

By William J. Bushaw and Valerie J. Calderon

## Try It Again Uncle Sam

The 46th annual PDK/Gallup poll of the public's attitudes toward public schools

Americans aren't convinced that the Common Core and federal involvement will improve education. Is it time to go back to the drawing board for school reform?

**D**eep in this nation's DNA is an abiding belief in personal liberty and freedom, and, for much of our history, these values often have conflicted with national and state policies. In public education, this conflict plays out under the guise of local control; that is, who should be most responsible for the quality of public education? Should it be the local school district, which is typically governed by a board of education; or state authorities, which usually include the governor, state legislature, and a state board of education; or is public education policy ultimately the responsibility of the President and Congress?

A careful reading of the results of the 46th annual PDK/Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools confirms what the data suggested last year: a majority of Americans do not support public education initiatives that they believe were created by or promoted by federal policymakers. For example:

- Over half of Americans (56%) say local school boards should have the greatest influence in deciding what is taught in the public schools.
- Most Americans (60%) oppose the Common Core State Standards, fearing that the standards will limit the flexibility of the teachers in their communities to teach what they think is best.
- Seven of 10 Americans support public charter schools, particularly when they're described as schools that can operate independently and free of regulations.

These findings have serious consequences for this nation's system of public education. Should the federal government reduce its involvement in public education and thus risk a reduced commitment to closing the well-documented achievement gap? Do local and state education leaders have the capacity and resources to transform America's public schools—especially during a time of unprecedented social upheaval, political gridlock, and calls for reform?

### Findings: Common Core State Standards

- Most Americans first heard about the Common Core State Standards from television, newspapers, and radio; far smaller percentages said they learned about the standards through school district communications, such as websites or newsletters, or from teachers and other education professionals.
- 60% of Americans oppose requiring teachers in their community to use the Common Core State Standards to guide what they teach, with opposition among Republicans much higher than Democrats.
- For the 60% of Americans who oppose using the Common Core, their most important reason is that it will limit the flexibility teachers have to teach what they think is best.
- For the 33% of Americans who favor the Common Core, the most important reason is because it will help more students learn what they need to know regardless of where they go to school.
- While most educators believe the new standards are chal-

lenging, 40% of Americans disagree, saying the Common Core State Standards are not challenging enough.

### Findings: Student assessment using standardized tests

- Just over half (54%) of Americans said standardized tests aren't helpful to teachers, and parents feel even more strongly about this. This belief is held uniformly regardless of political affiliation.
- While most Americans (68%) are skeptical that standardized tests help teachers, they support using them to evaluate student achievement or to guide decisions about student placement, particularly to award college credit such as through Advanced Placement exams.

### Findings: International comparisons of student achievement

- Although 70% of Americans were unaware of the most recent release of international comparisons, half said they believed U.S. students ranked lower than students in other nations, and another 46% believed they ranked in the middle. Just 3% believed U.S. students ranked higher than students in other nations. (U.S. students ranked below average in math but posted average results in science and reading.)
- About three of four Americans agree that understanding how students are taught in other countries could help improve schools in their community, but they're less certain that international test comparisons are important in helping improve U.S. schools, and they're unconvinced that test scores used for international comparisons accurately measure student achievement across nations.







# October is Connected Educator Month

In 2012, Arne Duncan and the U.S. Department of Education instituted Connected Educator Month (CEM) to encourage and expand the opportunities for professional learning for teachers through online communities and networks. And this month, millions of educators and others around the world are participating in hundreds of professional development opportunities as part of CEM 2014. CEM offers highly distributed, diverse, and engaging activities to educators at all levels, with the ultimate goal of getting more educators more connected, spurring collaboration and innovation in the space.

The goals of CEM include:

- Getting more educators proficient with social media to improve their practice
- Deepening & sustaining learning among those already enjoying connection's benefits
- Helping schools credential/integrate connected learning into their formal professional development efforts
- Stimulating & supporting innovation in the field

## Secretary Duncan's thoughts on CEM:

Continuous learning and problem solving in online spaces are not only possible, but can also be integral to supporting teaching and school leadership. The month's activities will help many educators become connected for the first time—and will deepen connections for those already learning and collaborating online.



Photo courtesy of United States Department of Education\*

The growing movement of connected educators has a lot of room to expand and mature before it can reach its full potential. But lessons learned from CEM can help guide that work and make online collaborations a more robust part of professional development in the months and years ahead.

The response to Connected Educator Month has been a powerful testament to the hunger of teachers for professional learning and their desire to grow as educators. In its first year alone, a diverse group of 151 organizations offered 455 free online activities and events involving

more than 2,000 speakers and facilitators.

Together, they resulted in well over 90,000 hours of professional development—freely given and freely taken—and this year's CEM is expected to far exceed that number.

Professional learning in online communities has a unique potential to support educators when and where they need it—and it makes way for a more personalized learning opportunity in the context of professional teaching practice.

To be sure, connected educators face some real challenges. From the beginning, the need for more formal support and recognition for online social learning and problem solving has been a common theme. One key step in the right direction would be devising methods for making online professional learning count as legitimate professional development.

