> <li>• Leadership (Welcoming and Supportive)</li> <li>• Principal knows every persons name</li> <li>• Welcoming</li> <li>• Everyone wants to try their best</li> <li>• Personal feeling</li> <li>• School Families</li> <li>• Collaboration</li> <li>• We care about one another and kids</li> <li>• People feel supported</li> <li>• Volunteerism</li> <li>• Positive place to be</li> <li>• Work ethic</li> <li>• Kindness and respect</li> <li>• Citizenship</li> <li>• We're in this together</li> <li>• A warm place</li> <li>• Voices hear and opinions are valued</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Camaraderie amongst teachers</li> <li>• Work ethic</li> <li>• Dedication to students</li> <li>• It's a family, not a job</li> <li>• Sharing of ideas</li> <li>• Leadership</li> <li>• Able to take risks</li> <li>• Family feel</li> <li>• Community spirit</li> <li>• Community Collaboration</li> <li>• Teachers are connected</li> <li>• Teachers don't leave (longevity)</li> <li>• Relationships over time</li> <li>• Supportive families</li> <li>• Welcoming</li> <li>• Care about kids</li> <li>• Here for the right reasons</li> <li>• Respect</li> </ul>

### Implications for Future Practice

Aside from fostering the development of Professional Learning Communities through standards reform changes and implementing PLC's as general practice within schools, the following recommendations are suggested to strengthen ELA PA Core changes and implementation:

1. Allotment of more time for collaboration across grade levels: While most teachers and administrators agreed that they were a collaborative faculty, they admitted that they were not able to do so across grade levels very often.

While the support teachers had more insight into how the standards impacted

several grade levels due to their mixed grade level caseloads, classroom teachers were not always as clear to the standards progression and expectations of students from one grade level to the next. Understanding the standard progression from grade to grade could strengthen more precision planning and instruction.

2. Supporting the first recommendation of creating more time for “cross-grade” collaboration is the knowledge and professional learning of what is expected of learners between primary and intermediate grades. The primary level was not as well aware of Text Dependent Analysis Questions that fourth and fifth grade were expected to know and teach. Teachers across grade levels understanding the expectations of ELA standards at each grade level would allow for more scaffolding K-5.
3. Former standards reform change (Legacy Standards/No Child Left Behind) primarily focused on grade three and above. The ELA PA Core Standards are now written from Pre-K through fifth grade. While primary grades are still not officially tested via the PSSA, it is recommended that K-2 teachers receive the appropriate professional learning/development in understanding and implementing these newer and rigorous standards to our earliest learners.
4. Continue to provide time and professional development opportunities for data analysis. Several interviewees, while acknowledging they were provided time for data analysis, did mention a need for more training in this area to help them support all learners.

5. While professional development is embedded through a school year at most districts, not all educators receive a choice of what they can select. Often, professional learning can be a “one-size fits all” model. Teachers and administrators seemed to appreciate *choice* in professional learning. An implication to benefit adult learning is to allot for choice within professional development through a PRP model. Choice allows for teachers to take ownership of their own professional learning.
6. The final recommendation that can be learned from Blue Ribbon Community Elementary is to not become complacent or settle for just being “good enough”. As Jim Collins wrote in *Good to Great* (2001):

Good to great comes by a cumulative process – step by step, action by action, decision by decision, turn upon turn of the flywheel – that adds up to sustained and spectacular results...

### **Limitations**

The primary limitation of any case study is the generalizability. Studying one school cannot necessarily be generalized beyond that participating school or district. In addition, the size and the socio-economic status of the school is a limitation. Size and socio-economic status are variables that could impact results of other similar studies if replicated.

While there are emerging studies on the ELA Standards, they are relatively new and there is no longitudinal data on what approaches or programs may or may not work concerning the changes brought about by the ELA PA Core. Furthermore, the study was

not only limited in scope to just one school, but one school in one of 42 states that are also negotiating the (ELA) national standards reform movement.

### **Suggestions for Future Study**

The following suggestions are recommended for further study. This study could be done collectively through multiple case studies to include elementary schools of various sizes, locations, and socio-economic status. A longitudinal study could also be conducted to see if teachers and administrators maintain the traits of Professional Learning Communities as they work through the change of standards reform and if it is sustained over multiple years as well as ELA academic success. Another similar, more focused study could be conducted at just the primary level (K-2) to determine if the rigor of the ELA standards is developmentally appropriate for the youngest learners. Finally, another study could be conducted on the concerns that teachers have due to the standards through the Concerns Based Adoption Model (Hall & Hord, 2015) and how those concerns impact them and students.

### **Conclusions**

A study on building learning communities found similarities in how Community Elementary negotiated the ELA PA Core through the theoretical framework of Professional Learning Communities (Mindich & Liberman, 2012). Positive faculty relations can help create the base for PLCs and time allocation needs to be provided for collaborative work with norms and goal-setting procedures in place to help keep groups focused. This study also suggested that interdependent work deepened practice, and use of data gives focus to teachers' work. In addition, Principals appear to play a vital role in making this work happen on a school wide basis (allowing for flexibility and



adjustments) with support from broader leadership (Director of Elementary Schools, Curriculum Director). The study also found that teacher autonomy (professional decision making/shared decision making) lead to a sense of empowerment (ownership) of what happens within the classroom.

Analysis of teacher and administrator evidence suggests a general agreement in the primary research questions of the study and through the interview protocol provides insight into the purpose of this research in understanding *How a Blue Ribbon School Negotiates the ELA PA Core*. Through the theoretical framework, key ideas and categories of Community Elementary's PLCs has functioned at such high levels academically and were able to work through ELA PA Core changes due to:

- *Building a Culture of Trust, Relationships, and Collaboration* at both a congenial and collegial level that supports a high achieving, collaborative, caring, and supportive environment through shared decision making. (Culture, Climate, Relationships; Shared Mission, Vision, Values; Leadership)
- Providing *Responsive Teaching and Learning* by using a variety of materials, resources and time to support individual student learning as well as collegial collaboration and learning for faculty (Action Oriented/Experimentation; Shared Mission, Vision, Values; Leadership).
- Having *High Expectations for All* through establishing continuous professional learning, planning and data driven collaboration to ensure student engagement and growth in learning (Continuous Improvement, Shared Mission, Vision, Values, Leadership).

- Establishing *A Welcoming and Safe Climate for Learning and Work* where all students are accepted and connected to a caring adult and teachers and administrators can respectfully voice (Inquire and Collaborate) views on learning to improve curriculum and instruction (Shared Mission, Vision, Values; Leadership).

Evidence would suggest that most of the interviewees at Community Elementary exhibited an assured, albeit cautious confidence throughout the study because they functioned within a Professional Learning Community, and did not feel overwhelmed by the changes due to the district and school being proactive with addressing change early on in the process. In addition, the district and school selected a few ELA PA Core topics (TDA, Writing, Grammar) to focus on versus attempting to take on all of the ELA standards/changes at once, which in turn could have caused teachers to feel overwhelmed. While there were obvious disagreements as to what may be the best way to go in curriculum and instruction (Whole Language, Novel, Basal, etc.), by focusing on learning and results, both teachers and administrators were able work through disagreements due to the relationships that were in place to bring about positive, growth-oriented change. A sense of interdependence seemed to be shared amongst teachers and administrators that led to the synergism that supported a Blue Ribbon Culture at Community Elementary through a Professional Learning Community Framework.

Despite the changes, newness, uncertainties, and wonderings of the PA ELA Core and what is the “best” way to teach reading, it would seem that negotiating these educational standards and issues could be successfully addressed through establishing a culture of Professional Learning Communities. The climate, culture, and relationships at

Community Elementary strongly appeared to support them in how they negotiated the PA ELA Core Standard changes through collaboration, relationships, leadership, and a supportive environment that focused on student learning and growth.

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## Appendix A

### District/School Participation Letter

**Title of Study:** How a Blue Ribbon Elementary School Negotiates the ELA PA Core

**Principal Investigator:** Todd Dishong

**Phone:** (814)-907-1212

**E-Mail:** tdd14@scasd.org

Dear Superintendent/Elementary Principal,

I am seeking permission to conduct a research project at your district's elementary school. My study will primarily focus on interviewing one teacher from each grade level (K-5) and the principal. Interviews will take from 30-60 minutes and take place outside of instructional time. Upon your approval, I will send an e-mail to teachers who have indicated an interest in the study with an informed consent statement. I will also be requesting documents that support English Language Arts PA Core curriculum and instruction professional development, faculty meeting minutes/agendas from administrators to help provide context and history to the processes that the school has gone through during the ELA PA Core standard changes while obtaining a National Blue Ribbon.

