



# Communicating the Common Core State Standards

A Resource for Superintendents,  
School Board Members,  
and Public Relations  
Executives

October 2013



# About the Council

The Council of the Great City Schools is the only national organization exclusively representing the needs of urban public schools. Composed of 66 large city school districts, its mission is to promote the cause of urban schools and to advocate for inner-city students through legislation, research, instructional support, leadership and management, technical assistance and media relations. The organization also provides a network for school districts sharing common problems to exchange information, and to collectively address new challenges as they emerge in order to deliver the best education for urban youth.

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# **Communicating the Common Core State Standards: A Resource for Superintendents, School Board Members, and Public Relations Executives**

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# At a Glance

## Messages

1. Identify key audiences.
2. Develop a set of primary messages for widespread use, as well as secondary messages with more detailed information geared to particular audiences.
3. Connect with stakeholders through real-life examples of the common core in action and the students who benefit from the standards.
4. Include messages that prepare stakeholders for an apparent drop in test scores, and begin communicating those messages long before assessment results are released.
5. Identify other likely stakeholder concerns and misinformation, and prepare messages in response.
6. In all messaging, link common core standards and assessments to other broad reforms underway in the district that will benefit children.

## Messengers

1. Make sure that your classroom teachers are well trained on the common core because the public will turn to them first for answers.
2. Think of parents and community members not only as consumers of district communications but as communicators as well. People often ask their neighbors about what is going on, so be aggressive in ensuring the public knows about what the district is doing with these new standards.

## At a Glance

3. Equip *all* district staff to serve as messengers to the external community.
4. “Deputize” local businesses, universities, celebrity graduates, and others to speak on your behalf about the value of raising the district’s academic standards.

### Strategies

1. Recognize and act on the critical need for the superintendent and school board to spur internal and external support for the common core. This includes encouraging communications staff to think and act strategically in support of the new standards.
2. Develop a common core communications plan or campaign, engaging a broad-based coalition of community partners and supporters.
3. Develop a comprehensive set of printed and online common core resources.
4. Use print and digital resources as a means, not an end, to community outreach efforts.
5. Proactively engage the media in communicating information and documenting progress.
6. Work closely with the State Department of Education on communications efforts.
7. Engage stakeholders and solicit feedback through public events and activities.



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# PURPOSE

Today, 45 states and the District of Columbia are in various stages of implementing new Common Core State Standards, which establish more rigorous expectations for student learning in English language arts and mathematics from kindergarten through high school, in order to prepare all graduates for college and career success. This significant reform presents school districts across the country with great challenges—and opportunities—to inform and engage a broad range of stakeholders about a complex set of issues.

The need for thoughtful communication about new Common Core State Standards (CCSS or the common core) is abundantly clear. A recent Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup [Poll of the Public's Attitudes toward the Public Schools](#) revealed that 62 percent of Americans surveyed had never heard of the common core. School districts across the country are investing significant time and resources in implementing the new standards, but the ultimate success of the common core standards movement may lie in the ability to convince principals, teachers, parents, students, and the public at large that shared college and career-ready standards are a step forward for schools and the nation.

A Council of the Great City Schools survey suggests that many of its member districts are trying to do just that. In a [survey](#) of Council districts released in the fall of 2013, approximately 77 percent of respondents reported that their districts were actively engaged in informing stakeholders about the CCSS.

Superintendents and school boards in particular, with support from public relations executives in their districts, have a critical role to play in educating families, staff, and the public about these changes. The Council has produced this resource guide to help leaders of the nation's largest urban school districts devise and execute comprehensive communication plans to strengthen public awareness about and support for the common core, as well as new assessments aligned to the standards.

Of course, the extensive and important work of communicating both internally and externally about this sea change in American public education cannot rest solely with superintendents, school boards, or district communications staff. Rather, a thoughtful and far-reaching campaign requires collaboration among a cross-functional team of district leaders from academic and operational departments working closely with schools and key public and private partners in the community.

This guide includes recommendations for key elements of a successful communications plan about the common core, including content (messages), spokespeople (key and secondary messengers), and delivery (strategies and tactics). It offers sample resources and materials from Council member districts and partner organizations. Finally, it includes a closer look at [Raise the Bar Louisville](#), the public engagement campaign led by Jefferson County Public Schools in Kentucky, the first state to begin implementation of the Common Core State Standards.

# MESSAGES

A successful communications plan requires a set of clear, compelling messages that are delivered consistently in all printed, digital, and spoken communications. The following recommendations are designed to inform the process of developing messages specific to each school district about the common core.

## 1. Identify key audiences.

- **Teachers and principals.** Teachers and principals require the most in-depth knowledge of the new standards. Classroom teachers, in particular, must develop the deepest understanding of the standards in order to adapt their instructional practices to meet them. Professional development for both teachers and principals about the common core should include messages and resources for communicating with families.
- **Parents.** It is important for parents to understand why the new standards have been adopted, what they mean for their children's education (including assessment), and how they can support the work at home.
- **Students.** What should students know about how their learning experiences may change as a result of new standards? Why are students being held to higher standards? What does this new approach mean for their futures? In reaching out to students, it is important to tailor messages to various age groups. Students are also a particularly important audience to keep in mind when communicating about common core assessments, as they will want to know why their own results may have declined from previous years.

