

## COMMON CORE – WHAT IS THIS?

**Summary:** A responsibility of the Civil Grand Jury is to periodically review the operations of our county education system. An area this jury chose to review is the newest curriculum standard adopted by the State of California in 2010 referred to as “Common Core”. What are these Common Core State Standards (CCSS)? How is it different from traditional ways of learning? What brought about this change and why? These are some of the questions this jury sought to answer. Our hope is that this informational report will bring some light to this new method of teaching and learning; though this report cannot possibly include all of what the “Common Core State Standards (CCSS)” entail.

**Methodology:** – Interviews were conducted as well as technological research.

**Background:** In 1997, California set a bold precedent when it adopted a statewide standards-based education system for English Language Arts defining what students should be learning in an attempt to improve academic achievement. In Math, the United States high school students were ranked 27<sup>th</sup> out of 34 developed countries. In 2001, Congress enacted what was known as the “No Child Left Behind” (NCLB) Act. The purpose of the NCLB Act was for states who were receiving federal funding, to develop and administer standardized tests to be given to all students each year. A school was required to show improvement in standardized test scores year to year known as Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), or steps were put in place for schools to make corrections. For instance, if a school did not show improvement for two years in a row, it was labeled as “needing improvement”. For a third year of not reaching an AYP, a school would be required to offer tutoring and other support services to those students who were in need. Fourth year non-AYP achievement would result in being labeled as “corrective action” needed. That “corrective action” could be as serious as replacing staff if necessary. Further corrective actions were put in place for fifth year and sixth year AYP failures, to the extreme that a school could lose funding, be closed or turned over to a private entity to be run as a charter school.

Along with yearly standardized testing, states were to provide schools with “highly qualified” teachers. Existing or tenured teachers were required to meet specific standards like that of a new teacher which could include a bachelor’s degree in teaching, be certified and have specific subject knowledge. Further, teachers were required to meet a “high, objective, uniform state standard of evaluation” aka “HOUSSE”. Problems existed in that educators throughout have struggled to identify specific teacher traits that are important for student achievement. No consensus could be met on what traits were important. Further research is required before “trait standards” can be ascertained.

In early implementation, Congress allotted massive amounts of funding for NCLB in elementary and secondary education. A new Reading First program was created at a cost of over \$1 billion where grant funds were distributed to local schools in an effort to help teach reading and additionally, \$100 million for a companion program called Early Reading First. Priority for funding was given to lowest-income areas. Funding was eventually cut with budget issues. Over the next several years, many different aspects of the NCLB Act as well as funding sources changed.

A state assessment in 2005 showed marked improvement in student test scores for reading and math. It became apparent, however, that teacher focus was on teaching students to achieve higher scores on the standardized tests – the measuring tool.

In 2010, the President rolled out the blueprint for the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the successor to the NCLB Act. In this blueprint, legislation would lessen its stringent test score accountability punishments and focus more on student improvement. School systems would be re-designed considering measures beyond reading and math tests. Incentives would be given to keep students enrolled in school instead of encouraging student drop-outs to increase the AYP scores. That Administration felt that standardized testing failed to capture higher level thinking and outlined new systems of evaluating student achievement, though standardized testing in some form would still be used. This plan came on the heels of the “Race to the Top” initiative, a \$4.35 billion reform program financed by the Department of Education through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009. Resources were given to improve the quality of standardized testing requirements and accountability measures produced by these tests. Critics maintained that high stakes testing is detrimental to school success as it encourages teachers to “teach to the test” and places undue pressure on those schools and teachers failing to reach the stated benchmarks. By 2015, the NCLB Act was replaced with the “Every Student Succeeds Act” or ESSA. During the last decade and as a result of the NCLB Act, education reform has been at the forefront and the “Common Core State Standards” were developed.

**DISCUSSION:** What is the Common Core? It is an educational initiative that details what students in grades Kindergarten through 12th grade throughout the United States should know in subjects of English Language Arts, Mathematics, History/Social Studies, Science and Technical Subjects to ensure that all students are literate and college and career ready no later than the end of high school. This was developed through a collaborative effort between the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) and the National Governors Association (NGA). Initially, 46 states adopted the Common Core Standards with Kentucky being the first to jump on board. Of the initial 46 states, 12 have now introduced legislation to repeal the CCSS outright with 4 states having since withdrawn. The CCSS are a continuously evolving standards as new and better data emerges. Input is gathered from numerous sources including state departments of education, scholars, assessment developers, and professional organizations, educators from kindergarten through college level, parents, students and other members of the public.