The purpose of the study is to identify the experiences and processes that a National Blue Ribbon Elementary School, its teachers and administrators, have gone through while negotiating standards reform with the English Language Arts PA Core Standards roll out and implementation. This research may help other districts understand the current perceptions of change as related to the ELA PA Core at the elementary level and support leadership and teachers in differentiating professional development in the future as a result of understanding teacher and principal experiences. In addition, it is my hope that this study will validate your practices and place emphasis on how culture, climate, and relationships bring about and sustain change through professional learning communities.

I plan to publish/distribute results of this study based on the data provided by the interview responses and document analysis. No identifying information will be disclosed regarding teachers or your district with the following exception of generally describing the community in which the school is located.

The Indiana University of Pennsylvania Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed this study and determined that it meets ethical obligations required by the federal law and University policies. A letter of the IRB approval is enclosed. It is my hope that I am able to research an elementary school that has achieved such academic excellence. I look forward to hearing from you and working with the principal and teachers. Please sign below indicating your permission to conduct and your understanding of the purpose and procedures for this study. A copy will be given to you to keep.

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(Signature)

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(Date)

### **Contact Information**

If you have any questions about this study, you can contact the person(s) below:

#### *Investigator:*

Todd Dishong  
Lemont/Houserville Elementary School (State College School District)  
P.O. Box 96  
675 Elmwood St.  
Lemont, PA 16851  
814-231-5034 or 814-769-9392  
xnls@iup.edu

#### *Advisor:*

Dr. Joseph F. Marcoline  
Department of Professional Studies in Education  
Davis Hall Room 311  
570 South Eleventh Street  
Indiana, Pennsylvania 15705  
724-357-2419  
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## Appendix B

### Informed Consent Form

**Title of Study:** How a Blue Ribbon Elementary School Negotiates the ELA PA Core

**Principal Investigator:** Todd Dishong

**Phone:** (814)-907-1212

**E-Mail:** xnls@iup.edu

Dear Teacher,

I would like to extend an invitation to you to participate in a research study to be conducted by Todd Dishong, a doctoral student under the direction of Dr. Joseph Marcoline, at Indiana University of Pennsylvania.

**Purpose of Study, Procedures and Time Involvement:**

The purpose of the study is to identify the experiences and processes that a National Blue Ribbon Elementary School, its teachers and principal have gone through while negotiating standards reform with the English Language Arts PA Core Standards roll out and implementation. The principal and one teacher from each grade level (K-5) will be interviewed to seek the experiences and processes that you have gone through with the ELA PA Core standards reform surrounding professional development, curriculum and instructions changes, and culture, climate, and relationships. The interview will take between 30 to 60 minutes at a time convenient for you.

If you agree to participate, I will be in touch to set a time to meet with to ask you a series of questions, which I will record. After our interview is transcribed, I will send you a copy of the transcription to verify your comments, answers, and overall clarity of the meaning of your experiences – your story. I may also email you during the duration of the study for further clarification and verification of your thoughts and experiences. I sincerely appreciate your time and willingness to participate in order that others may benefit from you and your school's reputation for academic excellence.

**Participant's Rights and Confidentiality**

Indiana University of Pennsylvania supports the practice of protection of human subjects participating in research. The Indiana University of Pennsylvania Institutional Review Board has approved this project for the Protection of Human Subjects. There will be no compensation for participation in this study. Participation within the study is strictly voluntary and you are free to choose not to participate and withdraw at anytime during the course of the study by notifying the Primary Researcher or Project Coordinator below. Individual participant survey responses will be kept confidential and will be stored within a password-protected computer.

### **Benefits and Risks**

The potential benefits to your district by participating in this study will help support decisions about differentiating ways to provide experiences and professional development with the ELA PA Core. In addition, by understanding teacher perceptions and concerns surrounding curriculum and instruction changes and how climate, culture, and relationships can support and sustain change through communities that learn together. After the results are compiled and the study is completed, the study results will be shared with schools/districts and may be published or presented at conferences. A better understanding of how a National Blue Ribbon School negotiates standard reform in the ELA PA Core State Standards may benefit school districts with the delivery of necessary support with future ELA PA Core professional development, experiences, and implementation. There are no potential risks to your voluntary participation in this survey.

### **Contact Information**

If you have any questions about this study, you can contact the person(s) below or if you feel your rights have been violated as a research participant, you may contact the Indiana University of Pennsylvania Institutional Review Board (IRB) at 724-357-7730.

#### *Investigator:*

Todd Dishong  
Lemont/Houserville Elementary School (State College School District)  
P.O. Box 96  
675 Elmwood St.  
Lemont, PA 16851  
814-231-5034 or 814-769-9392  
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#### *Advisor:*

Dr. Joseph F. Marcoline  
Department of Professional Studies in Education  
Davis Hall Room 311  
570 South Eleventh Street  
Indiana, Pennsylvania 15705  
724-357-2419  
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Your participation in this interview is voluntary. Your responses will be kept confidential and no individual identifying information will be disclosed except for the demographic data collected at the beginning of the interview. If you agree to participate in this study, we will set up a time convenient for you to meet. You may choose to stop at any time. Please sign this consent form. You are signing it with full knowledge of the nature and purpose of the procedures. A copy of this form will be given to you to keep.

**Statement of Consent:** I have read the above information and agree to participate.

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(Signature)

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(Date)

## Appendix C

### Teacher Interview Questions

Research Question(s)	Corresponding Interview Questions
1. What are teacher perceptions and understandings of how the teaching of reading has changed as a result of the ELA PA Core Standards?	<p><i>1a) Can you describe some of the changes that the ELA Standards have had on reading, writing, speaking, and listening? What are some similarities and differences in the common core and legacy standards?</i></p> <p><i>1b) Can you describe how the ELA Standards impact the teaching of reading as a ____ grade teacher?</i></p> <p><i>1c) What is your school's vision/philosophy regarding the teaching of reading?</i></p> <p><i>1d) Have you aligned/shifted your philosophy/thinking of teaching reading with what the standards are asking – from what you did in the past?</i></p>
2. How do teachers perceive the presentation implementation of ELA PA Core?	<p><i>2a) What concerns/uncertainties/wonderings do you have about the ELA PA Core Standards?</i></p> <p><i>2b) Please describe the professional development and training you've received to prepare you for the changes related to the ELA PA Core?</i></p> <p><i>2c) Please give some examples on how you were trained in the following ELA Core topics:</i>  <i>-Rigor, text complexity, and critical thinking</i>  <i>-Use of non-fiction</i>  <i>-Close Reading and Text Dependent Analysis</i>  <i>-Writing/Speaking/Listening</i></p> <p><i>2d) How would you describe administrator-teacher interaction with professional development?</i>  <i>-What is the principal's role?</i>  <i>-How would you describe the principal's leadership style?</i>  <i>-What are teachers' roles?</i></p> <p><i>2e) Would you please explain your level of confidence in how you were prepared regarding the ELA PA Core?</i></p>
3. What instructional and curricular changes have occurred in teaching reading at the elementary level due to the new ELA PA Core Standards?	<p><i>3a) Please describe anything you may be doing differently in English Language Arts instruction due to the ELA PA Core.</i></p> <p><i>3b) Please explain about any changes that occurred with the ____ grade-English Language Arts curriculum because of the ELA PA Core?</i></p> <p><i>3c) Would you say the standards themselves, eligible content, or reading data and analysis guided any of the changes made to curriculum and instruction?</i></p>

	<p><i>Follow Up:</i>  <i>-Can you please share how grade level teachers (and across grades) interact to understand the vertical progression of reading and the standards?</i></p> <p><i>3d) The new ELA Standards claim they will develop deeper thinkers, 21<sup>st</sup> century learners, and college and career ready students – what are your thoughts?</i></p> <p><i>3e) How do you balance Blue Ribbon Status, teaching, curriculum and instruction with the idea of teaching to the test?</i></p>
<p>4. How has culture and climate impacted ideology of learning and teaching through the ELA Common Core?</p>	<p><i>4a) Aside from academic excellence – what makes Community Elementary a “Blue Ribbon School?”</i></p> <p><i>4b) In your own words, what is Community Elementary School’s mission statement?</i>  <i>Follow ups:</i>  <i>-Would you say you inquire and collaborate together (teachers and administrators)?</i>  <i>-Are all voices heard and valued?</i>  <i>- How would you describe relationships across the school?</i></p> <p><i>4c) How do you improve from the National Blue Ribbon of excellence status?</i></p> <p><i>4d) Regarding the ELA Standards, curriculum and instruction, climate and culture – what would say is the biggest glow and grow of the whole ELA implementation process?</i></p>



