THE ASPEN INSTITUTE
EDUCATION & SOCIETY PROGRAM

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

AN INTRODUCTION FOR FAMILIES AND OTHER STAKEHOLDERS

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 math.

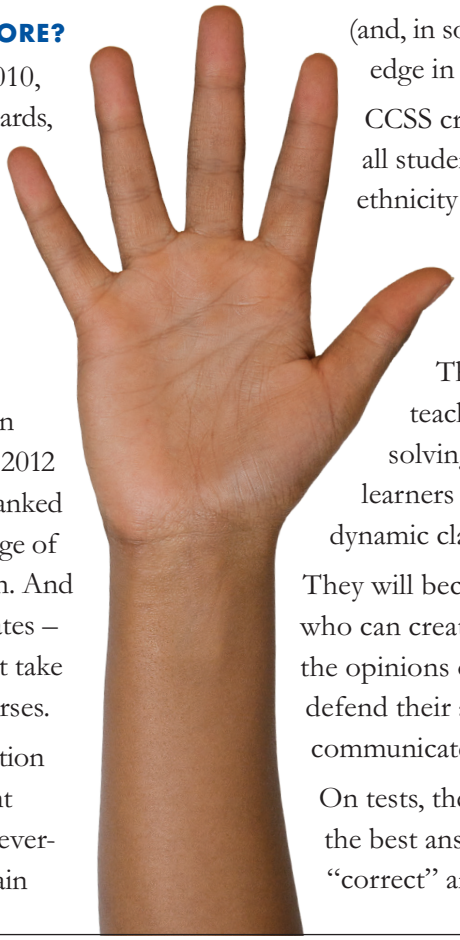
WHAT WERE THE STANDARDS BEFORE?

Before the adoption of CCSS in June 2010, each state developed its own set of standards, creating a wide range of uneven learning experiences and achievements. Students were not receiving a consistent high-quality education from school to school and state to state.

WHY CHANGE?

The world is changing and the American education system hasn't kept pace. In a 2012 report[1], for example, the United States ranked 14th among 37 countries in the percentage of 25- to 34-year-olds with higher education. And too many of today's high school graduates – 25% according to a recent study[2] – 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 creates a level playing field for all students regardless of income level, ethnicity or zip code.

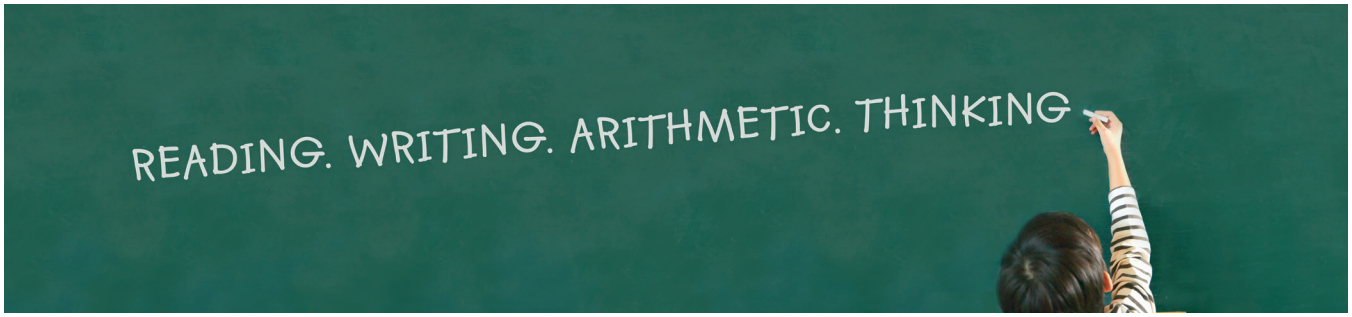
HOW ARE THESE STANDARDS DIFFERENT FROM CURRENT STATE STANDARDS?

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 points of view effectively.

On tests, they will be required to reason out the best answer, rather than memorizing the "correct" answer.

[1] *Education at a Glance: OECD Indicators 2012*, Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2012. [2] *Collegiate Remediation: A Review of the Causes and Consequences*, M. Kurlaender and J. Howell, Sept. 2012.



HOW WILL THIS CHANGE THE CURRICULUM?

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.

HOW WILL STUDENTS LEARN 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.

HOW WILL STUDENTS LEARN MATH?

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.

HOW WILL THIS AFFECT TEACHING?

CCSS offers teachers the opportunity to teach deeper rather than wider, and allows them more time to help students master critical skills.

In a recent survey[3] of math teachers in states that have adopted CCSS, more than 90% say they like the idea of the new standards.

HOW WILL MY CHILD BE TESTED ON THE CCSS?

Beginning in the 2014–15 school year, states will have the option to select one of two tests for grades 3–12: the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) or the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC). These tests focus on developing richer, more authentic measures of student learning, and will provide teachers precise, actionable information to improve performance.

HOW WILL MY CHILD DO ON THESE NEW TESTS?

Chances are, test scores will initially go down. Moving forward, every school district will need to retrain educators to teach CCSS. It will take time. However, a level playing field ensures that all students will face the same challenges.

AS A PARENT, WHAT CAN I DO TO HELP MY CHILD SUCCEED?

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.

WHY NOW?

With today's technology, the entire world's information is at our children's fingertips. But to be successful in school and careers, our children must learn how to evaluate and use this information. They must develop the grit and focus to solve difficult problems on their own. They must become thinkers as much as learners. CCSS will equip our children with the skills they need to handle these future challenges.

For more information, visit us online at www.aspeninstitute.org/policy-work/education-society

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[3] *Common Core State Standards Math: The Relationship Between High Standards, Systemic Implementation and Student Achievement*, Dr. William Schmidt, Michigan State University, 2012.