

COMMON CORE STANDARDS—COMING TO YOUR LOCAL SCHOOL DISTRICT

League members who participated in the September, 2011 consensus meetings on “The Role of the Federal Government in Public Education” will recall a brief introduction to new educational standards concurrently being introduced in most of the states under the Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSSI). At that time, we were able only to touch on these Common Core Standards, but we are hearing more and more about them as time passes. The LWVCA’s Education Committee has chosen to examine those standards in more detail and to survey local school districts about their implementation of those Standards. The committee will share their findings with League members, other nonprofit education organizations, parents and other interested individuals. Meanwhile we thought it might be helpful to fill in a few blanks that the September 2011 discussions may have left unfilled.

BACKGROUND

Public education in the United States has traditionally been a **local** responsibility. States are mandated by their constitutions to establish a system of public schools and to support them (at least partially) in some way. Their state departments of education set standards, establish various minimum requirements, and assess student progress via state-wide tests. The actual responsibility for providing the buildings, staff, equipment, etc. is delegated to local districts throughout the state, and funding for these tasks is provided, for the most part, by local property tax levies and bond issues.

What necessitated the change? This model of educational organization had worked well at least from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century, but by a century later, our population had become much more mobile. Students in Grades K-12 who moved from one state to another would be confronted with a curriculum very different from their previous ones. There was little or no consistency between what they left behind and what they found in a new state and their new local school district.

Recognition that some change was needed also came from universities and employers. Universities found that too many of their students were failing to graduate because they had come from areas of low expectations. At the same time, employers were increasing their requirements for new hires in the new century in order to compete in a global economy. It was becoming apparent that America’s public school standards were too varied to meet the challenges students faced when they left Grade 12 for college or the work force.

A first attempt to remedy the situation came in 2001 when Congress passed the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). Its goal was to force states and districts to upgrade their public education standards and practices through a system of tests that rewarded improvement at many levels and “punished” failure to do so. The result was a “50-states-and-50-tests environment in public education.” Despite a great deal of tinkering with NCLB, no one seems ready to acknowledge any success with its approach.

For these reasons, The Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSSI) was launched in March,

2009 when the National Governors Association (NGA) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) agreed to the concept of a uniform set of standards for English/Language Arts and Mathematics, areas in which there are general agreement and available teaching resources among states. Their final report was issued in June, 2010, and since that time, 45 states and three territories have adopted the standards. (Note: In order to be considered for funding under the Race to the Top (RTTT), a state must adopt the Common Core Standards.)

According to the official Introduction, this set of standards was developed by “representatives from participating states, educators, content experts, researchers, national organizations, and community groups.” The developers received input from the general public, teachers, parents, business leaders, states, and content area experts. It is important to note that the Standards did not result from a **federal** initiative or mandate. Its support came from those individuals who, on a daily basis, had to deal with the problems created by 50 different sets of standards.

The plan is for every state to adopt and implement the standards by 2014. To encourage this cooperation, the Obama administration offered two incentives: 1) To compete for funding in Race to the Top, a state must agree to adopt and implement the standards, and 2) To obtain a waiver from some of the requirements of NCLB, a state must adopt and implement the standards. However, not all of the states have jumped on this particular bandwagon; Arkansas, Nebraska, Texas, Virginia, and Alaska have not, to date, concurred with the other 45 states. Some argue that adoption/implementation of these standards is voluntary, but that these incentives being pushed by the Federal government make it almost obligatory.

Resistance is based on several factors. Opponents argue that public education has traditionally been a local responsibility, and this program would take much of that control out of the hands of individual states and put it in the hands of the Federal government. Some state governors have indicated that just because other states are in the plan, they see no reason to accede for that reason alone. Additionally, the standards have not been “field tested,” according to educator Diane Ravitch in an article in the New York Review of Books. “No one knows whether these standards are good or bad, whether they will improve academic achievement or widen the achievement gap.” (Cin. Enq. 4/28/2012) Finally, the cost of implementing the standards and changing the existing curriculum and assessments is cited as a reason to resist adopting and implementing them. Governor Rick Perry of Texas argued that “the Race to the Top funding would only generate a one-time amount of \$75 per student, yet cost Texas taxpayers an additional \$3 million.”

WHAT DO THE STANDARDS REQUIRE?