- **School board.** The school board represents a key audience to engage as early as possible. Presentations and updates to the board, particularly if televised, also can serve as updates to the community. When reporting on implementation of the common core, superintendents and public relations executives should also inform the board about ongoing efforts to build public awareness and support.
- **Non-instructional school staff** has an important role to play in communications, too. While they may not require the level of detail that educators need, support staff such as school secretaries, bus drivers, cafeteria workers, and custodians also have daily contact with students, families, and the community. They can be valuable providers of information—or, if not properly informed, *misinformation*.
- **Central office staff members**, including employees in both academic and operational roles, represent another important audience to reach. Staff across departments should share an understanding of the district’s common core messaging to avoid sending mixed signals to schools and the community.
- Other key community stakeholders include **elected officials** (the mayor, legislators, etc.), **the business community**, **higher education institutions**, **religious organizations**, **non-profit organizations**, **teachers’ associations**, and the **news media**.

## 2. Develop a set of primary messages for widespread use, as well as secondary messages with more detailed information geared to particular audiences.

- **Keep messages short and simple.** Make sure that the primary messages about the common core that the district is sending to its audiences are short, simple, and clear. For instance, sending copies of the district’s full strategic plan to parent groups may do less to convey the message than a simple statement.

- Don't be afraid of repeating key messages. **Consistency and repetition is important in crafting an effective, enduring message.**
- **While some messages about the common core are important to convey to all audiences, others should be targeted to particular groups of stakeholders.** As noted, teachers require more detailed information than non-educators about the standards themselves, including extensive training on how to teach the standards. The business community will be interested in hearing (and ultimately, articulating) how the new standards help prepare graduates for skilled jobs. The case study on Jefferson County includes that district's approach to "platform messages" and "supporting messages" in Exhibit 1.
- **Secondary messages may include more detailed information** about what common core implementation means for particular groups of students, particularly English language learners and students with disabilities, including any steps the district is taking to ensure the success of students in specialized educational programs. These messages should be translated into the major languages spoken in a district and provided in other formats for students with disabilities.
- Research suggests that **some messages are more effective than others** in communicating about the common core. The research indicates that parents and the public respond more positively to messages that:
  - ✓ focus on students rather than policy
  - ✓ emphasize that the standards will help students succeed in college and careers
  - ✓ demonstrate that our schools share students' and parents' priorities

- The Council reports that **the following messages are most likely to be effective:**
  - ✓ The new standards emphasize the high-level, core skills that students will need in the future to be successful in college and careers.
  - ✓ The common core encourages students to read the kinds of material they will see in the workplace, along with literature and history.
  - ✓ The consistency of the standards across jurisdictions ensures that students will not fall behind if they switch schools or move to a different city or state.
  - ✓ The high standards and expectations embedded in the common core will ensure that *all* students have the opportunity to succeed, no matter where they live or what their backgrounds are.
  - ✓ High school graduates who attain proficiency on the common core will arrive at college without the need for expensive remedial courses.
  - ✓ The common core helps prepare graduates to be competitive for high-paying jobs.
  
- The research indicates that **parents and the public respond less positively to messages related to policies and process**, such as how the Common Core State Standards were developed, and by whom. **Build the message around the benefit to students, rather than schools or districts, and avoid terms laced with images of bureaucracy**, such as districts, LEAs, superintendents, and government. Other messages considered less effective include:
  - ✓ The common core was developed by governors and state superintendents.
  - ✓ These standards replace old state standards.
  - ✓ The new standards are internationally benchmarked.
  - ✓ The common core allows for better measurement of student progress.

- Messages that frame common core implementation as an **investment in student success** are also more effective than messages about compensating for or overcoming poverty. Avoid victim-oriented language.

### 3. Connect with stakeholders through real-life examples of the common core in action and the students who benefit from the standards.

- A successful public engagement campaign will include numerous ways of “telling the story.” **Personal testimony—through print and video, and in person—helps put a human face on the issues** and illustrates what higher standards mean to parents, students, teachers, and other stakeholders.
- **Use photographs of students** in communications to tell stories rather than giving parents curriculum guides or wordy memos. Keep it simple.
- The campaign can also **showcase effective practices and success stories from the field**. For example, see Metro Nashville Public Schools’ video [“Common Core in Action at Cole Elementary School”](#), which provides a classroom view of the new standards.

### 4. Include messages that prepare stakeholders for an apparent drop in test scores, and begin communicating those messages long before assessment results are released.

- **Proactively address the apparent drop in test scores before the results are released**. As states shift to new, higher standards and modify or adopt assessments aligned to those standards, test scores may appear to drop, often by a considerable margin. In order to prevent widespread panic or backlash about the common core, it is critical to prepare stakeholders for the expected decrease with ongoing, consistent messaging long before results are released.

- **Emphasize that:**
  - ✓ Lower test scores do not mean that students have learned less or fallen behind academically.
  - ✓ When the bar is raised, more is expected in order for students to demonstrate proficiency.
  - ✓ Proficiency rates on new assessments may not be comparable to previous assessments.
  - ✓ Consistent and comparable measures of student achievement often show significant progress.
  
