



Massachusetts adopted the Common Core State Standards in 2010. Did the Commonwealth need new educational standards? Is Massachusetts ready to test students, teachers, and schools using the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers?

The Common Core State Standards are educational standards for mathematics and English language arts/literacy (ELA) adopted by 45 states, the District of Columbia, and four territories. As standards, the Common Core does not prescribe a curriculum, but instead sets out requirements for educational attainment. Common Core is an educational baseline. States may expand upon the national standards by 15%. Student, teacher, and school evaluations will ultimately be based on Common Core assessment outcomes. In Massachusetts, mastery of the standards will be assessed by either the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) assessment system or a revised Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS).

Some Common Definitions

Understanding the debate over the Common Core requires a clear understanding of certain widely used terms.

- **Standards**—Educational standards in Massachusetts define the knowledge and skills that a student should possess at a certain stage in his or her education. For example, the current Massachusetts Reading Standards require that 4th graders possess an ability to identify and compare points of view in a literary work and 5th graders possess an ability to identify how point of view impacts the understanding of the narrator and therefore the reader—a higher level of comprehension.
- **Curriculum**—Curriculum, controlled locally, is the course framework for educational content. It is the year-long program of study designed to achieve mastery of learning standards. In many cases, curriculum includes the selection of textbooks and learning materials.
- **Instruction**—Instruction, controlled locally, is the classroom delivery of content. It is the process for imparting knowledge and information from teachers to students. Lesson plans, crafted by teachers, lay out daily progressive instruction designed to achieve the successful understanding of State standards.
- **Assessment**—Assessment, controlled both locally and by the State, tests students to determine mastery of the curriculum and standards.

History

1965 – Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), the initial Federal involvement in education, states that “nothing in this act” shall authorize any Federal official to “mandate, direct, or control” school curriculum.

1993 – The Commonwealth adopts the Massachusetts Educational Reform Act, which includes new standards and new funding for communities through the creation of a baseline “foundation” budget.

1994 – ESEA reauthorization, “Improving America’s Schools Act,” requires states to create or adopt standards.

1995-1997 – Massachusetts adopts educational standards known as the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks.

1997 – Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) testing is initiated.

2001 – ESEA reauthorization, “No Child Left Behind Act,” requires states to test students to mastery of standards. Tests are developed by each state.*

2009 – Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) and National Governors Association Center for Best Practices (NGA) coordinate efforts to develop national standards in mathematics and English language arts/literacy (ELA).

2010 – Federal government gives funding preference to states that adopt Common Core as part of Race to the Top Assessment Program (authorized under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act in 2009).

2010 – Massachusetts Board of Education adopts Common Core.

2014 – Massachusetts pilots PARCC testing. (PARCC and Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC), composed of member states, are the two primary assessments of the Common Core standards.)

2015 – Massachusetts Board of Education will determine whether to adopt PARCC as state-wide assessment system.

* The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), known as “The Nation’s Report Card,” revealed significant disparities among states in student achievement despite individual state claims of high student performance on newly crafted state-based assessments. NAEP illustrated that certain state assessments did not adequately measure student proficiency or mastery of the subjects.

Arguments By Proponents of the Common Core:

- Higher-level baseline standards across the US
- Assessments based on Common Core allow comparison of student achievement across the US
- Provides for greater depth of content understanding than current state standards
- Facilitates educational mobility across school districts through nationwide grade-level standards
- Provides accountability for public education spending using annual student achievement and progress to assess teacher and school effectiveness

Arguments By Opponents of the Common Core:

- Top-down, nationalization of educational system
- Limits high-achieving individuals, districts, and states from significantly exceeding baseline requirements
- Developed and adopted quickly, in part from availability of Federal funding, without sufficient public review and testing
- Requires new expenditures of time and resources, including new training, materials, and equipment
- Not as comprehensive in scope as the current Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks and MCAS

General Misconceptions

- Common Core as “ObamaCore” — Although the Obama Administration supports the Common Core, the national standards and testing debate began well before President Obama and derives from laws passed under Presidents Clinton and Bush. The development of the Common Core standards was led by CCSSO and NGA, state-based governmental advocacy organizations, not the Federal government.
- The Corporatization of Education — The standards were developed by state government policymakers, education professionals, and education advocates, with significant funding, but not oversight, from corporate philanthropies.
- Lowest Common Denominator — The Common Core does not include some higher level mathematics however this does not prevent school districts from teaching these subjects. Calculus was not a standard under the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks but was offered in local school districts.
- Federal Invasion of Privacy — Massachusetts will provide PARCC with existing individual student data for validation and analysis of test results, however PARCC is not authorized to share that information with the Federal government without written authorization from the Commonwealth.

Questions for Policymakers

- Is the Common Core academically equal to or more rigorous than the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks?
- Is the PARCC a better measurement for assessing student, teacher, and school performance?
- Is the timeframe for implementation of the Common Core and PARCC reasonable?
- Is the cost for implementation of the Common Core known and affordable?
- What are the roles of parents, local school districts, state policymakers, and Federal leadership in determining a student’s educational needs and attainment?

For Additional Information

- Common Core State Standards Initiative — www.corestandards.org — The official home of the Common Core State Standards, the site is maintained by the CCSSO and the NGA Center for Best Practices. The site includes an overview of the standards and the history of the initiative.
- Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education — Common Core State Standards Initiative — www.doe.mass.edu/candi/commoncore/ — The Commonwealth of Massachusetts site on implementation of the Common Core and PARCC.
- National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) — nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/about/ - NAEP, first administered in 1969, is “the largest nationally representative and continuing assessment of what America’s students know and can do in various subject areas” under the National Center for Education Statistics and U.S. Department of Education.
- Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers — www.parcconline.org — The website for the consortium of 17 states plus the District of Columbia and U.S. Virgin Islands that drafted and are piloting a common set of K-12 assessments based on the Common Core standards.

Bureau Brief

Worcester Regional Research Bureau, Inc.
 500 Salisbury Street
 Worcester, MA 01609
 508-799-7169
www.wrrb.org

