



August 23, 2011

Dear Colleagues,

Over the last few months, Chancellor Walcott and Chief Academic Officer Suransky have spoken to you about the importance of ensuring “that all of our students are engaged in cognitively demanding learning experiences.” We believe that a demanding curriculum and increased participation in school-wide activities will enable English language learners and students with disabilities to reach higher levels of achievement. By focusing on the needs of individual students and identifying strategic opportunities for them to access the general education curriculum, we can help all students excel.

We know that English language learners and students with disabilities are making gains. However, we must continue to raise our expectations and provide them with high quality instruction, interventions, and supports that will result in far greater numbers of high school graduates who are ready to successfully participate in post-secondary education, careers, and independent living. Together, we can ensure that all of our students are able to meet the academic demands of the Common Core Learning Standards.

### ***What does this mean for English language learners?***

English language learners succeed in school when we provide them with grade-level materials and instructional opportunities that build on their prior experiences and allow for purposeful use of the native language. Therefore, teachers should continue to employ effective scaffolded instruction based on the individual strengths and needs of the students, including: pre-teaching key vocabulary, providing graphic organizers, and giving students opportunities to discuss what they are learning with their peers. One should activate students’ prior knowledge to help them in their critical thinking, content development, and to exceed their current proficiency. Moreover, a school’s organizational and instructional planning process must take into account that English language learners have distinct instructional needs. For example, newcomers may have emerging English literacy skills, while students with interrupted formal education come with significant gaps in their education. The unique instructional challenges posed by these student populations require thoughtful and purposeful planning. In many instances, students may require additional time to acquire the necessary skills; it is important to remember that a student’s native language serves as a resource and as an important tool for expanding his or her knowledge and language acquisition.

### ***What does this mean for students with disabilities?***

We have recently begun a system-wide reform of special education to ensure that students with disabilities have access to and participate in the general education curriculum. The focus is now on creating higher expectations for learning and achievement, integration into general education classrooms, and increased interactions with non-disabled peers. We are paying increased attention to how to best enable students with disabilities to be full participants in school and society. The role of special education is to “minimize the impact of the disability and maximize the opportunities for participation” (Hehir, 2005). We are taking bold steps to alter the view that students with disabilities are less capable. The individualized educational programming process gives us insight into how we can maximize the potential for each student in academic and behavioral instruction and assessment.

To ensure that all students, including students with disabilities, benefit from our academically rigorous instruction, we are applying a research-based framework called Universal Design for Learning (UDL), which recognizes that every student learns differently. All students will benefit from instruction that creates options for how information is presented, how students express their ideas, and how teachers can engage students in learning. For example, teachers can present a concept using text, a chart, a video clip, or computer software. Students will be able to break down tasks into shorter term goals and express their learning in a variety of ways including graphic organization, manipulatives, or interactive web tools. Teachers can engage students by allowing choice in high interest topics.

***What does this mean for all students?***

The work on the Common Core Learning Standards, across all of our schools, will undoubtedly help to narrow the achievement gap for English language learners and students with disabilities. We look forward to learning from you and supporting you by offering targeted professional development opportunities beginning this summer. We will also provide guidance documents on English language learners and students with disabilities, information on how UDL can be incorporated in the Common Core Learning Standards tasks, and tools to help you use UDL in your lesson planning. Please visit the [Common Core Library](#) to explore these resources. Thank you for your leadership and advocacy on behalf of all of our students.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Laura Rodriguez".

Laura Rodriguez  
Deputy Chancellor