STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT PARTNERS

What do I need to know about the Common Core?

Top 8 Questions Parents Ask Teachers

Across the country, educators are implementing the Common Core State Standards. These are standards that make sense to us as teachers; they reflect what we know to be in the best interest of our students.

As teachers, we think you should hear about the Common Core from educators that are working with it every day. We've seen powerful examples of success in our classrooms already: students thinking critically, embracing challenges, and being proud of their triumphs. We understand that many parents may have questions and concerns about standards that will affect what their students learn— we did too! Below are the questions we hear most often and our answers to them.

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Q: Where did the Common Core come from? Did we really need new standards?

By the 1990s, most states had a set of standards that determined what students should know and be able to do at each grade level, but they were different for each state. This meant that children in one state were learning different things at different times (and in different years) than children in another. When students came into classrooms from another state, we had to spend a lot of time finding out what they knew or didn't know. Between states, teachers would find a year or more difference in student expectations.

Additionally, the standards that were in place in each of the states were really long lists that typically kept getting longer with every new version. So, even though there was the idea that standards could bring consistency to what was being taught within a state, there were far too many expectations in each subject in each grade to realistically expect teachers to cover the material. Teachers were forced to make decisions each year about which standards to include and not include, leading to even more inconsistencies.

In 2007, governors and chief state school officers decided that the educational standards in their states needed to be updated to reflect new information about what it means to be college and career ready. They agreed that there should be shared standards from kindergarten to twelfth grade. The goal of these shared standards is to make sure students are well prepared to compete internationally (the USA is currently ranked 30th in the world in math and 20th in reading, according to the Program for International Student Assessment test results comparing students from 65 countries). The old standards were often a collection of unrelated concepts that did not tie together from year to year, and students were left without crucial connections between previous concepts and new ones. Teachers had to cover too many topics each year without being able to teach them in depth. Also the standards typically saw 12th grade as the end point, rather than thinking about how to build a K-12 system that supports college and career expectations. The new standards, in contrast, are connected from grade to grade and they home in on specific areas for each grade level, allowing children to truly master concepts before moving on.

Q: Who wrote the standards? How did my state adopt them?

The standards were developed by state education leaders with input from teachers, parents, and education experts. The federal government was not a part of writing the standards and does not mandate what materials we use in our classrooms.

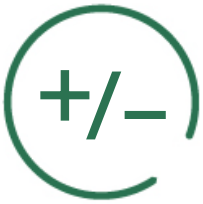
Beginning in 2011, each state looked at the standards and decided whether to use them in their state. Each state managed this process by whatever procedures were in place for reviewing state standards. By 2013, 45 states agreed to use these shared standards, now called the Common Core State Standards. School districts and teachers are beginning to use these new high standards in schools across the country and are in the process of matching their materials and instruction to the learning goals for each grade.

Q: How are the standards different from previous state standards?

The Common Core State Standards were written in a new way: starting with evidence for what students need to know in order to be ready for college and careers, and then working through each grade, starting with kindergarten, to chart a clear path to that goal. The resulting changes can be summarized by six "shifts:" three in ELA/literacy and three in Mathematics:

ELA/Literacy

- Regular practice with complex text and its academic language
- Reading, writing and speaking grounded in evidence from text, both literary and informational
- Building knowledge through content-rich nonfiction



Mathematics

- Focus strongly where the standards focus
- Coherence: think across grades and link to major topics within grades
- Rigor: In major topics, pursue with equal intensity: conceptual understanding, procedural skill and fluency, and application

Since the Common Core State Standards have been adopted by most states, teachers are working toward shared goals. Now we can easily collaborate with each other to create lessons; we're learning from each other and getting great ideas about how to help our students from teachers all across the country.

The Common Core State Standards, in comparison to the old standards, also allow for a more active learning environment. Teachers are seeing more student ownership in learning— teachers are facilitators of learning rather than simply presenters at the front of the room dispensing a long checklist of information.

With the Common Core, teachers ask for the correct answer and more, because preparing students for college and future careers requires being able to explain one's thinking, work well with others, and be resourceful when new or unknown problems arise.

Q: What are standards? How are standards different from curriculum and the homework my children bring home?

Standards are often confused with curriculum or tests. States chose to adopt the Common Core State Standards to outline learning expectations in English Language Arts and Mathematics that prepare their students for college and careers. Think of the standards as a blueprint that outlines what we want students to know and be able to do at each grade level. If you read the standards for your child's grade level, you'll see they are simply outcomes for reading and math. For example:

CCSS Math Standard (2nd grade)

Fluently add and subtract within 100 using strategies based on place value, properties of operations, and/or the relationship between addition and subtraction.

CCSS ELA-Literacy Standard (7th grade)

Support claim(s) with logical reasoning and relevant evidence, using accurate, credible sources and demonstrating an understanding of the topic or text.

Curriculum refers to the materials used in schools and the ways ideas are taught, both of which vary widely across the country – there is no single Common Core curriculum. Schools or districts are responsible for determining textbooks and classroom resources. Then teachers choose and supplement lessons, activities, homework (yes even worksheets), and teaching strategies to match the needs of individuals in your child's classroom. Just as a contractor would decide which tools and strategies to use to turn a blueprint into a building, we as teachers determine the lessons, materials, and activities we should use to meet the standards.