- **Reference other state examples for context.** District officials can point to other states that already have administered the first year or two of new assessments—such as Kentucky and New York—to cite drops as high as 30 to 40 points for reassurance that this shift is an expected outcome during the initial transition to new, higher standards. New York State went to great lengths to frame the first round of lower test scores as a “new baseline,” a message reinforced in a *New York Post* op-ed, “[The good news in lower test scores,](#)” and reiterated in much of the media coverage of the first year of results.
  
- If you want to forecast for the public what your district’s proficiency rates are likely to look like under either the [Partnerships for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers](#) (PARCC) or [Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium](#) (SBAC) exams in 2015, **use your NAEP Trial Urban District Assessment (TUDA) proficiency rates. NAEP and next generation assessments do not necessarily test the same things, but their overall levels of rigor and their definitions of proficiency are similar.** If your district does not participate in TUDA, look at the results from those TUDA districts that are demographically similar to get a sense of how your district might score relative to your state.
  
- If you are one of the TUDA districts, it is possible that your NAEP results will stay steady or increase in 2013 and 2015 while your new assessment results appear to go down. This is likely to be a source of



confusion for the public. **Use your NAEP results to demonstrate your improvement over time, given that NAEP is an assessment that is already as difficult as the common core.**

- **Don't draw a line between the results of your 2014 state assessments and your 2015 common core assessments if they are not comparable.** It simply reinforces the notion visually that your scores dropped, when, in fact, you have simply established a new baseline.
- **Direct the story toward the strength of the new standards and next generation assessments.** In states that adopt new tests such as PARCC or SBAC, communications plans should include key messages about these new measures of student performance. For example, the new assessments will:
  - ✓ require critical thinking, finding solutions to complex, real-world problems, and writing persuasively based on evidence
  - ✓ ask students to answer questions in different formats—such as short answers and extended responses—rather than just filling in bubbles on multiple-choice questions
  - ✓ indicate whether students are likely to succeed in entry-level, credit-bearing courses in college without having to take remedial courses that don't count towards a college degree
  - ✓ signal whether students have the critical thinking and problem-solving skills they need to succeed in today's workforce

## 5. Identify other likely stakeholder concerns and misinformation and prepare messages in response.

- As discussed above, test scores are likely to appear to drop when the new assessments are implemented, and there will be individuals who try to exploit this to undermine the value of the common core. **Districts should be clear that these critics are comparing apples to oranges.** It is also true that new instructional reforms do sometimes result in declines in test scores in early years as people get used to new practices. **Districts should help the public distinguish between the shortsighted anxiety of critics and the long-term dividends of high academic standards.**

- In addition to the apparent drop in test scores, **stakeholders are likely to have numerous other concerns and to have been exposed to misinformation.** For example, popular *myths* about the common core include:
  - ✗ With the new common core English language arts and literacy standards, students will no longer read fiction or literature.
  - ✗ The common core standards tell teachers what to teach, and prevent instructional creativity and innovation.
  - ✗ The common core standards will be a step backward for states with already high academic standards.
  - ✗ The common core spells the end of gifted and talented programs.
  - ✗ The common core signifies a massive new emphasis on testing.
  - ✗ The common core represents a significant federal intrusion in local schools.
- The Common Core State Standards website has a section entitled [Myths versus Facts](#) that aims to debunk these and numerous other myths about the development, content, quality, and implementation of the common core. **Consider creating a page on your own district or common core website that addresses concerns and answers frequently asked questions** (see later section on creating digital tools).

- Work with district leadership and curriculum department staff to **ensure that you are prepared to address concerns and misunderstandings and to dispute false information.** For example, some may argue that teachers don't have time to add these new standards on top of what they already teach. In reality, new standards have a number of clear benefits for teachers:
  - ✓ Teachers will be asked to teach fewer topics in ELA and math but to teach them differently and in greater depth.
  - ✓ Teachers will have clearer direction about what they need to emphasize so that their students will be successful.
  - ✓ Teachers will retain flexibility over *how* to teach.
  - ✓ Teachers will have the opportunity to collaborate with colleagues across the country who will be teaching the same standards.
- Another leading argument against the common core is that the new assessments add to an explosion in testing. To address this argument, **know the facts.** It is true that testing using either of the two consortia's assessments will run between seven and a half and nine hours, but it is also true that:
  - ✓ The testing time is lower in the early grades.
  - ✓ Testing is divided into two sessions.
  - ✓ Because the emphasis of the tests is on problem-solving, teachers should have to devote less time to test preparation.
  - ✓ Once the assessments are in place, schools should be able to scale back on the numbers of other assessments they give.
- **Level with your audience.** During the transition to the new common core assessments, districts, schools, and teachers may be accountable for meeting two separate sets of expectations. This is unavoidable, and not something that the school system can immediately address. The situation is not ideal, but not permanent.

**6. In all messaging, link common core standards and assessments to other broad reforms underway in the district that will benefit children.**

- Convey to parents, educators, and the public that **the common core is not an isolated “project”** with no connection to the broader work of transforming classrooms, schools, and the district as a whole. Emphasize the role that new standards and assessments play in the overall work of raising student achievement and preparing graduates for college and career success.
- Whenever possible, communications about the common core should be linked to other major reform efforts, such as educator quality. This approach will **help stakeholders see “the big picture”**—what the work ultimately aims to achieve—and understand that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

# MESSENGERS

Key spokespeople, including district leaders, staff, principals, teachers, students, and community leaders of all kinds, are necessary to convey common core messages.

