

Putting theory into practice in Metuchen

by Sarah Anderson, Robin Darrah, Laura Fischer and Christina Spring, NJEA members

Dr. Elias' article, "Let's Put Caring into the Common Core," featured in the February issue, provided further confirmation that addressing students' social emotional competence should be the first step in addressing the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). As kindergarten teachers at Moss School in Metuchen, we were initially introduced to this approach by Dr. Elias in September 2012. While enthusiastic about it conceptually, we had the common concern of all educators due to the increased rigor of the CCSS: lack of time. However, we found that by infusing social problem solving and academic problem solving skills found throughout the Common Core, along with supportive leadership, sustained professional development, dedication, and time, our practices and our students' social and academic successes were transformed. With the vision and guidance of our Principal and Director of Curriculum Rick Cohen, we created a developmentally appropriate curriculum called the Common Core Problem Solving Process for the half-day kindergarten program to simultaneously address the academic and social-emotional needs, which 95 percent of teachers believe are beneficial, but 81 percent state they do not have time to consider.

By using the social problem-solving models of Dr. Elias and Dr. Myrna Shure, we threaded six problem-solving steps that were common and integral to both models in order to construct a curricular framework. We then aligned the CCSS and

strategy-based content area instruction to each step. The result was powerful cross-curricular instruction which was manageable and meaningful in various academic and social contexts within the classroom and beyond the walls of the classroom.

As stated by Dr. Elias, "Habits of mind must be linked to habits of heart and connection."

The six Common Core Problem Solving Process Steps we developed and presented to the Metuchen community were:

1. Stop: identify the problem.
2. Gather information to solve your problem, such as events, facts, and background knowledge.
3. Brainstorm multiple solutions.
4. Pick your favorite choice from brainstorming.
5. Go—try out your favorite solution to problem solve.
6. Check if the problem has been solved. If the problem has not been solved, return to an earlier step.

With ongoing support from literacy consultant Deanne Opatosky, we developed a sequence for aligning our strategy-based literacy instruction with the individual steps. We taught each step explicitly through six units, with instruction lasting approximately six weeks per step.

The following are snapshots of how we have incorporated the steps in daily instruction aligned to the CCSS:

1. Stop: The first step is always to stop and define a problem such as, "I don't know this word (RL.K.4), I don't know the meaning (L.K.4), or what this part of the story is about?"(RL.K.1)
2. Gather information: Students gather information to decode unknown words by using reading strategies such as picture clues combined with initial sounds. (RL.K.7 and K.RFS.3)
3. Brainstorm: Students brainstorm solutions to the characters' problems. (RL.K.3) Students can brainstorm different ways to deconstruct and compose numbers. (K.NBT.1)
4. Pick your favorite: After brainstorming writing topics, students can select their favorites to illustrate and compose. (W.K.8) In math, students pick their favorite tools such as counters, unifix cubes, or a number line to solve a problem. (MP5)
5. Go: During literacy centers, students "go," which is the application of the strategy focus such as recording little words they have found in bigger words while "reading the room."(RF.K.3)



Moss School kindergarten teachers Sarah Anderson, Robin Darrah, Laura Fischer and Christina Spring (l-r) have infused social problem solving with academic problem solving.

6. Check: Students check if their word choice makes sense. (RL.K.4) Students use counters to check an addition problem. (K.OA.2)

Subsequently, we provided direct instruction on how to transfer the same six steps to solve problems in social contexts. This process helps increase students' confidence, tolerance, understanding of and caring for others as evidenced in the following examples:

- When two students argued over personal space in the hall, the teacher prompted them to quickly “problem solve.” The pair, without teacher guidance, brainstormed three resolutions and agreed to go to the end of the line to acquire more space.
- A group of students working cooperatively in a literacy center experienced difficulty sharing the available iPads. Without teacher prompting, they utilized the steps and decided to take independent turns.
- “Problem solvers” who are the team leaders/captains help resolve interpersonal issues during physical education classes using the steps.

From our experiences, we learned that everyone, including administrators, teachers, students, and parents, can utilize the same set of problem-solving skills to be applied universally. It has transformed our practices and empowered our students to become autonomous problem solvers in academic and social settings.

You can find Moss School's ELA and math curricula, as well as the Common Core Problem Solving Process on metuchenschools.org. Just click “Our District,” then “Curriculum” and select “Common Core Problem Solving.”

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