

NJ Embraces a Common Vision for Strengthening Teaching, Leading, and Learning

By Patricia Wright, Executive Director, New Jersey Principals and Supervisors Association



FACT: The DOE and the key educational organizations are supporting the same vision for strengthening teaching, leading, and learning in our schools.

FACT: The vision represents a shift in perspective related to curriculum design and implementation.

FACT: The vision encourages job-embedded professional learning that directly impacts collective teacher practice.

FACT: The foundation of the vision, the Connected Action Roadmap (CAR), is NOT a program. It represents a process for building the key components of effective schools. The process will look different in every school/district depending on decisions made at the local level.

FACT: This vision has been utilized by a number of schools and districts who have been participating in a four-year pilot.

Why a Common Vision and Why Now:

The Connected Action Roadmap is a framework for school improvement that has been embraced by NJ educational organizations for several years. As organizations that represent the educators in the field, we clearly saw the need for a common language and a coherent vision related to the practice of education. The NJDOE has also endorsed the vision and is taking concrete steps to make the vision a reality. Why now?

Over the past several years the actions of educators have been reform driven. Reforms are not in and of themselves bad things. However, as Michael Fullan, points out in his article, "Choosing the Wrong Drivers for Whole System Reform," some policy and strategy levers should not be used as the first step in creating system-wide improvements. Of course we should share accountability and ensure we have effective teachers in every classroom and effective leaders in every school. But let's see how the approach to making this happen across the state could in fact lead to an emphasis on poor lead drivers of change.

Fullan's Right and Wrong Drivers

WRONG: Accountability: In the past several years, New Jersey has seen new standards and a new state-wide assessment – potentially powerful tools to move student learning forward. However, policies can't emphasize new standards and assessments as tools for accountability without supporting schools in making meaningful changes to curriculum, instruction and assessment. If we do so, we ignore the very process that could ensure the accountability for student learning we seek.

RIGHT: Capacity Building: We need to spend time building the capacity of educators to develop, implement, reflect on and revise the curriculum, instruction and assessments they are using every day to ensure students meet the new standards.

WRONG: Individual educator quality: Teacher and leader evaluation reform focused on labeling individual educators on a 4 point scale. Of course evaluation is necessary, but is a label a driver for change in teacher practice?

RIGHT: Teamwork: It makes sense that when a group of teachers can collaborate in effective PLCs and share best practices related to curriculum, instruction and assessment on a regular basis, we not only impact the practice of one teacher, but enhance the instructional capacity of every teacher on the team.

WRONG: Technology drives pedagogy: Providing technology tools to educators is fine but their use alone does not ensure higher levels of student achievement.

RIGHT: Standards and student learning objectives drive deliberate choices in how educators use technology to positively impact student learning. Available technology does not determine learning goals; learning goals determine the choice of technology.

WRONG: Fragmented strategies: "Reforms" are often rolled out for implementation in isolation, thus creat-

ing a sense of being overwhelmed with "things to do or address."

RIGHT: Starting with a coherent vision encourages practitioners to consider the processes and structures that will support continuous growth rather than encouraging the implementation of a myriad of seemingly unrelated initiatives that foster a sense of chaos and confusion.



An Overview of the CAR Framework

The CAR framework represents a systemic approach to building the capacity of educators by developing PLC teams that are focused on curriculum, instruction and assessment. It puts the ownership for instructional decisions back where it belongs – in the hands of the educators who teach our students.

CAR uses an easy-to-remember and easy-to-follow metaphor of a journey. Student learning as the destination, a collaboratively developed, viable curriculum as the map, PLCs as the vehicle, assessments as the guideposts, teacher/principal effectiveness as the drivers, and climate and culture as the terrain.

It is worth repeating: CAR is NOT a program. It is NOT an initiative. CAR is NOT a step-by-step process that says if you just do this you will see student improvement. We have been sold that bill of goods throughout our careers, and it has resulted in an unproductive trend to outsource our professional practice. CAR represents the structures and processes needed to improve schools from within. CAR is an opportunity for schools to shift from a focus on compliance to a focus on practice and to set the foundation for a strong system of curriculum, instruction and assessment.

