



# Educating for Today

*Common Core State Standards aim to make students successful in a global world*

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**O**n June 2, State Superintendent Tony Evers adopted the Common Core State Standards for language arts and mathematics on behalf of Wisconsin. It was the first day that the final standards were available and the first day that states could formally commit to them.

## **What Are They?**

The Common Core State Standards include content, performance, and proficiency standards for K-12 students in language arts and mathematics. According to the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) Web site, “Academic standards specify what students should know and be able to do, what they might be asked to do to give evidence of standards, and how well they must perform.”

The standards were developed with the hope of establishing benchmarks that will help prepare students to compete and be successful

in a global economy. In addition, the standards should make way for a uniform state assessment, which would allow states to compare scores on a more level playing field. During the development stage, the standards of other countries with high-performing students were also taken into account, in an effort to bring U.S. students in-line with students anywhere in the world.

The standards themselves read like a list of requirements. They are organized by subject and grade level. Here’s a sample standard for 5th grade students from the reading section of the language arts stan-

dards: “Quote accurately from a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text.”

The standards tell districts what their students should be able to accomplish; they do not tell districts how to educate their students.

## **How They Were Developed**

While the standards were mostly devised by school leaders from U.S. states, including Wisconsin, the National Governors Association (NGA) and the Council of State School Officers (CCSSO) were the two main organizations that facilitated the development of the standards.

Keith Gayler, program director with the CCSSO, says that creation of the standards, which started a little over a year ago, began when states decided it was time to do something about the gap that is growing between U.S. and international students.

“I think states were starting to question, ‘What, ultimately, is our education system for?’” Gayler said. “The answer was preparing kids for college or their careers.”

With that conversation gaining momentum, NGA and CCSSO began, in June 2009, to call states together in an effort to develop common standards for language arts and mathematics. At that time, 49 states and territories agreed to participate in the development of the standards. The group first developed and released college and career-readiness standards. From those, the K-12 standards were developed.

On March 12, 2010, the first draft of the standards for language and mathematics was released. At this time, the standards went through a public review process during which education leaders, teachers, experts and the general public were invited to comment. Feedback was then received through April 2. With the feedback considered, the final draft of the Common Core State Standards were released June 2.

Throughout the development of the standards, a validation committee reviewed the process that was used to develop the standards. The committee, made up of educational leaders from across the country (including three from Wisconsin), also offered additional input concerning the standards.

Since the standards release on June 2, many school leaders and organizations have come out praising the standards. As of press time, 25 states had committed to the standards and several more said they would try to adopt them before the end of summer.

Only two states, Virginia and Texas, have clearly stated that they will not be signing on to the standards. It is also taking other states longer to adopt the standards because, Gayler said, some states have as many as three different boards that have to approve the standards before they are officially accepted by the state.

“Wisconsin was probably the

easiest case because your state superintendent of schools can make that decision on his own,” Gayler pointed out.

### Questions Raised

Some education leaders have expressed concerns with the standards, saying that the standards will not provide the dramatic improvement to public education that supporters think they will. Among the criticisms of the standards is that they will hinder those states that already have high benchmarks, that the standards don’t provide flexibility to individual student learning needs and paces, and that this is a stepping stone for greater federal control of public education.

Addressing the first point that the standards will impede upon high achieving states, Gayler said the standards allow states to add 15 percent more to the standards. This allows states to not only localize the standards but to also make them more rigorous. For example, Gayler said that Montana opted to add Native American literature to its standards.

“It acknowledges that while we work together on these shared goals, there are still differences in states that people want,” Gayler said.

As to whether the standards do not provide flexibility in student learning, Norman Webb, who served on the Common Core State Standards Validation Committee and is a senior scientist with the Wisconsin Center for Education Research, says it will take thoughtful implementation of the standards to allow for flexibility in student learning. For instance, Webb says the standards should not be used to penalize students.

“The Common Core Standards should be goals to strive to, but not absolute requirements with important consequences — grade promotion or graduation,” Webb said.

Finally, with the question of the standards setting up public education for even greater federal control, Gayler says that the standards were created by states for states. The U.S.

Department of Education had no hand in the creation of the standards.

In addition, Steve Pophal, principal of D.C. Everest Junior High School, President of the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP), and a member of the Common Core State Standards Validation Committee, says that each district will have say as to how their students will reach the standards.



## Core Standards Recap



*Here's a look at how developing Common Core State Standards began and where it's headed.*

- **June 2009**  
National Governors Association and Council of Chief State School Officers call states together to begin process of developing common state standards in language arts and mathematics.
- **March 10-April 2, 2010**  
First draft of the standards are released to public for review. Comments are taken online.
- **June 2, 2010**  
After the public comments are reviewed, the final draft of the Common Core State Standards is released. This is also the first day that states can adopt the standards, which Wisconsin does.
- **2014**  
Common state assessments based upon the standards available for use (tentative).



“We can’t have standards if there’s no methodology to measure those standards,” Falk said. “Otherwise, they just become a piece of paper. How we do that is going to be the tricky part, you have to judge these things holistically you can’t just have a checklist.”

Rick Eloranta, vice president of the Owen-Withee school board and the WASB Region 5 Director, said that one positive aspect is that the standards don’t dictate how to educate students.

“The good news is that the standards say where students need to be but doesn’t say how they need to get there,” Eloranta said. “So we still have some latitude as teachers and school board members at the local level.”

### Wisconsin’s New Standards

With the Common Core State Standards adopted by Evers in June, this means that those are now the state’s new standards.

Like the old state standards, school districts are not required to adopt the new state standards. Districts are required to have standards but they don’t necessarily have to be the state standards.

