

spotlight

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35 QUESTIONS ABOUT COMMON CORE *Answers for North Carolinians*

Over the last several months, the Common Core State Standards Initiative has attracted considerable attention from the state and national media. As a result, North Carolinians have begun to consider how these changes will affect their public schools.

Unfortunately, readily accessible information about the Common Core is often hard to come by. The purpose of this primer is to introduce North Carolinians to the Common Core State Standards by answering some of the most frequently asked questions about common standards and tests. North Carolina taxpayers should use it as a first step in an ongoing effort to assess the massive changes underway in our public schools.

1. What are the Common Core State Standards?

The Common Core State Standards are a series of grade-by-grade educational standards. In 2014, the state plans to add tests that correspond to the standards.

2. What are educational standards?

There is no established definition of educational standards. According to the Common Core State Standards Initiative website, “Educational standards help teachers ensure their students have the skills and knowledge they need to be successful by providing clear goals for student learning.”¹ Unfortunately, that definition of educational standards is unclear. A better definition of educational standards states that they are “levels of achievement or expectation against which people and objects can be assessed.”²

3. Are educational standards the same thing as curriculum?

No. Nevertheless, educational standards form the basis of curriculum, guide classroom teaching, and are used in the development of standardized tests.

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4. Which groups supported the development of Common Core standards?

Three Washington, D.C.-based organizations provided support – The National Governors Association, the Council of Chief State School Officers, and Achieve, Inc. The Seattle, WA-based Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation funded a significant portion of the project.

5. Who wrote the Common Core standards?

The chief architects of the standards were three individuals, David Coleman, Susan Pimentel, and Jason Zimba, who have ties to one or more of the groups listed above. Coleman, Pimentel, and Zimba were assisted by committees of college professors, public school teachers, state education officials, consultants, and representatives from advocacy groups. According to two curriculum experts, “changes [to standards and curricula] are being dictated by a very select group that occupies the top of the educational food chain.... the folks making the changes—or at least writing and assessing the educational mandates—are far away from the majority of folks who need to implement the changes.”³

6. Were any North Carolinians involved?

Professor Jere Confrey of the N.C. State University College of Education was the only North Carolinian identified as a participant in the forming of the standards. She declared, “Common Core State Standards represent an opportunity—once in a lifetime!”⁴

7. What grades do Common Core standards cover?

Public school children from kindergarten through twelfth grade will be taught according to Common Core standards.

8. Which subjects do Common Core standards cover?

Currently, Common Core standards exist for English language arts and mathematics. However, the English and math standards require children to “read, write, and research across the curriculum, including in history and science.”⁵

9. Will other subjects be added?

Achieve, the National Research Council, the National Science Teachers Association, and the American Association for the Advancement of Science, are developing common science standards, called the Next Generation Science Standards. The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages developed the National Standards for Learning Languages to complement the English language arts Common Core State Standards. Finally, the National Coalition for Core Arts Standards is leading the revision of the National Standards for Arts Education.

10. Are the Common Core English language arts standards high quality?

There is a great deal of debate about the quality of the Common Core English language arts standards. The new common standards are likely an improvement over North Carolina’s previous English standards but are still critically flawed. Chester E. Finn and Michael J. Petrilli of the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation argued that the Common Core English language arts standards are “clearly superior to the existing English standards of 37 states,” including North Carolina.⁶ On the other hand, in a detailed 2012 study, Sandra Stotsky, Professor of Education Reform at the University of Arkansas, and Mark Bauerlein, Professor of English at Emory University, concluded that the Common Core has deficient literature standards and a misplaced stress on literary nonfiction or information reading.⁷

11. Are Common Core mathematics standards high quality?

By most accounts, the Common Core mathematics standards are worse than most existing standards. Mathematics education writer Barry Garelick concluded that the Common Core math standards give students “a flimsy make-believe version of mathematics, without the ability to solve actual math problems.”⁸ Ze’ev Wurman, a former U.S. Department of Education official, observed, “It is not difficult to show that the Common Core standards are not on par with those of the highest-performing nations.” W. Stephen Wilson, professor of mathematics at Johns Hopkins University and member of the Common Core Validation Committee, agreed that the standards are “certainly not up there with the best of countries...or with the best state standards either.”⁹

12. To date, how many states have adopted Common Core?

Forty-five states, the District of Columbia, Department of Defense Schools, and four U.S. territories have adopted Common Core standards for one or both subjects.

