



UNDERSTANDING THE COMMON CORE STANDARDS:

What they are — What they are not

OCTOBER 2013 | VERSION 1.0

National School Boards Association



Center for Public Education

Understanding the Common Core Standards

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Whether or not states should share a common set of standards is a legitimate and important debate for states and communities. This brief is written to help ensure that the debate is based on good information about what the Common Core standards are and what they are not.

I. What are the Common Core State Standards?

The Common Core standards establish grade-level expectations in math and English language arts (ELA) for K-12 students. The standards are aligned with college and work expectations, based on evidence and research, and internationally benchmarked so that all students are prepared to succeed in our global economy and society.

The Common Core is not a curriculum. As a set of standards, the Common Core describes the knowledge and skills students are expected to develop but does not prescribe how to teach them. The latter is the job of curriculum — that is, the courses, texts, topics, lesson plans, etc. that are taught — which continues to be determined at the state and local levels.

The Common Core states agreed to adopt the standards in their entirety. The authors estimate that the Common Core should represent about 85 percent of

the total mathematics and ELA content taught to K-12 students, leaving 15 percent for state and local additions.

As of this writing, nearly every state has adopted the Common Core. However, a handful are experiencing second thoughts, either because of a change in political leadership or a response to emerging grassroots pushback.

The full set of Common Core standards is publicly available [here](#).

2. What's different about the Common Core?

While there is a lot of familiar content in the standards, there are key differences, especially in the amount of attention paid to high-level skills like thinking critically, applying concepts learned, communicating well, and using evidence, including data, beginning in the early grades.

OTHER DISTINCTIONS:

- The Common Core ELA standards assume that reading and writing will not be the exclusive responsibility of English teachers, but will be taught across subjects. In addition to standards for English classrooms, the standards define specific reading and writing standards for history/social studies, science, and technical subjects at the middle- and high-school levels.
- Mathematical practices are incorporated at every grade level as is the ability to reason and communicate mathematically. Below is an example from 4th grade math. The “before” was taken from a recently administered [state assessment](#); the “after” is a sample [Common Core item](#). Both assess rounding.

Before and After Common Core

BEFORE Common Core

Which of the following numbers will round to 26?

- a) 25.3
- b) 25.5
- c) 26.7
- d) 27.1

AFTER Common Core

CAPACITY OF DIFFERENT BASEBALL STADIUMS

San Francisco Giants' stadium:	41,915 seats
Washington National's stadium:	41,888 seats
San Diego Padres' stadium:	42,445 seats

Jeff said, “I get the same number when I round all three numbers of seats in these stadiums.”

Sara said, “When I round them, I get the same number for two of the stadiums but a different number for the other stadium.”

Can Jeff and Sara both be correct? Explain how you know.

Both of these items show whether 4th graders understand basic rules of rounding. However, the second raises the ante by further asking students to reason mathematically, critique the reasoning of others and communicate their response. It also demonstrates that some math problems can have more than one right answer. More sample Common Core items can be viewed [here](#) and [here](#).

3. How were the Common Core standards developed?

The effort to draft common standards was launched in 2009. NGA and CCSSO led the initiative with the guidance of an advisory group including experts from [Achieve, Inc.](#), a bipartisan, nonprofit organization that helps states raise academic standards; ACT, Inc.; the College Board; the National Association of State Boards of Education; and the State Higher Education Executive Officers Association. The standards development was privately funded with major support from the [Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation](#) and other foundations. No federal dollars or officials were involved.

The standards were drafted by working groups of experts aided by feedback groups including scholars, researchers, teachers and assessment experts (see full list [here](#)). Two drafts of the standards were made available for public review in which nearly 10,000 comments were received and considered.

4. What about other subjects?

The Common Core standards address math and English language arts only. A similar but separate effort to draft science and engineering standards was launched in 2011 under the leadership of Achieve, Inc., in partnership with the National Research Council, the National Science Teachers Association, and the American Association for the Advancement of Science. Twenty-six “lead states” provided feedback. Major funding was provided by the [Carnegie Corporation of New York](#) and other private funders. Neither CCSSO nor NGA were involved.

