

California's Common Core State Standards in English Language Arts: What's New, What's Not, and What's Missing

DR. MARGARET MOUSTAFA

CHARTER COLLEGE OF EDUCATION, CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, LOS ANGELES

ABSTRACT

Beginning August 2013 California will replace its current English-Language Arts Content Standards with California's Common Core State Standards in English Language Arts. This article provides background information on the development of the standards and an overview of what's new, what's not, and what's missing in the new standards. Among those things new is the expectation that students will independently read and write increasingly complex literary and informational text as they progress through school and the expectation that teachers of history/social studies and science will help students read and write in their respective fields. What's not new is a traditional view of beginning reading. Among those things missing is curriculum alignment in history/social studies and science across states and equal access to books.

Key Words: Common Core; Standards; English-Language Arts; Social Studies; Science; Assessment

Beginning August 2013 California will replace its current *English-Language Arts Content Standards* with *California's Common Core State Standards in English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects*. Assessments based on these new standards, now in development, will be ready the following school year.

What are the Common Core State Standards and where did they come from? How will they differ from California's current English-Language Arts Standards? And most

importantly, how will they impact your teaching? The answers to these questions could fill a book but the following might be a helpful start.

The standards movement began at the national level in 1994 when President Clinton signed (1) the reauthorization of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* (ESEA) for Title I schools, under the title *Improving America's Schools Act of 1994* and (2) the *Goals 2000: Educate America Act*. The first act required states to develop challenging academic standards and assessments aligned with the standards in at least mathematics

.....

When high-stakes testing in reading and math began in California, instruction in writing, science, and other areas was largely neglected in schools serving low-income communities.

.....

and reading or language arts. The second act offered funding for schools over and above state funding, on the condition that, among other things, the states develop challenging academic standards and assessments aligned with the standards for all students in core content areas such as English, mathematics, science, history, geography, foreign languages, the arts, civics and government, and economics.

California's current curriculum standards were written during this period. When high-stakes testing in reading and math began in California, instruction in writing, science, and other areas was largely neglected in schools serving low-income communities.

President George W. Bush continued President Clinton's policy of promoting standards-based education when he reauthorized ESEA under the title *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*. NCLB, among other things, added a requirement for states to adopt challenging academic standards in science by the 2005-2006 school year and to administer assessments aligned with the standards by the 2007-08 school year.

In the first year of the Obama administration, the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers in partnership with Achieve, the College Board, and ACT, released the first public draft of the Common Core State

Standards. The standards were draft standards in English language arts and mathematics for skills students should master to be college and career ready by the time they graduate from high school. They planned to work backwards until they had standards from twelfth grade through kindergarten.

Shortly thereafter the U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan committed \$350 million from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA), also known as the Stimulus Act, to develop tests that would assess children's academic achievements under these standards. When the complete set of K-12 standards were finalized in June of 2010, the U.S. Department of Education made their adoption a prerequisite for eligibility for Race to the Top funds and other programs created out of ARRA funds. California adopted the standards in August of 2010, the deadline to adopt the standards to be eligible for Race to the Top funds. EdSource (2010) estimates that it will cost California about \$1.6 billion over a few years to retool for the Common Core State Standards.

As of the writing of this paper, 45 states have agreed to replace the standards they wrote in English-language arts and mathematics during the Clinton and Bush II administrations with the *Common Core State Standards for Mathematics* and

Common Core State Standards in English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects. Because these new standards are nearly nation-wide standards rather than standards written by and used in a particular state, many people refer to them as the Common Core Standards rather than the Common Core State Standards. They can be seen at www.corestandards.org.

While each state that has agreed to adopt the Common Core Standards has the same core standards, participating states are allowed to augment the Common Core Standards up to a 15% limit. The Common Core Standards plus California's augmentation are referred to as California's Common Core State Standards. They can be seen at www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cc.



...“Reading, writing,
listening, and speaking
are not disembodied
skills. Each exists
in context and in
relation to
the others”.



How will the Common Core Standards in English Language Arts be new? How will they be the same as the 1997 English-Language Arts Standards? What's missing? Here are some ways:

NOT NEW: Both sets of standards see standards as descriptions of what, not how, to teach. California prefaces its current standards in English-Language Arts, Mathematics, Science, and History-Social Science with a statement by the State Board of Education and the State Superintendent of Public Instruction that “standards describe what, not how, to teach.”

Similarly, the Common Core Standards clearly state that grade-specific standards “define end-of-year expectations” (p. 4). They “define what all students are expected to know and be able to do, not how teachers should teach” (p. 6). “Teachers are thus free to provide students with whatever tools and knowledge their professional judgment and experience identify as most helpful for meeting the goals set out in the Standards” (p. 4).

NEW: The Common Core Standards emphasize the interrelatedness of reading, writing, listening, and speaking. California's 1997 English-Language Arts standards say “Reading, writing, listening, and speaking are not disembodied skills. Each exists in context and in relation to the others”. However, that is all the 1997 standards say on this matter.