13. When did North Carolina adopt the Common Core?

On June 2, 2010, the North Carolina State Board of Education voted unanimously to adopt the Common Core.

14. Why did North Carolina adopt the Common Core?

State education officials offered six reasons why it was advantageous for the state to adopt common standards and tests. Reasons included the following: 1) equity; 2) college and career readiness; 3) state-to-state comparability of test results; 4) sharing of resources; 5) economies of scale; and 6) student mobility.¹⁰ While these are laudable, North Carolina could realize all six ends using means other than Common Core.

15. Did the State Board of Education adopt Common Core based on evidence of its success?

No. Between the time of adoption and the statewide implementation of the Common Core standards, they had not been subject to field-testing.

16. How much will it cost to implement Common Core in North Carolina?

In a 2012 AccountabilityWorks report, researchers estimated that North Carolina public schools may spend as much as \$525 million over the next seven years, or an average of \$75 million per year, for professional development, textbooks and materials, and technology to implement the Common Core standards.¹¹ The Thomas B. Fordham Institute, which supports the Common Core State Standards Initiative, calculated a lower estimate. They concluded that fully implementing common standards in North Carolina might require the state to spend as much as \$300 million.¹²

17. Which North Carolina institutions, organizations, and companies have received funds to assist efforts to implement the Common Core? (Note: This is not an exhaustive list.)

2012

- N.C. State University (\$281,214 in federal funds)

2011

- James B. Hunt Institute for Educational Leadership (\$1,865,653 from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation)
- Metametrics, Inc. (\$3,468,005 from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation)

- University of North Carolina – Chapel Hill (\$988,820 from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation)
- N.C. State University (\$258,000 in federal funds)
- Western Region Service Alliance (\$762,000 in federal funds)
- Central Carolina Region Service Alliance (\$762,000 in federal funds)
- N.C. State University (\$261,312 in federal funds)
- MCNC (\$36,463 in federal funds)
- N.C. State University (\$150,000 in federal funds)
- The SERVE Center at UNC-Greensboro; Friday Institute at N.C. State University; and the Carolina Institute for Public Policy at UNC-Chapel Hill (\$9,111,554 in federal funds)

2010

- James B. Hunt Institute for Educational Leadership (\$1,673,623 from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation)
- Center for Teaching Quality, Inc. (\$395,836 from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation)
- Metametrics, Inc. (\$1,297,578 from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation)
- Voyager Expanded Learning (\$88,000 in federal funds)

2009

- James B. Hunt Institute for Educational Leadership (\$5,549,352 from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation)

2008

- James B. Hunt Institute for Educational Leadership (\$2,213,470 from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation)¹³

18. Is the federal government involved in Common Core?

Yes. On June 2, 2010, the U.S. Department of Education published a press release that declared, “The Department plans to support state implementation efforts by providing federal funds for high quality assessments, professional development to help teachers enhance the knowledge and skills needed to help students master the standards, and research to support continual improvement of the standards and assessments over time.”¹⁴

19. What is the relationship between Common Core and the federal Race to the Top initiative?

Shortly after their June 2010 announcement, the U.S. Department of Education enticed states to adopt the Common Core by tying approval of the standards to the \$4.5 billion federal Race to the Top competition. Adoption of the Common Core increased a state’s chances of obtaining a Race to the Top grant. Indeed, in his 2013 State of the Union address, President Barack Obama celebrated the federal government’s role in “encouraging” states to adopt Common Core. He declared, “Four years ago, we started Race to the Top—a competition that convinced almost every state to develop smarter curricula and higher standards.”¹⁵

20. Did adoption of Common Core help North Carolina receive a Race to the Top grant?

Possibly. Three months after the N.C. State Board of Education unanimously approved Common Core English and math standards, the state received a four-year, \$400 million Race to the Top grant. In fact, all 10 states that received a Race to the Top grant in 2010 adopted Common Core standards.

21. What is the relationship between the federal government and forthcoming Common Core tests?

The federal government has bankrolled the development of Common Core tests. The Education Department will distribute \$360 million in grants to members of two state consortia, the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium and the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers.¹⁶

22. Is North Carolina a member of a Common Core testing consortium?

North Carolina is a member of the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium. In its role as a governing state in this group, North Carolina will work with public education agencies from 23 other states to shape test-design policy.