Q: Are the Common Core Standards and the new assessments the same thing?

As teachers, we feel it is important for tests or assessments to align with the Common Core State Standards we are working toward in our classrooms: we use data from these assessments to make decisions about improving our teaching for our students. While many states have chosen to use one of the assessments created by PARCC or the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium, states can also choose to design their own assessments. Adopting the Common Core does not mean that states must automatically adopt a single testing option or strategy for assessment – those decisions are made locally.

Q: How and why is math different in Common Core?

Math standards are nothing new. Most states have had math standards for many years. What has been missing is how those standards connect to each other and build on each other across grades. What is unique about the Common Core State Standards is this connection, which allows teachers to focus time in a more impactful way. Standards are laid out as important ideas, or building blocks, covering many grades. K-2 focusing on addition and subtraction with place value understanding, 3-5 building into multiplication and division with fractions, and so on. You can see the focus areas for each grade at achievethecore.org/focus

Additionally, Common Core includes expectations called Mathematical Practice Standards, or ways to think and talk about math. Students learn different ways to approach problems: when they can approach a math problem by asking questions, looking for patterns, and using different tools strategically, they find many paths to the right answer. Given the chance to compare and collaborate with their peers and teacher, they learn to not only solve problems correctly, but to also make sense of what they are learning and apply it in creative, real-world ways. With the Common Core, teachers ask for the correct answer and more, because preparing students for college and future careers requires being able to explain one's thinking, work well with others, and be resourceful when new or unknown problems arise. So, standards that previously felt like a checklist of rules or skills, leading kids to often prove their thinking with the statement, "Because my teacher told me to do it this way," now are replaced with expectations of understanding that have many kids replying, "Let me explain it to you in my own words."

Q: How and why is English Language Arts different under the Common Core?

The Common Core State Standards for ELA/Literacy have helped teachers focus on building the skills students need in order to learn from what they read and become lifelong readers. There is also a shift to more evidence-based, text-dependent writing. Rather than answering questions based solely on opinions or personal experiences which requires no understanding of what was read, students are expected to make points based on details in what they've read. This is a skill they'll use in college and their careers.

The Common Core asks teachers to include a balance of fiction and nonfiction texts, but it's important to understand that this does not mean that fiction, plays, or poetry are being replaced in the English classroom. Instead, it's asking us to think about literacy across subjects (including social studies, history, and science). Reading is a necessary component of these subjects both in college and in the real world, and our students need to be prepared.

Another one of the most profound changes is that the standards raise the bar for reading materials to encourage a stretch for readers. Allowing students to read only what is easy for them, instead of spending time with rich texts appropriate for their grade level, will cause them to fall behind— not only in literacy skills, but also in content knowledge. Students gain knowledge from reading texts appropriate to their age level, and all students should be given the support they need to access this knowledge. This means that students should read independently the books they're comfortable with, but, when working with their teacher and classmates, they should focus on grade-level material.

In the past, students learned rules for English: rules for writing, and rules for reading, but they seemed very disconnected. An additional change prompted by the Common Core is the emphasis on connecting all of the elements of literacy in the English classroom. Standards for reading, writing and speaking and listening form a staircase for learning instead of a stepstool for grasping a single concept. Grammar and vocabulary, for example, are taught in connection to what students read, instead of as an isolated set of rules to memorize.

Q: Where can parents learn more about the Common Core and what it means for their children?

We, as educators, want to make sure you have the most accurate and up-to-date information about what's happening in our schools. You are not alone if you feel overwhelmed or confused by news about the Common Core...we're all in the same boat. This is a time of learning and transition for teachers as well. But, like the majority of teachers, we believe that these changes are good for our students, and we're already seeing positive changes in our classrooms. We encourage you to talk with your child's teacher and learn about all the new and exciting changes taking place.

Below are some clear, quick resources about the Common Core. We hope they answer more of your questions and help you understand what to expect for your child!

Be a Learning Hero Parent Website
www.bealearninghero.org

Common Core State Standards Initiative Myth-Fact Page
http://www.corestandards.org/about-the-standards/myths-vs-facts/

The Council of Great City Schools has produced Parent Roadmaps by grade in English and Spanish http://www.commoncoreworks.org/domain/131

Great Kids Milestone Videos
http://milestones.greatkids.org/

The National PTA's 2 and 4-page parent guides explaining focus by grade level
http://pta.org/parents/content.cfm?ItemNumber=2583

The National Urban League suite of parent materials for parents.
http://www.iamempowered.com/common-core-state-standards

NEA-PTA Parent Guides - Families and Educators Working Together for Student Success
http://www.nea.org/assets/docs/NEA-PTA-CCSS-Student-Success-Brochure.pdf
En español
http://www.nea.org/assets/docs/NEA_PTA_Blue_2Pager_Spanish_FINAL_12JUN14.pdf

Raise the Bar Parents, a new website created by parents, for parents and supported by America Achieves. http://raisethebarparents.org/

Today.com's 5 things parents need to know about Common Core
http://www.today.com/parents/common-core-5-things-parents-need-know-1D80018501

Univisión Guías de los Estándares por Grado
http://noticias.univision.com/educacion/estandares-academicos-estatales/