I urge schools and districts to come up with creative ways to incorporate these essential activities into their official professional development programs and policies.

Educators and school leaders need to devise smart, evidence-based ways to provide time, credit and credentials for participation, tailored to the ongoing needs of teachers, if online professional learning is going to become part of the norm rather than the exception in professional development. That evolution is key to capitalizing on technology's potential to support not only students as learners but also to fully support each and every teacher, each and every day.

To learn more about participating in CEM 2014, visit [connectededucators.org](http://connectededucators.org).

For Arne Duncan's full statement, visit [smartblog.com](http://smartblog.com).



\* The photo of Secretary Arne Duncan. Licensed under Public domain via Wikimedia Commons: <http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:DuncanArne.jpg#mediaviewer/File:DuncanArne.jpg>

# 7 Foundational Skills for Writing Mastery

**O**ur nation faces a writing crisis. And unless we fix it, we risk a generation of Americans ill prepared for work and society.

We have transitioned to a knowledge-based economy in which communication skills are more important than ever. It's how we inform, explain, argue, persuade, and convey actionable information to others. We interact through tweets, blogs, emails, presentations, and other types of formal and informal writing. Effective communication through these media outlets has become crucial to full participation in economic and social life. Therefore, the alarming decline in writing proficiency constitutes a true crisis.

Research has borne out that there are at least seven foundational skills required for writing mastery. These include:

1. **Handwriting.** Studies have repeatedly shown handwriting instruction and practice to be linked to better letter perception, reading acquisition, word learning, composition, and writing fluency. When handwriting becomes automatic, it reduces cognitive load and allows students to concentrate on idea generation, genre and creative expression.

2. **Spelling.** In addition to mastering letter formation, students must learn how letters work together to form words. Poor spelling negatively impacts a reader's perception of writing quality and can interfere with other writing processes.

3. **Vocabulary development.** A strong vocabulary is critical for both reading comprehension and effective writing. Writers must be able to choose the right words to convey meaning and intention to capture a reader's interest.

4. **Sentence construction.** Effectively using a variety of sentences to convey meaning and emphasis helps keep readers engaged and ensures that the intended audience understands the writer's message.

5. **Writing process.** Multiple studies have demonstrated the importance of explicit instruction in the writing process, including the systematic planning, drafting, revision, editing, and publishing of writing.

6. **Writing strategies.** Students also need specific strategies for each stage of the writing process. These may include brainstorming, outlining, goal setting, and self-evaluation.

7. **Genre knowledge.** Students must be able to apply writing skills across a variety of genres and to write for a variety of purposes.

Instilling these seven foundational skills requires intentional focus in the classroom.

Our national transition to a knowledge-based economy is certain to continue, requiring an increasing level of writing proficiency for workers across all industries and job levels. Giving young students a solid foundation, intervening with older students who struggle, and sharing responsibility for writing across the entire education community can help turn our writing crisis into a writing revolution. ■

Read the full article at: <http://ow.ly/Bpb9P>

**Steve Graham** is the Warner Professor in the Division of Educational Leadership and Innovation in Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College. For close to 30 years, he has studied how writing develops, how to teach it effectively, and how writing can be used to support reading and learning. He is often quoted in national publications regarding writing, handwriting and spelling.





# How We Do It: Success in the Classroom

I am a 7th-grade math teacher at Success Academy Harlem West, a public charter school in New York City. After the well-documented success of our middle school students last year, I heard from people all across the country who want to know exactly what we are doing in the classroom that leads to such tremendous academic achievement.

This year's New York State scores were recently released, and our students again did fantastic: 96 percent of my 7th-grade class for instance, passed the math test, compared to the state average of 34.5 percent, and twice as many passed the reading exam, compared to state-wide averages. Harlem West ranked fifth out of 1,880 other state middle schools in math and 30th in English Language Arts. Essentially, my students—minority kids from disadvantaged neighborhoods—crushed the test and are killing the achievement gap.

While we do many things differently at Success Academy compared with traditional district schools, I want to share just a few that I feel have allowed me and my colleagues to create successful classrooms. I truly believe that each of these components could be easily implemented in every school across the country.

## 1. The Power of an Extended School Day

Our school opens at 7:30 a.m. and dismisses at 5:10 p.m., giving our students 7.5 more hours of classroom time per week than the city's traditional district schools. Those hours add up to 74 extra days per year. By the end of 8th grade, students at Success Academy will have received the equivalent of two additional years of instruction.

However, more important than just extra time is how we use those hours. For me, I am able to plan lessons in which students explore advanced mathematical concepts, practice their skills, and partake in lengthy whole-class discourse. Because we believe that learning should be driven by student thinking, and not by teacher talking, our extended class periods provide the necessary time for students to collaboratively and organically arrive at high-level mathematical conclusions. The same goes for all subjects.

Additionally, I see every day the magic in my students' eyes as they fall in love with science and reading. Our extended school day allows us to teach science five days a week and includes a 50-minute independent reading block

each school day. Deep reading is key, but students also take an elective twice a day, developing their talents and passions in topics like chess, debate, robotics, and theater.

