

Common Core Standards

A national conversation about what students should know and be able to do

Many educators believe that the common core initiative strengthens California's academic standards



California educators are now taking part in the national conversation about the adoption of common standards and assessments for English-language arts and mathematics.

Up until now, the standards for what students should know and be able to do have varied among states, as have the assessments used to determine whether students are meeting those standards. But last year, a national initiative was launched with the aim of developing “common core standards” that set a clear and consistent progression for K-12 learning—regardless of students’ state of residence. Common learning goals were seen as a pathway to more equitable teaching, learning, and assessment systems across states and a strategy that would help states do a better job preparing students to meet college and career expectations.

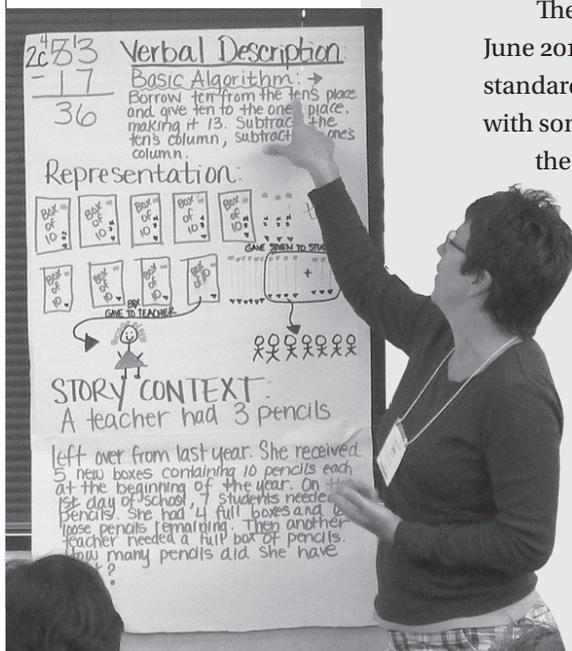
CALIFORNIA JOINS THE INITIATIVE

California was one of 48 states that joined the national initiative for shared educational standards. Our state worked in collaboration with the other participating states to draft common English-language arts and mathematics standards. The process was state-led and supported by the Council of Chief State School Officers and National Governors Association.

The resulting Common Core State Standards (CCSS) were released in June 2010 and adopted by California last August. In approving these new standards, our state combined the nationally-developed core standards with some state-specific supporting standards. The goal of supplementing the national standards was to maintain the unique strength and character of our existing state system, which is generally thought to include some of the most rigorous academic standards in the country.

Many educators believe that the common core initiative strengthens California's academic standards by adding areas of focus that were previously missing. For example, vocabulary and collaborative discussions are incorporated in the common

Petaluma High School teacher Jane Decker Baldwin analyzes a math problem, then explains how her Project LEAD team will apply the common core standards for mathematical practice to build student understanding.



standards. Also included are literacy standards for reading and writing during history/social studies, science, and technical instruction. In mathematics, number sense and algebraic thinking receive more attention.

MOVING TOWARD IMPLEMENTATION

California's implementation of the common core standards will occur in stages over the next few years, giving local educators plenty of time to determine what adjustments need to be made in instruction. One of the tools that will be available to support statewide implementation is a document known as the Administrator Snapshot.* This resource was designed to help schools

understand how the common core standards are similar to—and different from—our current standards.

The Snapshot summarizes “shifts” in the standards and identifies key points of emphasis for the content areas. It then provides a standard-by-standard listing for each grade level, specifying differences between the old and the new. The document will serve as a starting point for schools and districts as they begin the work of melding the common core standards with their current programs. In addition, SCOE will coordinate a “common core network” to provide ongoing implementation support to local districts.

AND ON TO ASSESSMENT

While all states adopting the common core standards will have to evolve their assessments to align with the new standards, they will not have to do this alone. In keeping with the spirit of multi-state collaboration, participating states are joining together to develop shared assessments systems. Two consortia have received federal “Race to the Top” funding for this purpose.

The consortia that California has joined proposes to build a next-generation assessment system for grades 3-12. It will be anchored by college- and career-readiness tests in high school, including end-of-year and “through course” assessments paced to instruction and administered throughout the school year. The computer-based system will include optional formative tests starting in kindergarten.

Although it will be some time before we know how the assessment



Snapshot: English-language arts

The Administrator Snapshot describes the common core standards for English-language arts as similar to our current standards, with two notable shifts.