## Appendix D

### Administrator Interview Questions

Research Question(s)	Corresponding Interview Questions
1. What are administrator perceptions and understandings of how the teaching of reading has changed as a result of the ELA PA Core Standards?	<p><i>1a) Can you describe some of the changes that the ELA Standards have had on reading, writing, speaking, and listening? What are some similarities and differences in the common core and legacy standards?</i></p> <p><i>1b) Can you describe how the ELA Standards have impacted you as the administrator (Principal, Literacy Supervisor, Curriculum Director, Superintendent?)</i></p> <p><i>1c) What is your school's vision/philosophy regarding the teaching of reading?</i></p> <p><i>1d) Have you aligned/shifted your philosophy/thinking of teaching reading with what the standards are asking from what you did in the past?</i></p>
2. How do administrators perceive the implementation of ELA PA Core?	<p><i>2a) What concerns/uncertainties/wonderings do you have about the ELA PA Core Standards?</i></p> <p><i>2b) Please share how professional development works in your school/district – what opportunities are provided within/without the district?</i></p> <p><i>2c) Can you please describe the professional development that's been provided to prepare the school/district for the changes related to the ELA PA Core?</i></p> <p><i>2d) Relating to the ELA Standards, please tell how you implemented:</i>  <i>-Rigor, text complexity, and critical thinking</i>  <i>-Use of non-fiction</i>  <i>-Close Reading and Text Dependent Analysis</i>  <i>-Writing/Speaking/Listening</i></p> <p><i>2e) How would you describe the administrator-teacher interaction with professional development?</i>  <i>-What is your role in professional development?</i>  <i>-How would you describe your leadership style?</i>  <i>-What are teachers' roles?</i></p> <p><i>2f) Would you explain your level of confidence in how you were prepared regarding the ELA PA Core and how you prepared others?</i></p>
3. What instructional and curricular changes have occurred in teaching reading at the elementary level regarding the new ELA PA Core Standards?	<p><i>3a) Please describe any changes you know are happening differently in English Language Arts instruction due to the ELA PA CORE at Community Elementary.</i></p> <p><i>3b) Please explain about any changes made to the English Language Arts curriculum at Community Elementary because of the ELA PA Core?</i></p>

	<p><i>3c) Would you say the standards, eligible content, or reading data and analysis guided any of the changes made to curriculum and instruction?</i></p> <p><i>Follow Up:</i></p> <p><i>-Can you please share how grade level teachers (and across grades) interact to understand the vertical progression of reading and the standards?</i></p> <p><i>3d) The new ELA Standards claim they will develop deeper thinkers, 21<sup>st</sup> century learners, and college and career ready students – what are your thoughts?</i></p> <p><i>3e) How do you balance Blue Ribbon Status, teaching, curriculum and instruction with the idea of teaching to the test?</i></p>
<p>4. How has culture and climate impacted ideology of learning and teaching through the ELA Common Core?</p>	<p><i>4a) Aside from academic excellence – what makes Community Elementary a “Blue Ribbon School?”</i></p> <p><i>4b) In your own words, what is Community Elementary School’s mission statement?</i></p> <p><i>Follow ups:</i></p> <p><i>-Would you say you inquire and collaborate together (teachers and administrators)?</i></p> <p><i>-Are all voices heard and valued?</i></p> <p><i>- How would you describe relationships across the school?</i></p> <p><i>4c) How do you improve from the status National Blue Ribbon excellence?</i></p> <p><i>4d) Regarding the ELA Standards, curriculum and instruction, climate and culture – what would say is the biggest glow and grow of the whole ELA implementation process?</i></p>

## Appendix E

### Interview Protocol Changes

Original Interview Questions	Interview Questions after Pilot
<p><i>1a) Can you describe some of the changes that the ELA Standards have had on reading? What are some similarities and differences in the common core and legacy standards?</i></p> <p><i>1b) How do you feel they impact you as a ____ grade teacher?</i></p> <p><i>1c) Could you describe how reading has been taught at Community Elementary?</i></p> <p><i>1d) How do you align your philosophy of teaching reading with what the standards are asking? Is this a shift in your thinking about how to teach reading?</i></p>	<p><i>1a) Can you describe some of the changes that the ELA Standards have had on reading, writing, speaking, and listening? What are some similarities and differences between the common core and legacy standards?</i></p> <p><i>1b) Can you describe how the ELA Standards impact the teaching of reading as a ____ grade teacher?</i></p> <p><i>1c) What is your school's vision/philosophy regarding the teaching of reading?</i></p> <p><i>1d) Have you aligned/shifted your philosophy/thinking of teaching reading with what the standards are asking – from what you did in the past?</i></p>
<p><i>2a) What concerns do you have about the ELA PA Core Standards?</i></p> <p><i>2b) Can you tell me about how professional development works in your school/district?</i></p> <p><i>2c) What types of professional development did you receive to prepare you for the changes related to the ELA PA Core?</i></p> <p><i>2d) Can you explain your level of confidence in how you were prepared regarding the ELA PA Core?</i></p> <p><i>2e) Is professional development an ongoing process in this area?</i></p> <p><i>2f) How would you describe the principal's/teacher's interaction with professional development?</i>  <i>-What is the principal's role?</i>  <i>-How would you describe the principal's leadership style?</i>  <i>-What are teachers' roles?</i></p>	<p><i>2a) What concerns, uncertainties, wonderings, do you have about the ELA PA Core Standards?</i></p> <p><i>2b) Please share how professional development works in your school/district – what opportunities do you have within/without the district?</i></p> <p><i>2c) Please describe the professional development and training you've received to prepare you for the changes related to the ELA PA Core?</i></p> <p><i>2d) Please give some examples on how you were trained in the following ELA Core topics:</i>  <i>-Rigor, text complexity, and critical thinking</i>  <i>-Use of non-fiction</i>  <i>-Close Reading and Text Dependent Analysis</i>  <i>-Writing/Speaking/Listening</i></p> <p><i>2e) How would you describe administrator-teacher interaction with professional development?</i>  <i>-What is the principal's role?</i>  <i>-How would you describe the principal's leadership style?</i></p>

	-What are teachers' roles?
<p>3a) What are some things you are now doing differently in your reading instruction due to the ELA PA CORE?</p> <p>3b) What are some changes that have occurred with the ___ grade-reading curriculum because of the ELA PA Core?</p> <p>3c) Why did you feel the changes were/weren't necessary?</p> <p>3d) How do you balance Blue Ribbon Status, teaching, curriculum and instruction with the idea of teaching to the test?</p>	<p>3a) Please describe anything you may be doing differently in English Language Arts instruction due to the ELA PA CORE?</p> <p>3b) Please explain about any changes that occurred with the ___ grade-English Language Arts curriculum because of the ELA PA Core?</p> <p>3c) Would you say the standards themselves, eligible content, or reading data and analysis guided any of the changes made to curriculum and instruction?</p> <p>*Addition: Do you have opportunities for data analysis throughout the year?</p> <p>3d) The new ELA Standards claim they will develop deeper thinkers, 21<sup>st</sup> century learners, and college and career ready students – what are your thoughts?</p> <p>3e) How do you balance Blue Ribbon Status, teaching, curriculum and instruction with the idea of teaching to the test?</p>
<p>4a) Being acknowledged as a Blue Ribbon School is quite a distinction. The process didn't happen overnight, could you tell your story of how it happened?</p> <p>-How and who decided?</p> <p>-Who was involved?</p> <p>-What steps were taken?</p> <p>4b) Can you tell me how grade level teachers (and across grades) interact to understand the vertical progression of reading and the standards?</p> <p>4c) How would you describe the climate and culture of Community Elementary School?</p> <p>-What is the mission, vision, and values of Community Elementary?</p> <p>-Would you say you inquire and collaborate together (teachers and principal?)?</p> <p>-Are all voices heard and valued?</p> <p>-How would you describe relationships across the school?</p> <p>-How do you improve from the status National Blue Ribbon excellence?</p> <p>-Do you like your job? Why do you work here?</p>	<p>4a) This question was deleted. There were only a few teachers involved in the actual application process.</p> <p>4b) Can you please share how grade level teachers (and across grades) interact to understand the vertical progression of reading and the standards?</p> <p>4c) Aside from academic excellence – what makes Community Elementary a “Blue Ribbon School?”</p> <p>4d) How would you describe the climate and culture of Community Elementary School?</p> <p><b>Deleted:</b> -What is the mission, vision, and values of Community Elementary?</p> <p><b>ADDED BELOW</b></p> <p>-Would you say you inquire and collaborate together (teachers and administrators)?</p> <p>-Are all voices heard and valued?</p> <p>-How would you describe relationships across the school?</p> <p>-How do you improve from the National Blue Ribbon of excellence status?</p> <p>*Addition: In your own words, what is Community Elementary School's mission statement?</p>