In contrast, the Common Core Standards emphasize the interrelatedness of reading, writing, listening, and speaking by saying “While the Standards delineate specific expectations in reading, writing, speaking, listening, and language, each standard need not be a separate focus for instruction and assessment. Often, several standards can be addressed by a single rich task.” (p. 5) They further say that a given task can involve more than one of these aspects of literacy, e.g., writing about something that one has read. (p. 4)

.....

However, this new emphasis on reading with comprehension, writing, speaking, listening, and language in History-Social Science and in Science classrooms is a major change in the History-Social Science and the Science standards in California.

.....

The clear message of the Common Core Standards is we don't need to teach to standards one by one. We can teach to multiple standards with one instructional strategy.

NEW: The Common Core Standards expect English language arts instruction to be a shared responsibility across the curriculum. In California's 1997 English-Language Arts Standards it says that "Reading, writing, listening and speaking . . . need to be developed in the context of a rich, substantive

core curriculum that is geared not only toward achieving [reading, writing, listening and speaking] standards per se but also toward applying language arts skills to achieve success in other curricular areas." (p. vii) However, reading, writing, listening, and speaking are not mentioned in California's other curricular standards. Rather than using words such as *read* and *write*, California's History-Social Science Standards use words such as *compare*, *define*, *discuss*, *distinguish*, *explain*, *identify*, and *understand*. Similarly, California's Science Standards use words such as *analyze*, *distinguish*, *identify*, *know*, *recognize*, *select*, and *solve*.

In contrast, beginning in Grade 2, the Common Core Standards expect children "By the end of the year, [to] read and comprehend informational texts, including history/social studies, science, and technical texts, in [their text complexity grade band] proficiently with scaffolding as needed at the high end of the range." In Grade 6-12 the Common Core Standards require teachers of content area subjects to use "their content area expertise to help students meet the particular challenges of reading, writing, speaking, listening, and language in their respective fields" (p. 3). In contrast to the language of California's History-Social Science Standards and Science Standards, the Common Core Standards use language such as *Read closely to determine what the text says, Read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently, Produce clear and coherent writing, and write arguments focused on discipline-specific context* (underlining added).

The Common Core Standards do not replace California's 1998 History-Social Science Standards and Science Standards. Rather, they are *in addition* to them. However, this new emphasis on reading with comprehension, writing, speaking, listening, and language in History-Social Science and in Science classrooms is a major change in the History-Social Science and the Science standards in California.

.....

In contrast, the Common Core Standards balance informational text throughout the grades. They clearly distinguish literary text from informational text by having separate sections for literary and informational text in Grades K-12.

.....

NEW: The Common Core Standards balance literary and informational text. The Common Core Standards aim to align instruction in literary and informational text with the distribution of literary and informational text in the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP). The proportion of literary to informational text in NAEP's assessment in the three grades it assesses is 50-50 in fourth grade, 45-55 in eighth grade, and 30-70 in twelfth grade.

While California's 1997 English-Language Arts Standards for reading in grades K-4 include informational text, the standards relate to literary text more than informational text. Then in Grades 5-12 the standards for reading emphasize comprehending informational materials. However, as we saw above, reading in history, social science, and science are not included in California's 1998 History-Social Science and Science Standards.

In contrast, the Common Core Standards balance informational text throughout the grades. They clearly distinguish literary text from informational text by having separate sections for literary and informational text in Grades K-12. This, too, is a major change from California's current standards.

NEW: The Common Core Standards expect students to read with comprehension and write increasingly complex text as they progress through school. The Common Core Standards cite research that shows that "while reading demands in college, workforce training programs, and life in general have held steady or increased over the last half century, K-12 texts have actually declined in sophistication, and relatively little attention has been paid to students' ability to read complex texts independently." Hence, one of the major expectations of the Common Core Standards is that, by the end of high school, "all students must be able to comprehend . . . independently and proficiently the kinds of complex texts commonly found in first year credit-bearing college courses and career preparation courses." (Appendix A, page 2)

To achieve this, the Common Core Standards start with the level of text complexity they assert is commonly found in first-year credit-bearing college courses and workforce training programs and work backwards to second grade. Figure I shows the level of complexity, as measured in Lexile ranges, that the Common Core Standards maintain students must be able to read with comprehension in various grade bands in order to be college and career ready (CCR) by the end of high school (Appendix A, page 8).

Figure I
The Common Core Grade Bands of Text Complexity

Grade	K-1	2-3	4-5	6-8	9-10	11-CCR
Lexile Range	N/A	450-790	770-980	955-1155	1080-1305	1215-1355

Appendix C in the Common Core Standards gives samples of student writing in each grade, K-12, in argumentative, explanatory, and narrative genres and describes the strength of each.

While I fully concur that students should learn to read successively more complex text as they progress through the grades, at the same time we also need to be careful to value literature for more than just its text complexity. A case in point is the literature in the 9-12 grade level span in the History/Social Science section of California's *Recommended Literature: Kindergarten through Grade Twelve*, referenced in the 1997 English Language Arts Standards. If we use text complexity alone as a basis for judging grade-appropriateness, Nobel Prize winning author John Steinbeck's books *Grapes of Wrath*, *Of Mice and Men*, and *East of Eden*, for example, would be considered inappropriate for grades 9-12 but appropriate for grades 2 - 3. Similarly, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, *Cry, the Beloved Country*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and *Cannery Row*, would be considered inappropriate for grades 9-12 but appropriate for grades 4-5. (The full list of books can be seen at www.cde.ca.gov/ci/rl/ll.) Obviously we need to keep quality and content in mind as well as text complexity when selecting texts for student to read.

