



A Union of Professionals

Making Common Core State Standards Work before Making Them Count

Frequently Asked Questions about the Common Core State Standards

Why does the AFT support and believe in the Common Core State Standards?

The Common Core State Standards have the potential to transform teaching and learning and provide all children with the problem-solving, critical-thinking and teamwork skills they need to compete in today's changing world. This approach to learning moves away from rote memorization and endless test-taking and toward deeper learning.

These standards establish high expectations for all students and make clear that we should no longer tolerate one set of standards for children in Bedford-Stuyvesant and another for children in Beverly Hills. Saying poor kids can't meet rigorous standards is a failure of our obligation to help all children reach their full potential. These standards have enormous potential. But raising achievement for all students also requires us to confront the devastating effects of poverty and put in place the interventions, added support and resources to meet the social, emotional and health needs of children.

What's different about these standards?

The CCSS are centered on the knowledge and skills students need to be college- and career-ready, and they were developed with the deep engagement of classroom teachers. They make clear that every child, no matter where he or she lives, must be able to solve problems, analyze and apply knowledge, and work with others.

Teachers and students are able to dig deeper on essential concepts and skills. It's no longer enough to simply memorize the multiplication table, recite back the plot of a book or memorize some historical facts. The Common Core requires students to understand how they reached their conclusions and understand multiple methods of achieving the right answer; analyze and interpret texts, literature and historical moments based on multiple perspectives; be able to argue for and defend their work; and work with other students in mastering concepts and completing work. In short these deeper skills prepare students for the challenges and opportunities that await them in college and their careers.

Do teachers support the CCSS?

A recent poll of our members showed that 75 percent of teachers support the Common Core standards and want them to

succeed. That's no surprise—because teachers, including many AFT teachers, played a fundamental role in the design and review of these standards. By focusing on less content more deeply, there is less racing through a course of study and more searching for evidence and conceptual understanding.

The standards establish what students need to know, understand and be able to do. They don't prescribe how teachers should teach or what curriculum materials to use. That is left to the professional judgment of educators. A veteran math teacher from Florida (Peggy Brookins) notes that, prior to the adoption of the CCSS, she faced enormous responsibility to cover the content in an 835-page textbook over the course of the school year. The CCSS "allow me to focus on what is truly important, knowing that what was taught prior was taught in depth" and that she will be able to "teach the standards in depth to prepare students for the next level."

New Mexico teacher Stephanie DeBellis says, "It makes it very easy for teachers to look at the end goal and backward-plan to make sure that your children have critical-thinking skills. We're moving away from rote memorization, drilling children, and moving more toward getting deeper into the content and really being able to not only apply our knowledge but transfer it from one thing to another. Critical-thinking skills are back! Science and social studies are back! It's a beautiful opportunity. And how you achieve your goals, and how you meet your standards, is up to you. We all go into this profession with so many gifts, and so many strengths, and now teachers finally feel like they can apply those gifts and those strengths to their pedagogy, and it's a beautiful thing."

How should the Common Core State Standards be implemented?

States and districts must work with teachers to develop a high-quality curriculum and professional development, provide teachers and students with the time needed to try out new methods of teaching to the standards in their classrooms, commit financial resources to ensure its success, and engage parents and community. Then, the assessments should be field-tested to ensure that the curriculum, teaching and testing are actually aligned.

When states and districts get the alignment right—moving

from standards to curriculum to classrooms to feedback and improvement—student success will follow. But until then, a moratorium on stakes is the only sensible course.

Businesses field-test new products and processes as a matter of course. And that same process must be followed with the Common Core to ensure its success.

What is wrong with the current implementation process?

Some states and districts, including New York, are giving students assessments based on the standards that have not been fully implemented, without giving teachers the tools and resources they need to meet these instructional shifts, and based on content students may have never seen.

Right now, test scores may be used to determine if a student advances or is held back, to designate a school's performance, to evaluate educators and even to decide school closures.

That is why the AFT is calling for a moratorium on the high stakes for students, teachers and schools linked with Common Core assessments until an implementation plan is developed in partnership with teachers, parents and community and is field-tested in classrooms. This is not about stopping the tests, it's about decoupling the tests from decisions that could needlessly hurt students, teachers and schools.

And it's about ensuring that teachers and students are able to make these instructional shifts in the classroom.

That same poll that showed tremendous support among teachers for the Common Core, also showed that an overwhelming majority said they have not had enough time to understand the standards, put them into practice or share strategies with colleagues.

A number of states have strong implementation plans, and some have resources for educators to support their professional learning. However, the existence of and access to these materials are haphazardly being shared with educators, and their availability is uneven and often untimely.

The federal government has spent \$350 million on new high-stakes tests aligned to the standards but nothing has been specifically targeted to prepare teachers. The Fordham Institute estimates the cost of implementation could run as high as \$12 billion nationally.

What will the accountability system look like during this moratorium?

AFT believes there is a very important role for accountability, but the call for a moratorium is to make accountability real. Teachers should still be evaluated and standardized tests should still be given. We need to look at multiple measures to evaluate student growth and progress—including classroom-based assessments and student learning objectives.

The AFT is calling for a moratorium on consequences in these transitional years. It's about decoupling the tests from decisions that could unfairly hurt teachers, schools and students.

The moratorium should be a time of intense activity—it isn't summer camp, it is boot camp. It is the time when administrators, political leaders, teachers, parents and others work together on a quality, comprehensive implementation plan, roll that implementation plan out, field test and make the necessary adjustments.

This is really about ensuring everyone who has a responsibility for our children's education takes responsibility for making sure the Common Core is supported, implemented, and then evaluated correctly. That's what making accountability real means.

How long should this moratorium last?

The moratorium should last until the implementation plan and field testing are completed. The length will vary based on where states and districts are in implementation now and when they start trying new assessments.

Why isn't the moratorium limited to the 2013-14 school year?

The new Common Core assessments developed by federally funded consortia will be fully implemented in school year 2014-15. The information from those assessments should be used to provide information to parents, teachers, schools and districts about implementation efforts.

If you want to hold off on stakes attached to testing, why have students take the Common Core-aligned state assessments at all?

It is important to have assessments that measure what you want students to know. We won't know if the assessments align to the standards, and to what is actually being taught, until the tests are administered in a widespread way—not just in small trials. Both the tests and teaching may need adjustment. That adjustment should happen in a transparent way before anyone faces consequences for the results.

How can parents help their children work toward the new standards?

In English language arts, parents should: establish a daily reading routine for their child; provide lots of informational texts; read the text, ask questions about the text and discuss the text with their child; and encourage their child to write.

For math, the AFT has developed a series of parent letters (<http://bit.ly/CCSSparentLetters>) that can be used to introduce the new standards to parents and provide sample math problems. They encourage parents to ask their child's teacher questions about the standards. They may also help parents recognize how close to or far from the goal their child may be.