



COMMON CORE IS UNCOMMONLY GOOD FOR KIDS

The Common Core State Standards are Key Prerequisites for 21st Century Learning

Executive Summary

Like many other elements of our public school system, California's legacy curriculum standards, while innovative for their time, were based on outdated educational theories as well as the then current need for career skills. As our students today face a world in which the majority of careers require "knowledge workers," public schools in the modern era must re-think their approach to curriculum standards. Although lauded by many in the education community, the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) have generated significant controversy. Attacks on the CCSS have largely been based on misunderstandings of how the CCSS were developed, their purpose, and the significant positive changes they will bring to the classroom. Additionally, because states are implementing the CCSS in different ways with varying degrees of success in communication and expectation setting, the CCSS have drawn criticism in the press; these critiques have less to do with the CCSS themselves but rather with methods of implementation. While the CCSS are "standards," they are not promoting "standardized education." The CCSS establish a *minimum* bar for excellence that all students in the United States should attain, with a myriad of options for how to get there.

California's adoption of the CCSS brings new elements of teaching and learning to the forefront and helps address the opportunities and challenges we currently face. Accompanying assessments will provide a richer set of formative data to inform teaching and learning. California has chosen to be a part of the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) which offers a new approach to assessment that requires deeper thinking and analysis. Tests are computer adaptive, and questions require students to explain their answers, show their work, model concepts in context, and do complex computation.

There is widespread agreement that students must have key skills to be ready for college and careers in the future, including the ability to (a) find, evaluate, synthesize and use knowledge, (b) frame and solve non-routine problems, (c) design and produce new products, and (d) communicate successfully. SMCSBA supports the implementation of the CCSS and SBAC to help meet these goals. We believe the CCSS offer teachers more creativity in the classroom and students a better chance at being prepared for the 21st century jobs that await them when they graduate.

There is no doubt that significant work is required of all local school districts to make this transformational shift, but the CCSS will empower our schools and our educators to delve deeper into subject matter and better promote critical thinking, analysis, project-based learning, writing, and communication. Perhaps most importantly, the adoption of the CCSS and SBAC will enable California to re-think assessment systems in the modern age. The opportunity is great to create a set of assessments that de-emphasize one-size-fits-all tests and place more emphasis on multiple measures of academic proficiency as well as college and career readiness. Albeit not a panacea, the CCSS are critical tools to enable our local school districts to deliver a 21st century education to all students.



Introduction

The San Mateo County School Boards Association (SMCSBA), representing the 22 school districts, San Mateo County Community College District and the County Office of Education in San Mateo County, California, has been publishing a series of position papers on relevant and important topics related to public education in California. These viewpoints are shaped by the collective experience and perspective of over 100 school board members who serve in San Mateo County, all for little or no compensation but rather for the passion of serving students in Pre-K through grade 14. Local school board members are charged with ensuring that our public education system fulfills its goals of providing opportunities for each student to reach his or her highest potential and to be a productive and responsible member of society.

This third in a series of position papers is meant to provide an important perspective around the new Common Core State Standards adopted by the State of California. The other position papers can be found at <http://www.smcsba.org/news-resources/position-papers/>.

Development of the Common Core State Standards

Like many other elements of our public school system, California's legacy curriculum standards were based on outdated theories of the science of learning and child development, as well as outdated career skills. California's standards focused on a broad base of knowledge that has been colloquially been referred to as standards that are a "mile wide and an inch deep." Middle school parents across the state can attest that their child's history class covered a millennium of time in one year, with an obvious focus on short-term memorization over deep analysis and insight. In addition, with historically limited technology support for the process of teaching and learning, teaching has often been diminished to rote, textbook-based memorization. Unfortunately, these relatively easy-to-teach skills are the ones which our current workforce can digitize, automate, and outsource. Clearly public schools in the modern era have both the need and the means to re-think the approach to curriculum standards. In 1970, Fortune 500 companies reported that the most important skills of new employees were writing, computational skills, and reading. Just 30 years later, these companies moved all of those skills to the bottom of their list while the most important ones became teamwork, problem solving, interpersonal skills, and oral communications¹.

Enter the [Common Core State Standards \(CCSS\)](#). The development of the CCSS was led by the National Governor's Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers. These two organizations collaborated with teachers, administrators and researchers to create new standards for English and math. The federal government, while supportive of the standards, was not involved in their development. Claims by some of a "federal takeover" of education are unfounded.

¹ Linda Darling-Hammond, *Developing and Assessing Teaching for the Common Core*, presentation to SMCSBA, March 4, 2013



Among many data points, the developers looked at national and international test data, surveys of skills students need for college and career, and standards from high-performing states. They received initial feedback on the draft standards from national organizations representing, but not limited to, teachers, postsecondary educators (including community colleges), civil rights groups, English language learners, and students with disabilities. Following the initial round of feedback, the draft standards were opened for public comment, receiving nearly 10,000 responses. This input from varied stakeholders informed the development of the final standards.

After the development of the CCSS, states had the option to adopt them as their own. 45 states in total have adopted the CCSS. California adopted the CCSS in 2010 and has since been working on implementation.

The CCSS Change Teaching and Learning

California's former "mile wide and inch deep" standards were too numerous to be effectively covered in one school year. Hence so many of these topics were only studied superficially. It was not uncommon for teachers to race through the old standards in an effort to cover as much as they could before the high stakes testing period in May.

