

Chapter 1

Exploring Common Core's Roots

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In This Chapter

- ▶ Grasping the rhyme and reason behind the Common Core Standards
 - ▶ Following the development of the standards
 - ▶ Tracking adoption and implementation
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As I write this chapter, 45 states and the District of Columbia are in the process of implementing the Common Core Standards, representing one of the most widespread education reform movements in the history of public education in the United States. As a parent, you probably have lots of questions about these standards, including what they are, why they're important, and what impact they're likely to have on teachers and students. These questions are at the center of a growing discussion about education in the United States. As more states enter the final stages of implementation and more schools send home information about the Common Core Standards, more and more parents have unanswered questions.

In this chapter, I field some of those general questions. I explain the motivation and purpose for developing the Common Core Standards, discuss their history from birth to the present, and discuss how states are progressing in adopting the standards and implementing them in schools. With this background information at hand, you have a much better understanding of what the standards are, why they're being adopted, and where to go from here. This chapter prepares you for a more thorough discussion, in subsequent chapters, of what's in the standards and what you can do, as a parent, to help your child or teen achieve the standards.

Understanding the Rationale

The first question you may have is, “Why do we need new standards to begin with?” Year after year, studies show that a vast majority of students are ill-prepared academically to move on to college or secure employment with businesses that require a highly skilled workforce.

The motivation behind the development of the Common Core Standards is grounded in the idea that higher academic standards in schools, from kindergarten through high school, are likely to produce students who are better prepared to take on the challenges of a post-secondary education or a challenging and rewarding career directly out of high school.

Recognizing the standards

The Common Core Standards set consistent and clear expectations for what students must know at the completion of each grade from kindergarten through high school. The standards establish expectations in three academic areas:

- ✔ **Mathematics:** The Common Core Standards for mathematics focus on gaining essential understanding to help students acquire a deeper knowledge of only the most important concepts and develop the skills to tackle mathematical problems in the real world. The standards call on students to develop deeper knowledge and higher-level skills in each successive grade, so it’s vitally important that students get a handle on the material covered in each grade before advancing to a higher grade level.
- ✔ **English language arts (ELA):** The ELA standards are structured to build foundational literacy skills in early grades and to continue to equip students with reading and writing skills as they progress into middle and high school. The standards gradually increase in complexity from grade to grade, so pay special attention to the additional concepts and skills added from one grade to the next.

- ✔ **Literacy:** The literacy standards establish reading and writing expectations for students in social studies, science, and technology. These standards provide few specifics on *what* students need to read or write, focusing instead on *how* students should read and write in these courses and how to evaluate what qualifies as good writing.

Recognizing the goals

The Common Core Standards address the shortcomings and build upon the strengths of current state standards. Governors, education officials, and educators who developed the Common Core Standards had several goals in mind, including the following:

- ✔ **Raise the bar for students in Grades K–12.** Higher academic standards represent higher expectations for student learning. Higher rigor and demand in classrooms increase the likelihood that more students will master essential skills and concepts in math, reading, and writing that will prepare them for success when they move to the next grade or course or on to college or a career.
- ✔ **Clarify expectations for students, teachers, and parents.** Inconsistent, complicated standards are difficult for everyone to understand and follow, from school administrators and teachers to parents and students. Common Core Standards are intended to be consistent and clear, so everyone involved in the learning process can collaborate on meeting expectations.

As you find out more about Common Core Standards, you're likely to hear the phrase "fewer, clearer, and higher" used to describe the first two goals on this list.

- ✔ **Standardize benchmarks for academic achievement across all 50 states.** Major discrepancies in the expectations of student performance from state to state make it difficult to determine which states are doing the best job of preparing students for college or career. Having the same benchmarks for students across state lines helps ensure that students from different states are being held to similar standards of academic achievement.



Higher standards or not?

Critics of the Common Core Standards believe that the standards are less rigorous than the current standards in some states and also fail to meet the benchmarks set by some international education systems. However, a study conducted by the Thomas B. Fordham Institute in 2010, “The State of State Standards,” found that the Common Core Standards

for mathematics were more rigorous than the standards in 39 states. The remaining states had standards in mathematics similar in rigor to the Common Core Standards. The same report found that only California, Indiana, and the District of Columbia had English language arts standards that were more demanding than the Common Core Standards.

- ✔ **Ensure that all students are prepared for college or career.** One of the fundamental goals of all schools is preparing students to pursue their goals after they graduate from high school, whether they enter college or the workforce. This isn’t something that just happens in Grade 12 or even in high school. College and career readiness is the outcome of an effective education in kindergarten through Grade 12. This is why higher, more-consistent standards are important at all grade levels.
- ✔ **Communicate real-world expectations.** Connecting what students are asked to do in school to the demands of the real world is a difficult job, but it’s vital to making sure that students understand what’s required of them when they go to college or get a job. The skills and concepts taught in schools need to be the same skills and concepts students use in higher learning or the job market.