<p><i>4d) How do you feel this climate/culture adds or detracts from learning and teaching about the ELA PA Core?</i></p> <p><i>4e) What are your thoughts on how culture and climate has made a difference in what you have going on here at Community Elementary?</i></p>	<p><i>4e) Deleted in lieu of 4c</i> -----</p> <p><i>*Addition/Closing question: Regarding the ELA Standards, curriculum, instruction, climate, and culture – what would you say is the biggest glow and grow of the whole ELA implementation process?</i></p>
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## Appendix F

### Upper Community School District Summary Literacy Statement

Journeys, published by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, is the core reading resource used to meet the diverse needs of our K-5 students.

This research-based program has been designed with a balance of shared (whole group instruction), guided (small flexible group instruction), and independent reading. All five critical strands of reading (phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, comprehension and fluency) are integrated in the daily reading skills and strategies.

All lessons utilize the most effective instructional approaches that current research has identified and current standards require. It has a rich collection of award-winning thoughtfully selected literary genres, which include fiction, poetry, nonfiction, and information writing in a magazine format to engage students.

There is a systematic and ongoing assessment system to inform teachers of the strengths and needs of their students. The technology component supports instruction in the classroom and provides opportunities for students to log on and read from home as well.

## Appendix G

### Assessments and Data Analysis

#### *Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS)*

The DIBELS literacy assessment will be given in grades K through five. Students will only be tested individually during the “testing windows” as indicated. Additional information will be provided to parents/guardians by the schools.

#### *Reading Records*

Reading Records are given in grades one and two, three times per year. Kindergarten students are tested in January and June only. Reading fluency and comprehension tests are administered on a one-on-one basis.

#### *Writing Assessment*

This is a diagnostic assessment tool to help determine students' writing abilities and estimate the amount of support students are likely to need during writing instruction. Students in grades one through five are administered a District-wide writing prompt three times a year. Kindergarten students are assessed mid and end-of-year. Teachers use the PA Writing Rubric to score the students' writing.

Data is the catalyst for informing instructional decisions in Lower Merion School District. The District analyzes data through four assessment domains to help inform short-term and long-term decisions about the education of our students. These include diagnostic, benchmark, formative and summative assessment data.

#### *Diagnostic Assessment Data*

Diagnostic assessment data ascertains, prior to instruction, each student's strengths, weaknesses, knowledge, and skills. Using this data allows the instructor to adjust instructional practices to meet each student's unique needs. LMSD utilizes Classroom Diagnostic Tools (CDT) provided by The Pennsylvania Department of Education in the following content areas for grades six through twelve: Reading/Literature, Writing/English Composition, Mathematics, Algebra I, Algebra II, Geometry, Science, Biology and Chemistry

#### *Benchmark Assessment Data*

Benchmark assessment data sets are designed to provide feedback to both the teacher and the student about how the student is progressing towards demonstrating proficiency on grade level standards. Well-designed benchmark assessments and standards-based assessments measure the degree to which a student has mastered a given concept, skill or application. Reports are developed by referencing standards rather than other students' performance. This kind of data is used to measure performance regularly, not only at a single moment in time. Administrators and teachers in the Lower Merion School District are working together closely to develop common benchmark assessments aligned to common learning standards and outcomes.

### *Formative Assessment Data*

Formative assessment data is used by teachers and students during instruction to provide feedback to adjust ongoing teaching and learning, and to improve the student's achievement of intended instructional outcomes. Meaningful formative assessment involves collecting the evidence about how a student is learning so that necessary instructional adjustments can be made to close achievement gaps at the classroom level. Formative assessment should be integrated into everyday instruction and learning with both teachers and students receiving frequent feedback. The use of ongoing formative classroom assessment data is vital to the teaching and learning process. Formative assessment examples are the quick comprehension checks teachers administer to students regularly to check for student understanding of learning outcomes.

### *Summative Assessment Data*

Summative assessment data is used to measure the overall learning and teaching progress made at the end of a defined period of instruction. This type of assessment is usually considered the high-stakes assessments, and results are usually tied to accomplishments at key points in a student's academic career. Some examples of summative assessment data are PSSA, Keystone Exams, end of unit exams, and final course exams.



## Appendix H

### Third Grade ELA Standards/Learning Progression

# Grade 3 Reading

	Reading Comprehension	Reading Fluency	Vocabulary	Writing
<b>What your child will learn</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Identify key ideas and details in literature and informational texts.</li> <li>Demonstrate understanding of craft and structure in literature and informational texts.</li> <li>Make connections within, between, and/or among texts.</li> <li>Identify and judge evidence that supports particular ideas in an author's argument to change a reader's point of view.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Read with accuracy and fluency to support comprehension.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Understand vocabulary and figurative language in literature and informational texts.</li> <li>Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases, choosing flexibly from a range of strategies.</li> <li>Recognize word relationships and nuances in word meanings.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Write narratives (real or imaginary), informational, explanatory, and opinion pieces on topics or texts, with supporting details.</li> <li>Write using effective technique, descriptive details, and clear event sequences.</li> <li>Understand on-level grammar and usage, capitalization, punctuation, &amp; spelling.</li> </ul>
<b>What your child will do to demonstrate understanding of a text</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ask/answer questions to demonstrate understanding of a text.</li> <li>Retell and summarize poems or stories from diverse cultures.</li> <li>Determine the main idea of a text.</li> <li>Explain a central message or moral in a story and explain how it is conveyed through key details in the text.</li> <li>Describe characters, and explain how their actions contribute to the sequence of events.</li> <li>Explain the point of view of a</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Orally read with understanding on-level text 110 words per minute (by end of year)</li> <li>Read on-level text with accuracy, appropriate rate, and expression.</li> <li>Use context to confirm or self-correct word recognition and understanding, rereading as necessary.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Use context as a clue to the meaning of a word or phrase.</li> <li>Determine the meaning of a new word formed when a known prefix/suffix is added.</li> <li>Use a known root word as a clue to the meaning of an unknown word.</li> <li>Demonstrate understanding of vocabulary and figurative language.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Write Narratives, opinion and informational pieces.</li> <li>Introduce and organize ideas on a topic which supports the writer's purpose and audience.</li> <li>Provide reasons that support an opinion.</li> <li>Provide a concluding statement or section.</li> <li>Develop the topic with facts, definitions, and/or details.</li> <li>Use linking words/phrases to join ideas.</li> <li>Choose words/phrases for effect.</li> <li>Develop characters in narratives.</li> <li>Use temporal words and phrases to signal event order.</li> </ul>

# Grade 3 Reading

	Reading Comprehension	Reading Fluency	Vocabulary	Writing
<b>What you will see (Products)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Oral/written retelling of stories</li> <li>• Projects, timelines, charts, and illustrations that show understanding of the text through oral and/or written responses.</li> <li>• Summarize text with key details</li> <li>• Integrate information from several sources to answer questions.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Your child will read with understanding grade level material aloud at 110 words per minute.</li> <li>• Your child will read with appropriate rate and expression.</li> <li>• Your child will use context to self-correct.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Word maps and drawings to show word meanings</li> <li>• Word lists and skill sheets</li> <li>• Use of academic vocabulary</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Webs and flow charts used for planning</li> <li>• Corrections and changes made by the student</li> <li>• Both narrative and informational writing</li> </ul>
<b>How you can help</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support nightly reading.</li> <li>• Supply or read with your child more non-fiction texts.</li> <li>• Read multiple books on the same topic.</li> <li>• Encourage evidence in everyday discussions and disagreements.</li> <li>• Talk with your child about the book s/he is reading. Ask open-ended questions.</li> <li>• Have your child retell events from a favorite story, show, or experience.</li> <li>• Take your child to the library to check out books.</li> <li>• Take your child to bookstores when author visits occur.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Read aloud to your child.</li> <li>• Encourage your child to read to you.</li> <li>• Practice reading in unison with your child.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ask your child the meaning of unfamiliar words while you are reading together.</li> <li>• Figure out and discuss new words with your child as they are encountered.</li> <li>• Support your child's use of newly learned words in every-day context.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encourage your child to keep a diary, write letters, poems, or other home writing projects.</li> <li>• Discuss and support the need for revising and editing.</li> <li>• Plan and write a story with your child.</li> </ul>

## Appendix I

### Part III – Summary of Blue Ribbon Application

Community Elementary is a K-5 school located in Unity Pennsylvania. As one of ten schools in Upper Community School District, the school currently serves 546 children.

