

Reactions to the March 2010 Draft Common Core State Standards: Highlights and Themes from the Public Feedback

Common Core State Standards Initiative Background

In June 2009, 48 states, 2 territories and the District of Columbia, coordinated by the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices (NGA Center) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), committed to developing a common core of state standards in English language arts (ELA) and mathematics for grades K-12. The purpose of this state-led initiative, Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSSI), is to create a rigorous set of shared standards that states can voluntarily adopt. The standards are crafted to “define the knowledge and skills students should have within their K-12 education careers so they graduate high school able to succeed in entry-level, credit-bearing academic college courses and workforce training programs.” The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) are designed to:

- align with college and work expectations;
- be clear, understandable and consistent;
- include rigorous content and application of knowledge through high-order skills;
- build upon strengths and lessons of current state standards;
- be informed by other top performing countries; and
- be grounded in research and evidence.

As with any such undertaking, the work is iterative. Early drafts of the standards were shared with the states, professional organizations, content experts, teachers, civil rights groups, and representatives from institutions of higher education as a way to solicit input from a wide range of stakeholders. Each round of feedback served to inform and strengthen subsequent internal drafts.

On March 10, 2010, a draft of the K-12 standards was posted online for public feedback. This offered the public an opportunity to provide input on the draft standards to the writing teams. By design, this was not a scientific, representative survey, and the results are not necessarily predictive of general public opinion.

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Nearly 10,000 individual online surveys were completed and submitted. Ninety-two percent of the respondents identified themselves as representing the opinions of an individual rather than a group or organization. Every state and territory is represented in the feedback. Participants identified themselves as:

- K-12 teachers (48 percent);
- parents (20 percent);
- school administrators (6 percent);
- post secondary faculty members or researchers (5 percent);

- students (2 percent); and
- other (2 percent).

Those who checked “other” went on to specify roles such as “librarian,” “early education teacher,” “grandparent,” “retired,” and “reading or math coach.”

Respondents were provided with the option to provide feedback on one content area—ELA or mathematics—or both content areas. They further chose whether to respond generally on a content area; at the more detailed, standard level; or both general and detailed feedback. The survey items were set up using a 4-point scale ranging from very negative (1) to very positive (4). Slightly more than a quarter of the respondents focused on either English language arts or on mathematics and about half responded to both content areas. Most respondents provided general feedback only.

Members of the Standards Work Teams received, read, and considered, all of the feedback data as they worked on the final Common Core State Standards. The following report summarizes the themes and highlights from this feedback.

Cross Cutting Themes from Written Feedback

Several themes rose to the top across content areas, grade levels, regions, and types of respondents, suggesting they are widely held opinions. In general, respondents like the CCSS. While many think the standards would be even better with some small changes, three-fourths of respondents give the CCSS high marks.

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Additionally, a majority of respondents see value in having common education standards across the states. For example, one respondent wrote, “clear, aligned national standards are long overdue and should be critical to unifying the patchwork of state and local standards that currently exist. I'm excited about how these standards can support raising the bar for achievement for poor and minority students.”

The draft standards received high marks for clarity. At the same time, the detailed comments included many suggestions to improve the usefulness and clarity of the standards documents. The comments tended to fall into three categories. 1) Many found the documents’ language difficult to follow. Feedback suggests that a glossary is needed for both ELA and mathematics. 2) Respondents also indicated an interest in seeing examples for each standard to ensure they understand the expectations. 3) Respondents also called for more details. While a few see the standards documents as already too long or too wordy, most respondents commented on the need for more clarity, more components, or further development of some aspect of the standards document.

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The call for additional details in the standards does not equate to a call for adding more standards. Many respondents note there are too many standards, particularly in high school mathematics, but also in ELA. Some teachers took the time to count the

number of standards for which they would be responsible and found it to be unreasonable. As one teacher says, “On my school's schedule, I see my students between eighty and ninety days in a school year. That means I have less than two days per standard. Obviously, some of the standards can be overlapped and simultaneously taught, but if I need to reteach any material or slow down for my ELL students or IEP students, there simply is not enough time to cover fifty standards. Also, in the introduction to the standards, it discusses how these standards are only the essentials and should be supplemented. Again, where is that going to fit?”

Some respondents took this opportunity to call for standards to be developed in additional areas. As the following samples indicate, the message is, “include standards for my content area.”