1 New organization of writing applications

While our current standards specifically identify various writing applications, the common core standards organize writing applications into these three categories:

- Write opinions (K-5) and arguments (6-12)
- Write informative or explanatory texts
- Write narratives

2 Shared responsibility for teaching the ELA standards

The common core standards have *one set* of grade-specific standards for K-5, but there are *two sets* for grades 6-12—one for English teachers and the other for history/social studies, science, and technical subject teachers who are expected to integrate literacy standards into their instruction. ♦

* *The Administrator Snapshot was developed by the California County Superintendents Educational Services Association (CCSESA).*

component of the common core standards will unfold, it's already clear that a common nationally-aligned system holds significant benefits. The possibility of comparing student performance across states on a common metric will provide new information about how California schools are doing, while cross-state cooperation will reduce per-state development costs.

THE LOCAL PERSPECTIVE

Setting clear learning expectations for all students also presents new opportunities to share best practices and develop ongoing professional development for teachers. Here in Sonoma County, work is beginning through the formation of a common core network, which will involve curriculum leaders from districts and the County Office of Education in discussions about local implementation, timelines, and challenges. Continuing the collaborative model, SCOE and Sonoma County districts are joining together to determine what resources and support are needed to move the common core standards into local classrooms. What best practices should we model? Where is access to professional development most critical? What resources can be shared countywide and what aspects are best addressed at the district or site level?

One idea being discussed locally is to use the multi-year transition to common standards as a focal point for all county-level professional development. Responding to the reality that teachers have limited time available for training, sessions may be less frequent but delve deeper into key issues. Because districts are at different starting points when it comes to readiness to take on this new challenge—some districts are already

California's common core standards highlight these six components of English-language arts instruction.

- **Text complexity** | The reading standards place equal emphasis on the sophistication of what students read and the skill with which they read it.
- **Reading and writing across the curriculum** | The standards focus instruction on the connection between reading and writing and the purposeful use of each to gain general knowledge and discipline-specific expertise.
- **Informational text** | There are an equal number of standards for literature and informational text in all grades, which aligns with the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) framework. There are also grade 6-12 literacy standards for other subjects that support the study of informational text.
- **Collaborative conversations** | The standards for speaking and listening call for students to engage in a wide range of collaborative discussions.
- **Writing arguments and drawing evidence from sources** | The standards emphasize writing to persuade and explain. Less emphasis is placed on narrative writing.
- **Integrating media sources** | Research and media skills are incorporated in all strands rather than called out as a separate strand. ♦



aligning formative assessments to the common core standards, while others are just learning of this national movement—training will be differentiated to local needs and respond to the unique issues faced by both small and large districts.

To some extent, the implementation timeline will be driven by the development of the common assessment system, which is expected to be in place in 2014-15, and our large state's ability to align to that system in the next couple of years. But whether or not California meets this timeframe, it's clear that shifts are under way and local educators must prepare to respond. ♦

Conversations about the common core standards are already taking place in Sonoma County ✦

As part of Project LEAD, middle and high school teachers, joined by Sonoma State University mathematician and principal investigator Ben Ford, work together to design instruction that's aligned with the common core standards for mathematical practice.

Pictured from lower left:

*Molly Behm, Petaluma Junior High
Brent Jackson, Santa Rosa Middle
Petina Huffman, Montgomery High
Ben Ford, Sonoma State University
Ed Weber, Piner High
Jim Gueretta, Petaluma High*

About this publication:

The SCOE Bulletin is a quarterly publication that highlights key instructional issues and provides information to help local educators improve student achievement. Content for this issue was provided by Nancy Brownell, assistant superintendent for instructional services, nbrownell@scoe.org. Edited by Suzanne Gedney.

Teachers from several local districts are engaged in a three-year California Mathematics and Science Partnership Grant known as Project LEAD. One of their tasks is to document and implement the processes and structures that engage students in rigorous standards-aligned mathematics learning. In summer sessions and Saturday seminars, the teachers are working collaboratively to analyze the mathematical practices that are at the heart of the common core standards and investigate instructional strategies that support student engagement in those practices.

In addition to defining content standards for each grade level, the common core standards lay out **eight standards for mathematical practice** to describe how students should engage with the subject matter. Throughout the grade levels, students should be actively involved in:

- Making sense of problems and persevering in solving them
- Reasoning abstractly and quantitatively
- Constructing viable arguments and critiquing the reasoning of others
- Modeling with mathematics
- Using appropriate tools strategically
- Attending to precision
- Looking for and making use of structure
- Looking for and expressing regularity in repeated reasoning

As the Project LEAD teachers work together, they “unpack” mathematical problems that support these practices, collect evidence of students’ level of understanding, and work through the problems using representations to devise ways of helping students grasp abstract concepts. Delving into this process, they are realizing that the new standards are **coherent, focused, and aligned** as students advance through the grade levels. The common core standards are a step forward from the standards of the past and compare favorably to international standards. They have evolved from what California educators have learned through years of standards implementation and show promise for helping all schools improve. ✦