At Community, students are provided with numerous opportunities to develop not only their academic and critical thinking skills, but also to enhance their ability to make connections between the knowledge they gain in the classroom and the larger world outside of the school setting. There is a school-wide emphasis on helping children develop empathy, understanding, cooperation, respect for individual differences while learning to appreciate the perspectives and experiences of others. Community staff and families feel that helping children develop meaningful connections with others serves to enhance their overall educational experience.

Building classroom communities, relationships and connections are vital aspects of helping students see themselves as caring, capable and competent learners. The children begin each day with a morning meeting as part of the Responsive Classroom Approach. Second Step, a social skills program, is implemented in classrooms and provides students with opportunities to apply problem-solving skills in the school domain. In addition, Community has been recognized for the last five years as a No Place for Hate School, and initiative that is sponsored by the Anti-Defamation League. In place is also a school-wide Positive Behavior System that seeks to instill positive expectations for behavior across all settings within the school day. School families is a program that was initiated at Community in the late nineties and continues today. All staff members are assigned a multi-age/multi-grade level group of children who meet on a monthly basis to participate in team building activities, community service initiatives, and to engage in thoughtful conversations about school activities and issues. The school staff recognizes and values the need to ensure that each child feels safe and secure in their school environment so that they can be productive, invested and creative in their daily learning experiences.

Our school continues to exceed AYP targets for performance on the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA). Consistently ranking in the top quartile of Pennsylvania schools, Community was recently ranked third in the entire state meriting a score of 100.6 based on the PA School Performance Profile (SPP). Ninety-eight percent (98%) of fifth grade students were proficient or advanced in the area of writing on the most recent state assessment. During the 2012-13, Community was honored as a Title I Distinguished School. In addition, our fifth graders recently earned first place in the Constitution Challenge writing contest, sponsored by the Rendell Center for Civic Education and The National Constitution Center. Among our accomplished and dedicated staff is a recipient of the Presidential Award for Excellence in Mathematics and Science Teaching and a Unity County Voices of Inspiration teaching award honoree.

Community teachers continue to be engaged in thoughtful dialogue about how to differentiate instruction for children on all levels of academic proficiency, including

children in specialized learning programs such as emotional support, autistic support, learning support and English as a Second Language (ESL). Collaboration and communication among classroom teachers and members of the Community Achievement Team provides a forum for staff to identify areas for individual student growth. In order for students to meet targeted outcomes, team members develop action plans that develop action plans that thoughtfully incorporate research based for individual strategies that are evaluated on a regular basis. The team includes the reading and math specialists as well as the school psychologist, counselor, principal, IST and speech clinician. Parents are involved at the onset of the process and routinely participate in meetings to help develop plans of action or to implement a suggested strategy at home.

Community service is an integral part of the school culture and philanthropic endeavors are often initiated by the students themselves. This year, in an effort totally inspired by students, Community students raised more than \$3000 in one week by making rainbow loom bracelets during recess to benefit the victims of the typhoon in the Philippines. For the third successive year, Community Students contributed 3.5 tons of non-perishable good to a local food bank, surpassing any other local organization. For our most recent outreach activity, students collected personal care items and food for the annual Treats for Troops campaign designed to show appreciation for our service personnel overseas: handwritten notes from the students were included in each package. Community outreach is part of who we are at Community School.

Daily interactions among students, staff and families have fostered an atmosphere conducive to enthusiastic involvement in the learning process, both inside and outside of the classroom. Community and school family spirit at Community Elementary help make the school a wonderful place for children to learn and to grow.

## Appendix J

### Curriculum and Instruction (Narrative from Blue Ribbon Application)

#### **Curriculum**

The curriculum is aligned with PA Core State Standards. The emphasis is on providing foundational skills in each core academic area, encouraging curiosity and exploration, fostering academic confidence and enthusiasm and delivering an appropriate balance of individual and group learning settings.

To help ensure competence and genuine engagement in learning, our elementary school program at Community emphasizes active learning experiences in a nurturing, supportive and challenging environment.

The elementary Language Arts curriculum is developed collaboratively with teachers. This standards-based curriculum provides an additional level of specificity to the knowledge, skill and understanding students need to know and be able to do to develop competencies in reading comprehension and critical thinking, using a range of texts and genres. Children are exposed to and involved in standards for reading, writing, listening and speaking for information and understanding, literacy responses, critical analysis and evaluation. The curriculum contains the most effective instructional approaches that current research has identified and current standards require. The curriculum incorporates the use of technology for teacher planning, instruction and student activities. The curriculum is designed using a comprehensive, balanced approach to literacy, which included modeled, guided and independent approaches to reading and writing.

The elementary math curriculum is designed to ensure students learn mathematics with understanding and develop a strong conceptual foundation. Through worthwhile and engaging tasks, appropriate use of hands-on activities to build conceptual understanding, quality discussion of the mathematical tasks, and meaningful practice to ensure mastery of those concepts and skill, students are given multiple opportunities to engage in mathematics and learn that they can be mathematical thinkers. It focuses on the development of computational fluency and number sense and using accurate and efficient strategies for computing. The math curriculum is designed to promote a deep understanding of mathematics and develop mathematically proficient students who can think, reason, and model and solve problems. Inquiry based instructional materials support the math curriculum and embodies the PA Core State Standards and Mathematical Practices. Practices are deeply embedded in the fabric of curriculum and instructional resources, and facilitate the teaching and learning of mathematics.

The elementary science curriculum is inquiry based and provides hands-on experiences and real-world applications with objects, organisms, and systems. This approach helps students understand and make sense of science concepts through active investigation and experiments. The curriculum is based on learning of science concepts through active investigations and experiments. The curriculum is based on learning progressions that provide students with opportunities to investigate core ideas in science in increasingly complex ways over time. The instructional materials used to support the science curriculum are designed to help students understand the nature and development of scientific knowledge and technological capabilities; and to participate productively in scientific and engineering practices. Science-centered language development also promotes learning in all areas through the use of science notebooks, which fosters reflective thinking and scientific reading, which relate to the authentic experiences students have during the active learning sessions.

All elementary students receive instruction in the specialist's areas of art, music, physical education, foreign language, library science on a weekly basis. Each day, students also engage in Responsive Classroom activities that merge social, emotional, and intellectual learning. It also sets the tone for respectful learning and establishes a climate of trust.

Upper Community School District provides an extensive range of educational services and supports for students with special needs within our schools. These services include; Learning Support, Emotional Support, Autistic Support, and Life Skills Support. Speech/language therapy, occupational therapy, physical therapy, hearing support, vision therapy, and transition services also are provided to eligible students requiring these services due to an educational need. A broad array of supplementary aids and services to support students'

educational needs included communication devices, audio versions of books, assistive technology, a braille production center, and pre-vocational opportunities. The continuum of programs and services for children with disabilities varies in accordance with the changing needs of our community.

### **Reading/English:**

The reading curriculum, instruction, and instructional methods reflect a comprehensive approach to literacy using a balanced framework that incorporates reading and writing approach of Shared (whole group/modelled instruction), Guided (small/flexible group instruction) and Independent reading. Evidence based methods of reading instruction and critical strands as identified by the National Reading Panel (phonemic awareness, phonic, vocabulary, comprehension and fluency) are integrated in the daily reading skills and strategies used in the classroom. The curriculum is specifically designed to help students think critically and problem-solve as well as communicate and collaborate with one another. Teachers establish a learning environment in which students feel comfortable sharing their thinking with each other. Teachers utilize a variety of questioning and discussion techniques to challenge students cognitively and to promote discourse. All lessons incorporate the most effective instructional approaches and digital tools that current standards require. The curriculum relies on a rich collection of award winning literature that included fiction, nonfiction, poetry, and information writing.

The curriculum reflects a coherent K-5 instructional plan that establishes consistency of instruction throughout the district in different grade levels. The literacy goal and Community is for each student to reach maximum success within a school year. It is our goal to help students read deeply and think critically about text and also develop a love of reading.