- “Add pre-k standards.”
- “I am concerned that science and history-social studies exist only as part of English Language Arts. Giving these disciplines cursory attention and incorporating their content into the ELA standards solely to support ELA learning is a grievous error in terms of preparing students for college/careers.”
- “In the Social Studies area of reading, geography appears to be un-addressed at this time. In order to have students well prepared for real world situations, an understanding of local, national, and world geography is a must.”
- “There should be connections to the arts. Visual and kinesthetic learners can demonstrate reading mastery through art projects and musical performances. Social studies students should make artifacts, wear costumes to depict historical figures, and make art-filled portfolios to use more ways of demonstrating student performance of these standards.”
- “Where is world history?”
- “Emphasize spelling, punctuation, grammar.”
- “Strengthen digital/information literacy.”
- “...I think more needs to be emphasized in the 5 areas of phonemic awareness.”
- “Add handwriting.”
- “Where is visual literacy?”
- “Not enough emphasis is given to the spoken word and the correction of speech mannerisms that take away from the students ability to speak in a clear, coherent, listenable manner.”
- “Where is multicultural education?”

Many respondents’ concerns are focused on the implementation of these new education standards. The majority of respondents are comfortable with the quality of the standards, but they want to be sure that enough is done to ensure successful implementation. They want standards that exist as part of a well-supported, cohesive, seamless education system.

Respondents expressed concerns about the availability and cost of aligned curricula. They are concerned about timelines for implementation. There are questions and suggestions related to particular teaching materials and instructional strategies, which some believe should be

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embedded into the standards document. There is even mention that the initiative should feed into a common teacher licensure effort. They want to be sure that these standards exist as the engine to a standards-driven system.

Related to this, few respondents believe the current education system is well prepared to meaningfully implement the Common Core State Standards. Local resources and capacity were frequently cited as potential problems. Some suggest the solution lies in the need for phasing in the standards, perhaps one grade level at a time, along with outside resources and

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outside guidance. Some respondents want guidance on implementation embedded into the CCSS document. This reaction is balanced by respondents who do not want methodology embedded into the standards and are pleased the CCSS leaves implementation to local jurisdictions.

Similarly, many respondents are concerned with assessments and expressed the opinion that common assessments are at least as important as common standards. They are interested in assessments that are less invasive and more useful, although exactly what that means differs among the respondents. Nonetheless, there are strong feelings about the types and frequency of assessments.

There is a theme around the impact of the CCSS on gifted students, special education students, English language learners, and/or economically disadvantaged students. There was a strong reaction to the idea that ALL students should meet the standards, with numerous comments similar to “Special Education modifications are needed.” A second group of comments is from respondents who suggest that the standards do not go far enough to specifically address the needs of the gifted, English learners or special education students.

In addition to the widely held themes, there were three messages that were clearly linked to specific groups of respondents. These three themes - no federal standards, opposition to the K-3 standards, and a call to establish health standards – are outlined below.

A significant number of respondents oppose all federal standards, which they perceive the CCSS to be, and, in some cases, all forms of standards. The community of parents who home school their children feel very strongly that any standard not perceived as local is problematic. Many of these respondents see this initiative as a first step toward a required national curriculum and loss of parental freedom. Many versions of, “This is simply not a government function,” were posted.

A second group of respondents believe the standards are developmentally inappropriate. Parents from this group are concerned that “children are being pushed too hard to meet standards at too early an age.... It is too much to ask 5, 6 and even some 7 year olds to sit at a desk and learn all these things. We need to let our young children be young children.”

A third group of respondents pressed hard to establish health standards. While many expressed an interest in expanding the CCSSI to additional areas such as pre-kindergarten, media literacy, or the arts, the hundreds of responses that included very similar language calling for health standards are notable and indicative of an organized effort.

Educators' General Reactions to English Language Arts

Most respondents chose to answer only the general questions and to add explanations to some of their questions rather than respond to the specific sections for the ELA standards.

The headline for English language arts is that, at both the general and detailed level of feedback, the majority of the educators¹ reacted positively or very positively to every standard and every question. While there were numerous suggestions for small word changes or grade level adjustments for identified topics, the number of the criticisms paled in comparison to the overall positive reaction.

Educators reacted positively to all of the following general questions:

- Students meeting these standards will be well prepared for success in college or the workplace after high school.
- Overall, the standards represent a clear and coherent vision of English language arts.
- The architecture and design of the standards is easy to use and follow.
- The language is clear and easily understandable for educators.
- The College and Career Readiness Standards for Reading (page 7) are clear, focused, and appropriate.
- The College and Career Readiness Standards for Writing (page 15) are clear, focused, and appropriate.
- The College and Career Readiness Standards for Speaking and Listening (page 19) are clear, focused, and appropriate.
- Overall, the Introduction is clear and provides a good overview of the intent of the standards.
- The section on the college- and career-ready student accurately portrays the characteristics exhibited by a student ready for success after high school.
- The key design considerations are an appropriate description of what the standards do, and should do.