- **Classroom teachers are like first responders**—they are responsible for providing students and parents with information about the new standards and addressing their concerns in real time. Study after study shows that they are relied on by the public above all others when it comes to finding out what goes on in schools. Districts should marshal teacher expertise and credibility by creating a cadre of “lead teacher ambassadors” with communications training to talk about the common core.
- According to polling done by the Council of the Great City Schools, the public also gets its information through neighbors, parents, students, and word of mouth. In other words, both employees and “customers” of the school district have an important role to play as the public face of the common core, and school and district staff should **ensure that parents and students are equipped with accurate information and clear messages to share with their communities.**
- **School principals are the district leaders “on the ground,”** and should play an outreach role in getting not only teachers, but students, parents, and their respective communities to understand and embrace the common core.
- **All school-district employees**—from central office secretaries to school-bus drivers to chief financial officers—are the **front-line in word-of-mouth communication**, and should be informed, influenced and motivated through an ongoing internal communications operation. *If employees don't buy into the Common Core State Standards, how do you expect the public to embrace them?*

- **The CEO of any organization is always the most visible spokesperson.** The superintendent and senior district staff should set the tone for inspiring and encouraging internal and external audiences to become aware of, engage in, and convey the benefits of the new standards.
- Third-party validators such as **local business leaders, community and religious leaders, or celebrity graduates** can also serve as effective messengers, and can demonstrate the value of the new, higher academic standards beyond the classroom.
- **Advocates within the African American, Hispanic, Asian American, Native American, immigrant, and disability communities** can reach diverse audiences.
- With the direction of school district leadership, **public relations executives are responsible for developing communications plans, strategies, messages, and tools** and utilizing traditional and new media outlets for disseminating common core information to internal and external audiences.

# STRATEGIES

The following strategies are designed to help districts engage audiences with key messages about the common core.

## 1. Recognize and act on the critical need for the superintendent and school board to spur internal and external support for the common core. This includes encouraging communications staff to think and act strategically in support of the new standards.

- District leaders should **signal the importance and value of implementing the common core by becoming the public face of the initiative** and championing the work within the organization and in the community.
- Superintendents and boards **should not assume that staff is taking care of outreach and communication**. Make sure that the district is being proactive and aggressive.
- District public relations executives and other communications staff are often pinned down with daily crises being covered by the media. Leadership should give them the direction, time, and authority to **think more strategically and work with others on long-term communications efforts around the common core**.

## 2. Develop a common core communications plan or campaign, engaging a broad-based coalition of community partners and supporters.

- Communications needs to be a major part of any comprehensive plan to implement the CCSS. The **development of a multifaceted awareness and engagement campaign** will help internal and external audiences understand and embrace the new academic standards.

- The school district cannot be solely responsible for the design and execution of this communications plan. Engaging **high-profile and diverse partners** in the work:
  - ✓ expands the district’s capacity for delivering messages to a wide range of audiences
  - ✓ signals broader support for the education reform effort
  - ✓ provides third-party validation by business, higher education, clergy, and parent advocacy organizations through their involvement and endorsement
  - ✓ highlights the importance of the common core for college readiness (through the participation of higher education institutions) and workforce development (through the involvement of the business community)
  - ✓ makes it clear that the new standards will benefit *all* students
- Districts may opt to **“brand” the partnership by naming a campaign or coalition and identifying organizations as co-sponsors** or signatories, such as the “Raise the Bar Louisville” initiative (see Appendix A). Each group also can be asked to make particular commitments to the campaign, such as hosting stakeholder engagement events and distributing informational materials to constituents.

### 3. Develop a comprehensive set of printed and online common core resources.

- **Create a common core website** (or section of the district website) to serve as the centerpiece of the communications campaign, a clearinghouse for all print and video resources, and the home of the latest news and updates about implementation. A link to common core resources on the homepage of the district’s website also signals the importance of the initiative and makes the content readily available to parents, educators, and other visitors without extensive searching or navigation.



Many Council member districts already have created web pages about common core implementation. The Broward County Public Schools website, [Defining the Core](#), won a “Best of the Web” award from the Center for Digital Education. The Albuquerque Public Schools common core site includes “[Advantages of CCSS](#)” from various stakeholder perspectives, as well as recommended [apps for mobile devices](#). Other notable district websites with common core pages include:

- ◆ [Atlanta Public Schools](#)
  - ◆ [Fresno Unified School District](#)
  - ◆ [Los Angeles Unified School District](#)
  - ◆ [New York City Department of Education](#)
  - ◆ [Santa Ana Unified School District](#)
- The Council of the Great City Schools has also produced a website called [Common Core Works](#), with **numerous print and digital resources**—including videos and Parent Roadmaps in English and Spanish—that can be easily uploaded to any district website. The Council also has provided [web buttons](#) (in Flash and GIF formats) to link directly to CommonCoreWorks.org. See Appendix C for more information.
  - **Use social media to engage constituents.** These tools can be powerful outlets for building awareness and understanding about the common core. Some districts have created social media accounts specifically about the new standards, such as the Los Angeles Unified School District’s [Twitter account](#), while others are using existing district social media tools to communicate with followers about common core news, resources, and activities.
  - **Release periodic e-news and other electronic communication** from the superintendent, school board, and other officials to provide a broad group of stakeholders and supporters with the latest news and regular updates about the common core. These e-mail blasts may include snapshots of common core best practices and success stories,

features about partner organizations and community supporters, announcements of upcoming events and activities, links to resources, and tips for teachers and parents.

