

# Reality Check

Common Core State Standards (CCSS) Initiative: **Rhetoric vs Facts**

**O**n one side are those who believe the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) Initiative will lead to a federal government control of education. On the other side are educators, state leaders including the State Board of Education and the Education Oversight Committee and education advocates who believe having common standards defined for each state that are internationally benchmarked will result in career- and college-ready high school graduates.

School boards, superintendents and school communications professionals are now caught squarely in the middle of an intense political/ideological battle that is threatening to derail years of planning, professional development and implementation. The time is now to cut through the rhetoric and communicate the facts.

## **What is the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) Initiative?**

The Common Core State Standards Initiative is a state-led effort coordinated by the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices (NGA Center) and Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) that established a single set of clear educational standards for kindergarten through 12th grade in English language arts and mathematics that states voluntarily adopt.

## **What is CCSS?**

CCSS is a clear set of shared goals and expectations for the knowledge and skills students need in “core” subject areas (English language arts and mathematics) at each grade level to ultimately be prepared for either college or career. In South Carolina, common standards are nothing new. Schools have been teaching common standards – developed by and unique to our state - in English language arts (ELA), mathematics, science and social studies since the passage of the Education Accountability Act of 1998. As part of the CCSS Initiative, SC no longer has to maintain its common standards for English language arts and mathematics, but will continue to approve both and may add to either. The state will continue to maintain its common standards in science and social studies. The standards establish what students need to learn, but they do not dictate how teachers should teach. Teachers will continue to devise lesson plans and tailor instruction to the individual needs of the students in their classrooms.

## **What about testing?**

States that adopted CCSS in English language arts and mathematics are currently collaborating to develop common assessments that will be aligned to the standards and replace existing end of year state assessments. There are two consortiums working to

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develop the tests – the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Career (PARCC) and the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC). These state-led consortia on assessment are grounded in the following principles:

- allow for comparison across students, schools, districts, states and nations
- create economies of scale
- provide information and support more effective teaching and learning

States can voluntarily choose to participate in one of these consortiums or develop tests of their own.

On February 8, 2012, the SC State Board of Education voted to adopt tests being developed by the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium. The State Department of Education released the following implementation schedule:

- 2011-12 transition year
- 2012-13 transition year
- 2013-14 bridge year (CCSS will be used for instructional purposes)
- 2014-15 full implementation (testing will begin)

### **1. Rhetoric:** CCSS is another step toward the centralization and complete takeover of education under the federal government.

**Fact:** State leaders, not the federal government, drove the creation and development of CCSS. The decision for states to participate is voluntary and is not a requirement of the federal government. State leaders, including governors and state commissioners of education from 48 states and two territories, were concerned about differing levels of education standards from state to state and unfair comparisons being made concerning the quality of schools from one state to another. Leaders realized that if the country is to compete in the future in the global marketplace for jobs and innovation, students today must learn more

than standards unique to their states. They need to learn standards that are internationally benchmarked to prepare them to compete with counterparts around the world for college admission and careers. Also, in an increasingly mobile country, students who move from one state to another would have the benefit of being taught the same standards across grades and states.

### **2. Rhetoric:** CCSS is a curriculum that will usurp local control of our schools and classrooms.

**Fact:** Common core learning or academic standards are not a curriculum. They are shared education goals and expectations for what students should know at each grade level. Curriculum, on the other hand, is how teachers teach to help students meet those standards including the textbooks and other materials. Curriculum is generally chosen at the district or even the school level, and in many cases, individual teachers actually decide on the curriculum and classroom content.

### **3. Rhetoric:** SC's ELA and mathematics standards were already rigorous so it is a waste of time and money for our state to participate in CCSS.