Educators' Specific Feedback on English Language Arts

Educators also reacted favorably to the detailed questions related to the ELA standards, with at least two-thirds of them registering strong or very strong approval.

Many of the respondents who chose to respond to the detailed questions took the opportunity to add additional comments for each section of the document. Most comments were detailed suggestions about grade placement of particular standards or suggestions for ways to rewrite

¹ Includes teachers, professors, principals, mathematics coaches, etc. In short, everyone except those who self-identified as parents or grandparents.

or expand certain standards. The following section highlights the major themes that could be pulled from the specific comments.

Respondents want a broader range of examples that cover different genres, contexts, and stages of development.

The Range and Level of Text Complexity sections in Appendix A confused many respondents. There were questions about how to use it and the research behind it. This quote captures a frequently expressed sentiment: “The range and level of text complexity is unclear. How are we instructing students that do not yet meet standard? Why instruct most students above their reading level in content areas?”

Respondents are pleased that writing samples are included in Appendix C, but are not completely comfortable with the current exemplars. They want a broader range of examples that cover different genres, contexts, and stages of development. They want the context explained so that the conditions under which the writing was produced are clear.

Not everyone appreciates the grade band organization. Many respondents think that every grade level needs to be separate. As one unhappy respondent explained, “Treating grades 9 and 10 as a unit (and doing the same with 11 and 12) makes vertical alignment a nightmare.”

Educators’ General Feedback on Mathematics

Similar to English language arts, the reactions to the mathematics standards were very positive. At least three-fourths of educators, from pre-kindergarten through higher education, reacted positively or very positively to each of the general topics.

A majority of educators agree or strongly agree that the College- and Career-Readiness Standards accurately portray the characteristics exhibited by a student ready for success after high school. Twenty-five percent of respondents who disagree that the standards are set at the appropriate level of rigor, do so for a variety of reasons but are split between whether they are too high or too low. Some think that the standards are fine for those headed for university, but irrelevant for the student who is interested in a career technical education field. Others expressed concern that the expectations are set too high for most college-bound students and only appropriate for those headed into science, technology, engineering, or math (STEM) careers. A third group believes that particular chunks of content, currently identified as STEM, should be required for all students. And finally, a fourth group believes there is essential content, currently omitted, that needs to be included for both groups of college-bound students.

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Educators like the architecture and design of the mathematics standards. They describe the document as easy to use and follow. That said, there were also requests for language that is easier to understand and translate into practice. More specifically, some educators would like to see a document that is

easier to understand with simple language, more detail, more information, and more examples.

Educators think the *Introduction* is clear and provides a good overview of the intent of the standards. The mathematical practices were particularly appreciated. Most educators see the process standards as incorporated into the content standards, although some want this aspect to be more explicit and more like those in the National Council of the Teachers of Mathematics' *Principles and Standards for School Mathematics*.

Educators agree that the *Key Design* considerations are an appropriate description of what the standards do, and should do. There is strong agreement that the standards define "what" and "when" content is taught, and avoid describing "how" it should be taught.

The mathematical *Practices* sections of the standards document were well received with about two-thirds of the educators strongly supporting or supporting every section. They are viewed as clearly written, focused on key content, and appropriately rigorous. Some respondents suggested the practices be part of every grade level and integrated into the content. Those who criticized usually suggested bringing the practices into closer alignment with the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM) by adding a section or two (e.g., problem solving, reasoning). Some awarded low marks because they do not see the mathematical practices as well enough embedded throughout the content strands.

Educators embrace the idea of fewer topics. Many are relieved that they will be responsible for fewer standards and be able to spend the time necessary to teach a topic well. Some worry that there are still too many standards and that the CCSS does not fix the "mile wide" issue.

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Without explicitly saying so, educators gravitate toward a curriculum that revisits concepts and topics across grades. Although none of the feedback questions addressed this topic, many educators offered suggestions that moved the standards in that direction. They suggest adding foundational skills in earlier grade levels and continuing practice to maintain skills in subsequent grade levels.

Respondents also suggest that new topics such as economic literacy be built into the CCSS. They identify "critical" areas that should be expanded or developed. Rarely does someone suggest a topic be removed.

Educators' Specific Feedback on Mathematics

Specific feedback on the mathematics standards can be broken up into three sections: the elementary grades (K-5), the middle school grades (6-8), and the high school grades (9-12).