- Circulate the [Parent Roadmaps](#) to the common core in English and Spanish to all schools and make them available to parent teacher organizations and other parent forums.
- **Produce short, high-quality videos** to inform and engage audiences through images and sound. Districts with in-house video production and editing capability are creating their own videos about common core, including a [message](#) from the superintendent of the Atlanta Public Schools. Many other videos are available from national sources, including the Council's own Common Core Works mentioned above, which includes three-minute common core [overview videos](#), 30-second [public service announcements](#) (both in English and Spanish), and videos about implementing new [ELA / literacy](#) and [mathematics](#) standards.

Videos can be posted on district websites, shown at public events and professional development sessions, and aired on community access television channels, among other venues.

- **Develop print materials** such as fact sheets, answers to Frequently Asked Questions, letters from the superintendent and principals, and parent guides. These documents can be translated into the major languages spoken in each district. Some school districts, including [Fresno Unified](#), are producing periodic newsletters (online and in print) to keep parents, educators, and the community informed about progress in implementing the common core.
- If your district operates a **radio or television station**, use it to broadcast information and videos about the benefits of new higher standards for student learning.

#### 4. Use print and digital resources as a means, not an end, to community outreach efforts.

- **It is not enough merely to post common core resources on the district website or include them in a press kit. Districts need to use those resources as a platform for conducting extensive and proactive outreach to schools, parents, and the community.** Ensure that materials—particularly those targeted to parents—are broadly disseminated multiple times and available at a wide range of locations, including community centers, libraries, family services agencies, day care centers, etc. Distribute copies of printed materials to schools so that they can be shared at PTO meetings, open houses, and all other school-based and public events.
- **Ask schools to post online common core materials and links on school websites,** and regularly update schools when new resources are available.
- **Provide guidance and tips for school staff in using common core resources** to inform and engage students, parents, and the community. It is not enough to post materials on the district website and hope for the best.
- Don't assume that because you sent material to parents and the community that they know about what you are doing. **Follow up** to make sure.
- Reach out to schools to **determine which resources have been helpful to them, what changes could be made, and what further resources they could use** to advance implementation in the classroom and outreach to parents.

## 5. Proactively engage the media in communicating information and documenting progress.

- Given the breadth and complexity of the issues, district leaders may **consider conducting a series of press briefings about the common core**, perhaps led by the superintendent and supported by the school board and leaders of partner organizations. The topic lends itself well to meetings with the editorial boards of local newspapers, whether for initial background or for an editorial about the new standards. Appendix A has excellent samples from the Louisville community on how they partnered with a wide group of stakeholders to communicate about the common core.
- **Invite media to all public engagement events**, and seek their cooperation in airing **public service announcements**.
- Particularly during the formal launch of any public engagement campaign, it's important to:
  - ✓ **provide media with contact information for campaign spokespeople**, including community groups participating in the coalition
  - ✓ **equip these ambassadors with talking points** (key messages) for interviews with print, radio, and television outlets
- In order to demonstrate widespread support for higher standards, **submit letters to the editor and guest op-ed pieces from teachers, principals, parents, and community leaders**. Positive perspectives from educators, such as a recent [op-ed](#) in the *Los Angeles Times* by a Boston Public Schools teacher, help reinforce the educational value of the reforms.

## 6. Work closely with the State Department of Education on communications efforts.

- Many states are developing informational and public awareness campaigns and have launched websites about common core and other statewide reform initiatives. See examples from [Arizona](#), [Arkansas](#), [Missouri](#), [New Mexico](#), [New York](#), and [Tennessee](#). **School districts should be aware of what resources the state has produced that can be replicated or adapted for local use.**
- The school district’s public relations executives also can benefit from collaboration with their counterparts at the state agency, particularly in coordinating any media outreach to **include both state and local perspectives** in press coverage of the common core.

## 7. Engage stakeholders and solicit feedback through public events and activities.

- The most effective communication—particularly for dialogue and discussion—occurs through face-to-face contact. For an issue as complex and far-reaching as the common core, **live conversations with superintendents, school board members, principals, teachers, and other district leaders are an important strategy for engaging parents, educators, and the community.** Community forums, town hall meetings, and other public events create opportunities for leaders to make informational presentations, answer questions, hear ideas, and gather feedback from stakeholders.
- Some of these activities may be **large events open to the public** (and perhaps broadcast on television, streamed, or video recorded for posting online). Others may be **smaller gatherings tailored to a particular audience** on narrower topics—such as a parent meeting in an elementary school about understanding new K-5 standards in mathematics. The campaign also may include **targeted meetings with leaders of particular stakeholder groups** to address questions and enlist their support.

- Identify opportunities to **incorporate common core awareness and training into existing district activities**, such as Parent University, and community events. Any public appearance by the superintendent—particularly speaking engagements with parents, educators, and groups of influential community leaders—should include comments about the importance of common core and the status of implementation.
- Offer multiple ways for the public to submit questions or concerns about the common core, perhaps through a **telephone help desk or dedicated email address** with answers regularly compiled and posted on the website. Districts could also develop mobile apps or set up robo-calls directing parents to online resources and ways they can find answers to their questions about the common core.