CCSS are designed to prepare our students for the future by teaching them real-world skills they will need entering into college and then on to a career. The major benefit of the CCSS is that with almost all of our states implementing the CCSS, keeping the curriculum for English Language Arts and Math similar enough for each grade level, that if a family moved from one state to another, their child(ren) will have access to the same lesson types. In the educational video explaining the CCSS that is available on the California State Education website, it explains the CCSS like this:

*...“You can think of kindergarten to 12th grade like a giant staircase. Each step is a skill your child needs to learn before stepping up to the next one. But right now, too many kids aren’t really confident with like  $2 + 2$  before they have to move on to  $2 \times 2$ . We need more focus on the skills that help them move up the stairs or they can slip up and fall behind. Further, each standard creates a landing on the staircase, a stop along the way as your child heads toward high school graduation. Each stop is a*

*chance for every parent and teacher to focus on the skills their students are supposed to know at that step no matter the ZIP code, language or race. And more importantly, each standard makes sure all students are learning what they need to know to get to graduation and beyond. Because something like coming to a hundred leads to understanding dollars and cents which eventually leads to understanding how to manage a budget. Secondly, the standards are consistent from school-to-school and they match up against international standards too. Now, we know how we're doing compared to just about everyone. So even though local communities will still design their own curriculum, with the same rules, everybody can compete on the same kind of staircase but standards aren't learning. That's why we need teachers, parents and students to help make that happen by working together to help kids meet these standards. The world is getting more and more competitive every day. But now, when our kids get to the top of their staircase, they can have way more options on where their life goes from there. Clear goals, confident well-prepared students, that's the Common Core State Standards"*

Though California's original educational standards were very rigorous, overall they didn't focus enough on preparing students to be college and career ready after high school graduation. Some of the outgoing curriculum in California was more rigorous than what was being proposed for the new standards so portions were integrated back into the new curriculum. Now with CCSS, students learn materials at a greater depth so they are able to use and apply information. One teacher stated that "before, we just taught kids simple reading, writing and arithmetic. Now, we teach them how to apply what they learn to everyday life skills". For example, students are taught to read informational text, then write supporting arguments based on the text they have read.

Under the CCSS mathematics are done beyond simple calculations. Solid mathematical foundations are provided to students in earlier grades where they learn in whole numbers, addition, subtraction, multiplication, division, fractions and decimals. When they reach higher grade levels, their understanding of mathematical concepts is much greater and more entrenched. The California Common Core State Standards for Mathematics (CA CCSSM) provides higher mathematical standards in two model courses or pathways: the Traditional pathway which includes Algebra I, Geometry, and Algebra II. The Integrated pathway includes Mathematics I, II, and III. Whichever pathway a school district decides to take, each student must learn the concepts and skills in the K-8 standards to be ready for the rigors of these courses. Further, regardless of which pathway is chosen, students will also use "modeling" which is a Standard for Mathematical Practice as well as a conceptual category for higher mathematics. Modeling is "the process of choosing and using appropriate mathematics and statistics to analyze situations, to understand them better and to improve decisions." According to the California Department of Education, as a mathematical practice, modeling should be interwoven throughout both pathways and bridge the gap between academic and real-world problems (California Department of Education June 2013).

Students are expected to meet each year's CCSS for that particular grade level before advancing to the next. They are expected to be able to retain and further develop skills that were mastered in their preceding grades. They are also expected to work steadily toward meeting the expectations described in the College and Career Readiness (CCR) standards.

The CCSS are divided into individual grade levels in kindergarten through 8<sup>th</sup> grade. Two-year bands are used for grades 9-10 and 11-12 to allow schools flexibility in high school course design. The CCSS leave room for teachers to use whatever tools and knowledge that their professional judgment and experience deem most helpful for meeting the CCSS. This gives a

great deal of flexibility to districts and their schools. They are allowed to choose different publishers and use many additional resources to teach the curriculum as long as the outcome meets the mandated CCSS. Here in Siskiyou County, representative teachers from all the districts are involved in choosing what publisher's textbooks and materials will be used. Each year, one of the subject areas is implemented. The first one to be implemented four years ago was English Language Arts. Math followed the subsequent year. Currently, the implementation of the new Science curriculum is being addressed. The next cycle will again be the English Language Arts where there will be a county-wide adoption of specific publisher's textbook(s). These publishers will provide training necessary for staff to teach the curriculum. Siskiyou County has 25 school districts and 2 charter schools under its umbrella. The charter schools are unlike other public schools as they are not mandated to teach the "CCSS". The Northern United Charter School (formerly Mattole) has 126 students and Golden Eagle Charter School currently has approximately 480 students. The Memorandum Of Understanding between the charter schools and the Siskiyou County Office of Education states that students attending the charter schools must be Siskiyou County residents.