When the standards were introduced in June 2010, the presenters pointed out that college- and career-readiness standards had been incorporated into the K-12 standards and that certain criteria had been used to develop those standards:

- Aligned with college and work expectations;

- Are clear, understandable and consistent;
- Include rigorous content and application of knowledge through high-order skills;
- Build upon strengths and lessons of current state standards;
- Are informed by other top-performing countries, so that all students are prepared to succeed in our global economy and society; and,
- Evidence and/or research-based.

Those interested in more detailed information for further individual or group action should use their computer's search engine (Google, Yahoo, Bing,) and look for:

- National: Common Core State Standards Initiative
- Ohio: ODE - Academic content Standards

National Standards were developed in two areas of study, Mathematics and English Language Arts to provide teachers and parents with a common understanding of what students are expected to learn. Consistent benchmarks and consistent progression goals will be provided for all students regardless of where they live.

The standards are initiated in the early grades and are designed to build on learning already acquired by the student. This approach continues through high school subjects with the goal of preparing high school graduates for post-high school learning or employment with twenty-first century skills.

The elementary school mathematics standards begin at the kindergarten level, where youngsters are introduced to how numbers are associated with quantities and how to put numbers together (addition) and take them apart (subtraction). As students progress through Grades 1 to 5, they're learning fractions, negative numbers, and geometry. This prepares them for the geometry, algebra, and probability and statistics they will study in middle school. By high school, students should be prepared to apply mathematical ways of thinking to real world issues and challenges. This is reinforced by an emphasis on mathematical modeling to analyze problems and challenges and improve decision making.

While the English Language Arts & Literacy Standards reinforce History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects, these areas were not initially included because of substantial differences among states regarding Social Studies, and because rapid acceleration in Science/Technology limits correlation of national standards. However, the Ohio Department of Education (ODE) is working to develop Standards for both.

These standards begin at the primary grade levels and are reinforced and compounded through Grade 12. Students, as they progress, are expected to learn not only to read and write, but to speak, listen, and use language effectively in a variety of content areas. The Grade 6-12 standards do not intend to replace current states' Social Studies and Science requirements; they are meant to complement those standards that may already be in place in a given state. (Ohio, for example, has adopted new standards in social studies and science to coordinate with the goals of the Common Core.) The goal of this segment of the Common Core Standards is to

educate students to read critically and thoughtfully analyze the enormous amount of information that is available today in print and digitally. Again, these are skills that will be vital to young people as they move into the 21st Century world of work or higher education.

The website for the Common Core Standards (<http://www.corestandards.org/the-standards>) contains all of the adopted standards for every grade. There are two groups, English Language Arts Standards and Mathematics Standards. Each of these groups is then divided into numerous subgroups. For example, some of those subgroups for the English Language Arts are: Anchor Standards, Reading: Literature, Reading: Informational Text, Writing, Language, etc. Each subgroup then is divided into grade levels. The Mathematics Standards are similarly arranged, but their initial grouping is by grade level, and each grade level is then subdivided into the goals for that level, e.g., Number & Operations in Base Ten, Measurement & Data, etc.

One can contrast what is expected from a First Grader, a Fifth Grader, and a Junior or Senior in high school by examining comparable segments of the English Language Arts Reading: Literature standards for each level.

- Grade 1: “RL 1.1 Ask and answer questions about key details in a text.
- Grade 5: RL 5.1 Quote accurately from a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text.
- Grade 11-12: RL 11-12.1 Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.

The Mathematics Standards are arranged simply by grade level, kindergarten through high school. While some concepts are repeated throughout the lower grades (Number and Operations in Base Ten), new concepts are introduced as students grow and progress. Again, each grade level of the standards builds on what the student has learned in the previous grade, whether it’s fractions, statistics & probability, or ratios & proportional relationships.

ASSESSMENTS

Up to now, most assessments (tests) have been “norm-referenced,” i.e., they are designed to rank students and identify those who strong or weak in academic skills. This type of test, however, does not measure students’ mastery the specific content and skills that comprise the curriculum.