## 2. The Power of Professional Development

My students' success is a direct result of the professional development I receive. My principal has a candid partnership with every teacher in the building. Weekly classroom observations and follow-up appointments allow me to reflect on what went well and also on areas where I can improve. My principal's feedback has been critical to my growth as a teacher.

All Success Academy principals and teachers spend the month leading up to the first day of classes in intensive training sessions. I just finished my third year of this program, and once again, I learned new techniques to better help my students achieve mastery. For me, teaching is a performance art, and extensive practice, feedback, and professional development are essential to be at the top of my game.





### 3. The Power of High-Quality Education

My final point is much less easily quantified, but no less important. It's what drives my colleagues and me to work long hours and make ourselves available by phone or in-person to parents and students well after school hours and on the weekends.

In our view, teachers are tasked with arguably the most important public service in the country. We look upon our work as every bit as urgent as that of doctors or firefighters. The lives we tend to are just as dear, just as precious, and failure to help our students live up to their potential is just as tragic as a lost life.

In neighborhoods like Harlem, the power of a high-quality education can be transformative. It can literally save lives and build futures. It is the one true ticket to pursuing and realizing the American Dream. Three out of four of my students are poor or "low-income." They have none of the advantages my friends and I had growing up, yet they are every bit as deserving. A world-class education is their lifeline to opportunity and a better life.

I may not be skilled enough to set a broken leg or brave enough to carry a person from a burning building, but I, like my colleagues, can work to inspire a teenager to believe in his own potential, to see that her future depends on hard work and perseverance, to teach them the math they will need in high school and beyond. At Success Academy Harlem West, the flexible and supportive school structure allows me to teach math—and possibility. ■

This article originally appeared on [eSchoolNews.com](http://eSchoolNews.com).



**Nicholas Simmons** is a 7th-Grade Math Teacher, Success Academy Charter Schools.

# Pumpkins, Pumpkins Everywhere!

Lesson Plan Ideas for all Subjects Brought to you by Scholastic

Take them off the front porch and put them to work in the classroom!

#### Language Arts:

##### The Silliest Pumpkin Story Ever

**What to do:** Prepare an autumn storytelling bag by filling a pillowcase with nature finds, classroom items, clothing or accessories, plus one small pumpkin. Make sure there is at least one prop for each child. Have students pull out a prop, and weave that item into a group story.

##### Art: If Picasso Had Used a Pumpkin

**What to do:** Divide students into teams & give each group brushes, paints, a pumpkin, and a reproduction of a famous painting. Provide a wide variety of styles from different time periods. Encourage groups to discuss what they notice about each painting. Ask students to think about the colors used, the look of the brush strokes, the feeling of the piece, and whether it is abstract or not. Remind them that their goal is not to copy the image onto the pumpkin, but rather to capture the style on their pumpkin art. When finished, create a gallery featuring the pumpkins and the masterpieces that inspired them.

##### Social Studies: Roll That Pumpkin!

**What to do:** In Colonial times, children would challenge their friends to pumpkin rolling races. Players used large wooden spoons to roll their pumpkins to the finish line. Play the game with your students using a chair to mark the starting line and a large spoon or broom. No carrying allowed. Use this to launch a discussion about the games children played in Colonial times.

#### Math: Seed Sense

**What to do:** Display pumpkins of various sizes in the classroom. Working in groups, have students collect data on the weight, height, and circumference of each pumpkin. Ask students to estimate the number of seeds in each pumpkin & record their guesses on a sheet of paper along with their names. Then hold a "Counting Day" to tally, record, & report the number of seeds. As a fun treat, let the student whose guess is closest take home that pumpkin.

#### Science: Pumpkin Petri Dishes

**What to do:** Cut two pie pumpkins in half. Place each half in a plastic bag that is mostly closed to remain moist but still allowed to breathe. Set one bag in a sunny spot, one in a shady spot, one in the refrigerator, and one in a location of the students' choosing. Have students predict which will grow the most mold over the course of the experiment. Examine the pumpkin halves every day and have students record their observations. Then ask students: Where is the best place to keep a jack-o-lantern?

#### Language Arts: Ode to a Pumpkin

**What to do:** Fill the classroom with pumpkins of all shapes and sizes & invite students to observe them using all five senses. Ask students to write down as many descriptive words as possible. On pumpkin-shaped paper, have students write pumpkin poems using those words. Create a "pumpkin patch of poetry" board so the whole class can enjoy their work. ■



**The Association of American Educators Foundation**  
 27405 Puerta Real, Suite 230  
 Mission Viejo, CA 92691-6388

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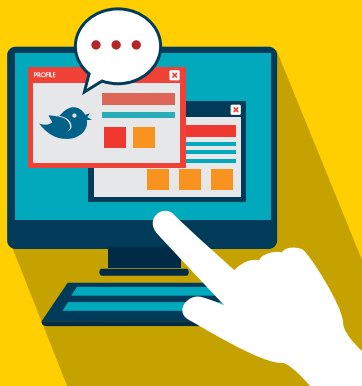
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- To be a part of a nationwide teacher support network

When AAE members like you join the conversation, everybody wins.



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