

# IMPLEMENTING THE COMMON CORE STANDARDS IN PENNSYLVANIA

## REFLECTIONS FROM THE FIELD | A STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION WHITE PAPER

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The State Board of Education July 1, 2010 adoption of the **Common Core State Standards in English Language Arts (ELA)** and **math** pledged to ensure educator voice in the implementation of the standards revision. The Common Core Standards were developed through a state-led process coordinated by the Council of Chief State School Officers and the National Governors' Association Center for Best Practices and represent a national, collaborative effort to provide educators, parents, and students with a common understanding of what students are expected to learn in English and math. The standards setting work was informed by representatives from higher education, K-12 education, researchers, community organizations, parents, business leaders, and civil rights groups who considered international models; the best state standards; the experience of teachers, content experts and states; and feedback from the general public as part of their deliberations. As of November 2010, approximately 40 states and the District of Columbia have adopted these voluntary standards.

During the late summer and early fall, the Board held a series of public roundtables across the state to invite feedback from education stakeholders on the steps that would ensure successful integration of the Common Core. The Board wishes to thank the Erie City School District, Colonial Intermediate Unit #20 in Easton, and the Pittsburgh Public Schools for hosting these forums (a fourth was held at the Department of Education) and the more than 100 stakeholders—representing district and IU administration, classroom teachers, higher education leaders, statewide education associations, and civil rights organizations—who joined the discussions.

- How do Pennsylvania's current standards align with Common Core?
- What is the greatest difference between the two?
- What elements will guide transition to Common Core?

Each forum featured a diverse range of questions and suggestions, many of which are highlighted in the call out boxes throughout this white paper. In addition, several important themes emerged; these are detailed below, along with initial response points and links to key resources.

### Getting from here to there...

Understandably, Pennsylvania's educators are eager for details about the similarities and differences between our state-level standards and the Common Core. Perhaps the greatest difference is a matter of organization: the PA ELA and math standards adopted in 1999 are situated at grades 3, 5, 8 and 11, while Common Core establishes a K-12 staircase of standards leading to college and career readiness. But on the more central considerations of content and rigor, the Common Core Standards are strongly aligned with Pennsylvania's standards. Prior to adopting the Common Core, the State Board commissioned an **independent study** by the University of Pittsburgh's School of Education that

compared both sets of standards and found important agreement between the two. For example, “over 87 percent of Pennsylvania’s [current] ELA standards were considered aligned moderately or very strongly to the Common Core Standards” (Lane, 2010).

However, important differences do exist, and the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) has gathered teams of educators to create detailed crosswalk documents that will support the transition to Common Core. These **resources** will be unveiled in early November, and a significant portion of the Department’s December 5-8, 2010 Standards Aligned System (SAS) Institute will focus on how these materials can support professional development activities at the district and school levels.

Consistent with the planning of other states, the State Board’s regulation adopting the Common Core establishes a three-year window for implementation efforts; with planning and resource development already underway at PDE, Pennsylvania’s school districts can be assured a thoughtful, coherent transition to these standards. To support school district leaders in their own transition process, PDE will present a Podcast and a PowerPoint presentation with guidance for school leaders on local considerations in planning for the Common Core, as well as a document responding to frequently asked questions.

## How does it all fit together?

Given the obvious association between the United States Department of Education’s (USDE) Race to the Top (RTTT) competition and Common Core, roundtable participants asked if the RTTT results would impact Pennsylvania’s plans for Common Core. Likewise, USDE’s support for common assessments prompted questions regarding the intersection of this reform with state-level efforts to develop rigorous, end-of-course exams. Clearly, there is a desire for clarity and context around various state and federal initiatives.

By way of background, the State Board was in the process of revising the state’s system of academic standards well before RTTT emerged as a policy priority. The Board had commissioned a comprehensive standards review and was in the process of promulgating new standards in 2009. When the nation’s chief state schools officers identified common standards as a priority, the Board placed its standards revision on hold to ensure a consistent, coherent approach. Considering the opportunities Pennsylvania had to impact the make up of Common Core, and the degree of alignment discussed previously, the Board’s adoption of Common Core was not predicated on a RTTT win. However, the Department is pursuing other federal resources as well as foundation grants to support implementation efforts while the three-year phase-in of Common Core will provide districts with important flexibility to accommodate curriculum revisions and adjust professional development offerings. While some roundtable participants asked if the Department could now extend this implementation window beyond 2013-14, doing so might disadvantage Pennsylvania in preparing for the common assessments which may be available as early as the 2014-15 school year.

- What do the Race to the Top results mean for Common Core?
- What is the connection between Common Core and Common Assessments?
- Will the PSSA and Keystone Exams be adapted to align with the Common Core Standards?