The writing curriculum is a yearlong program for Kindergarten through grade five students. It is a combination of writing process approach with guided instruction along with opportunities for peer interaction. Using authors as mentors, teachers use a balance of inquiry and direct instruction to help students understand the craft of writing and to develop their skills as writers and communicators.

A systematic and ongoing assessment system that includes diagnostic, formative and summative assessments is used to measure students' understanding and progress, as well as to help teachers plan for future lessons. Community is committed to meeting the diverse needs of all students by differentiating instruction. In addition to support provided by the classroom teacher, small group interventions are provided by the following: reading specialists, ELL teachers, teachers of special education, and teachers of gifted as well as after school support. Dedicated time is allotted to review data, make instructional decisions and work with small groups of students. The technology component supports instruction in the classroom and provides opportunities for students to read at home.

### **Mathematics**

The standards based math curriculum is coherent, focused on key concepts and is well articulated across the grades. It reflects the importance of mathematical thinking and reasoning to develop a deep understanding of fundamental math ideas and develop computational fluency. Students are provided with opportunities to explore mathematical ideas and the contexts in which they are useful. The curriculum is designed to help students make connections between mathematical ideas through exploration and problem solving experiences, including real world application.

Through daily classroom experiences, students explore problem in depth and find more than one solution by using problem solving strategies and appropriate tools. Using models, diagrams, and graphs, students are expected to explain mathematical thinking and reasoning, then communicate their ideas orally and in writing. Through classroom experiences, student works in a variety of groupings-whole class, small groups, in pairs, and individually. Math Workshop is also an integral part of the elementary math curriculum, providing students with additional opportunities for reinforcement or extension, allowing time to refine strategies and apply important skill. Math Workshop also provides opportunities for the teacher to work with individuals and small groups while assessing students' learning and understanding. Classroom Routines are also implemented daily, providing practice with previously introduced content, increasing students' repertoire of strategies for mental

math and problem solving. Technology and online programs enhance the learning of math concepts and provide students the opportunity for additional practice during the school day and at home.

Opportunities for formative assessments are woven throughout each unit, including observations, checklist, writing opportunities, exit slip and check for understanding. Teachers use the data from those assessments to plan and differentiate instruction to meet the needs of all learners. Curriculum resources support teachers in providing intervention, practice or enrichment to students based on the data from the assessments.

Student learning in mathematics is also measured by district unit and benchmark assessments. The assessments support the learning of important mathematics and furnish useful information to teachers, students and parents. Grade level teams meet with the math support teachers to analyze this data and collaboratively plan for remediation or enrichment. All assessments, formative or summative, are designed to inform and guide teachers as they make instructional decisions.

#### **Additional Curriculum Area:**

The Elementary Science Program supports students in learning scientific, mathematics and engineering concepts (STEM). Community teachers are committed to helping students develop the necessary skills to critically and actively participate in scientific practices through investigations and analyses. Lessons provide students with meaningful experiences through hands-on experiments and active participation in the scientific engineering practices. Teachers use formative assessments to guide instruction. The science program uses the instructional approach of inquiry and direct instruction to teach concepts in the Earth and Space, Physical and Life Sciences. The elementary science program reflects current research on teaching and learning, and complements the PA Core Literacy standards including student discourse, argumentation, writing to learn, and reflective thinking. The curriculum is based on learning progressions that provide students with opportunities to investigate core ideas in science in increasingly complex ways over time.

The science program also provides a foundation for more advanced understanding of core science ideas while it helps students develop lifelong skills for living in an increasingly complex, scientific and technological world. The curriculum incorporates active learning, scientific practices, collaborative group work, integration of literacy, use of digital technologies and drawing connections to students' lives extending beyond the classroom. Students are given multiple opportunities to address engineering practices and apply and test their scientific knowledge. These opportunities include developing solutions to problems, constructing and evaluating models, and using systems thinking. Science notebooks help students organize their observations and data, process their data and maintain a record of their learning for future reference. The use of Science Readers help students relate to the active learning sessions, gaining greater meaning from the text material. There are multiple strategies for formative assessment at all grade levels as well as benchmark assessments. Online resources also provide enrichment for students during the school day and at home.

#### **Instructional Method**

Across all grade levels, teachers at Community design and deliver meaningful instruction to a diverse range of students each day. In order to identify and meet the instructional needs of all students, classroom teachers analyze assessment data throughout the academic year and adjust their instruction and grouping strategies accordingly. Community staff created professional partnerships called Data Buddies as a mechanism to thoughtfully analyze and discuss assessment data with a colleague. Within this framework, classroom teachers are paired with specialists for the purpose of routinely examining student assessment data and planning instructional groups and interventions. Classroom teachers then collaborate with grade level colleagues and specialists to plan instruction that meets students' academic strengths and needs. Teachers communicate instructional objectives to students, use effective questioning techniques, engage students in active learning and adjust the pace of instruction, as needed.

Throughout Community, classroom teachers have multiple avenues in order to identify the unique needs of their students as well as design effective instruction. For Example, during the reading and language arts instructional block, teachers deliver reading instruction through guided reading groups using text that is appropriate for each

group's assessed needs and skill levels. Specialists throughout the school also deliver differentiated instruction and interventions through our reading specialists, math support teacher, special education teachers, ELL teachers, and gifted support teachers. During WIN Time (What I Need) each week, classroom teachers and specialists work together to provide tiered instruction in reading and math. In order to meet the needs of advanced learners, classroom teachers plan and deliver TEE Time (Targeted Enrichment Experience) curricular extensions. Students in fifth grade have the opportunity to receive accelerated math instruction at the sixth grade level based on their demonstrated mathematical strengths.

Community teachers participate in a variety of workshops and professional learning opportunities in order to remain current with test practices on effective instructional delivery. This year every teacher set a personal goal aligned to the Danielson Framework for Teaching. When teachers engage in on going and meaningful sharing of ideas and strategies pertaining to the domain that focuses on instruction, the learning experiences of students in our classroom will be deeper and more

### **Professional Development**

Community provides meaningful professional development opportunities to staff members. As teachers differentiate instruction for students, the school provides differentiated profession development opportunities for teachers and support staff. When staff needs to build a common understanding of initiatives such as the Danielson Framework for Teaching, the district provides training for all. Typically, encouraging a trainer of trainers' model. Community teachers are often trained in order to share their expertise with building peers and teachers across the district. The district has also created an innovative approach to professional development called PRP (Professional Responsibilities Profile). Through this system, teachers select topics that meet their needs and by extension, the needs of their students.

Another way that the district provides professional development is through in-service days. These non-instructional days allow teachers to meet with colleagues to address topics relating to student achievement such as assessment data analysis or PVAAS and curriculum design or development.

Additionally, the district funds teachers' unique professional development needs and interests through the Professional Conference Committee. Specialist or classroom teachers can make requests to attend state or national organizations' annual conferences to further develop areas of expertise. The information learned directly impacts instruction and student achievement. Recently, several teachers attended a Common Reading ELA Standards training to help refine their understanding of shifts from PA's Legacy Standards to PA Core Standards. Community staff is engaged in ongoing professional development that includes staff meetings, grade level meetings and cross-building Collaborations.

Community's Cultural Proficiency Committee meets regularly to facilitate professional development and dialogue on issues designed to build teacher's capacity to acquire skills, knowledge and attitudes that will enable them to effectively relate to and educate students who comprise our diverse populations.

When teachers and staff collaborate professionally, a caring, effective instructional climate emerges for all: staff, students, and families. In the words of Marcia Conner, "Training often gives people solutions to problems already solved. Collaboration addresses challenges no one has overcome before." There exists within the classrooms and corridors of Community, a spirit of collaboration and teamwork that goes beyond mere training. Whether you are a seasoned teachers encountering a fresh challenge or a long-term substitute teacher striving to create a smooth transition for students, Community staff members routinely reach out to peers for support. True teamwork, a limitless spirit of collaboration, and thoughtful responses to staff's needs are hallmarks of this school. We call it "The Community Way."

### **School Leadership**

"Scratch the surface of an excellent school and you will find an excellent principal." The principal at Community instills a positive tone while fostering a continuous dialogue with honest communication among staff members, students, and families. She exhibits a strong equanimity when facing challenges, and inspires teachers



and staffs to think “outside of the box” in orders to create lessons that enhance student achievement. Community’s principal has masterfully created an environment where the staff is encouraged to speak up and express their ideas, questions, and concerns. Serving as a liaison between the District’s curriculum supervisors and teachers, she is know to identify and encourage others to use their strengths; recognizing that through shared decision-making, capitalizing on the talents and strengths of staff, and allowing for teachers to think and plan creatively, achievement will ensue.

