



FEDERATION FOR CHILDREN
WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

Family **FACTS** on Education

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Common Core State Standards: What they mean for families and students



What do the Common Core State Standards mean for Massachusetts students?

In July of 2010, Massachusetts adopted new national education standards. These standards, called the *Common Core State Standards*, were designed by experts from across the nation to prepare students for success in college and 21st century careers. This issue of **Family FACTS** explains what the *Common Core State Standards* are, why they were created, and how they will affect Massachusetts students.

Standards – protecting your children’s right to a quality education.

Every child in Massachusetts has the legal right to a quality education. Learning standards spell out what knowledge and skills students have the right to be taught. Standards are also the basis for statewide tests, like the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS), which is given annually to public and public charter school students. English learners in Massachusetts also take the World-class Instructional Design and Assessments (WIDA), which is given annually to assess students’ abilities to understand, read and write English. These tests allow families, students, and schools to know how well students are learning and how well teachers are teaching. This information allows us to make sure schools are providing a quality education to every student. In July of 2010, the Board of Education voted to adopt the *Common Core State Standards* to replace the previous statewide standards in English Language Arts and Mathematics. The *Common Core State Standards* are the result of a nationwide effort to develop educational standards for the entire United States.

What are the Common Core standards?

The *Common Core State Standards* (CCSS) were created to make sure that every student graduates high school “college and career ready.” Educational experts started by asking colleges and employers what skills and knowledge they want high school graduates to have. Then the experts worked backwards to create standards to prepare students for college and a career. Instead of starting from scratch, they borrowed from the best standards from across the United States (including Massachusetts) and around the world. Then they asked for feedback and got nearly 10,000 responses! After reviewing each one, they produced the *Common Core State Standards*. All this work was done with one goal in mind: to make sure every US student is prepared for college and careers after high school.

Why Common Core State Standards?

Before the *Common Core State Standards*, each state had different standards. This made it hard to compare education in different states. It also made adjustments difficult for students

and families who moved from one state to another. In many states, low standards did not prepare students for college or good jobs. As a result, colleges and employers now teach students and employees many things they could have learned in public school. Educational experts created the *Common Core State Standards* to solve these problems. So far, 45 states have adopted them, including Massachusetts.

How are the Common Core State Standards different from the old Massachusetts standards?

The *Common Core State Standards* have a lot in common with the old Massachusetts standards. In fact, many of the things students will learn and do have not changed at all. What has changed is a focus on depth of understanding and a new emphasis on “college and career readiness.”

In mathematics, this means the standards focus on major concepts in addition to specific skills. This is so students understand **why** math works the way it does as well as **how** to solve certain types of problems. By mastering the how and the why, students will have a strong foundation to build on when they begin learning more advanced math. The new math standards also emphasize “modeling,” which means using math to answer real world questions. Modeling will help students use their math skills more effectively in college, in the workplace, and in day-to-day life.

The new English Language Arts standards recognize that students build communication (listening speaking, reading and writing) skills in many classes, not just English class. That’s why they have new guidelines for English Language Arts instruction in history, social studies, science, and technology classes. Another change is that students will read more non-fiction than before, especially in high school. The new English Language Arts standards also emphasize the three main purposes of writing: to persuade, to explain, or to convey an experience. In high school, most writing will be to persuade or to explain, just like in college and the workplace. The new standards also expect students to use a wide variety

of media to learn and communicate. The purpose of all these changes is the same – to better prepare students for the challenges of college, work, and life in the 21st century.

When will the Common Core State Standards replace the old Massachusetts standards?

Massachusetts adopted the *Common Core State Standards* in 2010, but they didn’t replace the old standards all at once. In March of 2011, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE) released new *Curriculum Frameworks* for English Language Arts and Mathematics. The *Curriculum Frameworks* are Massachusetts’ detailed guide to the *Common Core State Standards*, with a few additions from ESE. During 2011, ESE began creating model lesson plans based on the new *Curriculum Frameworks*, revising and adding additional sets of model curriculum units.. Teachers were provided with access to an online system with lesson plans, a digital library, and instructional videos. The final set of model curriculum units are scheduled for publication in the 2013-2014 school year. In 2013, the Massachusetts Comprehensive Statewide Assessment (MCAS) included new material from the new standards. Two groups of states created national tests based on the Common Core Standards for the 2014-2015 school year. By then, students across the country will be benefiting from standards designed to prepare them for life and work in the 21st century.

Sources/Resources for Common Core State Standards:

National PTA *Common Core State Standards* Initiative:
www.pta.org/advocacy/content2.cfm?ItemNumber=3664

Briefing Packet: Common Core Standards. James B. Hunt, Jr. Institute for Educational Leadership and Policy.
www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop/communities/hunt-institute-briefing-packet.pdf

Mass. Dept. of Elementary and Secondary Education
Common Core information:
www.doe.mass.edu/candi/commoncore



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The Schrafft Center

529 Main Street, Suite 1102 | Boston, MA 02129

617-236-7210 | 1-800-331-0688

info@fcsn.org | www.fcsn.org

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