

# Policy Points

## COMMON CORE TALKING POINTS



**A**lthough most states plan to fully implement the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) during the 2014–15 school year, many questions remain about what the standards are, how they were created, and how they will influence students' and teachers' daily work. These Common Core talking points outline basic facts about the standards that you can use not only for your own background knowledge, but also to inform your discussions with your colleagues, community members (including parents), and local policymakers. For more, see the October issue of *Policy Points* (PDF), which highlights Common Core myths and facts.

### WHAT ARE THE COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS?

- The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) outline what students should know and be able to do in English language arts (ELA) and mathematics from kindergarten through 12th grade.
- The standards align with the reading and math knowledge and skills that students need to succeed in credit-bearing, college-entry courses at two- and four-year postsecondary institutions and in workforce training programs for careers that offer competitive, livable salaries; provide opportunities for career advancement; and are in growing or sustainable industries.
- The CCSS include only ELA and math standards. Separate efforts are under way to create model standards for science, social studies, and the arts.
- The ELA standards place a new emphasis on nonfiction content, increasing text complexity, the ability to write logical arguments, and literacy skill building across all subjects.
- The math standards emphasize greater and earlier understanding of mathematical concepts so that students are prepared to apply mathematical problem solving to real world issues and challenges.
- The CCSS are benchmarked to the standards of the world's top-performing countries, including Canada, China, Finland, Hong Kong, Ireland, Korea, New Zealand, Singapore, and the United Kingdom.
- The final version of the standards was introduced in June 2010.

### WHY WERE THEY CREATED?

- The standards were designed to help students succeed in college and their careers. They are intended to stem the need for college remediation and prepare students to collaborate and compete with graduates of other countries in today's global marketplace.
- The standards create consistent, high expectations for all students, no matter where they live, and help ensure that students do not fall behind or receive a disjointed education when they move between districts or states.
- The standards' consistency makes it easier to measure student learning progress across schools, districts, and states.



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## HOW WERE THEY CREATED AND ADOPTED?

- The nation's governors and state education commissioners spearheaded Common Core development by working through their respective membership organizations—the National Governors Association (NGA) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO).
- The state leaders collaborated with subject matter experts, researchers, and educators to write and review the standards.
- States voluntarily adopt the standards. Forty-four states have adopted the CCSS and most are preparing to fully implement them—including administering tests aligned to them—in the 2014–15 school year.
- The federal government was not involved in the standards' development and does not require states to adopt them. However, the federal Race to the Top grant competition incentivized states to adopt college- and career-readiness standards, such as the CCSS, by providing state applicants with additional points for doing so. Additionally, the U.S. Department of Education required states to adopt college- and career-ready standards to receive waivers from No Child Left Behind requirements. To receive a waiver, each state needed to adopt either the Common Core standards or another set of reading and math college- and career-ready standards approved by its network of higher education institutions.

## COMMON CORE IMPLEMENTATION

- The Common Core standards set new targets for what students should know and be able to do, which means that districts and schools need to adjust their curricula, instruction, and educator support so that they align with and complement the standards.
- Districts and schools are choosing their own textbooks and instructional materials, providing teachers with tailored professional development, and designing supports and interventions to help students reach proficiency.
- Districts and schools have the flexibility and the responsibility to implement the new standards in a manner that reflects their local contexts and students' needs.



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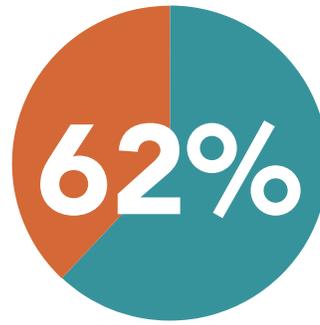
## COMMON CORE ASSESSMENTS

- Many states are participating in one of two assessment consortia that are developing tests aligned with the standards: The Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) and the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (Smarter Balanced).
- Both the PARCC and Smarter Balanced tests are computer-based and will feature varied and sophisticated questions—including performance-based items—that are designed to evaluate students' problem-solving and critical-thinking skills. The Smarter Balanced assessments will use adaptive technology, which adjusts the difficulty of questions throughout the assessment and provides a precise determination of each student's achievement level.
- Both consortia are offering optional interim assessments intended to help educators adjust and differentiate their instruction throughout the year.
- PARCC estimates that its summative assessments will cost less than \$24.00 per student and Smarter Balanced estimates that its summative assessments will cost \$22.50 per student. These cost estimates, however, do not include additional testing expenses such as upgraded classroom technology and improved technological infrastructure and capacity.
- Member states will use the PARCC and Smarter Balanced summative assessments to meet federal accountability requirements. Participating states can also use the tests as part of their school, district, and state accountability systems.