Understanding the Vision



Let's use an analogy of a journey to understand the CAR vision. Every school is starting from a different location; however, every school is focused on the same **destination**: student learning. The CAR framework uses a set of guiding questions to establish a schoolwide focus on student learning: 1. What do we want students to know? 2. What strategies do students need in order to master the student learning objectives? 3. What instructional activities will help teach students the content, skills, and strategies they need to master the student learning objectives? 4. How do we know when they know it? 5. What do we do if they don't or already do? 6. How can we best address these questions in order to build knowledge, skills, and strategies effectively and consistently across grade levels and content areas?



If we are to reach our destination, we need a **vehicle** to get us there. That vehicle is the professional learning community. It is the job of collaborative teams to answer the guiding questions. The CAR framework outlines 10 specific conversations that PLC teams must have in order to provide the most effective answers to the guiding questions. (See PLC Conversations list on page 7.)



The next tool required for the journey is a **map or GPS**. The answers to the guiding questions make up the curriculum map. This map must include the standards, the agreed-upon specific student learning objectives unpacked from those standards, and the effective instructional plan that will ensure that all students reach the destination by mastering those objectives. Curriculum must be directly related to daily lessons in order to truly drive instructional decisions. This must mean more than just simply putting the standard number on lesson plans and calling it alignment. True alignment comes through PLC discussions regarding the connection between standards, SLOs, instruction, and assessment.



Even if we have a viable map, we also need some **guideposts** along the way like the gas station on the right or the shopping mall on the left. Common formative and summative assessments are educators' guideposts. They allow us to determine on a daily basis if students are getting closer to the destination or if they have veered off in the wrong direction. The elements represented by the circles inside the framework represent the practice of education—PLC teams collaboratively use guiding questions to develop, implement, reflect on, and revise curriculum based on student data.



Notice the perimeter of the framework — **the terrain** on which each school travels — the culture of the school. A school's culture can be the greatest barrier to the collaborative process of enhancing teacher practice and student learning. The culture is made up of three components: the climate, the degree of shared leadership and the effective communication of connections.



Finally, the knowledge, skills, and abilities of teachers and principals are **drivers** on this journey. The more educators engage in conversations related to curriculum, instruction, and assessment, the more effective they become. The more effective they become, the more effective the collaborative process becomes, creating a true cycle of continuous school improvement. Evaluation systems will only be effective in improving learning if both teachers and administrators are engaged in meaningful, ongoing and focused conversations about their practice and student learning.

PLC Conversations

Developing, Delivering, Reflecting on, and Revising a Viable Curriculum

1. Unpack the standards into clear, specific, student-friendly learning objectives.
2. Cluster the student learning objectives into units of study.
3. Create essential questions.
4. Create summative assessments including rubrics, exemplars and non-exemplars.
5. Design pre-assessments to establish the readiness of each student to learn.
6. Design learning experiences including instructional activities, student learning strategies and formative assessments – ALIGNMENT IS KEY.
7. Analyze formative assessment data throughout the unit to drive instructional planning, differentiation and timely interventions.
8. Analyze summative assessment data to monitor student progress, revise unit learning experiences, revise unit assessments, seek targeted professional learning, set goals.
9. Discuss the Career Ready Practices and Social Emotional Learning Competencies and embed them in units of study.
10. Discuss grading philosophy, policies and procedures. Strive for consistency.

Challenging Assumptions

With CAR, educators engage in a process to deepen conversations and develop a viable curriculum that aligns standards, student learning objectives, instructional design, and assessments. CAR challenges some very common long-held assumptions about practice. Without challenging the status quo, schools will never be able to ensure the highest levels of student achievement.

Check out the list of assumptions. Do the educators in your school/district act in ways that show they believe these assumptions to be true? If so, you may want to engage in learning more about CAR and in shifting long-held assumptions in a way that supports our common goal – improved student learning.

