

The March for our Lives: Bringing Power and Authenticity to the Language and Literacy Standards

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Regardless of political views, many applauded the young teen and pre-teen leaders of the March for our Lives, held on March 24th, 2018, in Washington, DC and at sister rallies throughout the world. Even those who may disagree with the students' viewpoints recognized their right to free speech as enshrined in the Constitution. However, few acknowledged the student speeches as aligned to a more recent document that governs their PreK-12 education: the College and Career-Ready standards (adopted as the Common Core State Standards, or CCSS, in many states) (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers 2010). Yet for three hours, interspersed with entertainers such as Jennifer Hudson and Lin-Manuel Miranda, the students, all under 18 years of age, gave powerful speeches through reverberating microphones, over chants, with a daunting view of hundreds of thousands of people, across an intimidating corridor of stately museums and federal buildings that stretch to the White House. The language and literacy demands of the assignment were high.

The March for our Lives was the ultimate test of argumentation skills, which along with non-fiction text, was one of the biggest shifts in the CCSS (Duguay et. al., 2013). Teachers who give argumentation tasks are not meant to evaluate the politics of the opinion, but rather the soundness of the argument. In fact, when assigning a debate or event such as Model UN, educators often purposefully assign students to support a side that is antithetical to their true opinions in order to measure how effectively the learners build evidence to support their case. However, educators do not always have the tools to analyze argumentation. Argumentation is defined as "a claim and the evidence used to support or refute that claim" (Quinn, Lee & Valdés, 2012). More elaborate models of argumentation, such as the Toulmin (1958) model, outline the various negotiations that might take place, including

- claims,
- evidence,
- warrants (explaining how the evidence backs the claim),
- backings to support the warrants, and
- rebuttals or counterclaims.

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Each of these features of argumentation require sophisticated language and literacy skills, which are peppered throughout the CCSS (von Lier & Walqui, 2012), asking students to read and interpret content materials, develop a point of view, use text-based evidence to support that point of view, and then communicate it both orally and in writing. With minimal time for preparation (only 48 hours in at least one case), a diversity of K-12 students from across the nation took the stage one after another with poise to stake claims, cite evidence, provide details on their views, and capture their audience.

Students' speeches stirred the nation, and their ability to deliver their positions with organized reasoning and detail demonstrate mastery of the skill of argumentation.

Take [an eleven-year-old](#), who coordinated a school walk-out in her home city of Alexandria, Virginia (Nirappil, 2018). This pre-teen was frustrated that elementary schools were not overtly invited to participate and she and her best friend organized a walk-out for 17 minutes, to recognize the 14 students and three teachers who died at Parkland High School, FL, on February 14th, 2018. However, unlike at other schools, these elementary school students added a minute for a Black student who was killed in her school in Alabama on March 7th, calling attention to the fact that girls of color are disproportionately affected by violence and yet too often forgotten in our national conscience. In Virginia, where these two students attend school, the Standards of Learning (SOLs) introduced in 5th grade expect students to:

- “effectively use verbal and nonverbal communication skills to plan and deliver collaborative and individual, formal and informal interactive presentations” (Communication and Multimodal Literacy, 5.2a);
- “organize content sequentially around major ideas” (Communication and Multimodal Literacy, 5.2c); and
- “clearly state a position including supporting reasons and evidence to persuade the intended audience” (Writing, 5.7h) (Commonwealth of Virginia Board of Education, 2017).

The eleven-year-old student’s speech was organized around a central theme regarding the media’s exclusion of girls and women of color and was skillfully delivered with smiles and effective pauses reacting to the roar of a response she received from the crowd. Both the content of her speech and its delivery demonstrate her skills with verbal and nonverbal communication to connect with her audience. Her speech brings authenticity to these SOLs.

Another student activist who lent authenticity to the standards is a [seventeen-year-old high school student](#) from South Los Angeles, who delivered a stirring call to action against violence in our nation’s streets (Hansen, 2018). In Spanish and English, she punctuated her speech with details about what it feels like to “duck from bullets before I learned how to read” and to “see the melanin on your brother’s skin turn gray”, meeting the California writing standard to “develop the topic thoroughly...[with] concrete details and examples appropriate to the audience’s knowledge of the

topic” (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12-2.B). She recounted how she not only lost a brother to violence, but then “also lost my mother, my sister and myself to that trauma and that anxiety”.