Adequately measuring whether or not the development and mandate of the CCSS has improved student learning has been difficult as there has not been sufficient time to analyze the data. However, now that we in our county will soon be entering into our fifth year of adoption, we have new data coming in that is more accurate and that has validity indicating a marked improvement in overall student learning. For those schools and school districts who are not yet "measuring up", the County Office of Education is required to offer differentiated assistance to assist those that may be struggling. In other words, to provide individually designed assistance to address specific identified performance issues. At the writing of this report, it could not be ascertained whether there had been any type of national survey done on whether the CCSS had a marked improvement on our students' scores.

What Common Core State Standards do not cover:

- They do not tell us how teachers should teach, only what students are expected to know and be able to do.
- They do not describe all that can or should be taught. A great deal is left to the discretion of the teacher.
- They do not define advanced work for students who meet the standards prior to the end of high school.
- Though grade specific standards are set, there are no defined interventions or materials to support students who are well below or well above grade-level expectations.
- Also beyond the scope of standards is a defined full range of supports appropriate for English language learners and for students with special needs. However, students have opportunity to learn and meet the same high standards if they are to acquire skills necessary immediately following high school graduation.

What is an example of a student portrait after being taught by the CCSS?

- Ability to comprehend and evaluate complex texts across a range of types and disciplines and be able to construct effective arguments and convey intricate information.
- Be self-directed learners and able to use a wide range of vocabulary. Also to be good listeners discerning precisely what an author or speaker is saying.

- Become proficient in new areas through research and study.
- Become proficient in the use of technology and digital media by learning strengths and limitations of various technological tools and media and select the best method to use for their communication goal.
- Be able to apply mathematical ways of thinking to real world issues and challenges, as well as construct sound mathematical arguments. Use mathematics in ways that produce various outcomes and be able to apply and solve complex problems.
- Greater diversity.

As stated in the California Department of Education Curriculum, Learning and Accountability Branch, the CCSS define what it means to be a literate person in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. *“Students who master the standards will be fluent readers, critical thinkers, informative writers, effective speakers, and engaged listeners. They also will use technology as a source of information and a means of communication.”*

The homework of today is not like the homework of yesterday. It is much more complex with terms and problems many of us did not experience in our school days. Parents often become confused and frustrated and unable to assist their child(ren) with homework. The CCSS are a new way of learning prompting new ways of thinking. Good or bad, in California, the Common Core State Standards are here to stay. At least for a while anyway!

There is an ocean of information available on the Common Core State Standards. Many of our county school websites have informational tabs and links to help inform parents of what the “Standards” are about. Visit your school’s website or another excellent source is the California State Department of Education (CSDE) website: <https://www.cde.ca.gov>. Within this website are scores of links and tabs that have information on the “Standards”

Go to the CSDE website and choose “Standards & Framework”. Next, click on “Common Core State Standards”. Then, under “Resources” is a “Student/Parent” tab. Here, a parent can find all the information they may need to understand the “Standards”. There is also an informational video as well as easy to read printable brochures on specific subject matters such as Reading Comprehension and Writing Skills. Also available are tools to help parents learn and in turn, be more adept at helping their child(ren) with their homework and most importantly, what their children are learning in school to prepare them for their future.

Questions: Common Core Team | [commoncoreteam@cde.ca.gov](mailto:commoncoreteam@cde.ca.gov) | 916-319-0881.

It is the hope of the 2018/19 Civil Grand Jury that readers have gained a better understanding of the Common Core Curriculum Standards or at least, enough resource information has been given for readers to seek and further their knowledge on the subject matter.

This information was generated from the following resources:

- California Department of Education
- California State Board of Education
- Sacramento County Office of Education
- Siskiyou County Office of Education
- United States Department of Education

- National Governor's Association
- Council of Chief State School Officers
- Mathematics Standards/Common Core State Standards Initiative