Common Assumptions for the Instructional Cycle and Professional Learning

1. Completing a 5-year curriculum review process ensures that the standards are being taught in the classroom with fidelity.
2. If teachers use the curriculum documents created by a small group of teachers over the summer, they should be held responsible for ensuring student growth when students are assessed on the standards.
3. When a principal or supervisor checks lesson plans they can ensure that all components of the instructional cycle are aligned to the standards.
4. There is no problem if each teacher teaching the same grade level and content creates their own lesson objectives.
5. PLCs are effective if they meet regularly, create an agenda, and complete reports on progress toward achieving a goal set by the administration.
6. If school teams and administrators review data from classroom, district, and state assessments, they are engaged in data-driven instruction.
7. Consistently addressing the climate for students ensures a positive learning climate.
8. A congenial staff is a collegial staff.
9. Professional development trainings ensure effective implementation of best practices.

NJDOE and Educational Organizations Take Action Toward the Vision

Currently, talented teams of educators from across the state are working with the NJDOE Office of Standards and Assessment to unpack the ELA and math standards into clear specific learning goals and place them into suggested units of study (the first 2 conversations of the CAR process). Districts could then have teams of teachers build out the units of study by engaging in the rest of the CAR conversations, which are focused on implementing, reflecting on, and revising the curriculum.

Why unpack the standards into clear student learning objectives? What are the potential outcomes of shared SLOs and shared units of study?

1. Alignment: In many schools every teacher creates their own student learning objectives for their daily lessons. How does this ensure that every teacher's objective is well-aligned to the standard? If every teacher in one grade level and/or content area uses different SLOs, how can they collaboratively collect and analyze assessment data?

2. Equity: For years many have looked at our statewide assessments through the lens of creating equity. We cannot assess our way to equity; we teach our way to equity. If every teacher has their own interpretation of a standard, how do we know that students in every district are being taught lesson goals that will support their mastery of a standard? How do we ensure that we have equitable instruction in every classroom in a school building, never mind in every district across the state?

3. Capacity: PLC teams that have regular conversations focused on curriculum, instruction and assessment can enhance the practice of every team member and support the learning of all students in one grade level and or content area. Imagine as a district leader, bringing ELA or math grade level teams together to share best practices related to instruction and assessment of specific SLOs in specific units of study. Imagine having a statewide online platform to share instructional strategies and resources, common formative or summative assessments, successful intervention strategies, etc.

The DOE Instructional Units will not be mandated. This is not an effort in compliance. This is a joint effort to create system-wide change and enhance the potential of every educator in the state to support every student in the state in reaching their greatest potential.

Closing

In closing, I want to thank the DOE and the educational organizations in the state for believing in this vision and for coming together to model collaboration on behalf of our students. We hope we can send educators a different message — not about reform, but refocus — a refocus on the practice of education. Our message is one of process and practice, not programs and compliance. It is my hope that we can continue to work together and to support educators who want to explore the possibilities the CAR vision can have for their own schools and districts.

Please feel free to reach out to me at pwright@njpsa.org for more information.

About the Author



A lifelong educator, Patricia Wright is currently the Executive Director of the New Jersey Principals and Supervisors Association. She has held the positions of teacher, reading specialist, assistant principal, principal, and superintendent. She also served as the chair of the New Jersey Anti-Bullying Task Force and co-authored the New Jersey Bar Foundation's Anti-Bullying Curriculum. She is the developer of the Connected Action Roadmap (CAR), a strategic and collaborative approach to developing a standards-based curriculum that fosters equitable outcomes for students and a comprehensive and coherent model of school improvement. For all of her outstanding achievements, Mrs. Wright was awarded the prestigious Dr. Ernest L. Boyer Outstanding Educator Award by the New Jersey Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (NJASCD) in 2018.

CAR has been endorsed by the New Jersey Department of Education and the Partnership for Collaborative Professional Learning (NJPSA/FEA, NJASA, NJEA, NJSBA, LEARNING FORWARD NJ, NJASCD, EIRC, NJACTE).

