



New York State's New Standards

Since 2009, the National Governor's Association (NGA) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) have been working to develop common standards – skills and areas of knowledge – for English Language Arts and Mathematics in grades K through 12 in the nation's public schools. Adoption of the new "Common Core State Standards" is voluntary for the states. But the federal Department of Education made adoption of the standards a requirement for states to receive certain federal grant monies, so most states, including New York, have adopted them.

New York State's Board of Regents formally adopted the Common Core State Standards in 2010, and will begin to implement them in public schools across the state in September of 2012.

What are the Common Core Standards, and why is there so much controversy surrounding them? What are the promises and challenges of Common Core Standards?

Standards – History and Purpose

Educational standards establish what *all* students should be expected to learn—and to be taught—through their elementary and secondary school years. Supporters argue that standards serve several purposes:

- They establish markers and goals for academic achievement that is aligned with college and career expectations;
- They ensure equity across districts and schools, in terms of what is taught and how rigorous the educational material is. Standards of learning help protect students from low expectations or "tracking," where some children are placed in low-level classes that don't fully prepare them for graduation and beyond.

Opponents of standards argue that they narrow educational content. They worry that educators will be forced to script their lessons to the standards, at the expense of more creative lessons, and possibly more critical thinking or experiential learning. Some also critique the notion that nationally-established standards are useful in preparing students for careers, and for *civic* participation—an explicit purpose of public education.¹

These arguments aren't new. The move to establish specific expectations for public education, aligned with the needs and ideals of American business executives emerged with the 1983 publication of "A Nation At Risk." Several years later, then-president George Bush –working with business leaders -- established "nine essential components of a high quality education system."

¹ Bomer, Randy and Maloch, Beth: "Relating Policy to Research and Practice: The Common Core Standards." *Language Arts*, Volume 89 Number 1, September 2011. Retrieved from:

<http://www.ncte.org/library/NCTEFiles/Resources/Journals/LA/0891-sep2011/LA0891Research.pdf>

President Bill Clinton took the next step in 1994, signing a law that created a grants program, to fund states for developing their own content standards for public schools. The second President Bush went one step further, by incorporating language in the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) to *require* states to create their own standards and aligned assessments. No Child Left Behind also established consequences, creating systems of awards and sanctions for states, districts and schools based on measurements of whether students were meeting the standards.

Leaving the development of learning standards to the states, however, resulted in wide variations in the content and rigor of student expectations from state to state. These disparities grew in the years following the passage of NCLB. Because of the high stakes attached to student achievement, some states actually *lowered* their standards, making it easier for students to pass the tests. Wide recognition of this “race to the bottom” led the most recent drive to create uniform national standards.

Sensitive to the argument that the federal government should not be determining learning standards for the states, a task force was established under the aegis of the National Conference of Governors and the Council of Chief State School Officers in 2009. In just a single year, the task force introduced the Common Core Learning Standards in English Language Arts and Mathematics, and states were exhorted to adopt them. The same task force is now creating standards in other subjects, with social studies and sciences being the next on the list.

What’s the difference between “standards,” “curriculum” and “assessments?”

Standards are the specific skills or areas of knowledge that students are expected to learn through each year of their elementary and secondary educational experience. They are intentionally broad-based: the standards don’t identify specific texts that students should read, for example. For each grade, in both English and Math, the Common Core spells out a dozen or more specific skills that students should master.

For example, here are just a *few* of the standards for students in 4th grade English language:

- Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases based on *grade 4 reading and content*, choosing flexibly from a range of strategies.
 - A. Use context (e.g., definitions, examples, or restatements in text) as a clue to the meaning of a word or phrase.
 - B. Use common, grade-appropriate Greek and Latin affixes and roots as clues to the meaning of a word (e.g., *telegraph*, *photograph*, *autograph*).
 - C. Consult reference materials (e.g., dictionaries, glossaries, thesauruses), both print and digital, to find the pronunciation and determine or clarify the precise meaning of key words and phrases.

- Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings.
 - A. Explain the meaning of simple similes and metaphors (e.g., *as pretty as a picture*) in context.
 - B. Recognize and explain the meaning of common idioms, adages, and proverbs.
 - C. Demonstrate understanding of words by relating them to their opposites (antonyms) and to words with similar but not identical meanings (synonyms).

- Acquire and use accurately grade-appropriate general academic and domain-specific words and phrases, including those that signal precise actions, emotions, or states of being (e.g., *quizzed*, *whined*, *stammered*) and that are basic to a particular topic (e.g., *wildlife*, *conservation*, and *endangered* when discussing animal preservation).

Source: http://www.p12.nysed.gov/ciai/common_core_standards/pdfdocs/nvsp12cclsela.pdf page 40

These are just three of *dozens* of specific skills included in the English Language Arts, Grade 4 standards. All told, the Common Core Learning Standards includes *hundreds* of skills, grade-by-grade and subject by subject.

Standards are the *destination*. Once standards are set, a state must develop the road to get there—the curriculum—and the mile posts to make sure students are on track—assessments.

A curriculum provides the specific content, and the step-by-step components of learning that link each year into an aligned system that brings students to their high school graduation, hopefully having achieved the knowledge and skills required by the state standards. Assessments are aligned with both the curriculum and the standards, and are intended to ensure that students are on pace throughout their school experience. As you can see, given that there are hundreds of skills, and twelve years of schooling, the full implementation of a new set of standards, with matching curricula and tests, is a significant undertaking.