Without high academic standards that outline the knowledge and skills students need in math, English, and reading and writing in other subjects, few students are ready to tackle college or a career after they graduate from high school.

Tracing Common Core’s History

The push for common standards shared by multiple states isn’t new. Conversations about “common” or “national” standards have been a significant part of the public discussion on

education for several decades. However, efforts to agree on a common set of standards for state departments of education and, as a result, local school districts have often been sidetracked by concerns that the federal government would become overly involved.

In the following sections, I describe the hurdles and the history of attempts to standardize measures of academic achievement.

Identifying the barriers

Efforts under the administrations of President George H. W. Bush and President Bill Clinton to establish common standards among the states failed because of a few key issues:

- ✔ **State leaders want to retain oversight.** In general, each state has a department of education, although the name sometimes varies from state to state. Among other things, the departments of education oversee education policy, administer statewide assessments, distribute federal and state funding, and monitor compliance with state and federal laws. State lawmakers, policymakers, and leaders oversee a majority of the decisions relating to education. Differences of opinion over what's best for students and a desire to remain competitive with other states have made agreeing on national reforms very difficult.
- ✔ **Educators want to maintain local control over curriculum.** Some teachers and parents feel threatened by standards because they see standards as the government's attempt to dictate curriculum. They don't realize that standards dictate only what students need to know upon completion of each grade level. Curriculum choices, including which materials are used to teach certain subjects in each grade, are still left up to schools and districts. However, fears of government overreach are still a barrier for some people.

As I explain in Chapter 2, Common Core Standards don't dictate *curriculum* — how teachers teach and the specific materials they use to help their students meet the expectations outlined by the standards. The standards establish expectations for what students know and are able to do academically at different grade levels.



- ✔ **Reaching consensus is difficult.** National leaders find it easier to agree that all students should be proficient in reading than to reach a consensus on what they should read. The same is true in other subject areas. Tensions over nailing down the specifics of what should be taught nationwide have been a major contributing factor to the failure of previous education-reform efforts. For the most part, Common Core clears this hurdle by focusing on what students should know and not how they come to know it.

Recognizing these barriers, you can better understand why the discussion of standards common to all states raises concerns. In the 1990s, several efforts to rally support for common standards were put on hold because of fears that local control would be compromised. Who decides what goes in the standards? What materials will be used to teach? When is a student supposed to know certain material and master certain skills? Differences of opinion over the answers to these questions represent some of the reasons that previous efforts to develop common standards were unsuccessful.

Resuming the conversation

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 reignited the discussion about common standards. Signed into law by President George W. Bush in January 2002, No Child Left Behind increased state accountability, among other criteria, for reaching certain levels of educational attainment and reporting those outcomes. Although the emphasis was on increasing the level of state accountability for student progress, certain components of No Child Left Behind sparked renewed interest in common standards:

- ✔ **Focusing on student progress:** Every school in every state was required to meet certain achievement targets on assessments that measure student learning in math and English, with further specifications for certain demographic groups. Called “adequate yearly progress” (AYP), these benchmarks became the measures by which schools, districts, and states were graded on their ability to educate students. Consequently, an emphasis on measuring student progress was accompanied by an intensified focus on exactly what was being measured.
- ✔ **Accentuating the disconnect between states:** No Child Left Behind presented a significant challenge that involved the measurement of student progress with AYP,

which compared progress in each state. The difficulty was that each state used its own standards for learning and for determining proficiency in subjects. The result? Some states had remarkably high proficiency rates in math and English, while others were considerably lower.

✓ **Learning from national assessments:** According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), an annual test that measures performance across core academic subject areas in each state, certain states consistently outperform other states in math, reading, writing, science, history, the arts, and other assessed areas. The assessments used by individual states didn't reflect the same distribution of scores.

After looking at only a few years of test scores from states using different standards and tests, educators and legislators concluded that, without common standards, comparing student achievement between states would be next to impossible. A comparison of NAEP scores to the results of individual state assessments reinforces this fact. These considerations have persuaded more and more state leaders and policymakers to pursue common standards once again. Their goal: to introduce a degree of consistency and clarity regarding educational expectations across state lines.

Developing the Common Core Standards

With renewed purpose, state leaders and policymakers confronted the issue of common standards again in 2006. After policymakers took a closer look at the differences in content and rigor among the states' standards, investigated the influence of high standards in other countries, and gathered feedback on implementing the standards, the move toward common standards was in full swing.