Teachers and staff are encouraged to take risks, work together to share strategies, and lead each other in generating innovative ways to help students succeed. Consequently, Community teachers feel a shared sense of purpose and direction as they work with students and colleagues. Each year the principal clearly states the school’s goals, makes student-centered decisions, and is forthright and proactive in all communication. Moreover, she is known for her positive energy and sense of humor. An example of shared decision-making is Community’s Faculty Advisory Council. This is a representative group of staff members who meet regularly with the principal to discuss building issues and concerns. The goal of these meetings is to provide a forum group, staff members have evolved, and mechanism to express concerns and brainstorm solutions. While the success of any school’s efforts cannot be attributed to a singe factor, the daily contributions and efforts of a committed and talented leader like the principal at Community Elementary School are in fact, indispensable and immeasurable.

## Appendix K

### Indicators of Academic Success (From the Blue Ribbon Application)

Community administers the Pennsylvania system of School Assessment (PSSA) to all students in grades three through five. Student scores for this standardized assessment are categorized into four performance levels: Advanced Proficient, Basic, and Below Basic. The Pennsylvania Department of Education considers the Advanced and Proficient performance levels to be acceptable while the Basic and Below Basic levels of performance are not.

Community administers curriculum benchmark assessments in the fall, winter and spring in grades one through five. The areas of reading, writing and math have been identified for tri-annual assessment. In addition, students participate in the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIEBELS) assessment beginning in the kindergarten. DIEBELS is used as a screening tool to determine early reading skills in the areas of phonemic awareness, non-sense word fluency, oral reading fluency and retelling. Student growth in grades two through five take the Degree of Reading Powers Test (DRP) each fall and Spring. Student growth is assessed on this rigorous measure of comprehension. All data is entered into four areas of performance which correlate to the four areas of performance on the PSSA. Teachers use this benchmark data to guide and differentiate instruction, identify remediation needs, and enrich student learning.

Teaching staff can easily access student assessment data and results are routinely shared with parents. In addition, there are a variety of supports available for students who have not yet demonstrated success on academic assessments.

Over a five-year period, Community students have demonstrated consistently high levels of achievement on the state assessments (PSSA) in Reading and Mathematics. All grades measured exceeded adequate yearly progress goals in each of the last five years. For the 2008-09 school year, in reading achievement, 94% of third graders, 95% of fourth graders and 95% of fifth graders scored in the proficient/advanced categories. Ninety-seven percent (97%) of third grade students scored in the proficient/advanced categories on the 3013 PSSA, while fourth grade students showed a slight increase and scored for the fifth grade students decreased slightly to 93%. Community had a significant increase in the number of students receiving special education services in the fifth grade cohort during the 2013 year, which is a contributing factor to the slight decrease in scores for that grade level.

In the area of Mathematics, 95% of third graders, 94% of fourth graders and 92% of fifth graders scored in the proficient/advanced categories in 2008-2009. Results on the 2012-13 PSSA for math are as follows: scores for students in grade four remained consistent at 94%, while student scores in grades three and five showed an upward movement at 98% and 97% respectively.

A focus on student performance among subgroups is at the forefront of our data analysis. Overall, students who participate in our special education programs have demonstrated positive growth in math and reading in grades three and five. However, in reading and math, most recent PSSA results indicate a gap of more than ten percentage points between scores of all fourth grade students and those in the same grade with an IEP (Reading – 95% proficiently for all compared to 71% proficiency for students with IEP's; Math – 94% proficiency for all compared to 71% proficiency for students with IEP's).

In the area of reading, teachers of special education provide systematic direct instruction to increase decoding/encoding skill, reading fluency, literal and inferential comprehension and the ability to respond to reading in written form. Our language arts curriculum provides teachers with many resources to ensure that students are being taught the same skills and strategies as their regular education peers in a manner that addresses the specially designed instruction that is inherent in their IEP. Students also have an opportunity to participate in a district's extended day program that is focused on test taking skills and reading and math development.

Students progress is built around a curriculum that reflects state standards and well-designed consensus maps, providing teachers with a clear plan of what skills students need to demonstrate by the end of a given school year.

Community Staff set high expectations for student learning and continue to encourage all students to reach their potential. They demonstrate responsiveness and flexibility in their approach to teaching and continuously add depth, creativity and appropriate challenges to keep students engaged and excited about learning.

## **2. Using Assessment Results**

Community staff members utilize a variety of assessment data with the purpose of monitoring the academic progress of students. Based on regularly administered formative and summative assessments, teachers make adjustments to their instruction for groups, as well as for individual students.

Each September, the principal reviews with the staff the state assessment results (PSSA) in reading, mathematics, science and writing. Goals toward improvement are based on the data and include specific goals for sub-groups, those students who have not yet met proficiency in assessed disciplines. Students in grades four and five who did not meet proficiency levels on the PSSSA are invited to participate in the district's extended day program. Offered for the first time in 2013, the program provided students with extra support through direct instruction in reading and math, as well as test taking skills.

Additionally, those same students were provided with opportunities to work with a staff mentor with whom they already had an established relationship, via our School Families Program. For a six week period prior to PSSA tests, staff met with those students at the beginning of the school day to review and practice test taking strategies, as well as focus on comprehension of text or application of mathematical skills.

Classroom teachers also analyze data to assist in the formation of flexible groups within the classroom, based on need. At Community, all students in grades one through five take curriculum based benchmark assessments in reading, math and writing, tri-annually. Writing assessments are scored using the Pennsylvania Writing Rubric, which allows students to recognize their areas of strength and identify areas that require additional refinement.

Teachers and specialists access data from Performance Tracker to identify areas in which students excelled, in addition to targeting areas where improvement is needed in reading, math, and writing. Literacy specialists, math support teachers, ESL staff and other specialist provide small group instruction, both within the classroom as well as in a pullout setting, as needed. For example, students who require additional support in constructing written responses to reading selections are provided with small group instruction that provide strategies and models that can be practiced and applied in the classroom setting. Likewise, in mathematics, after reviewing student error on benchmark assessments, the classroom teacher collaborates with the math support teachers to develop a plan to provide students with targeted instruction as part of small group within the classroom.

The Community staff also uses data from the Pennsylvania Value Added Assessment System (PVAAS) in order to review students projected growth on the state assessments. While it is important that we consider the PVAAS information for those students who may not yet have met proficiency targets, it is equally as important to ensure that our students who score in the proficient and advanced ranges of performance, which is the majority of our Community students, continue to meet or exceed growth targets on PVAAS,

## **3. Sharing Lessons Learned**

Community staff is actively involved in sharing professional learning experiences with district colleagues. This occurs in a variety of ways cross-school grade level meeting, district workshops, and local and national conferences. Teachers trained in the Danielson Framework for Teaching facilitate workshops focused on the domains and elements of effective teaching. Community staff was trained in the use of Responsive Classroom approach and provided in-service for staff members across the district including teaching staff, lunch recess aides and instructional assistants.

The integration of technology in instruction is vital to the Community experience. Many of our teachers serve as technology mentors, guiding colleagues as they infuse technology throughout the curriculum.

Teachers attend targeted trainings and coursework through the Intermediate Unit. In this way, teachers share successful ideas and strategies with teachers from other school districts in Pennsylvania. Teachers who attend conferences outside the district are required to share newly learned information with their colleagues, as well as possibilities for application in the classroom.

As part of the Community initiative on cultural proficiency, trained staff members conducted a two-hour workshop that was required for all district staff, focusing on meeting the need of our diverse student group. Community's Cultural Proficiency Cadre meets monthly to facilitate professional development and dialogue on issues that heighten teachers awareness on how to foster a school environment that is welcoming, accepting and inviting for all students.

Our students have consistently demonstrated exemplary performance on the state writing assessments administered in grade five. Community teachers engage in cross grade level meetings within the school to share exemplars of student writing samples. They discuss and share tools and strategies used to teach the craft of writing along with ideas and suggestions to help students become skilled at communicating well-developed ideas in writing.

We were honored when one of our teachers earned the Presidential Award for Excellence in Mathematics and Science Teaching; she shares her expertise regularly at NSTA conferences on both local and national levels.

One of our most important missions is to support and guide the work of our novice teachers. Over the years, Community teachers have been called upon regularly to lead sessions on classroom management, communication with families and other best practices at the district's New Teacher Assistance Program (NTAP) that occurs prior the start of the school year.