The common assessment initiative, while not a component of the Board’s regulation adopting Common Core, was an important theme across the roundtables, and especially in regards to

Keystone Exams. The Department is moving forward with Keystone Exam development—both because it is too soon to commit to common assessments that won't be available for several years and because the initiative will produce exams in ELA and math only, while Keystone Exams will cover 10 core academic subjects: algebra I, algebra II, biology, chemistry, civics and government, English composition, geometry, literature, U.S. history, and world history. Ultimately, the three-year phase-in of Common Core provides Pennsylvania with maximum flexibility relative to the common assessment initiative: fast enough to be ready for common assessments if they meet our expectations, while providing time for thoughtful implementation and the chance to course correct if USDE's timeline changes.

In response to specific questions concerning adjustments to state-level assessment systems during this transition phase, **PDE does not plan to adjust the eligible content or design of the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) before the July 1, 2013 effective date for Common Core.** The emerging Keystone Exams are already aligned with enhanced, course-level standards that are in even stronger accord with the Common Core than Pennsylvania's 3, 5, 8, and 11 standards. By working from these resources (see the [assessment anchors and eligible content](#) approved by the State Board of Education), districts will be assured that their efforts are aligned with expectations for the Keystone Exams.

For more information on the relationship between Common Core, common assessments, and Keystone Exams, please review the Department's new [guidelines](#) on high school graduation requirements.

## INVOLVING HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE TRANSITION

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Roundtable participants wisely noted that as the K-12 system adjusts curriculum, instruction and assessments to align with Common Core, so too must the state's teacher preparation programs. According to the 2006 report of the Governor's Commission on Training America's Teachers, Pennsylvania is "one of the top five states in producing future teachers—some 13,000 per year." This is one reason that the Board convened a special panel of higher education faculty to review the Common Core and provide specific recommendations around implementation efforts. The panel made several recommendations regarding implementation and assessment of the Common Core Standards, including providing professional development for teachers conducted by content area specialists, allowing time for colleges and universities to consider necessary changes to their teacher preparation programs, and collaborating with teachers at all grade levels as well as higher education faculty from both mathematics and ELA in revising assessments to align with the Common Core.

By involving postsecondary leaders in the transition to Common Core, we help ensure that the next generation of teachers and school leaders graduates with deep understanding of the content of the standards as well as the reform's implications for policy and practice. Specific suggestions advanced during the roundtables included more frequent communication between PDE and the state's 93 teacher preparation programs, involving teacher preparation faculty in Department trainings (including the December SAS Institute) and jointly training K-12 and postsecondary educators at the IU level. The Board has shared these recommendations with the Department and we are pleased to note that representatives from the state's teacher preparation programs have been invited to attend this year's SAS Institute which will bring teachers and school leaders together to plan for the transition to Common Core.

## SUPPORT FOR DIVERSE LEARNERS

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While stakeholders were broadly supportive of the Common Core Standards, several roundtable participants expressed concern about adverse impacts for special needs and English Language Learner (ELL) students. For example, advocates for ELL students recommended that in implementing Common Core Standards states must recognize that ELL students may require tailored curriculum, resources and instructional strategies, and aligned assessments as they acquire both English language proficiency and content area knowledge. Pennsylvania already has adopted **English language proficiency standards** for students in grades Pre-K through 12 that teachers can use in conjunction with the Common Core Standards to guide their planning instruction, assessment, and curriculum for ELL students.

Further, some roundtable participants said it is vital that ELL students have access to teachers who are prepared to address the unique learning needs of these students. Fortunately, the State Board previously recognized that ensuring educators are equipped to meet the needs of diverse learners is critical to student success and already has taken steps to make sure all teachers in the Commonwealth receive training and support in this area. Recent revisions to the Board's Chapter 49 regulations require all current teachers to receive professional development in working with ELLs and students who have special needs. These regulatory changes also require Schools of Education to incorporate instruction in working with ELL and special needs students into their preparation programs so that future educators will graduate prepared to meet the individual learning needs of an increasingly diverse student population. Finally, the revisions to Chapter 49 require school districts to include activities that focus on teaching diverse learners as part of their induction programs for newly hired teachers.

## MAKING MEANINGFUL CONNECTIONS

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As the implementation process continues, stakeholders asked that PDE consider developing cross-curricular materials to provide examples of how content from other academic subjects can be woven into instruction related to the Common Core. For example, stakeholders presented ideas on how financial literacy skills could be incorporated into lessons that focus on the Common Core Standards for math and how concepts from the state's academic standards in Arts and Humanities could be incorporated into instruction related to the Common Core Standards for ELA. Stakeholders suggested that such cross-curricular materials not only could put greater emphasis on the academic subjects not currently assessed at the state level, but also could increase the relevance of instruction to real life situations in which students would apply the knowledge.

For more information visit [www.pdesas.org](http://www.pdesas.org)

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