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Elementary teachers are most alarmed that “patterning” is missing. Many of the respondents asked that it be added back in the standards at every grade level, even as they suggest removing the Properties of Arithmetic. (Rather than “Algebra as patterns,” the CCSS emphasizes “Algebra as generalized arithmetic,” and so the Properties of Arithmetic are the appropriate precursor to Algebra.) The following comments show the range of topics educators would reintroduce to the standards.

- “Where is patterning? This is the basis of the Algebra strand and it seems to be non-existent.”
- “Repeating and growing pattern recognition and generalization are not explicitly stated in the K-3 mathematics standards. Need for students to recognize, generalize, and extend.”
- “Why is there no skip counting in 1st grade, but in 2nd grade?”

The reaction to the term “standard algorithm” was strong and split. Some educators embraced the idea as “a return to sensibility.” Others are troubled by the idea that standard algorithms are required, with a few respondents even taking exception to the notion that “standard algorithms” actually exist. At the extremes, educators worry that teaching the standard algorithm means students forego the opportunity to understand the mathematics and mathematicians worry that foregoing the standard algorithm locks students out of higher mathematics.

Related to this topic, some respondents felt the CCSS generally tilted toward procedural expertise at the expense of conceptual understanding. Some suggest that consolidating a topic within one or two grade levels necessitates reducing the topic to learning the procedures rather than developing conceptual understanding.

Although generally positive, middle school comments revealed some of the tension within the mathematics education community around the amount and type of statistics and probability that should be included and disagreements about when it should be taught. Educators disagree about whether this content is more important and should replace the other content. Even among those who want it included, there is little agreement about what content should be removed from the school curriculum to make space.

Educators offered wide-ranging and contradictory observations, criticisms, and suggestions.

Educators reacted positively to the high school standards. They also offered wide-ranging and contradictory observations, criticisms, and suggestions. Educators accept the notion that students want and deserve access to different mathematical content. It seems reasonable that the standards would make clear what is required for all students and also specify the additional topics students interested in continuing on in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) need. Only three respondents expressed concerns related to early tracking of students into specific pathways. Several respondents suggested another pathway be carved out for the “unprepared, uninterested” student.

While respondents agree that STEM/non-STEM pathways make sense, there is less agreement about what content should be in each of the pathways. For example, there is little agreement about who should be required to generate the quadratic formula, which is

currently identified as STEM. Some teachers think the topic should be completely eliminated for everyone. As one teacher states, “I think the quadratic formula needs to go the way of the paper-and-pencil algorithm for roots.” Some teachers agree with the CCSS placement because, “Not all students are going to be able to complete the square of a quadratic equation but they can all learn to use the quadratic formula to solve a quadratic equation.” Finally, some teachers think the topic should be required for non-STEM. As one teacher said, “Strongly disagree with the following: ... solving quadratics with complex roots is labeled STEM. Let us go deeper for non-STEMs!”

The headline for non-STEM would have to be that CCSS is expecting more than is reasonable or necessary and needs to add more. Many respondents state that the CCSS are too rigorous for the non-STEM student and explain that students do not need all of these skills to enter the workplace or go to college. In some cases the same respondent goes on to suggest ways the content load could and should be increased. There seemed to be a thread of agreement that non-STEM content should include more geometric proofs; matrices because of the business and spreadsheet application; complex numbers because they are assessed on the ACT exam; simple trigonometric functions; the Binomial Theorem, which can be accessed through Pascal’s Triangle; and some arithmetic with polynomials.

The one exception to the tendency to add content is the general agreement that “the level of probability understanding expected for all high school students is too high. Some of the standards need to be a STEM standard or take them out entirely. These are really at the Advanced Placement Statistics level of understanding.”

The agreement about the STEM pathway is clearer. Amid the hundreds of unrelated comments on isolated topics are many about arithmetic with polynomials. Most respondents think this area, especially the Remainder Theorem and long division with polynomials, are STEM. There is an effort to protect the STEM students’ time to build a solid preparation for college. To that end respondents identify topics (e.g., 3-dimensional vectors, statistics) that should wait until college.

Conclusion

The feedback is, overall, very good news for the standards developers. Respondents like the draft standards. The calls for the standards to be a bit more clear and easier to use were accompanied by hundreds of conflicting suggestions on ways to improve the standards. There are concerns about assessment and about how the standards will be implemented. There are requests for additional guidance and support in this area. However, all in all, the Common Core State Standards are seen as an important step in the right direction.