# CONCLUSION

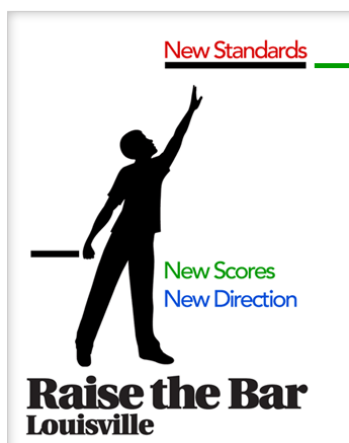
The adoption of the new Common Core State Standards represents one of the most significant shifts in public education reform in decades. In cities and states across the country, the new standards—and the assessments that accompany them—are being met by some with optimism and enthusiasm, and by others with uncertainty, skepticism, and in some cases, fierce resistance. Despite all of the competing demands for time and resources, school districts cannot afford *not* to undertake a thorough public awareness and engagement campaign about what the common core means for the future of students, schools, and the community.

School district public relations executives—working closely with colleagues expert in the content—have an important leadership role to play in crafting and executing plans to communicate with families, educators, and the community about this major reform effort. Fortunately, numerous resources are available from partner organizations, including the Council of the Great City Schools, and from other school districts that can be shared and adapted to meet the needs of each community. The materials contained in this resource guide should serve as a starting point for building greater awareness about and support for the common core and, ultimately, preparing all students for college and career success.

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## Appendix A: Case Study, “Raise the Bar Louisville,” Jefferson County (KY) Public Schools

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When Kentucky became the first state to adopt and implement new common core standards and assessments, Jefferson County Public Schools (JCPS) in Louisville led the way among Council of the Great City Schools member districts in informing and engaging its stakeholders about this significant education reform initiative.

JCPS implemented the Common Core State Standards (called Kentucky Core Academic Standards) in August 2011.

New assessments were administered in May 2012, with results released in October 2012. Due in part to changes in leadership among senior district staff, including the communications team, officials acknowledge that JCPS did not develop a plan to communicate the changing standards or their impact prior to testing.

Just over a month before test scores were scheduled to be released – and expecting a significant decline – Superintendent Donna Hargens convened a meeting of communications and public relations professionals from the school district, Mayor’s office, chamber of commerce, and an influential graduation initiative (55,000 Degrees) to discuss and prepare for the impending test score release.

According to Ben Jackey, JCPS communications specialist, “The result of this meeting was a cohesive partnership held together by the belief that the new, more rigorous standards were a benefit not only to students but the community. Therefore, our primary objective had to be preparing the



community for test scores that would show a significant decline from the year prior, despite the two tests being incomparable.”

Together, the team conceived and launched “Raise the Bar Louisville,” a partnership of business and community leaders educating stakeholders about the benefits and impact of the new common core standards and assessments.

In a short period of time, the group developed a robust set of strategies for widespread communication about three key points:

- The new standards are more rigorous.
- The new standards are necessary to make our students competitive in the global marketplace.
- The new standards will have an impact on test scores.

“[Raise the Bar Louisville](#)” quickly evolved as a multi-faceted public awareness and engagement campaign, branded with its own logo and tagline: “New Standards. New Scores. New Direction.” Its creators launched a website, [raisethebarlouisville.org](http://raisethebarlouisville.org), that continues to serve as the centerpiece of the initiative.

## Deliverables and Activities

The key messages of the campaign were disseminated throughout the community using a variety of print, online, and live strategies, including the following:

- **Messaging guide:** (Exhibit 1) This document provides spokespeople for the campaign with key message points, including both “platform messaging” and “supporting messaging,” to address the benefits of implementing common core standards and explain the initial drop in test scores.
- **Videos:** “[What is Raise the Bar Louisville?](#)” provides a seven minute overview of the challenges facing the community’s educational system, and the solutions that common core

offers. The video features the superintendent, mayor, business leaders, teachers, parents, and students, stating their support for higher standards. Officials report that the video was aired at many community events in order to set the stage for discussion. The website also features a series of [short videos](#) with answers to frequently asked questions, including [“What do the new scores mean?”](#), as well as parent tutorials about changes to math and ELA standards and instruction.

- **Public Service Announcements:** Several PSAs featured various stakeholders calling for support of the new standards and assessments.
- **Print Materials:** Intended primarily for parents, a series of print materials was produced to reinforce the three key messages. They included a letter from the superintendent (Exhibit 2), letter from the principal (Exhibit 3), talking points card for teachers (Exhibit 4), and an information sheet to distribute at parent-teacher conferences. The materials were designed to trigger conversations between parents and teachers prior to the release of test scores.
- **Mayor’s Briefing:** Louisville Mayor Greg Fischer convened in his office an off-the-record briefing for media and a select group of business and community leaders, the first of its kind in more than a decade.
- **Business Leaders’ Breakfast:** This event, held the day after the Mayor’s briefing, featured prominent speakers from business, government, and higher education explaining the issues to an influential group called Business Leaders for Education. The event earned positive media coverage and effectively kicked off the public campaign.
- **Parent Teacher Association Information Sessions:** The local PTA conducted dozens of information sessions for various groups, an effort that later earned an award from National PTA

for excellence in communicating with parents about the common core.