- Each consortium is working to set common cut scores and definitions of “proficiency” so that their member states can report their students’ achievement on a shared scale. These common benchmarks will make it possible for members of the same consortium to compare their respective students’ performance. In addition, Smarter Balanced and PARCC are collaborating to ensure cut score comparability across the two assessments, which would also allow for performance comparisons between the two groups of consortia states.
- Both PARCC and Smarter Balanced will collect basic student demographic data so that states have subgroup performance information for accountability purposes, but they will not report assessment or demographic information at the individual student level.
- PARCC’s privacy policy states that it will never share personally identifiable information about students with the federal government without written authority from a state, unless legally required to do so by court order. The policy also clarifies that PARCC will not use such data for commercial purposes and that state and local education agencies will never release students’ social security numbers to PARCC or its contractors.
- Smarter Balanced’s data privacy policy principle clarifies that each member state retains control of its student-level data. The consortium is also developing separate data privacy agreements with each of its member states.
- Some states are pursuing other assessment options, including using tests from other vendors such as ACT, Inc., or working with test providers to develop their own state assessments aligned with the standards.

## SPECIAL POPULATIONS AND THE COMMON CORE

- The standards were designed according to the belief that all students—including students with disabilities and English language learners—should have access to rigorous academic content.
- The CCSS developers acknowledge that students with disabilities and English language learners may need varying levels of support, services, and accommodations not only to demonstrate their knowledge of the standards, but also to master them.



**of Americans have never heard of the Common Core standards. Of those who have heard of the standards,**

**only 15 percent say they are very knowledgeable about them. Fifty-one percent say they are somewhat knowledgeable about the standards.**

(PDK/Gallup Poll of the Public’s Attitudes Toward the Public Schools, 2013).

- CCSSO, the California Department of Education, and the San Diego County Office of Education have translated the Common Core State Standards in Spanish and made them publicly available.
- Both the PARCC and Smarter Balanced assessment designs will include accommodations for students with disabilities and English language learners.
- Two additional consortia—The National Center and State Collaborative and The Dynamic Learning Maps Alternate Assessment System Consortium—are developing alternative assessments for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities.
- Another two consortia—Assessment Services Supporting English Language Learners Through Technology Systems Consortium and the ELPA21 Consortium—are working on assessment systems for English language learners.

## EDUCATOR AND PUBLIC OPINION OF THE STANDARDS

- Nine out of ten principals and teachers say that they are very knowledgeable or knowledgeable about the Common Core standards (The MetLife Survey of the American Teacher: Challenges for School Leadership, 2012).
- Sixty-seven percent of principals and fifty-nine percent of teachers believe that implementing the



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Common Core standards is very challenging or challenging for school leaders (The MetLife Survey of the American Teacher: Challenges for School Leadership, 2012).

- Eight out of ten principals are very confident or confident that the implementation of the Common Core standards will improve student achievement and better prepare students for college and the workforce; by comparison, slightly more than seven in ten teachers believe the same (The MetLife Survey of the American Teacher: Challenges for School Leadership, 2012).
- Among the third of Americans who have heard of the CCSS, only four in ten say the standards can help make education in the United States more competitive globally; a majority say the standards will make the United States less competitive or have no effect (PDK/Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools, 2013).

### CONSIDERATIONS AND CONCERNS

States, districts, and schools face a number of challenges and questions as they implement both the Common Core standards and the aligned assessment and accountability systems. Read on for some of the considerations and concerns that education leaders will have to address as they make these standards a reality for students across the country.

- The Common Core State Standards and their focus on English language arts and mathematics could further emphasize these two subjects to the detriment of providing students with a comprehensive education that also includes instruction in the arts, civics and government, economics, foreign languages, geography, health education, history, physical education, and

science. **How will states, schools, and districts implement the standards while maintaining a well-rounded approach to education?**

- Many instructional resources in the marketplace are not truly aligned with the Common Core standards and are only labeled as such for marketing purposes. Other resources are of poor quality and reflect misguided interpretations of the standards. **How can districts and schools build the capacity to determine which instructional resources are truly aligned with the standards? How can they help educators identify high-quality classroom resources that are aligned with the standards?**
- The computer-based nature of the PARCC and Smarter Balanced assessments raise several unresolved issues for schools and districts. **For example, what are the upfront and ongoing technology costs for districts to successfully administer the assessments? Do younger students have the technological skills to take the tests?**
- Assessment comparability could be affected if states increasingly drop out of the PARCC and Smarter Balanced consortia to pursue other testing options. **Will the testing options become so diffuse that meaningful performance comparisons across states will be difficult or impossible?**
- States are grappling with how to fairly use the results of the new Common Core assessments to evaluate teachers, make school accountability determinations, and inform decisions about student graduation and postsecondary preparedness. **How will states remain committed to these accountability mechanisms while giving districts, schools, educators, and students ample time to implement and adjust to the new standards and their aligned assessments?**
- Mastery of the Common Core standards is meant to signify college and career readiness. **Will postsecondary institutions consider student demonstration of proficiency on the standards in their admission, class placement, and remediation decisions?**