23. Will Common Core increase standardized testing?

We will not know the answer to that question until the two testing consortia finish the test development process. Nevertheless, the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC), estimated that testing would take between eight and ten hours. The other testing consortium, the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium, predicted that testing would take between seven and 8.5 hours to complete.¹⁷

24. Will the Common Core tests be superior to standardized tests that are currently available?

Probably not. According to the Gordon Commission on the Future of Assessment in Education, “The progress made by the PARCC and Smarter Balanced consortia in assessment development, while significant, will be far from what is ultimately needed for either accountability or classroom instructional improvement purposes.”¹⁸

25. Does Common Core put more pressure on North Carolina’s teachers?

Yes. In a blog post, NC Superintendent of Public Instruction June Atkinson admitted, “Some teachers have said they feel like first-year teachers all over again, and that is ok. Changing to different standards does require more work for teachers in learning new course material, adjusting lesson plans and switching to new assessments.”¹⁹

26. Are teachers prepared to implement Common Core?

According to an Editorial Projects in Education survey, 76 percent of teachers believed that students were not prepared to master the Common Core standards. In addition, 75 percent of classroom teachers believed that their states were not prepared to implement the Common Core. A slightly lower percentage of teachers (71 percent) observed that their school districts were not prepared to implement the Common Core.²⁰

27. Do teachers and principals believe that Common Core will raise student achievement?

Few teachers believe that Common Core will improve student performance. In one national survey, only 17 percent of teachers and 22 percent of principals report that they are very confident that the Common Core will improve the achievement of students. Similarly, only 20 percent of teachers and 24 percent of principals believe that the Common Core will better prepare students for college and the workforce.²¹

28. Are data collection efforts tied to Common Core?

Yes. Over the last two years, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Carnegie Corporation of New York, and Amplify Education, a division of News Corp, provided the infrastructure for a massive student information database. A nonprofit organization called inBloom, Inc. is now overseeing data collection. One of the main goals of the database,

according to the inBloom website, is to give educators “a complete view of their students, including how students are tracking against national and local learning standards such as the Common Core.”²²

29. Are North Carolina school districts aiding inBloom’s data collection efforts?

Seven states, including North Carolina, voluntarily submitted student data from selected school districts to inBloom.²³ Currently, Guilford County Schools is the only participating district from North Carolina.

30. Who supports Common Core, Republicans or Democrats?

There is no typical defender of common standards. (Coincidentally, there is no predictable opposition to Common Core either.) Support for common standards and tests can be found among Republicans and Democrats, conservatives and liberals, and everything in between.

31. Where do North Carolina’s Republicans and Democrats stand on Common Core?

Similar to national trends, support for Common Core is bipartisan. In 2011, a bill passed by the Republican-led General Assembly and signed by Democratic Governor Bev Perdue mandated that the N.C. State Board of Education “continue to participate in the development of the Common Core State Standards.”²⁴

32. What would be required for North Carolina to withdraw from Common Core?

First, it would take a change of heart. A majority of elected officials in Raleigh either back Common Core or believe that it is too late to change course. Second, it would take a change in law. Although the law appears to give the N.C. State Board of Education some discretion in curriculum and testing matters, the North Carolina General Assembly would have to revise or repeal statutes that direct the State Board of Education to implement Common Core standards and tests.²⁵

33. Is it too late to replace the Common Core standards and/or withdraw from the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium?

No. The states have the responsibility to fund and maintain systems of public education. Article I, Section 15 of the North Carolina Constitution affirms, “The people have a right to the privilege of education, and it is the duty of the State to guard and maintain that right.”²⁶ (Emphasis added.)

34. Are state legislators in other states filing legislation to sever their state’s ties to Common Core?

Yes. Legislators in Utah, Indiana, Georgia, Kansas, Idaho, Kansas, Missouri, and South Dakota have introduced bills to withdraw from Common Core.²⁷

35. Is Agenda 21 behind Common Core?

Opposition to Common Core must be based on facts, not theories. The fact that Common Core grants extraordinary power to the federal government and a handful of Washington, D.C.-based groups is a necessary and sufficient reason to oppose it. “Connect-the-dots” conspiracy theories diminish the legitimacy of that opposition and, in the long run, will only strengthen those who wish to broaden Common Core’s scope.

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End notes

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