Like the Common Core, the [Next Generation Science](#) standards are aimed at college and career-readiness. The final standards were released in 2013, and at this writing, seven states have adopted them: California, Delaware, Kansas, Kentucky, Maryland, Rhode Island, and Vermont.

5. What role does the federal government play?

While the federal government was not involved in developing the Common Core standards, it has supported the effort in other ways. The U.S. Department of Education encouraged the adoption of “college- and career-ready standards” and aligned assessments in state applications for [Race to the Top funds](#) (RTT). To earn points, the standards needed to be “common to a significant number of states” or approved by a “state network of institutions of higher education” who would certify that state standards are college- and career-ready. States meeting this criterion could earn a possible 70 out of 500 total points. At least 40 states applied for the competitive RTTT grants; to date 19 states have received them.

Similar provisions were built into applications for [NCLB waivers](#). Neither RTTT nor NCLB waivers explicitly calls for the Common Core standards. (Virginia, for example, has its own state standards and received a waiver.) However, adopting the Common Core clearly gave states an easy way to earn college- and career-ready points.

The Department is also the main source of funding for the development of Common Core assessments. In September 2010, the Department awarded a combined \$346 million to two state

consortia to design and field-test “next generation” assessments aligned to the new standards. The first, the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College & Careers ([PARCC](#)) includes 18 states and the District of Columbia and is headed by Achieve, Inc., which was also a key player in drafting the standards. The second, the 25-state [SMARTER Balanced Assessment Consortium](#), is headquartered at the Washington state department of education. Both consortia expect to deliver the first assessments in 2014-15.

6. Why is there pushback and who is pushing?

Opposition to the standards unites two groups that generally don't find themselves on the same side of an issue. On one hand, Tea Party and libertarian critics disapprove of the idea of national standards in the belief that educational decisions are rightfully made by parents and local communities. On the other are progressive educators, such as [Diane Ravitch](#) and [FairTest](#), and some [parents](#) who believe the Common Core will impose more test-driven accountability on classrooms and open the door to corporate influence over education. While both groups offer valid perspectives for public debate, they are also the source of a lot of misinformation about how the standards were developed, their quality and effect.

The Tea Party backlash seems to be the most visible. A recent [Politico article](#) identified some of the major think tanks boosting the anti-common core surge, notably the [Pioneer Institute](#), the [American Principles Project](#), and the [Heartland Institute](#), as well as grassroots organizations representing parents, including the [Family Research Council](#) and the [Home School Defense Fund](#). Conservative media personalities

[Michelle Malkin](#) and [Glenn Beck](#) have also weighed in to condemn what they see as leftist indoctrination in the initiative.

The progressive educators' pushback is unusual in that both teachers unions are on record supporting the Common Core. However, the critics within their ranks are concerned that the new standards will constrict teaching to test prep, and many also see a heavy [corporate hand](#) in the standards' promotion. Both the progressive and libertarian opponents have inspired a parent movement to "[opt out](#)" of Common Core testing.

Pushback notwithstanding, a recent [Gallup poll](#) shows that most Americans — nearly two-thirds — have not even heard of the Common Core standards. Of those few who have, a plurality say the standards will make the country more competitive (41 percent say the effect will be "more competitive" vs. 21 percent who say "less"). Other surveys show that most teachers have a favorable view of the Common Core standards' content. (For example, see surveys by [Education Week](#) and [NEA](#).) But across the board, teachers worry whether there will be enough support for them and their students to make the shift.

