

Understanding the Common Core State Standards

WHAT IS THE COMMON CORE?

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) is a near-universal set of academic standards agreed to by 45 states and the District of Columbia. Created for students in kindergarten through 12th grade, CCSS was designed by educators and academic experts, and inspired by standards from the world's highest-performing countries. It represents a seismic shift in the teaching of English Language Arts (writing, reading, listening and speaking) and Mathematics.

This is important for a number of reasons. First, clear expectations, so that all students can work toward the same definition of college and career readiness, no matter what state they live in. Second, accountability means the same thing in Alabama, for example, as it does in California.

The primary goal of CCSS is to teach critical thinking and problem solving. Students will become active learners – rather than passive – in a dynamic classroom environment. They will become independent thinkers who can create informed opinions, critique the opinions of their peers and their world, defend their arguments with evidence and communicate their point of view effectively. On tests, they will be required to reason out the best answer, rather than memorizing the “correct” answer.

WHAT'S NEW IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS?

Students will read more complex texts, both nonfiction and fiction. They will learn to create written arguments using evidence from multiple texts. They will learn to gather evidence to defend their opinions. In middle school and high school, students will learn to apply their literacy

skills to math, science, social studies and technical subjects. They will learn to read and write well across all subjects in preparation for college and careers.

Although there is an extensive list of recommended texts, CCSS leaves most curriculum decisions in the hands of local educators. The only reading explicitly required in the CCSS is the Declaration of Independence, the U.S. Constitution, Abraham Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address, a Shakespeare play and one play by an American dramatist.

WHAT'S NEW IN THE MATH STANDARDS?

Students will acquire the habit of mathematical thinking – a way of problem solving across all math courses. The foundation, which will begin in kindergarten and continue through 12th grade, will give students the building blocks to understand why and how math works in real-world situations.

While memorization of math facts is still important, more emphasis will be placed on true comprehension. To demonstrate their depth of understanding, students will be required to explain in writing how they solved a math problem.

WHY IS A CHANGE NECESSARY?

The world is changing, and the American education system hasn't kept pace. In one 2012 report, for example, the United States ranked 14th among 37 countries in the percentage of 25-34-year-olds with higher education. And too many of today's high school graduates – 25 percent according to another recent study – must take remedial classes to enroll in college courses.

Experts agree that we must retool education to better prepare our students to confront the challenges of an unpredictable and ever-changing future. We must help them retain (and, in some cases, regain) their competitive edge in the new global marketplace. CCSS aims to create a level playing field for all students, regardless of income level, ethnicity or zip code. **MORE**

HOW WILL THIS CHANGE

WHAT IS TAUGHT AND TESTED?

CCSS provides a basis for instruction and assessment that provides for deeper understanding; a clear picture of the end result; a clear and sensible progression from grade to grade; an emphasis on higher order thinking; a recognition of the importance of collaboration, communication, creativity and critical thinking; assessments designed to guide instruction rather than create systems of accountability.

English language arts Common Core is very close to our current standards. Actually, California's ELA standards were used as a role model for Common Core. Students in ELA will also be expected to collaborate with their peers on group projects and presentations.

In mathematics there will be a deeper focus on key concepts in the early grades, such as a greater focus on proficiency in fractions before moving students to higher math. This is where California has been weak – a mile long and an inch deep. That will change with CCSS.

In theory, CCSS should require fewer topics but give teachers and students more time to explore the most important ones in greater depth. Students will develop a deeper understanding of key concepts, and be able to apply their knowledge to real-world situations.

TELL ME ABOUT THE NEW TESTS?

In 2010, the U.S. Department of Education awarded \$330 million to two groups of states – the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) and the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) – to develop a valid, reliable, and fair system of next-generation assessments. California is part of the SBAC, which piloted tests this year and has provided sample tests online.

SBAC assessments are distinguished by the use of computer-adaptive technology. Computer adaptive tests are typically shorter than paper-

and-pencil assessments because fewer questions are required to accurately determine each student's achievement level. The assessments draw from a large bank of questions, and since students receive different questions based on their responses, test items are more secure and can be used for a longer period of time.

WHAT CAN I DO TO HELP MY CHILD SUCCEED?

Parents will see the most significant changes in the depth and rigor of courses offered, particularly secondary, and the type of assessment results that will come home. Learn more about the CCSS focus on literacy and math. Encourage your child's school to offer workshops for parents at every grade level, so both you and your child can benefit from this educational shift. Talk with your child's teacher(s).

Sources:

Aspen Institute Education & Society Project
www.aspeninstitute.org/policy-work/education-society

Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium
www.smarterbalanced.org/resources-events/faqs

Association of California School Administrators
<http://www.acsa.org/commoncore>



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