

CHAPTER 2.

WHY IS THIS HAPPENING?

CONTEXT AND PROMISE OF THE COMMON CORE ELA STANDARDS

In our experience, most teachers are not rigidly resistant to change, but they are often not provided with the critical explanations and rationales behind reforms and initiatives that contribute to creating a productive context for change. School-wide and district-wide initiatives quickly devolve to the nuts and bolts of getting them done, often because there simply is not enough time in the day, week, month or year, or because those responsible for making the initiative happen do not consider it important to provide a clear and coherent explanation of why the initiative is necessary. Any attempted change will stand a much greater chance of succeeding if teachers are provided with the rationale for why the change is important and necessary. This brief overview should answer the simple, but important question, “Why is this happening?” That is, why is California transitioning to a new set of standards?

Before discussing the history of the standards movement itself and the larger context for the Common Core standards, it is important to note that the federal government has no real authority over education in the United States, as authority over public education resides strictly with state and local governments. The federal government can however incentivize states to cooperate with federal educational initiatives by attaching federal funding to them. In each of the cases discussed here – including the Common Core, the federal government has done exactly that. In order for states to be eligible to apply for and receive certain federal funds, they must comply with the requirements of certain federal legislation (e.g. Goals 2000, NCLB, Common Core State Standards). This explains some things: The Common Core standards are not National Standards. We do not now, and will not, as a result of the Common Core, have mandated “national standards,” as required by the federal government. Instead, they are truly a set of core standards that will be common to all states that choose to adopt them. Each state decides to adopt or not to adopt the new Common Core State Standards. Currently, 46 of 50 states have adopted the Common Core standards. That leaves some holdouts. Holdout states still may decide to adopt the Common Core and become eligible for certain federal funding (in the case of the Common Core, Race to The Top funding) or they may not. States have license to add up to 15% more material to the Common Core from their currently existing state standards. This affords states some latitude to make the Common Core their own by retaining standards they feel are of particular importance.

2.1. The History

So how did we get to this point and why is the Common Core even happening? With regard to the new Common Core standards, there is a very clear rationale for why the new standards are necessary, and that rationale is rooted in the history of educational standards in this country. The history of the standards movement in the United States is short, reaching back only to the late 1980s. Goal’s 2000 was a set of six national goals developed by the National Governors Association in 1989 and introduced by President Bush in 1990. In 1994, President Clinton formally signed into law Goals 2000 with two additional goals added. As an initiative, Goals 2000 was intended to improve educational outcomes in the United States by the year 2000. The goals were broad in nature and very different from the kinds of standards we have become familiar with over the last 12 years. As an example, the Goals 2000 legislation specified that, “All children in America will start school ready to learn,” and, “The United States students will be first in the world in mathematics and science achievement.” As well intended as these goals were, they lacked the usefulness of standards that provide real direction and detail concerning that which students should be able to know and do on a grade-by-grade basis. In 2002, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) effectively replaced Goals 2000 as the driving force behind national educational reform. NCLB required each individual state to develop state standards and annual assessments to measure student progress against the standards. The federal government accomplished this on a state-by-state basis. They negotiated with each state regarding exactly what their standards would be, how they would assess them, and the level of achievement they would consider to be “proficient.” Although NCLB required annual measureable growth in student achievement each year until all students reached proficiency (by 2014), the legislation never definitively defined what proficiency meant, leaving that for individual states to decide.

Some notable things were achieved as the result of NCLB. For instance, all states formalized learning goals in the form of state standards—no small achievement considering the latitude individual states have with regard to educational policy. It is notable, however, as it generally represents an effort to truly define that which students should be able to know and do grade-by-grade, K-12. Fifty individual sets of standards, assessments and proficiency levels, however, does represent a complex undertaking and significant variation became apparent as states began reporting results. Literally and figuratively, states were all over the map.

2.2. The Evidence

In 2007, the U.S. Department of Education published a report that analyzed state reported results against achievement data collected by the U.S. Department of Education. Every 2 to 4 years the U.S. Department of Education through the Institute for Educational Sciences (IES) and the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), conducts a random sample assessment of students across the country called the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). While NAEP is by no means a national exam (random samples of students within each state at grades 4, 8 and 12 are given the test), it is a common exam and as such provides an interesting cross-reference to the data that states were reporting via their own individual standards-based assessments. NAEP data, when cross-referenced with achievement data reported from states for the purpose of NCLB showed a clear and very interesting correlation. States that were reporting larger percentages of students meeting state standards tended to have lower equivalent achievement levels on NAEP, and states reporting smaller percentages of students meeting state standards tended to have higher equivalent achievement levels on NAEP. Extracted from the 2007 IES report, Table 2.1 lists NAEP equivalent scores and the percentage of students meeting state standards for Reading at Grade 4 and 8 in 2005. For grades 4 and 8, respectively, columns 3 and 7 include the average percentage of students meeting or exceeding the state proficiency criterion (a cut score) at the schools randomly sampled in the NAEP assessment. To determine the NAEP equivalent score shown in columns 4 and 8, the IES/NCES analysts determined the NAEP score met or exceeded by the average percentage of students meeting state proficiency criteria. For example, in California, on average, 48% of fourth graders across the schools in the NAEP sample scored proficient or advanced in ELA on the California Standards Test in 2005 (CST scale score of 350 or better). On average, 48% of fourth graders in the NAEP sample scored at or above a scale score of 210 on the NAEP assessment that same year. The NAEP equivalent is the score that divides the state's NAEP sample into the same percentage meeting and not meeting as the state assessment.

