

# The skinny on the Common Core standards

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When I'm traveling between schools, I alternate listening to sports talk radio, political talk radio and Motown CDs (*showing my age, I guess*). Recently, I was listening to a nationally syndicated radio show, and I heard the host ranting about the Common Core Standards and government brainwashing. I know we live in an age of overstatement, but this seemed over the top. It might be useful for someone working with the Common Core Standards at the ground level, versus in the sensationalistic world of talk radio, to provide some information about this topic. To be sure, I don't have to worry about Arbitron ratings...

## **Background on the Common Core standards**

What are the Common Core Standards? They began as an initiative of the nation's governors and state superintendents during the Bush administration to establish a set of rigorous national curriculum standards that could be adopted voluntarily by states. The Common Core Standards are not a prescribed curriculum or course of study. Rather, they are a description of what students should know and be able to do. The latitude as to how to meet the standards is local, at the teacher, school and district level.

Interestingly, the federal government was not involved in the development of the Common Core Standards, and still isn't. All that the federal government requires is that states adopt standards that will enable high school graduates to be college and career ready. The people involved with the development of the Common Core Standards included teachers, administrators, researchers, business people and curriculum design experts. Business people have played a major role in this process because of the need for an educated workforce to promote economic development.

## **Benefits**

Why would a set of more widely adopted standards be advantageous? The biggest problem with curriculum standards as they now exist is that they vary significantly from state to state. A few years back, the Thomas Fordham Foundation released a study that showed that because our state standards are very high, a student who was deemed to be performing below grade level in South Carolina actually would be considered at or above grade level in other states. This certainly hurts a state like South Carolina because our performance is compared to states whose standards are lower. Voucher proponents in our state certainly use this situation to their advantage.

Probably the biggest difference in the Common Core Standards from what has been in place across the country is that they focus more heavily on critical thinking skills and connecting content to "real-world" situations. I recently had the opportunity to visit the new Boeing facility in Charleston with a group of other superintendents. The folks at Boeing told us that their employees must have the ability

to apply and use knowledge and information to create, innovate and solve problems. Based on my reading of the Common Core Standards, developing this capacity is a major focus.

### **Examples**

Below is an example of a standard from seventh grade math involving probability and statistics. Students would be expected to be able to perform this skill.

*Use data from a random sample to draw inferences about a population with an unknown characteristic of interest...For example, estimate the mean word length in a book by randomly sampling words from the book; predict the winner of a school election based on randomly sampled survey data. Gauge how far off the estimate or prediction might be.*

In short, this standard asks students to use a statistical sample to figure something out. Seems pretty reasonable and practical. Certainly, analysis of statistical samples is discussed a lot at election time.

This is an example of a standard for eleventh grade English:

*Cite strong and thorough contextual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.*

Very simply, this standard asks students to understand something they have read at a very deep and detailed level, certainly a necessary skill for college, the workplace, and day-to-day living. It seems hard to understand why anyone would find this undesirable.

A complete listing of the standards can be found at [www.corestandards.org](http://www.corestandards.org). I think reading the standards sheds a lot of light on what they are, and aren't.

### **Concerns**

One of the major objections to the Common Core Standards is loss of local control. While I certainly understand this issue, that horse has been out of the barn for some time. Local school districts and school boards everywhere are subject to extensive state and federal regulations. Actually, I have found South Carolina regulations to be a lot more troublesome and unnecessary than the federal ones. For example, our accreditation status would receive a "black mark" for hiring Albert Einstein to teach high school physics; he would not be properly certified. The significant emphasis—some would say overemphasis—on high stakes testing in our state was a South Carolina initiative before the federal mandates of "No Child Left Behind."

Probably the biggest question surrounding the Common Core Standards is how student achievement on them will be measured. I do think it would be beneficial for South Carolina to have the achievement of its students measured in a way that is apples-to-apples comparable to other states. If this happened, I believe the performance of South Carolina students will look much better compared to other states than the detractors of public schools in our state are expecting.

Now that would be a great day in South Carolina. (Couldn't resist....)