With the new CCSS, we see fewer standards that cover topics in much greater depth. The standards are aligned across the grades and build on each other. Overall the CCSS in English address reading, writing, speaking and listening, and include research and media studies as critical skills for the 21st century. English standards include classic myths and stories, literature, and "foundational documents" including the U.S. Constitution, and Shakespeare. Because the CCSS address different skills that are interwoven, teachers have the opportunity to meet several standards through rich complex assignments, leveraging their own unique teaching skills and style.

In English, the CCSS emphasize areas such as:

- Reading increasingly complex texts closely
- Communicating effectively in multiple media and across content areas
- Using evidence; interpreting with justification
- Engaging in inquiry and research

In math, the CCSS address two areas – practice and content. The practice standards are consistent across grade levels while the content standards are different for each grade level. The goal is to foster "habits of mind" that develop mathematical understanding and skills. With the CCSS, students should be engaging in mathematical practices that use mathematical reasoning in application as well as using mathematical skills across content areas and contexts.

The State of California describes the skills of a student who meets all the standards as the following:

- Demonstrates independence



- Has a strong content knowledge
- Responds to the varying demands of audience, task, purpose and discipline
- Comprehends as well as critiques
- Values evidence
- Uses technology and digital media strategically and capably
- Understands other perspectives and cultures

Standards vs. Curriculum vs. Testing

Much of the discussion of the CCSS has conflated them with curriculum and testing. The CCSS delineate what students are expected to know and do, but not how to do them. From these standards, curricula must be developed. It is here that there is great potential for creativity and effective teaching. With scores of CCSS-aligned lesson plans available online, teachers have the chance to build on their strengths in the classroom. Districts can work with their staff to develop different approaches to teaching the standards and innovatively use technology in teaching. And by continually working with teachers around curriculum development and implementation, districts have the opportunity to ensure the voice of the teacher throughout this significant shift in practice.

To determine whether students are meeting the CCSS, California has chosen to be a part of the [Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium \(SBAC\)](#). The SBAC is a significant shift from the multiple-choice tests our children have been subjected to over many years. The SBAC offers a new approach to assessment in that it requires deeper thinking and analysis. Tests are computer adaptive which means that the questions will get harder with every right answer and easier with every wrong answer, resulting in educators better understanding more precisely what students have learned. Questions require demonstration of conceptual understanding by explaining answers, showing work, and doing complex computation rather than choosing from a few multiple choice answers and filling in a bubble. Compared to our old assessments, educators will have a better picture of what students have learned and can apply. This "formative" testing approach gives educators more timely and meaningful feedback to help differentiate learning and to create interventions for each student.

A Call for Patience

Because the CCSS require deeper learning and a more rigorous conceptual understanding of content, teachers and schools will need time to create, adopt and implement new curricula to meet the standards. Many teachers will need high-quality professional development as well as planning and collaboration time to empower them to teach in a way that lets students struggle more to find the right answers rather than choosing from a list of possible answers. Also, as the SBAC will be measuring completely different skills (and in some cases, knowledge) from historical assessments, test scores from prior CSTs cannot be compared to the new scores from the SBAC. Depending on the "norming" system adopted by the state, scores may appear to be lower but it should not imply our students are learning less than before, just that we are evaluating them with more complex tests. For this reason, it's important for our local communities to have patience during this implementation phase.



Transformational change of teaching methods as well as curriculum and technology-based assessments will take time to iterate and perfect. Teachers and schools will need their local communities to offer support and encouragement rather than criticism and demands for speedy results. With such support of local parents and communities, our schools will thrive, and many more of our students will achieve their potential.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the CCSS will enable our schools and educators to delve deeper into subject matter and better promote critical thinking, analysis, project-based learning, writing and communication. Many parents might already see evidence of the CCSS in their classrooms with more rigorous, collaborative, and creative assignments.

And perhaps most importantly, the adoption of the CCSS and SBAC will enable our state to completely re-think assessment systems in the modern age. The opportunity is great to create a set of assessments that de-emphasize one-size-fits-all tests and place more emphasis on multiple measures of academic proficiency as well as college and career readiness. This will require a commitment to multiple measures of healthy school functioning and investments in continual improvement and innovation. The CCSS will need to be implemented in the context of many other educational innovations. They are not a panacea, but rather one critical component to deliver a 21st century education to all students.

More information about the CCSS can be found on these websites:

<http://www.smcoe.org/learning-and-leadership/common-core-state-standards.html>

<http://commoncore.wested.org>

<http://www.cde.ca.gov/re/cc/>

*APPROVED BY THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS OF THE SAN MATEO COUNTY SCHOOL BOARDS ASSOCIATION
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About SMCSBA

The San Mateo County School Boards Association represents the 22 school districts, the Community College District and County Office of Education in San Mateo County, California.

SMCSBA supports governance teams — school board trustees, superintendents and senior administrative staff — and provides networking opportunities for its members. It is a chapter of the California School Boards Association, which is involved in developing, communicating and advocating the perspective of California school districts and county offices of education.

SMCSBA provides educational opportunities at dinner events for board members and administrators on critical issues as well as a New Board Member Workshop in the fall. Each academic year is celebrated with the J. Russell Kent Award Banquet, which honors creative teaching and educational programs within the county.