Do the new standards, then, guarantee that all students will be prepared for college or a career?

Implementing new standards is a massive project. Once new standards are established, states must develop curricula and assessments for students in each grade that are aligned with the new standards. And, they must train teachers and principals in the standards, so that instruction will be aligned and comprehensive.

New York State adopted the new Common Core Standards in 2010 and will begin implementing them in schools across the state in September of 2012. The standards will not be fully in place—with the required new assessments to measure student achievement in the standards—until the 2014-2015 school year. Meanwhile,

in 2013 and 2014, the state will adopt and begin to implement the anticipated new standards in the sciences, economics, social studies, computer technology and other subjects.

The proof of a state's commitment to the promise of standards is in the *implementation*. It's not enough to adopt the standards, change the curriculum and write up new tests. In order to make the promise of the Common Core Standards real, the state must ensure that:

- (1) Every school has the basic *resources* necessary (science labs and materials, technology, up-to-date textbooks, etc.) to adequately teach to the standards;
- (2) Students have access to high-quality and comprehensive *supports* to give them the best possible chance to *succeed* in these college and career tracks, and
- (3) Teachers have the *ongoing* professional development needed to create lesson plans that not only are aligned with the curriculum, but also develop the problem solving and analytical skills that students need to be successful in college and careers.

High quality standards don't mean much without equitable, high quality resources and support for students, so that schools are able to fully deliver the instructional content and experience that students need to succeed. Unfortunately, at a time when states are cutting back on education spending—eliminating, rather than strengthening school resources—it is unlikely that the adoption of the Common Core standards will be met with the required increase in educational supports that students will need to achieve them.

Parents, educators and advocates need to argue for the full range of supports that both educators and students will need in their schools and districts to ensure that all students have the opportunity to meet these new standards.

What can parents and community groups do to monitor the implementation of the new Common Core Standards?

Parents need to monitor their children's schools and advocate for high quality instruction and rigorous coursework available to *all* children. And students who are struggling, should be provided with additional supports—tutoring, extra time—in order to succeed.

Parents can make sure that their children's schools are fully equipped to deliver on the state standards. In New York City, for example, parents organized in 2006 when they discovered that almost one third of middle schools in the City had no working science labs – even though the state requires lab work as part of its 8th grade science test. The Coalition for Educational Justice released a scathing report² on the failure of the city's middle-grades schools to provide students with the courses and resources necessary to meet state standards.

Do common standards provide the benchmarks to ensure that student learning is high quality and rigorous? Yes. Does it mean that all students will meet those benchmarks? No. In the two decades since state standards have been launched in a big way, there is little evidence that our schools are more equitable, that students are getting a rigorous education across the board, or that student performance has increased because of the standards. The reason for the lack of progress associated with standards is that states continue to under-fund

² *New York City's Middle-Grades Schools: Platforms for Success or Pathways to Failure?* Produced by the New York City Coalition for Educational Justice, January 2007. Available at: <http://annenberginstitute.org/pdf/middlegrades.pdf> (retrieved on December 6, 2011)

schools, so few schools—particularly those in low-income districts—have the resources necessary to ensure full implementation and full support for both teachers and students.

The Common Core Standards are a step towards making sure that students all across the country are being asked to reach high, and are being taught to rigorous expectations. But without the robust supports, teacher training, technological resources and constant monitoring necessary to actually improve the quality of educational experience students are having in our schools, the actual standards mean very little.

What are New York States plans to implement the Common Core Standards?

New York State Education Department (NYSED) is currently developing new curricula to help guide teachers in teaching to the Common Core. The new curricula will be put in place gradually over the next three years, with a goal of 50% of the curricula in place by the summer of 2012, and 100% in place by the summer of 2013.

In addition, the State has joined a consortium of experts and other states to develop new assessments that accurately measure student achievement in the standards. These new assessments won't be fully in place until the 2014-2015 school year. They will replace the current state exams.

NYSED is developing plans to provide intensive professional development to teachers in both the new standards, and the new curricula, to ensure that both are delivered effectively. But what about resources for schools and students? New York State is currently facing a budget crisis that is threatening to unravel much of the progress that has been made in providing equitable resources for our highest need students and schools. With teacher layoffs imminent and class sizes rising because of these budget cuts, how will teachers be able to give each student the attention they need to succeed at the new standards?

Resources

Parents can look at the actual Common Core Learning Standards.

New York's Common Core Learning Standards in English Language Arts are available online at: .
http://www.p12.nysed.gov/ciai/common_core_standards/pdfdocs/nysp12cclsela.pdf

New York's Common Core Learning Standards in Mathematics are available online at:
http://www.p12.nysed.gov/ciai/common_core_standards/pdfdocs/nysp12cclsmath.pdf

The National PTA has developed a *Parent's Guide to Student Success* (<http://www.pta.org/4446.html>), which The Guide includes offers parents information about key items that children should be learning in English language arts and mathematics in each grade, once the standards are fully implemented; activities that parents can do at home to support their child's learning, methods for helping parents build stronger relationships with their child's teacher and tips for planning for college and career (high school only). Your local PTA may have additional fact sheets or suggestions for how to best monitor your student's school.