Table 2.1 orders states by their NAEP equivalent score for each of grades 4 and 8. States with the highest NAEP equivalent scores tended to have the lowest percentages meeting state proficiency criteria. States with the lowest NAEP equivalent scores tended to have the highest percentages meeting state proficiency criteria. The results indicate that states were setting the bar for proficiency at significantly different levels. This likely was not a complete surprise to educators and policy makers. The vast range of state proficiency results is hard to explain in and of itself: Why in 2005 would some states have as few as 30-35% of 4th and 8th graders meeting state proficiency standards while others had almost 90%. The identification and reporting of the NAEP equivalents made very clear that the bar set for meeting state proficiency varied significantly from state to state.

Table 2.1. Mapping state results to the NAEP reading scale, grades 4 and 8, 2005.

Grade 4				Grade 8			
1 Row Num.	2 State	3 Estimate of percentage meeting the state proficiency standard	4 Estimated NAEP score equivalent to the state standard	5 Row Num.	6 State	7 Estimate of percentage meeting the state proficiency standard	8 Estimated NAEP score equivalent to the state standard
1	MA	48%	234	1	WY	39%	278
2	SC	35%	228	2	SC	30%	276
3	WY	47%	228	3	NY	49%	268
4	AR	53%	217	4	FL	44%	265
5	CT	66%	212	5	CA	39%	262
6	NV	48%	212	6	HI	37%	262
7	CA	48%	210	7	PA	64%	258
8	NM	50%	208	8	ND	72%	255
9	NY	71%	207	9	AR	57%	254
10	KY	67%	206	10	OR	64%	254
11	HI	56%	205	11	LA	54%	251
12	ND	76%	204	12	NM	52%	251
13	FL	71%	202	13	IA	72%	250
14	IN	72%	199	14	NJ	74%	250
15	OH	77%	199	15	IN	66%	249
16	LA	65%	198	16	MS	58%	247
17	IA	77%	197	17	IL	72%	245
18	MT	81%	197	18	MD	68%	245
19	WA	80%	197	19	AZ	63%	244
20	NJ	81%	191	20	DC	44%	244
21	TX	81%	190	21	OK	71%	244
22	WI	83%	189	22	CT	77%	242
23	MD	82%	187	23	DE	80%	242
24	CO	86%	186	24	KS	78%	242
25	WV	80%	186	25	OH	80%	241
26	ID	87%	185	26	ID	82%	235
27	NC	82%	183	27	AK	82%	230
28	AK	79%	182	28	CO	86%	229
29	OK	82%	182	29	WI	86%	229
30	GA	87%	175	30	WV	80%	228
31	TN	88%	170	31	TX	83%	225
32	MS	88%	161	32	GA	83%	224
				33	TN	87%	222
				34	NC	88%	217

NOTE: NAEP reading cut scores at grade 4 are 208 for Basic and 238 for Proficient, and at grade 8 are at grade 8 are 243 for Basic and 281 for Proficient. SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 2005 Reading Assessment, and National Longitudinal School-Level State Assessment Score Database (NLSLSASD).

There are a few likely explanations for these results and the concerns they raise: First, there might be great variation among the standards developed by states for NCLB. While some states may have developed more challenging standards for students to master, others may have developed less challenging standards that many students readily master. Second, there might be great variation among the assessments developed by states to measure student progress. As is the case with the standards, some states may have developed more challenging assessments, and other may have developed less challenging assessments. Third, there might be great variation among individual state's definition of proficiency. As an example, even before NCLB went into effect, California had established five achievement bands for the California Standards Test: Far Below Basic, Below Basic, Basic, Proficient,

and Advanced. By design, the Proficient band represented a high standard, as evidenced by the fact that, on average, less than one third of 2nd through 11th graders were scoring Proficient or Advanced in ELA as of 2002. In fact, on average, almost two-thirds of 2nd through 11th graders were scoring Basic or better in 2002 (i.e., Basic, Proficient or Advanced). Ostensibly, California could have set its NCLB bar at Basic or better (CST scale score of 300 or better), but chose instead to retain the proficiency criteria already established in the state pre-NCLB (350 or better). Some states likely opted for setting their bar at a level corresponding to what would be Basic or better in California.

The Common Core is, in large part, intended to eliminate this kind of inconsistency created by NCLB's state-by-state approach to standards, assessment and accountability. A "Common Core" should contribute to greater consistency and coherence across states. This effort represents not just a "raising of the bar" but a matter of setting the bar at the same height for all states. However, given the state-by-state history of educational standards and their development, it stands to reason that the implications for transitioning to the Common Core are also somewhat state-specific. Since each state is transitioning from its own set of standards, assessments and proficiency definitions, the transition to Common Core—what it means and what it entails—will naturally vary from state to state. In California, given the available data indicating the relative strength of our standards and proficiency criteria, the transition clearly will be different from those who set the bar significantly lower.

