Academic standards define the skills and knowledge young people need to acquire to be successful. As such, standards are crucial components of a high-quality education system. Since 2010, more than 40 states have adopted new, consistent, and rigorous standards—often referred to as the Common Core State Standards—for English language arts and mathematics in grades K – 12. The states that made these standards their own are now working to implement those rules, as well as put related supports in place. This work involves key stakeholders including teachers, administrators, parents, and other members of local communities. Many states are striving to implement the new standards by the 2014-2015 school year, and a majority of states are working in one or more consortia to develop new assessments aligned to these standards.

This primer provides information on:

- The origin and adoption of states’ new academic standards;
- Supporting educators through effective implementation; and
- Assessments aligned to the new standards.

The State-led Development and Adoption of the New Standards

The development effort was coordinated by the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices (NGA Center) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), and it included a robust public comment period in which more than 10,000 comments were received. NASBE has been active in coordinating with the NGA Center and CCSSO and have worked with states in the adoption and implementation processes of the standards by holding conferences, disseminating written information, and providing technical assistance.

Education leaders and experts—including teachers, school administrators and researchers—in 48 states and the District of Columbia worked together to create a rigorous and consistent set of standards in English language arts and mathematics for grades K – 12. The new standards build on the best of state and international standards. They also set appropriate goals for young people to achieve in order to be ready for success in college and the workplace.

By sharing consistent standards that are challenging and mapped to what young people actually need to know and be able to do, states will be holding all students to the same high academic expectations that prepare young people for success in college and career. In addition, for the first time military parents will have the benefit of knowing there are consistent, high expectations in a majority of states across the country. Even if a family moves from one state to another, they will know what the goals and expectations are for their child regardless of what grade the child is in. Finally, the adopting states will reap the benefits that come with coordinating efforts, realizing economies of scale, and learning from each other’s best practices.

Adoption

Once the standards were finalized in June 2010, they were thoroughly reviewed by most states. In addition, some states exercised the option of adding up to 15 percent more material to tailor the standards to fit local needs. It is important to note that all states followed their established processes for adopting academic standards. For a majority of states, that entailed a state board of education vote.

To date, 46 states and the District of Columbia have adopted the standards. This includes Minnesota, which decided to only adopt the English language arts standards. While there has been some skepticism about the federal government role in the process, the push for consistent standards has always been state-led and has operated independently during two presidential administrations. For instance, while the U.S. Department of Education provided an incentive for a handful of states to adopt consistent college and career ready academic standards as part of the Race to the Top competition, states made the decision to adopt on their own. Most states that did not receive Race to the Top funds still made the new standards their own.
Supporting Educators Through Effective Implementation

Every state that adopted the Common Core is moving ahead with the hard work of aligning curriculum, instruction, teacher preparation, professional development, and assessments to the new standards in order to support and guide teaching and learning. State boards of education are in a unique position to act as a liaison and visionary leader between stakeholders as states work to make changes that suit the needs of all students.

Are the New Academic Standards Curriculum?

No. Teachers will continue to create lesson plans and tailor instruction to the needs of the students in their classrooms. States are currently in the process of developing programs, curricular frameworks, and instructional material that suit their unique needs.

In addition, state boards can help ensure that states take the critical steps toward effective implementation, including:

- Aligning the state’s graduation requirements to ensure that students will graduate ready for college and the workforce;
- Ensuring teacher preparation programs are graduating students who are ready to teach the content and possess the necessary pedagogical knowledge/skills necessary to teach the standards;
- Making investments to align all components of the education system with the new standards;
- Keeping district officials, principals, teachers, and parents informed and working closely with them to assess needs and determine sensible solutions;
- Supporting and seeking ways to fund the ongoing professional development that is necessary to help teachers bring the new standards into the classroom effectively; and
- Ensuring the state’s accountability system supports the shift to the new standards and assessments.

NASBE has been working with states and collaborating with partner organizations to provide state boards the relevant information and assistance to support the transition to the standards. Please visit www.nasbe.org to learn more about these efforts.

Assessments Aligned to the Common Core State Standards

Two coalitions of states funded through the U.S. Department of Education are developing assessments aligned with the state’s new academic standards: The Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium and the Partnership for the Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC). Forty-four states and the District of Columbia are involved in at least one of the consortia. This collaborative work has the potential to save states money and time staff would have taken to create state-specific exams. Additionally, the work of the consortia will provide parents, students, and teachers a transparent process of preparing students for the demands of college and the workplaces; and state education leaders the opportunity for comparability of student progress across the nation.

Both of these groups are developing systems that will include end-of-year tests that measure what students have learned over the year and shorter formative assessments that can act as “spot-checks” throughout the year. The formative assessments will help teachers to monitor student progress and to modify instruction when needed.

Two additional assessment consortia called the National Center and State Collaborative and Dynamic Learning Maps were created to ensure that students with significant cognitive disabilities achieve higher academic outcomes upon leaving high school ready for post-secondary options. A fifth consortium, the Assessment Services Supporting ELs through Technology Systems (ASSETS), was created to develop computer-based English language proficiency assessments for English language learners aligned with the new standards.

State boards of education will play a critical role in implementing the new assessments. For example, in most cases, board members will weigh in and have a role in setting cut scores to define student performance levels for entry into college.

Additional Resources

More information about the states’ new academic standards and coming assessment is available from these organizations:

- NASBE – www.nasbe.org
- Common Core State Standards Initiative – www.corestandards.org
- Partnership for the Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) – www.parcconline.org
- Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium – www.smarterbalanced.org

The primary beneficiaries of the new Common Core standards are the students of our country. The natural extension of that fact is the ultimate benefit to our communities, states, and our country. Common focus and standards in these areas of study are essential to assuring success for all our students….The Common Core Standards in math and language arts were determined by the Kansas State Board to be a big step toward eliminating these problems and inequities and leveling the playing field for U.S. students.

—Ken Willard 2009 President of NASBE