NOT NEW: Both sets of standards hold traditional views of beginning reading. Both California's 1997 English-Language Arts Standards and the Common Core Standards have expectations that K-1 children will learn letter-phoneme correspondences, despite the large body of research findings that young children have difficulty analyzing spoken words into phonemes when there is more than one phoneme in an onset or

a rime. Both sets of standards are silent on phonics as letter-onset and letter-rime correspondence, despite research findings that young children naturally analyze spoken words into onsets and rimes and that they use analogies between known and unknown print words at the onset-rime level to figure out unknown print words. (See Moustafa, 1995, for a review of these bodies of research.)

In *Becoming a Nation of Readers*, the Commission on Reading recommended that phonics instruction should end by the end of second grade (Anderson, 1985, p. 118). While California's 1997 English-Language Arts Standards continue phonics through Grade 3, the Common Core Standards continue phonics through Grade 5.

California's Common Core Standards have an additional goal for beginning readers. They expect children in Grade 1 to identify print words in isolation. This goal is problematic for two reasons: (1) researchers agree that beginning readers identify words in context better than in isolation and (2) it is not clear why anyone needs to be able to identify words in isolation. (See Moustafa, 1995, for a review of this body of research.)

In my view, the Common Core Standards for beginning readers is the weakest area in an otherwise excellent set of standards. The Common Core Standards state that "The Standards are intended to be a living work: as new and better evidence emerges, the Standards will be revised accordingly" (p. 3). In the next iteration of the Common Core Standards, the National Governors Association, the Council of Chief State Officers, and their partners will be wise to expand the body of research they use when choosing goals for beginning readers.

MISSING: Curriculum alignment in history/social studies and in science across states. While I applaud the

.....

The Common Core Standards claim to be the "next generation of standards".

In many ways they are.

.....

Common Core Standard's inclusion of reading and writing in history/social studies and in science, I wonder how reading and writing can be assessed in these areas with a common assessment instrument across states. States vary in the specific topics they cover and when they cover them. For example, one state may teach about the Civil War in sixth grade and another in eighth grade. Readers use their background knowledge to read with comprehension and to write. If, for example, students in a state that studies the Civil War in eighth grade were to be assessed on reading with comprehension on the Civil War in sixth grade, they would be in a poorer position to read with comprehension on this topic than students in states that study the Civil War in sixth grade. With current efforts to tie teacher evaluations to student test scores, this could be a point that affects teachers as well as students.

MISSING: Equal access to books. An elephant in the room that must be addressed in order to achieve the goals of the Common Core Standards—on any standards—in reading is equal access to books. According to the findings of 39 different studies reviewed by Allington and his associates (Allington et al., 2010), during the school year, low-income elementary-school children gain in reading achievement at the same rate as middle-income students. However, during summer vacations, middle-income children gain a couple of month's worth of achievement in reading, whereas low-income children lose an

average of three or more months. By the time children are in middle school, summer slide can account for more than two years' worth of achievement between low-income and middle-income children. The reason for the disparity is access to books.

This disparity can be addressed with a minimum of money and effort. In a large-scale, federally-funded study with experimental and control groups, Allington and his colleagues found low-income children achieve reading gains equal to middle-income children's gains when allowed to select and take home 12 books a year at the onset of summer vacation. The cost? About \$50 a year per child, a paltry sum compared to the costs associated with developing the standards and developing assessments based on the standards.

The Common Core Standards claim to be the "next generation of standards". In many ways they are. However, no matter how good the standards and how well we teach, neither state nor national standards in reading and writing will be realized until all children have access to books they can and want to read all year round.

As Loveless concluded in his study of standards and achievement (Loveless, 2012), if the goal is to close the gap between high-achieving and low-achieving students, standards are not enough. To this I would add, as Allington's study shows, good instruction is not enough either.

REFERENCES

Allington, R. L., McGill-Franzen, A., Camilli, G., Williams, L., Graff, J., Zeig, J., Zmach, C. & Nowak, R. (2010). Addressing summer reading setback among economically disadvantaged elementary students. *Reading Psychology*, 31, 5, 411-427.

Anderson, R.C. and others (1985). *Becoming a Nation of Readers: The Report of the Commission on Reading*. Urbana, IL: Center for the Study of Reading.

EdSource (2010). California and the "Common Core": Will there be a new debate about K-12 standards? Mountain View, CA: EdSource.

Loveless, T. (2012). The Brown Center on American Education: How well are American students learning?, Vol. III (I). Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution.

Moustafa, M. (1995). *Beyond Traditional Phonics: Research findings and reading instruction*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Dr. Margaret Moustafa is Professor of Education at Charter College of Education, California State University Los Angeles. She is a Past-President of California Professors of Reading and Language Arts.