**Fact:** CCSS standards focus on knowledge and skills rather than understanding or memorization and are internationally benchmarked. A 41-member group of SC educators convened by the SC Education Oversight Committee reviewed SC's current ELA and mathematics standards and compared them with CCSS. The group found the CCSS to meet or exceed the current rigor of SC's standards. Also, the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, a conservative think tank in Washington D.C., compared each states' standards to CCSS and found the following for SC's standards:

South Carolina will continue its science and social studies standards which are judged independently

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| SC Standards                   | Common Core Standards    | Comments regarding SC Standards                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
|--------------------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| ELA (2008)<br><b>D</b>         | ELA<br><b>B+</b>         | "Woefully vague and repetitive, despite some good content, such as the treatment of early reading, and some aspects of literacy and informational text."                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
| Mathematics (2007)<br><b>C</b> | Mathematics<br><b>A-</b> | "South Carolina's standards are often strong. Many are clear and easy to read, and the high school content contains some mathematically rich material. Unfortunately, the standards neither prioritize nor support the arithmetic skills that students need and therefore fail to provide the kind of guidance K-12 teachers need to truly prepare students for college mathematics." |

as the highest in the nation by the Thomas Fordham Institute.

**4. Rhetoric:** The federal government plans to build a national student database and access individual student data for tracking such information as academic performance, disciplinary history, family income range, religious affiliation, health history, etc. The data collection is part of a broader effort to achieve Progressive Utopia – a managed economy with trained workers, not educated citizens.

**Fact:** Local school districts own, and will still control, all student data, just as they do now. The Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) prohibits the reporting of aggregate data that could identify individual students. In addition, the federal government does not have access to the student-level information held in state databases. States have collected student information through state assessments in compliance with state and federal law, and will continue these practices under new assessments.

**5. Rhetoric:** CCSS demoralizes teachers by removing their creativity.

**Fact:** Because there are fewer standards in each subject, CCSS will provide more freedom for teachers to delve into appropriate content, spend time on analysis and reading and on mathematical application and fluency. What is demoralizing is being overwhelmed by the demands of too many standards and not enough time as presently exists. And since 45 states have adopted CCSS, collaborative possibilities have been opening up in classrooms not only throughout each state but across the country.

**6. Rhetoric:** CCSS is a federal government program because the U.S. Department of Education (USDE) is paying for the tests to be developed.

**Fact:** In 2010, the USDE announced that it would reserve about \$350 million of the total \$4.35 billion appropriated for the Race to the Top grants program to support consortia of states designing and implementing high-quality tests aligned with a common set of rigorous, college- and career-ready, K-12 standards. The USDE awarded two, four-year grants totaling about \$330 million to the two testing consortiums that were already in existence. At the time of award, the 31-state SBAC was

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awarded \$160 million and the 26-state PARCC was awarded \$170 million.

- 7. Rhetoric:** CCSS is a federal government program because the USDE mandated that in order to apply and win Race to the Top (RTTT) grant funding, states were required to adopt CCSS.

**Fact:** RTTT applications awarded points—40 points out of 500—to states that were collaborating to create common college- and career-ready standards. The total RTTT dollars were less than one percent of what the U.S. annually spends on K-12 education. Dozens of states, including SC, that adopted CCSS did not win RTTT grants.

- 8. Rhetoric:** CCSS is the work of so-called education experts and special interest groups with no classroom experience.

**Fact:** Teachers, parents, and education experts worked on a set of “common standards” for every state to ensure high school graduates are prepared for college or a career. Drafts of standards in English/language arts and mathematics (grades K-12) received intense public review and feedback was received from national organizations representing teachers, postsecondary education, civil rights groups, English language learners, and students with disabilities.

- 9. Rhetoric:** CCSS only include skills and do not address the importance of content knowledge.

**Fact:** CCSS recognizes both content and skills are important. ELA standards require certain critical content for all students, including: classic myths and stories from around the world, America’s Founding Documents, foundational American literature, and Shakespeare. Appropriately, the remaining crucial decisions about what content should be taught are left to state and local determination. In addition to content coverage,

students must systematically acquire knowledge in literature and other disciplines through reading, writing, speaking, and listening.

In Mathematics, CCSS lays a solid foundation in whole numbers, addition, subtraction, multiplication, division, fractions, and decimals. Taken together, these elements support a student’s ability to learn and apply more demanding math concepts and procedures. The middle school and high school math standards call on students to practice applying mathematical ways of thinking to real world issues and challenges; they prepare students to think and reason mathematically.



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