#### **4. Engaging Families and Community**

Community families are integral members of the students' educational experience and we continuously seek ways to build upon the strong base of parent support we enjoy. The Community Home and School Association (HSA) is an active, vibrant and dedicated group of parents whose mission is to serve as a liaison between families, the school, and the Community School District in order to provide opportunities to learn about and to discuss relevant and timely issues. Guest speakers provide meaningful information that ranges from bullying and appropriate use of electronic devices to curriculum discussions, explanations of various assessment tools and transition programs for our youngest students entering kindergarten as well as fifth graders preparing for middle school.

The HAS sponsors a variety of family based activities that take place annually, including; Artist in Residence Programs, Art Goes to School, Breakfast Buddies, Book Fair, Spanish Festival, Field Day, and Welcome Back Picnic. Our HAS generously sponsors over one hundred fourth and fifth graders in an annual county-wide Reading Olympics event.

Lunch and Learn sessions are held for each grade group of parents focusing on topics germane to the group, such as "Kidwriting" in kindergarten; at home literacy and math strategies to support first graders; foreign language skills for second grade; preparing third graders for state assessments.

The Human Relations Committee is comprised to parent representatives from every grade level and staff representatives who meet monthly. Emphasis is focused on enhancing Community's effort to grow as a culturally proficient school community. The committee works to design steps to help every family at Community feel welcome, with a focus on those families from diverse groups. In response to the increasing number of diverse families, a hugely successful International Night was planned and orchestrated by parents and staff. The even has been an authentic learning experience for our students,

their families, and the staff. Through open dialogue, the committee has established a partnership with B+M College that pairs Community students of ESL with graduate students who are fluent in English as well as their native language.

We believe that a warm and welcoming environment for all members of the school community is key in maintaining engaged and supportive parents; a factor that directly relates to student achievement. We believe that the support that our school receives from Community Families is one of the reasons for our continued success as a high achieving school.

## Appendix L

### Professional Learning (From ELA Curriculum Director)

2014-15 School Year - Some of these workshops were repeated in the fall of 2014 and again spring of 2015. I did not repeat the workshop in this list. These are workshops offered to teachers. These are not mandatory. I did not include workshops for music or art teachers or librarians.

2: Writing Workshop with Dr. Andy Fishman (with brown bag lunch), 7/1/14, 8:30 a.m. - 3:30 p.m., Admin Rooms 264A & B

2: Collaborative Analysis of New PA Core ELA Curriculum Resources; July 2, 2014, Admin Room 202 from 8:30 a.m. - 3:30 p.m. bring a brown bag lunch

Grammar Boot Camp (Brown bag lunch), 7/8/14, 8:30 a.m. - 3:30 p.m., Admin Rooms 264A & B

2: Reading Is Thinking (Brown bag lunch), 7/9/14, 8:30 a.m. - 3:30 p.m. with a working lunch, Admin Room 202

2: How a Reader's Notebook Can Improve Student Comprehension; July 9, 2014, Admin Room 264A from 9:00 a.m. - 4:00 p.m. (Bring brown bag lunch) with one hour of independent work following 7/9/14 and Meeting PA Core Standards (Brown bag lunch) - Grades K-2, 7/15/14, 8:30 a.m. - 3:30 p.m. with a working lunch, Admin Board Rooms A & B

2: Using Journeys to Meet the Needs of Advanced Readers and Meeting PA Core Standards (Brown bag lunch) - Grades 3-5, 7/17/14, 8:30 a.m. - 3:30 p.m. with a working lunch

2: Using Journeys to Meet the Needs of Advanced Readers and Meeting PA Core Standards (Brown bag lunch) - Grades 3-5, 7/17/14, 8:30 a.m. - 3:30 p.m. with a working lunch

How a Reader's Notebook Can Improve Student Comprehension; August 20, 2014, Admin Room 264A from 9:00 a.m. - 4:00 p.m. with one hour of independent work following 8/20/14

2: Grammar Matters; 10/8/14 (Admin Room 264A); 11/12/14 (Board Room A); 12/11/14 (Admin Room 154), 4:00 p.m. - 6:00 p.m. with one hour of independent work

Teacher-Created Informational Writing Unit, Grades 1-5; 11/11/14, 11/18/14, 11/25/14, 4:00 p.m. - 6:00 p.m. with one hour of independent work

ACT 48 ONLY - FOR PAY: Understanding the Text Dependent Analysis Essay of the New ELA Test; 1/28/15; 4:00 p.m. - 6:00 p.m., Lower Merion High School - Room 106

3: Understanding the Text Dependent Analysis Essay of the New ELA Test; 1/29/15; 4:00 p.m. - 6:00 p.m., Admin Room 264A,

Teacher-Created Informational Writing Unit, Grades 1-5; 11/11/14, 11/18/14, 11/25/14, 4:00 p.m. - 6:00 p.m. with one hour of independent work

ACT 48 ONLY - FOR PAY: Understanding the Text Dependent Analysis Essay of the New ELA Test; 1/28/15; 4:00 p.m. - 6:00 p.m., Lower Merion High School - Room 106

3: Understanding the Text Dependent Analysis Essay of the New ELA Test; 1/29/15; 4:00 p.m. - 6:00 p.m., Admin Room 264A,

Discovering Mentor Texts; 5/5/15, 5/12/15 and 5/19/15, 4:00 p.m. - 6:00 p.m. (Admin Room 154) with one hour of independent work: Understanding the Modes of Writing, 6/19/15, 8:30 a.m. - 11:30 a.m.; DAO 264A

2: Text Dependent Analysis Question for Reading Benchmarks, 7/1/2015, 8:30 a.m. - 3:30 p.m., Admin Room 264A - BROWN BAG LUNCH

2: Elementary SLO Development, 7/6/2015, 8:00 a.m. - 3:00 p.m., Admin Room 264A - BRING BROWN BAG LUNCH

2: Writing Academy II, July 7, 2015, 8:30am -3:30pm, DAO Room 264 A BRING BROWN BAG LUNCH

K-2 Literacy Professional Development & Assessment Collaboration, 7/8/2015 Cynwyd Elementary and 7/16/15 Admin Room 154 - 1:00 p.m. - 4:00 p.m. plus 1 hour of independent work

### **Fall 2015**

Strengthening Guided Reading to meet the needs of all readers, 17:15m. - 8:15 a.m., This workshop is being offered by the reading specialist in all six elementary schools. We are using the same text to deliver the same message.

2: Informative Writing: Collaborative Workshop, 10/13/15 - 12/8/15, 4:15 p.m. - 6:15 p.m., Admin Room 264A plus 1 hour of independent work

**\*During the 2014-15 school year**, ALL teachers engaged in professional learning on school days. We had Dr. Andy Fishman go to each of our elementary schools and work with teachers in writing and do an inquiry approach in writing.

We had Dr. Carolyn Gwinn come on Nov. 3, 2014 and do a general session on guided reading. She returned March and June to visit each of our 6 elementary schools. Dr. Gwinn spent a day at each school. Using our students data, she created and demonstrate a guided reading lesson with our K, 1 and 2 teachers. Teachers from the grade levels met separately with Dr. Gwinn and conferred with her prior to the lesson, observed the lesson, and then processed with her after the lesson.

Other All staff professional learning that took place in 2014-15 school year was a focused concentration with grade 4 and 5 teachers on Text Dependent Analysis. What is it? How is it similar to Opinion Writing? Teachers had time in these sessions to collaboratively create samples to use with their lessons.

## Appendix M

### Research Question Document Support Matrix

<b>APPENDIX</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>G</b>	<b>H</b>	<b>I</b>	<b>J</b>	<b>K</b>	<b>L</b>
<b>Research Question One</b>	<b>X</b>		<b>X</b>		<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	
<b>Research Question Two</b>	<b>X</b>			<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>
<b>Research Question Three</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>
<b>Research Question Four</b>				<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	



## Appendix N

### PLC Document Support Matrix

<b>APPENDIX</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>G</b>	<b>H</b>	<b>I</b>	<b>J</b>	<b>K</b>	<b>L</b>
<b>Shared Mission, Vision, Values</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>
<b>Collective Inquiry and Collaborative Teams</b>		<b>X</b>		<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>
<b>Action Oriented and Experimentation</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>		<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>
<b>Continued Improvement-Results Oriented</b>		<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>
<b>Leadership</b>				<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>
<b>Culture, Climate, Relationships</b>				<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>