A CAUTIONARY NOTE ABOUT UNPACKING, UNWRAPPING, AND/OR DECONSTRUCTING THE KANSAS COMMON CORE STANDARDS

Although involving educators in a process of close reading and interpretation of the Kansas Common Core Standards can be a wise and productive activity, we must guard ourselves against the misapplication of such activities and the potential unintended consequences that may result.

For the following reasons, the Kansas State Department of Education (KSDE) cautions educators against an overreliance on unpacking, unwrapping, or deconstructing (henceforth "unpacking") the Standards:

- Much of the content and conceptual understanding conveyed by the Standards exist not in the standard statements themselves but rather in the ancillary materials included with the Standards (e.g., the preface, the sidebars, the glossary, the appendices, etc.);
- "Unpacking" often results in a checklist of discrete skills and a fostering of skill-and-drill instruction that can fragment and isolate student learning in such a way that conceptual understanding, higher order thinking, cohesion, and synergy are made more difficult; and
- Distributing the *product* of "unpacking" to educators who were not directly involved in the *process* of "unpacking" can often compound confusion rather than offering clarity.

Each of the reasons above is explained in greater detail in the paragraphs that follow. KSDE encourages all educators to establish a clear purpose and guiding vision prior to beginning any "unpacking" work and to revisit that purpose and vision often if the *products* of that work are to be shared with others.

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The Common Core Standards were created under the mantra of being "fewer, clearer, and higher." To achieve a set of standards that are "fewer" in number than previous standards, more of the content and understanding being communicated has been moved outside of the individual standard statements themselves and into other portions of the document (e.g., the preface, the sidebars, the glossary, the appendices, etc.). Typically, "unpacking" focuses upon the individual standard statements themselves and not upon the ancillary information included alongside the standard statement. This practice has the potential to produce a final product that is incomplete and insufficient when it comes to the Kansas Common Core Standards as important information will be omitted from the "unpacking."

For example, within the English language arts and literacy standards, many of the individual standard statements in the language strand are marked with an asterisk to identify the fact that

these are "skills and understandings that are particularly likely to require continued attention in higher grades." However, in some instances, those standards are not explicitly stated in the higher grades. Educators must pay close attention to these kinds of tangential details to ensure their instruction matches the intent of the Standards. "Unpacking" may obscure that intent and, therefore, inadvertently suppress the level of student learning necessary to reach the Standards.

Additionally, in mathematics there are the Standards for Mathematical Practice found at the front of the Standards document. These practices are intended to underlie all instruction in mathematics, but if one focuses only on the standard statements very little direct evidence of them can be found. Also, the first page at each grade level (K-8) identifies a series of “Critical Areas” that are to be used as the broad ideas on which to plan all instruction around at that grade. These are based on, and taken largely from, the Focal Points document created by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM), and they tie into the work that has been done and continues to be done by NCTM to improve mathematics education. A focus on the standards statements will find no reference to these and will miss a large part of the instructional impact intended with the new Standards.

The manner in which these Standards were constructed—with an emphasis on reducing the overall number of standard statements—has resulted in a document where large quantities of important information are contained outside of the standard statements. "Unpacking" these Standards may result in an incomplete picture of the relevant details necessary to understand their intent and implicit implications they hold for instruction.

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Too often, the process of "unpacking" is engaged in an attempt to isolate the specific foundational or prerequisite skills necessary to be successful with the ideas conveyed by the overall standard and is a common precursor to test preparation and reductive teaching. Although this process may be important work in some instances and can certainly be enlightening, it also poses substantial problems if those completing the work never take the time to examine the synergy that can be created when those foundational or prerequisite skills are reassembled into a cohesive whole. Metaphorically speaking, "unpacking" often leads educators to concentrate on the trees at the expense of the forest. It is the relationships among the trees—their interdependence and environment—that defines the forest. To simply call a forest a collection of trees would be a very narrow vision of what a forest really is. The Kansas Common Core Standards operate in a very similar fashion.

Often times, the individual prerequisite and foundational skills contained within a single standard statement work together to prompt higher order thinking and reasoning, problem solving, and critical and creative thought. This synergy often leads to the standard statement being greater than the sum of its individual parts. Additionally, these Standards are built upon an integrated

model of student learning where individual standard statement often comment on, contribute to, and help to solidify the learning addressed in other standard statements. Examples of this kind of integrated learning can be found in both the mathematics standards and the standards for English language arts and literacy.

For example, in mathematics the Standards for Mathematical Practice articulate essential ideas that cut across individual standard statements. So, regardless of which individual standard statement is being explored, multiple mathematical practices may be incorporated, reinforced, and refined. For example, consider the domain of Geometry at the 8th grade level. If we look at the first cluster in that domain, we find the following statement: "Understand congruence and similarity using physical models, transparencies, or geometry software." The standards below this cluster list a series of very specific facts that students are expected to know. However, when we consider these with the Standards for Mathematical Practice, we can see that these standards form the foundation for formal proof at the high school level and that students should be “construct(ing) viable arguments” as well as “model(ing) with mathematics” as they learn these concepts. The integrated learning endorsed by these Standards could be undone by educators misapplying the concept of "unpacking."