New tests, criterion-referenced, are being designed to accomplish the aforementioned goal. It is important to note that the federal government is not developing the tests that will be used to measure mastery of a curriculum. In 2 010, two coalitions obtained funding in a Department of Education competition to develop relevant assessments based on the Common Core Standards. They are the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) and the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC). Their approaches differ slightly, as the PARCC effort leans more to a computerized administration of the tests while the SBAC method

will use a paper-and pencil edition for the initial three years. Both approaches will test students more frequently throughout the school year and will allow teachers to see immediately where students need remediation. Both systems will also determine whether or not a student is ready for college or career by the time he/she is to graduate from high school.

Developers of the Common Core Standards see these tests as a valuable tool in measuring students' comprehension of the subjects being studied. Virtually immediate feedback would provide educators with the ability to adjust the curriculum if problems are revealed in the tests. Moreover, the use of multiple assessments would avoid the use of a single test, often given late in the year, to determine what students have or have not mastered.

Although the new assessments will not be officially in place until 2014-15, questions about their use have arisen. Should these tests be used to highlight accountability? Should they be used in evaluating the teaching staff and their schools? Both PARCC and SBAC are designing ways to allow for cross-state comparisons. (Recall, one rationale for the Common Core Standards is to ensure that the residence of a student does not affect the quality of his/her education.) Will 45 states really be on the same page at the same time? If not, what happens next? The question of connecting these tests to a reward/penalty system for teachers and administrators is being debated vigorously in many states, educators, politicians, and community organizations weighing in on the subject.

Both public school districts throughout the United States and the states that have adopted the Standards are making many changes in their curricula to ensure that they can meet the goals of this ambitious educational plan. Parents and community members need to be knowledgeable about the new approach so the transition is as smooth as possible. The purpose is to enable our students to emerge with the skills and learning necessary for success in the 21st Century.

HOW LOCAL SCHOOL DISTRICTS ARE ADAPTING

The local League of Women Voters' Education Committee developed a brief survey which was submitted to every public school district in Hamilton. The purpose of the survey was to help us understand how the districts were integrating the Common Core Standards and the assessments into their curricula. We also asked them what problems, if any, they were facing as they worked to adapt to these new standards, and how they would work with students who did not meet the levels of learning required by the Common Core.

Eight districts (Wyoming, Oak Hills, Sycamore, Princeton, Loveland, Three Rivers Local, Winton Woods, and Southwest Local) responded to our written questions. We met personally with a Curriculum Director from Cincinnati Public Schools to learn how they were meeting the challenges of the new approaches.

Although the new Standards are scheduled to "roll out" in 2014, districts have been preparing for

the transition for several years. Ohio's State Board of Education adopted the Standards in 2010 and introduced a model curriculum in March, 2011. These actions made it necessary for local districts to begin teacher development, local curriculum revision, and test development. Intensive and comprehensive training programs for teachers and administrators were initiated by the responding districts, and most of them relied on "curriculum mapping" to produce a method of phasing the new standards into their programs. Administrators and teachers are primarily responsible for the success of this new program, but the schools are working on ways to communicate the changes to parents/caregivers in an effort to involve them closely in the students' education. Outreach plans vary from one district to another, but all recognize the need to ensure that the student's parents/caregivers understand what this new curriculum's goals are and how they can help their children meet them.

Adopting the Common Standards in local districts has proved to be expensive. Oak Hills and Princeton received funds from the federal Race to the Top program, while others must redirect funds from other programs to address the mandate. The costs are associated with release time for teacher training and development of curriculum maps and lessons. All of the responding districts indicated that they would factor these costs into their budgets in order to meet the state's requirements. The Department of Education has provided some resources on the web and has sponsored some training sessions. The State did not provide any additional funding to the districts specifically for implementing these new standards.

No matter what course of study a student may choose—college prep or career tech—the student will be required to take classes in the core areas required by the Common Core Standards. All levels of high school mathematics, reading, writing, science, and social studies will align with the new curriculum.

The assessments being developed along with the Standards will test students more frequently and will provide teachers with quicker feedback on where a student might be having problems in a subject. As a result, several of our local districts use the Response to Intervention (RTI) model to provide additional assistance. All of them indicate that there will also be tutoring, small group work, in-classroom supports, and, in some cases, summer instruction for these students.

The Common Core Standards will be "standard" practice by 2014, and it will take some time to determine if their goals are being reached. Results will be monitored and reams of reports will be written as the students immersed in these programs progress through their elementary, middle, and high school grades. The challenges are obvious, and will take enormous dedication from multiple participants to enable students, educators, and schools to reach those very lofty goals.