

<https://www.michigan.gov/mde/services/academic-standards>

The Common Core State Standards arose from a simple idea: that creating one set of challenging academic expectations for all students would improve achievement and college readiness.

What are the common-core standards?

Pure and simple, they are descriptions of the skills students should have at each grade level in English/language arts and math by the time they finish high school. They're not a detailed, day-to-day curriculum; they're a broad outline of learning expectations from which teachers or district leaders craft a curriculum.

The [66-page English/language arts document](#) emphasizes students' ability to read complex literary and informational texts, and cite evidence from them in constructing arguments and interpretations. It also envisions a new, distributed responsibility for teaching literacy, asking teachers of all subjects to teach literacy skills that are unique to those disciplines.

Here's a taste of the literacy expectations: By the end of 2nd grade, students should be able to explain how images in an informational text contribute to its meaning. By the end of 6th grade, they should be able to build a coherent analysis of a text, citing evidence to back up their arguments.

[In 93 pages, the math standards](#) emphasize a deeper focus on fewer topics, a response to research that found U.S. math curricula to be "a mile wide and an inch deep." Common-core math seeks to build a coherent sequence of topics and concepts across grades, and aims not only for procedural skill and fluency, but also mastery in applying math skills and in understanding math concepts.

The standards expect kindergartners to be able to count to 100 by ones and by tens. By 5th grade, children should understand the concept of volume and be able to relate it to the operations of multiplication and addition, as well as solve real-world problems involving volume. The high school standards expect students to be able to construct an "informal argument for the formulas for the circumference of a circle, area of a circle, volume of a cylinder, pyramid, and cone."

Why did state leaders think we needed a set of common standards?

The push to create shared standards took shape in part because of a key failing of the standards movement that swept the country in the 1990s. States began writing their own standards after the 1983 report “A Nation at Risk” warned of a “rising tide of mediocrity” in American schools. But the quality [of those academic expectations varied from state to state](#). And even when the federal No Child Left Behind Act (signed into law in 2001) required states to test students’ mastery of those standards annually, and face consequences for students’ poor performance, some states set far higher proficiency goals than others.

State leaders also cited high college-remediation rates as evidence that more-rigorous, shared standards were needed. When [1 in 5 college students has skills too weak for credit-bearing coursework](#), they argued, the K-12 system is falling short in preparing young people for the postsecondary work that leads to good jobs. Surveys of employers, too, showed widespread dissatisfaction with the literacy and math skills of young job applicants.

The idea, then, was to “raise the bar” for all students to create better college and work outcomes, and establish a common bar by which all students could be measured.

So what caused opposition to the common core?

The involvement of the federal government. And to a much lesser degree, the content of the standards themselves. Some educators and activists [objected to the standards’ stepped-up focus on nonfiction reading](#), saying it would downgrade the place of good literature in the classroom. Others said the standards [harped too much on “cold readings” of complex text](#) without any background preparation. Some early-childhood educators argued that 1st and 2nd graders were expected to tackle skills they [weren’t developmentally ready for](#). Some math educators contended that the standards were particularly weak [in preparing students for college majors in math or science](#). But the lion’s share of attacks on the common core were grounded in politics. The idea that all states would be expected to share one set of standards offended conservative activists and lawmakers, who saw the initiative as an [encroachment on the American tradition of states’ rights](#). And it offended more liberal ones, too, who feared it could undermine teachers’ attempts to tailor instruction to students’ and communities’ needs. President Barack Obama and U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan stoked that fire when they encouraged states to adopt “college- and career-ready standards”—widely interpreted as code language for the common core—to win [\\$4 billion in federal grants under their “Race to the](#)

[Top](#)” school-improvement program. States’-rights backers argued that the federal government had violated laws that prohibit it from mandating what’s taught in classrooms. But common-core advocates pushed back, noting that federal officials had no role in writing the standards, and that encouraging their adoption violated no laws.

But isn’t the common core about testing?

It is, but that part took a while longer to materialize. In 2010, the U.S. Department of Education [awarded \\$360 million to two groups of states](#)—the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium and the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers, or PARCC—to design assessments for the common standards. Locking in shared standards with only two, federally funded tests nationwide—rather than each state using its own test—only deepened the perception that “the feds” were dictating what students should learn.

Teachers, parents, students, and policymakers argued that the tests—ranging from 7 to 9 ½ hours, [much longer than the ones most states were using](#)—ate up too much instructional time. Liberal activists who saw corporations as playing too large a role in K-12 policy crusaded against the tests, which were developed by big-name companies such as Pearson. An [“opt out” movement also took hold](#), with tens of thousands of students boycotting the first administration of the PARCC and Smarter Balanced tests in the spring of 2015.

Where does all this leave us? Did we end up with higher, shared standards across the states and a way to compare student performance from state to state?

Not really. [All but seven states still had the common standards on their books](#) as the 2015-16 school year began. Whether they are truly more rigorous than every state’s previous standards remains a matter of debate, and many districts were slow to implement the standards, hobbled by a lack of money and good instructional resources. But anecdotal reports suggest many teachers are using the standards to deepen their instruction. As for that common measuring stick, it fell far short of its original vision. In November 2010, 45 states and the District of Columbia had all agreed to use PARCC or Smarter Balanced, offering the possibility of comparing student performance across many states. The two consortia also hoped to devise a way to make their scoring systems comparable, facilitating a true nationwide comparison. [But by May 2014, barely half the states still planned to use a consortium test when](#) the tests debuted in 2015. The rest designed their own tests or bought off-the-shelf exams