However, Paul Sandrock assistant director of the Content and Learning Team in the Division for Academic Excellence at DPI says it behooves school districts to adopt some or all of the state standards since the state assessment will be based on the new state standards.

So, with the standards officially adopted in Wisconsin, the question is what now?

The DPI has laid out three steps on its Web site:

- Collaboratively develop model curriculum, using the work done by Wisconsin’s standards writing teams in English language arts and mathematics, which will focus the standards for teaching and learning.
- Use the new academic standards in developing the new state assessment system.
- Work with consortia of other states to develop formative and benchmark assessments.

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## New Standards, New Assessment

Two groups of states are proposing different assessment systems

With many states already signed onto the Common Core State Standards, the next question is how will states test their students on the new standards?

This question has spurred the formation of two large groups of states. Both groups are working to create a new assessment based off of the new Common Core State Standards.

One of the groups, the SMARTER Balanced Assessment Consortium, of which Wisconsin is a part of, is led by Washington state and is made up of 31 states. The other group, the Partnership for the Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers, is comprised of 26 states and is led by Florida. Some states are supporting both initiatives. The two groups are also working together on several aspects but overall their proposals differ in several areas.

The SMARTER Balanced Assessment Consortium’s proposal would implement an online smart, adaptable assessment system that most states would not be able to afford on their own. The assessment, which would be given twice a year, would go beyond multiple choice and require students to conduct research.

The proposal of the Partnership for the Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers is focused on creating an assessment that is cost-effective and, yet, effectively tests students’ progress. The tests, which would be given

three times a year, would not be adaptive and may be more along the lines of a traditional pen and paper system.

The two groups will be competing for hundreds of millions of dollars that U.S. Department of Education Secretary Arne Duncan has set aside for those state that adopt the standards to develop a set of common assessments to be used across states.

In a Web chat facilitated by *Education Week*, cases were made for and against the creation of uniform state assessments.

“In our conversation with states, many have indicated that the standards alone will not drive teaching and learning,” said Dane Linn, education division director, National Governors Association Center for Best Practices. “In addition, a state led common set of assessments has the potential to also create greater efficiencies and free up resources for better professional development.”

On the other hand, Alan Farstrup, executive director of the International Reading Association, said there is legitimate concern about putting too many resources into testing.

“We, again, need to be sure we are not spending all of our resources on testing and relatively little on the classroom, on teaching,” Farstrup said. “Carefully crafted standards need to be focused as much, if not more, on teaching and outcomes.” □

Addressing the first bullet point, Sandrock said DPI along with language arts, mathematics, and other professional organizations plan to provide a framework for curriculum based on the Common Core State Standards.

“That is a main priority for the 2010-11 school year,” he said.

Sandrock said this curriculum would give school districts something to model their curriculum resource upon — if they so choose. “The idea is to prepare students to achieve the new standards so they are ready not only for the new state assessment but more importantly, for their continuous learning and future careers,” Sandrock said.

This leads to the second and third bullet points regarding assessments.

Many of those states that have adopted the Common Core State Standards have already joined together and formed the SMARTER Balanced Assessment Consortium. The consortium, which as of press time, includes 31 states, is aimed at developing an assessment that could be used by all participating states.

The hope is to have a new assessment in place by the 2014-15 school year.

### Part of the Picture

As with any new measure, there is a lot of debate back and forth addressing how effective the new Common Core State Standards will be. However, Pophal says it’s important to remember that the standards are only part of the picture.

“The standards are the starting place in order to really impact student achievement,” Pophal says. “The standards need to be followed up with the development of quality aligned instructional tools; and the development of rigorous, high quality assessment instruments. That’s no small task. It’s a substantial undertaking but done well and done right, will ultimately lead to increased student learning.” ■

*Anderson is editor of Wisconsin School News.*

### CONNECT TO WASB.ORG

To view the Common Core State Standards or to find links to more information on the standards, visit [wasb.org/connect-to-the-web.html](http://wasb.org/connect-to-the-web.html).

photo and video editing software, and a lot more.

“What we’re trying to do is have our students be prepared for that next level, whether it be for the workforce or college,” Ferguson said. “So that what we’ve done here are the high school for them doesn’t hinder their opportunities to be successful.”

### Pushing the Bar

Gronski found that in the process of bringing technology into her classroom, it pressured the district to provide her with the appropriate tools.

“It has started a district-wide discussion,” Gronski said. “We were dealing with computers that we’ve had about 10 years. This has allowed us to be able to upgrade some of those and get the bar a little higher and look at what’s out there.”

In the fall, three high school teachers from Pecatonica will be participating in the same training. Overall, Gronski says the program has caused the district to continue to improve itself.

“It created a wonderful discussion of ‘How are we going to better our school? How do we become a better place and how can we add more of this into our curriculum?’” Gronski said.

“Our kids have to be just as prepared as a student might be in a school of 4,000,” Rolfsmeyer said. “And that’s what makes that technology, the integration of that technology and the professional development we provide to our teachers really, really critical because our students have to be as ready as anyone else.”

### Combining Tools and Training

Harm says the training has been successful because it not only gets educators the technology tools they need, but that they also get strong, supportive training. That training, Harm says, is aligned with 21st century skills and national technology standards. Another big element is that the training is research based and uses project based learning and 21st century assessments.

“Those two combined were essential to get the teachers up to speed and to know what a 21st century learning environment looks like, how they should be engaging students, and what they should be asking to promote critical thinking and problem solving in the classroom,” Harm said. ■

*Anderson is editor of Wisconsin School News.*