Collaboration and argumentation are dynamic tools for change.

At the upper high school grades, the Common Core speaking standard requires students to “present information, findings, and supporting evidence, conveying a clear and distinct perspective, such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning, alternative or opposing perspectives are addressed and the organization, development, substance and style are appropriate to the purpose, audience, and a range of formal and informal tasks” (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.4). This South Los Angeles high school student met these standards by addressing calls to add more armed police on school campuses and by offering a counter-argument that police are more likely to “profile and criminalize” students of color. Furthermore, she exceeds the standards by drawing on her own experiences with street violence, offering a “distinct perspective” that is unfortunately drawn from her own family tragedy.

Also leading through family tragedy is a District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) [seventeen-year-old high school student](#) who lost his twin brother to violence in our nation’s capital, violence which he and his school community experience all too often (Lang, 2018). The seventeen-year-old student told the crowd he was addressing that in addition to losing his brother, his school lost another student to gun violence, and in addition, four others under age 19 died by gun violence in DC during the same school year. With a shaky yet determined voice, this DCPS student situated gun violence as not just school shootings, but “every day in our communities”. After the march, he and his family, as well as his classmates planned to draft and promote proposed legislative changes in honor of his brother. Lifting the standards from a static document to a dynamic tool for change, drafting the legislation will require students to:

- “conduct short as well as more sustained research projects to answer a question or solve a problem” (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.11-12.7);
- “draw evidence from informational texts to support analysis, reflection and research” (CCSS-ELA-LITERACY.WHST.11-12.9); and
- “write arguments focused on discipline-specific content” (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.11-12.1).

As a final example of the real-world application of the CCSS standards, take a [Florida high school student](#) already well-known for her activism on social media, in speeches, and through interviews with various outlets on television and radio (Aratani, 2018). Knowing how to negotiate meaning in each media format is a sophisticated skill, making what the Language Arts Florida Standards (LAFS) call “strategic use of digital media” (Florida Department of Education, 2010). Where the LAFS ask students to “respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives” and “resolve contradictions when possible” (LAFS.112.SL.1), this Florida high school student has also had to engage in counter-arguments based on attacks on her character and viewpoints in the past few weeks. At the March for

our Lives, she used a device of repetition; while reading the names of the fallen students from her high school along with activities or people they would never again enjoy, she emphasized all that they “would never”. She proved that nonverbal communication can also capture an audience by pausing for a period of several minutes to mark the time that the shooter was at work in her school. A few in the audience gave shouts of support to continue with her speech, but her tearful and intentional silence carried across Pennsylvania Avenue and spoke louder than any words. When words failed her, she was able to connect with her audience in the deepest way, with a “point of emphasis” (LAFS.1112.SL.1.3) that was deafening.

Any parent or youth coach knows that children and teenagers have natural argumentation skills. While argumentation takes on many forms across disciplinary areas in terms of what constitutes evidence and what types of claims are valid (Wright & Duguay, 2014), teachers often struggle with finding authentic assignments and ways to measure students’ natural argumentation skills.

The sheer planning of the March for our Lives, which was student-led, required students to meet the standard to “work with peers to promote civil, democratic discussions and decision-making, set clear goals and deadlines, and establish individual roles as needed” (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.SL.1), all within a five-week timeframe. By connecting their safe schools movement with more established groups advocating for safe neighborhoods, such as Black Lives Matter, the students challenged their own thinking and promoted “divergent and creative perspectives” (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.1.C) as showcased through their lineup of inclusive speakers. With a high-stakes event that tested their collaboration and argumentation skills, the student leaders passed any measure to demonstrate that they are not only college and career-ready, but also community-driven.

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The Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL) is a non-profit organization founded in 1959. Headquartered in Washington DC, CAL has earned an international reputation for its contributions to the fields of bilingual and dual language education, English as a second language, world languages education, language policy, assessment, immigrant and refugee integration, literacy, dialect studies, and the education of linguistically and culturally diverse adults and children. The mission of the Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL) is to promote language learning and cultural understanding by serving as a trusted resource for research, services, and policy analysis. Through its work, CAL seeks solutions to issues involving language and culture as they relate to access and equity in education and society around the globe.

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