

WHY COMMON CORE MATTERS

What Parents Need to Know

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The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) are probably the biggest thing to hit public education in the United States in recent years. Forty-five states have pledged to the federal government that they will adopt the standards specifying the English language arts and math skills that students must attain in each grade from kindergarten to the end of high school. Teachers across the country, including those in nonadopting states, are actively involved in professional development, revising their curriculum, developing new lesson plans, and preparing students for the new assessments that are soon to be put in place.

In all these efforts, however, one group has been left largely in the dark: parents. Although many of us recognize that “parents are our children’s first literacy teachers,” we often fail to communicate new reforms with parents. How might these standards affect the nature of our teaching? What can parents do to prepare for the CCSS? And what are the expectations we now have for student learning? As our collaborative partners, we need to address these and other questions if we are to continue to engage parents in supporting and advocating for their children.

In short, there is a good deal of information that parents need to know. In this column, we hope to answer some basic questions that parents might ask about these standards.

What Exactly Are the CCSS?

The CCSS are a progression of learning expectations in English language arts and mathematics designed

to prepare K–12 students to be career and college ready. These standards communicate what is expected of students at each grade level, placing students, parents, teachers, and school administrators all on the same page. Previously, although most states had standards in place, they varied widely from state to state in their expectations and coverage. What is common, then, about common standards is that regardless of where you live, students now will be held to the same expectations.

These standards are the result of collaboration between the Council of Chief State School Officers and the National Governors Association working with parents, teachers, school administrators, and content experts from across the United States. National and international research, evidence, and standards from other countries that are known for their high-quality education informed the development of the standards. They are meant to be rigorous and will demand that students at all levels are sufficiently prepared to enter exciting careers and higher education opportunities. The CCSS:

- Are aligned with college and work expectations
- Are clear, understandable, and consistent
- Include rigorous content and application of knowledge through higher order skills

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- Build on strengths and lessons of current state standards
- Are informed by other top-performing countries, so that all students are prepared for success in a global society
- Are evidence-based

What Are the Benefits for Students?

A common set of standards ensures that all students are able to have the skills and be prepared for a career or postsecondary education. In an increasingly mobile society, this means that students will not have to adjust to new learning expectations if their families transfer to new communities or move to another state. Standards will be the same for all students in states adopting the Common Core, making any transitions far less disruptive for students who may have to move from district to district or to another place. Furthermore, in a competitive global economy in which knowledge becomes information capital, students will need to compete for positions not only with their American peers but also with students around the world. Common Core standards are designed to prepare students to succeed in a knowledge-based economy.

Common standards should also facilitate conversations among all of us who care about education—parents, teachers, and students—in addressing these academic learning goals. Because common standards define what students should know and be able to do at each

grade level, they can support parents’ engagement in learning activities outside of school, building on what children are learning with authentic experiences in home and community.

What’s New About Common Core Standards for Literacy Development?

Frankly, these standards are at a higher level than previous standards. They begin with college and career readiness standards, and then they identify specific target skills to be learned grade by grade. By emphasizing expectations, the standards leave room for teachers and curriculum developers to determine how the goals should be reached. In other words, they do not mandate a particular strategy or a curriculum to be used. Rather, teachers are free to provide students with whatever tools they can identify as most helpful for meeting the goals. The focus, therefore, is on results, not on the means to reach these goals.

Reflected throughout the standards is an understanding that to become highly literate, students need to experience an integrated model of literacy. Reading, writing, speaking, and listening are all very important in helping students communicate well. Parents will find that there is more attention placed on writing and on developing a synthesis of information and critical essays than in the past. Furthermore, there will be a more deliberate effort to have students engage in rich discussions that enable them to form an argument or a persuasive point of view.

In addition, to be ready for college and the workforce, students will need the ability to gather, comprehend, and evaluate information and ideas in multiple media. They will need to conduct research to answer questions or to solve problems, and this will require students to analyze and interpret a high volume of print and nonprint texts. They’ll need to become their own personal reference librarians to begin to discern arguments from these different texts. In addition, parents will find a greater emphasis on some new aspects of reading, such as the following:

- A focus on challenging text—An emphasis is placed on stretching students to meet the demands of reading harder text (rather than placing students in “leveled” text).
- An emphasis on disciplinary literacy—These are the specialized reading skills that are related to learning about history/social studies and science/technical subjects.
- A greater emphasis on reading informational texts—These are books that provide concepts and information, such as biographies, in contrast to narrative or stories or literary text.
- A targeted focus on what is being called “close reading”—This is a term that suggests a greater attention to what the text says, and its meaning and implications.

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- The use of multiple texts—Students will be encouraged to read and compare and contrast how different texts provide information.
- A much greater emphasis on the use of evidence in understanding text or an author’s perspective—You might increasingly hear the question, “How do you know” addressed to a student, with an understanding that the student will have to provide specific evidence from the text to make a claim.

How Will the Standards Be Assessed? Does This Mean More Testing?

Two consortia of states—the SMARTER-Balanced Assessment Consortium and the Partnership for the Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers have been awarded federal funding to develop assessments aligned with the Common Core. Both groups have developed assessments to measure children’s progress during and at the end of the year, for grades 3 through 12. These assessments are being rolled out now in some states, to be formally adopted by 2014–2015. As of now, there are no “adopted” assessments for grades K–2 aligned to the Common Core. States and districts, however, are likely to create their own measures or will use already-established standardized

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measures to examine children’s progress.

These new assessments are designed to tap how students can engage in authentic literacy practices, applying the skills they have learned to new situations. Inevitably, teachers and parents may ask if this means more testing for our students. More likely, it will mean that there will be a suite of assessments designed for different purposes. For example, both consortia are working on progress-monitoring measures that will examine how students are performing, providing teachers and parents with information on whether students are on track or may need more instructional assistance.

When Will the Common Core Be Implemented?

Now. Many states are already implementing the Common Core. Some others are in the process of doing so. Several states have posted a comparison of their former standards with the new ones. Parents will hear more about the planning and training of

district staff and the transitioning from existing to new assessments. Therefore, it is important to have ongoing communication with teachers and administration so that we are all working to provide students with the highest quality education they richly deserve.

Finally, although it may be a challenging time, it is well worth the effort. Students who are career and college ready may become independent learners who have a strong basis of knowledge across a wide range of subject matter. They may be able to adapt their rich communication skills to meet different audiences, tasks, and purposes. If we are successful, our students will increasingly value evidence when offering oral or written interpretations and use technology and digital media more strategically and capably. Lastly, our students will come to be ever more sensitive to other people’s perspectives and the diverse experiences and cultural opportunities they bring. In short, they will become well prepared to participate in the global society of the future.