Likewise, in English language arts and literacy the integrated model of literacy in which the four strands of reading, writing, speaking and listening, and language are woven together also reflects this concept within the Standards. Individual standard statements from one strand often comment on standards from another strand. For example, writing standard #9 asks students to draw evidence from what they read and apply that evidence to their writing. Similarly, language standard #1 asks students to apply their knowledge of conventions to both their writing and speaking. Again, the interwoven nature of these standards is one of their clear strengths; "unpacking" may threaten that strength. As 2010 National Teacher of the Year Sarah Brown Wessling has described, the Common Core Standards should not be viewed as a checklist of skills but rather as a kind of a topographical map that reveals the "lay of the land" of what we teach.

This integrated nature of the Standards is an essential element of their creation. The intentional design of the Kansas Common Core Standards serves to stimulate these kinds of cross-curricular, cross-grade-level connections that facilitate this kind of learning. "Unpacking" may, in some instances, serve to undo the natural integration these Standards endorse. Intensifying this idea is the fact that an individual Common Core Standard is of a much larger granular size (i.e., it covers far more intellectual ground) than a previous standard. This larger granular size can exacerbate the problems of "unpacking." Because these Kansas Common Core Standards are larger in scope than previous standards, they often cover a far greater number of foundational or prerequisite skills. The process of "unpacking," then, can oversimplify the content and intent of the Kansas Common Core Standard and lead educators down a fruitless path in terms of cultivating the kind of holistic, integrated learning the Standards embrace.

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As a *process,* there is certainly power and potential for professional learning in "unpacking" the Kansas Common Core Standards. However, "unpacking"—at best—is only a small part of the professional learning that is necessary and, in fact, is an activity better suited nearer to the end of that professional learning rather than the beginning. In short, "unpacking" activities are not a replacement for professional learning opportunities to read closely and recursively to digest the ideas contained within the Standards. Nor are these activities a replacement for giving classroom teachers the time and space to explore these standards and construct collaboratively the kinds of instructional activities that will lead to student success.

If "unpacking" is to be successful, it needs to be done by all educators within a system, not by a select few. The focus must remain, at all times, on the *process* of "unpacking" and not on the *product*. Grave danger exists in sharing the *product* of "unpacking" with educators not involved in the *process*, particularly in sharing those *products* with educators still in the early stages of learning about the Standards. In many instances, "unpacking" will produce a document that is far longer and more complicated that the Standards documents themselves. Not only do these *products* have the potential to confuse and frustrate educators new to the Standards, but they are often seen as a kind of "shortcut" to the close and recursive reading of the Standards document necessary for deep understanding. In an effort to provide professional learning on the Standards, sharing a *product* of "unpacking" may have the opposite effect; it may only serve to undermine the deep understanding these Standards require and the corresponding changes in instruction our students need and deserve.

MORE PRODUCTIVE ALTERNATIVES TO "UNPACKING"

Again, "unpacking" certainly has its benefits and its place in helping educators to understand and approach the Kansas Common Core Standards. However, "unpacking" cannot be successful—and may actually be counterproductive—if educators attempt to "unpack" before they have a deep understanding of the Standards as a whole. "Unpacking" is not a place to start in creating this deep understanding.

As alternatives to "unpacking" KSDE suggests the following possible endeavors:

- Classroom teachers of all content areas need time, space, and resources to begin to digest and interpret the Standards into language and examples that make sense to them. Professional learning opportunities could be created to facilitate classroom teachers creating documents similar to the examples of this work from North Carolina:
    - Math example: http://www.ncpublicschools.org/docs/acre/standards/common-core-tools/unpacking/math/8th.pdf
    - ELA/Literacy example: http://www.ncpublicschools.org/docs/acre/standards/common-core-tools/unpacking/ela/7.pdf
- Focus on implementing the instructional practices endorsed by the Kansas Common Core Standards. Allow classroom teachers of all content areas the professional learning opportunity to share their experiences with and research into these instructional

practices with one another, sharing and building their own expertise. These instructional practices are outlined as the Standards for Mathematical Practice on page 6 of the math Standards document and are outlined in the Publisher's Criteria documents for English language arts and literacy:

  - Publisher's Criteria Grades K-2: http://www.ksde.org/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=SdyB0m62iYI%3d&tabid=4778&mid=11623
  - Publisher's Criteria Grades 3-12: http://www.ksde.org/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=aIHZUQzWGKI%3d&tabid=4778&mid=11623

- Have classroom teachers of all content areas collaborate to create teacher observation tools (e.g., rubrics, checklists, review forms) that address the Kansas Common Core Standards and then provide time for them to visit one another's classrooms to observe the teaching of a colleague. With the help of these tools, classroom teachers can dialogue about what was seen, strengths, and areas for advancement. Examples of such teacher observation tools are forth-coming from Student Achievement Partners (the not-for-profit formed by the lead writers of the Standards) at the following URL: www.achievethecore.org
- Have classroom teachers of all content areas identify and focus on major topic shifts before or instead of the dissecting the details in Kansas Common Core Standards. Covering the major topics in depth and in a meaningful way IS the focus of Standards, rather than focusing on small discrete skills. One such tool that might be helpful in this endeavor is the Surveys of Enacted Curriculum's (SEC) Content Analysis Tool: www.seconline.org Information on using the SEC Content Analysis Tool can be found on the Resources pages of the Kansas Common Core Standards website at the following URL: www.ksde.org/kscommoncore