• Section notes: For additional reading on the history and analysis of standards-based reform in the U.S. and the major source for the explanation in this section see Resnick, L. B., Stein, M. K., & Coon, S. E. (2008). "Standards-based reform: A powerful idea unmoored." In R. Kahlenberg (Ed.), Improving on no child left behind: Getting education reform back on track (pp. 103-138). New York: The Century Foundation.

2.3. The Response

Given the growing concern about inconsistencies in achievement data described in the previous section and the National Governors Association's (NGA) involvement in the standards movement from its very inception, it makes sense that once again it was the NGA that led the charge for standards reform specifically to create greater coherence in learning goals and outcomes nationally. Under the banner Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSSI), the NGA and the National Council of Chief State Schools Officers (CCSSO) recruited and established specific groups to (a) develop, (b) feed back, and (c) validate the Common Core standards. The process involved representatives from a wide range of stake-holder organizations, including the National Council of Teaching of English, National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, American Federation of Teachers, National Education Association, American Association of School Administrators, National Parent Teacher Association, National Association of State Boards of Education. Drafted and reviewed and revised after several public hearings, the Common Core Standards were finalized and published in June of 2010 (for additional information see www.corestandards.org). Immediately subsequent to finalization of the Common Core standards California established a Commission to review them, propose items to be added from the 1997 California ELA standards, and make recommendations to the California State Board of Education about adoption. In August of 2010, the State Board of Education adopted California's versions of the Common Core standards for ELA and Math.

2.4. The Insight and Innovation

The Common Core State Standards Initiative is an extension of a previous initiative spear-headed by NGA and CCSSO to develop College and Career Readiness (CCR) standards in mathematics, reading, writing, speaking, listening, and language. Released in September of 2009, the CCR became the "Anchor" for the development of the K-12 Common Core Standards. Each of the 32 CCR ELA standards were translated into grade-by-grade progressions from Kindergarten through grades 11-12. The 32 College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards (CCRA) include 10 reading standards, 10 writing standards, 6 language standards, and 6 speaking and listening standards. For each of these 32 standards there is a version for Kindergarten, 1st grade, 2nd grade, 3rd grade and so on, all the way through 12th grade. This architecture and method provides a new and notable change for standards in California. They allow the progress of each standard to be traced, studied and understood from Kindergarten through 12th grade.

The coherence of the K-12 Common Core ELA standards provides new opportunities for meaningful and productive vertical articulation around a standard or standards that, while not identical from grade to grade, are all about the same thing. The CCRA also provide a common language within and across grade levels. Reading Standard #2 is about the same thing (themes or central ideas in a text) for all grade levels. Once familiar with the standards, the mention of Reading Standard #2 is potentially meaningful for all teachers. This represents an important improvement over the 1997 ELA standards. In addition, owing to the CCRA architecture, the K-12 Common Core ELA standards provide an additional level of organization and coherence as they group related standards together into clusters. The clusters provide a way of viewing the standards in larger, but sensible chunks. The clusters for the Language Arts Common Core Standards by strand are (see the end of this Chapter for the CCRA standards themselves):

Reading

Key Ideas and Details
Craft and Structure
Integration of Knowledge and Ideas
Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity

Writing

Text Types and Purposes
Production and Distribution of Writing
Research to Build and Present Knowledge
Range of Writing

Speaking and Listening

Comprehension and Collaboration
Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas

Language

Conventions of Standard English
Knowledge of Language
Vocabulary Acquisition and Use

2.5. From College and Career Readiness Standards to K-12 ELA Common Core Standards

In translating the CCRA standards to the K-12 Common Core standards, the developers incorporated two adaptations. First, they developed two versions of the reading standards: one version as applied to reading literature, and one for reading informational text. Creating standards for both literature and informational text does not necessarily double the number of Reading standards but rather creates two versions of the same standard that addresses both kinds of text students need to learn to read. In fact the two versions of the standards provide beneficial guidance to teachers in helping students tackle the challenge of each kind of text—studying literature via themes, plot, character development, setting and studying informational texts via central ideas, supporting ideas and/or argumentation.

In addition, the Reading Foundational Skills are a set of four standards that are relevant to grades kindergarten through five. These standards outline the basic reading skills that students must master in order to tackle the more challenging texts they'll face in upper elementary years and beyond. The four Reading Foundational Skills focus on (1) Print Concepts and (2) Phonological Awareness specified for grades K and 1, and also (3) Phonics and Word Recognition and (4) Fluency specified for grades K-5. These standards are not included in the CCRA as they would, for the most part, bear on very few students beyond 5th grade. The Reading Foundational Skills are available for use by teachers at any grade level and should be referenced when appropriate to helping older students who continue to struggle in mastering these basic reading skills.

Section notes: For additional reading on the CCSS Initiative, CCR standards, and the development of the Common Core K-12 standards, as well as the major source used for explanations in Sections 2.2, 2.3, and 2.4, go to www.corestandards.org.