- **Press Conference:** The day scores were released, the superintendent joined the mayor and a former state senator (who was influential in the passage of legislation that led to adoption of the common core) to share the results under a “Raise the Bar Louisville” banner. JCPS officials report that media coverage largely echoed the three key messages of the campaign.

## Goals and Measures of Success

Ben Jackey stated that JCPS considers two primary indicators of the campaign’s success: parent response and media coverage.

“Considering how significantly our scores dropped (30 to 40 points in some content areas), the media coverage was brief and largely followed our message points,” he said. “In schools and in the public, administrators shared with us encounters with parents that showed that the parents, too, had absorbed and repeated the key message points.”

He reported that in a recent *Time* magazine article about the new Kentucky standards, a Louisville parent responded to a question about declining test scores by saying, “We knew they would drop because the standards were tougher. I will take short-term setback if it’s going to help us long-term.”

Mr. Jackey also reported that the launch of the campaign could have been strengthened by specific calls to action.

“We really missed an opportunity to set a clear objective for every stakeholder group,” he said, such as business-led informational meetings, and partnerships with community-based organizations to develop extended learning opportunities focused on the common core (which evolved later in the year).

“We wanted media to feel there was a buy-in for them, aside from covering a news story,” Mr. Jackey added. “We wanted media to invest airtime

spreading the word about this effort to improve our community. That was not communicated, and therefore, our PSAs did not air frequently, if at all, on some stations.”

JCPS officials also said that meaningful parent involvement on the issue remains an ongoing challenge, given the complexity of the changes.

Overall, “Raise the Bar Louisville” – a strategic, multi-faceted campaign developed in a very short period of time – has deepened awareness and support among high-profile community leaders and fostered critical conversations about the issues surrounding the common core.

Mr. Jackey added, “Making the common core a community matter, instead of just a school district matter, is key to helping parents understand the bigger picture of creating a better tomorrow for Louisville.”

**For more information, contact:** Ben Jackey  
Jefferson County Public Schools  
Communications Specialist  
502-485-3357  
[ben.jackey@jefferson.kyschools.us](mailto:ben.jackey@jefferson.kyschools.us)

## *Exhibit 1: Key Messages on the Common Core State Standards*

### **Jefferson County Public Schools**

#### **Key Messages: Common Core State Standards**

**Platform messaging** is meant to be conversational and focuses on briefly answering the “who, what, when, where, and why.” These messages are a starting point when explaining the common core and will be supplemented by more detailed messaging outlined in supporting information that will be found in FAQs, fact sheets, etc.

A) Kentucky is leading the nation in a focused effort to ensure students are career- and college-ready when they graduate from high school. Called common core, these new standards allow parents and teachers to compare the academic progress not only of students who sit across the classroom but also of those who sit in classrooms across the world (who, what).

B) In order for students to meet these challenges, they must be prepared to compete globally. The common core standards are focused on preparing students for this environment by providing more rigorous work and a deeper mastery of core subjects (how).

C) Because the common core standards are tougher, students will have to work hard to reach proficiency. These higher standards will also mean that test results released in October will be lower than previous assessments. As students adjust to this shift, scores will improve and students will have the necessary skills to be successful after graduation. Additionally, our community will have the highly skilled work force needed to be stronger (why).

**Supporting messages** will be included in FAQs, in fact sheets, on a Web site, and in other communications.

**Kentucky is leading the nation in a focused effort to ensure students are career- and college-ready when they graduate from high school. Called common core, these new standards allow parents and teachers to compare the academic progress not only of students who sit across the classroom but also of those who sit in classrooms across the world (who, what).**

1A) Kentucky was the first state to adopt and implement the common core. These new standards have been adopted by 46 states and provide for greater consistency on what students are taught and how they are assessed in school districts across the nation.

**Students will face an increasingly global marketplace, and the competition has moved from being regionally focused to internationally focus. In order for students to meet these challenges, they must be prepared to compete globally. The common core standards are focused on preparing students for this environment by providing more rigorous work and a deeper mastery of core subjects in order to achieve proficiency (how).**

1B) The common core standards are built on the strengths of state standards and are guided by standards in top-performing countries. This design creates a rigorous curriculum that requires students to use problem-solving skills and other skill sets that are essential as they prepare to enter the work force.

2B) The new standards provide for greater consistency and serve as the foundation for instruction within schools. The common core standards also set clear expectations and accountability for what students should be able to do at each grade level.

Because the common core standards are tougher, students will have to work hard to reach proficiency. These standards will also mean that, initially, the test scores released in October will be lower than previous assessments. As students adjust to this shift, scores will improve and students will have the necessary skills to be successful after graduation. Additionally, our community will have the highly skilled work force needed to support continued economic growth.

1C) Because the 2011-12 school year was the first year that the Jefferson County Public School (JCPS) District implemented the common core standards, the results we receive in October will serve as a baseline. As students adjust to these tougher standards, results will improve.