7. What challenges will local school districts face in their attempts to implement the Common Core?

A lot! Let's begin with:

- **Timeline.** The first PARCC and SMARTER assessments will be ready for administration in 2014-15. That's not a lot of time to get ready. Earlier this year, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) asked for a [moratorium](#) on accountability measures attached to the standards in order to allow schools more time for implementation and field-testing. The National School Boards Association ([NSBA](#)) has also called for a delay alongside national associations for superintendents and school principals in order to ensure teachers are sufficiently prepared to teach the new standards. In June 2013, the [U.S. Department of Education](#) allowed Common Core states with NCLB waivers an extra year before teacher evaluations count. Other states are considering more hearings and postponements in recognition of the fast approaching deadline.
- **Technology needs.** The “next generation” assessments being developed will be computer administered in order to take full advantage of technology's capacity to offer rich, high-level test items without breaking the bank. But most states report that schools need more computers and more bandwidth in order to accommodate the new tests.
- **Professional development for staff.** Districts need to make sure their teachers have enough support to realign their instruction to new, higher standards.
- **New curriculum and instructional materials.** Schools will need to invest in new curricular materials aligned to the Common Core and for staff time to develop new lesson plans.
- **Managing expectations.** A [Fordham Foundation](#) analysis found that the Common Core standards were more rigorous than the current standards in 37 states in ELA and 39 states in math. Most districts should, therefore, expect their first scores to be lower than what their communities are used to seeing. This could be a public relations disaster for districts if the public isn't well-prepared ahead of time. Kentucky was the first to test its students on the Common Core, and as expected, scores dropped significantly. However, state officials and school leaders — including the Kentucky School Boards Association — were very effective at getting the word out ahead of time and gaining public support for higher standards. As a result, there was little panic in the commonwealth when the test scores were announced.

I heard that the Common Core ...

There is a lot of misinformation being reported about the Common Core. Here is just a sample:

The common core will push out classic literature.

The ELA authors recommend that reading at the high school level comprise 70 percent non-fiction and 30 percent fiction texts. Some critics interpret this to mean students will not read much literature. If English teachers were the only ones responsible for reading assignments, this could be a problem. However, the authors expect reading and writing to be taught across subjects, leaving plenty of time for literature in the English classroom.

Schools will no longer teach cursive writing.

It's true that cursive is not addressed in the Common Core, but nothing precludes schools from teaching it.

Schools can no longer enroll 8th graders in algebra.

See cursive writing. Nothing stops schools from advancing students in math or other subjects. The math standards further provide optional models for organizing curriculum so that students who are ready can move into Algebra courses before 9th grade.

8. How much will Common Core implementation cost?

All of these challenges — new technology, professional development, field-testing and administering new tests, and new instructional materials — come with a price tag. States and districts should not expect to make the transition without some new investments.

When budgeting for Common Core implementation, school leaders should find out if there are state dollars available to help with support; if the item is a one-time upfront cost like technology purchases; if it will be an ongoing expense; or if the dollars will replace current expenditures.

For example, according to the Brookings Institution, states now spend an average of **\$27 per pupil** for their state assessments; **current estimates** for the new Common Core assessments are in the same ballpark, meaning that average per-pupil cost to states for administering the new tests will not change much. These are averages, however, so some

states will be paying more than they currently do and others less. Likewise, districts already spend **considerable resources** on professional development. Some of these dollars can be rerouted to specifically address professional development for the Common Core.

Still the need for new instructional materials and technology can add a lot to already stretched budgets, placing an even greater burden on many states and districts. In such cases, the Common Core could be viewed as an opportunity to create the political will to invest in school resources that may have been neglected and overdue for an overhaul.

9. What should school boards do?

School boards need to make sure they have allocated sufficient resources for effective implementation. This means teachers and principals have professional development time to collaborate on new curriculum and instructional practices; students have instructional materials aligned to the new standards; schools have up-to-date data systems for monitoring instruction and student progress; and the district has a technology infrastructure to support it all.

As elected officials, school board members are responsible for communicating the changes parents and the broader community can expect with the Common Core. They should be very clear that the new standards are higher, the new tests are richer, and to therefore expect initial scores to be lower. But they should also

emphasize that the community should see test scores rise in subsequent years.

Finally, boards should hold themselves accountable for results. This includes serving as advocates for their district in their state capitals to make sure schools get the support and resources they will need to meet the Common Core.

Learn more about the Common Core standards, stay up to date about progress and developments, and download presentations, videos and other resources at CPE's dedicated web page at www.centerforpubliceducation.org/commoncore.

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