The two organizations that officially led the development of the Common Core Standards were the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and the Council of Chief State School Officers. In early 2009, a meeting of state education leaders in Chicago resulted in overwhelming support for the idea of common standards. By the summer of 2009, all but two states, Texas and Alaska, had signed an agreement to participate in the development of the Common Core Standards.

Meeting the Common Core architects

Although the final draft of Common Core Standards represents input from educators, state leaders, policymakers, parents, and others who participated in the process of submitting public feedback, two individuals most often labeled the “architects” of the Common Core Standards are David Coleman and Jason Zimba. For

the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and the Council of Chief State School Officers, these two were a natural fit to lead the process of standards writing because of a report they produced in 2007 that called for “fewer, clearer, and higher” academic standards in math and science.

The process of writing the Common Core Standards began in 2009 and involved consulting existing state standards, researching college and career readiness, and exploring international education systems. The public was able to comment on a first draft of the standards released in September 2009, followed by a second draft for comment in March 2010. After nearly 10,000 individuals provided input on the standards, a final draft was released in June 2010. After years of trying to agree on common standards for states, the Common Core Standards were ready for adoption.

State Adoptions and Implementation

At the same time that the Common Core Standards were written, President Barack Obama announced a competitive grant program called Race to the Top, offering more than \$4 billion in available funds. The grant sought to provide federal funding for education reform at the state level. Among other criteria, the opportunity to receive a slice of this pie required states to revamp their academic standards. This included pursuing common standards backed by college and career readiness research with other states. Although states didn’t necessarily have to adopt the Common Core Standards to be eligible for the grant, the fact that 48 states had agreed to contribute to the development of the standards certainly made them a viable option.

The process for adopting academic standards varies from state to state. In general, some combination of the state legislature, a body empowered by the state legislature or governor (such as a state board of education), and the state department of education is responsible for recommending and approving standards for use by schools and districts. As the Common Core Standards neared completion in 2010, conversations regarding adoption took place in a majority of states.

Recognizing Common Core states

Most states adopted the Common Core Standards between 2010 and 2012. A majority of adopting states did so in 2010 to meet the timelines and specifications for common standards in the Race to the Top grant. However, not all states considering adoption of common standards took the same path. In fact, states pursued a few different options:

- ✔ **Adopting the standards verbatim:** Verbatim adoption of the Common Core Standards means that a state adopts the Common Core Standards for mathematics, English language arts, and literacy without adding to or taking away any content. The standards for mathematics and English language arts provide learning expectations for those subjects, while the literacy standards set expectations for reading and writing skills for social studies, science, and technology.
- ✔ **Adding 15 percent:** States that adopt the Common Core Standards have the option to add 15 percent to the total number of standards in a specific subject area. A state can decide to do this if adding content in certain grades or courses, or on certain subjects, is necessary. However, adopting states can't choose to remove standards from the Common Core.
- ✔ **Deciding to go it alone:** In order to qualify for the Race to the Top grant, states didn't have to adopt the Common Core Standards. States had the option of developing and adopting common standards in conjunction with other states. With that option in place, some states opted to take alternative paths.

For information on what your state chose to do, check out your state's website. You can also visit www.corestandards.org.

Striving to implement Common Core

Implementation of the Common Core Standards refers to the process of actually putting the standards to use in schools and districts. When it adopted the Common Core Standards, each state set a goal for when it would fully implement the standards. And because states adopted the Common Core Standards at different times, the timeline for full implementation of the standards varies by state. Regardless of the date set for a full implementation of the Common Core Standards, keep a few things in mind about the process:

- ✔ **Starting on the standards:** The process of implementing the standards depends on decisions made in each state. Some states may start teaching toward the standards all at once, while others may use a gradual phase-in approach. Having a good grasp on the approach being used in your state helps you better understand how to support the process at home. For more information on the approach being used in your state, reach out to your local school or district for more information.
- ✔ **Deciding on new books and materials:** Because the Common Core Standards establish concepts and skills that are potentially different from previous state standards, school districts are likely to use new textbooks and materials as they start teaching to the standards. Getting familiar with these resources will assist you in helping your student tackle the new standards (see Chapter 3 for details).
- ✔ **Developing a new assessment:** A change in standards usually triggers a change in the assessment used to measure student progress. Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) is a 19-state consortium that's developing K–12 assessments that measure achievement of Common Core Standards. Visit www.parcconline.org. Another consortium is developing what it calls Smarter Balanced Assessments; for more information, visit www.smarterbalanced.org.