2C) Because the common core standards are tougher, the work students will be required to complete will be more difficult and they will have to work harder to achieve proficiency. Here are some tips for helping your child make this adjustment:

- o Tell your child that persistence and hard work matter. People aren't just born smart; we get smart through hard work.
- o Help your child see how the schoolwork he or she does now gets him or her ready for the future. Help your child see the connections.
- o Sit with your child, and talk to him or her about the work he or she is doing. Discuss the work, and encourage your child.
- o Help your child recognize that it isn't as much about grades and test scores but becoming college- and career-ready. When he or she masters this work, he or she can do anything. Test scores might actually be lower now, but your child actually knows more and can do more.
- o Ensure that your child has opportunities to read all kinds of books, articles, and materials, including nonfiction articles and real-world documents.

3C) The new standards mark a new direction in education, and community support and involvement are essential for success. Here are some ways you can help:

- o Ask questions about college and career readiness and the common core standards when you attend every parent-teacher conference. Find out what your child needs specifically.
- o Help other parents, neighbors, and community leaders understand that when the standard is raised like this, it might mean test scores are lower at first. However, when our students master the common core standards, they will be proficient and ready for college, work, and life.

- o Write letters and editorials to local media outlets describing how your child's life will be different when he or she masters these standards and graduates from high school college- and career-ready.
- o Participate in community forums, parent-engagement trainings, and other activities at schools and churches that provide information on how parents can help their child become school-ready.
- o Challenge our students, Louisville's future leaders, to embrace the challenge of the common core standards so that they achieve on all of the precollege tests and, more importantly, so that they enter college or a career able to do the work in front of them.



## Exhibit 2: Superintendent's Letter to Parents

### Administrative Offices

VanHoose Education Center  
P. O. Box 34020  
Louisville, Kentucky 40232-4020  
(502) 485-3011  
Fax: (502) 485-3991



October 1, 2012

Dear JCPS Parent,

If your child took a new state test in the spring, you will receive the results in mid-October.

### **New Standards—The Common Core**

Standards are simply what students are expected to learn at each grade level. Kentucky was the first of 46 states to adopt the more challenging Common Core Standards in reading and math because Kentuckians recognize the importance of preparing our students to compete with other students across the state, the nation, and the world.

### **New Tests—New Scores**

The new tests were based on higher expectations. They were harder! Your child will score Novice, Apprentice, Proficient, or Distinguished. It is harder now for any student in Kentucky to be Proficient or Distinguished, and under the state's new system, there will be fewer students who receive those scores. In fact, some schools may have more than 30 percent fewer students who are Proficient. But, remember, you can't compare scores under the old system with scores under the new system.

### **New Direction—Raising the Bar**

The new standards raise the bar for our students. The score your child receives will give you and the school system important information about what we need to do and how we can work together to ensure that your child masters the new higher standards.

I am confident that our educators and our students can do this! We must do this. It is important that, as partners, we embrace this challenge. It will benefit your child, your school, the district, the state, and the nation.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Donna M. Hargens".

Donna M. Hargens, Ed.D.  
Superintendent

DMH:scf

[www.jcpsky.net](http://www.jcpsky.net)

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### *Exhibit 3: Principal's Letter to Parents*

October 4, 2012

Dear \_\_\_\_\_ Parent,

Last week, you received a letter from Dr. Donna Hargens, Superintendent for JCPS, on The Common Core. Kentucky is the first state to adopt these new and more challenging standards and if your child took this new state test in the spring, you will soon receive the scores.

The goal of this new accountability model is simple: to ensure all students graduate career and college ready. While we realize that this new accountability model will lead to a decline in our scores in the short term, long term students from Kentucky will be better prepared to compete with other students across the nation and the world.

Attached is an example of what each student's report will look like. Based on your child's results, they will rank either a Novice, Apprentice, Proficient, or Distinguished. While these categories are the same from previous years, it is important to remember that this is a new assessment system and this year's results are a baseline. As teachers and students adjust to the tougher standards, I am confident that scores will increase.

With the support of community, business and PTA leaders, the district has created a website- [www.raisethebarlouisville.org](http://www.raisethebarlouisville.org). This site offers helpful tips on ways parents can support their child's academic progress as well as additional information on the Common Core. For additional information on the Common Core, or tips on how you can support your child's success please visit the district's website at [www.jefferson.kyschools.us](http://www.jefferson.kyschools.us), or [www.raisethebarlouisville.org](http://www.raisethebarlouisville.org).

Please know that my staff and I are committed to the success of each child within our school and the leadership role our state and the district will play to ensure all students graduate career and college ready. Throughout the year, we will continue to update you on our progress and success.

Thank you for your support.

Sincerely,

## *Exhibit 4: Educator's Postcard*

### **Talking to Parents about State Test Results and the Common Core Standards**

JCPS Educators,

Please share the following information when you talk to JCPS parents about the Common Core State Standards and the results of state tests that they will receive this fall:

- Kentucky is leading the nation in implementing the Common Core Standards to ensure students are **college- and career-ready** when they graduate from high school.
- The standards are more challenging so that **students will be ready** for a globally competitive environment.
- Because the standards are tougher, **students will have to work harder** to reach Proficiency.

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RTB Talking Points card 12 kk



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## Appendix B: Common Core State Standards Initiative Frequently Asked Questions

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### College and Career-Training Ready Standards from the National Governors Association\*\*\*

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In 2010, recognizing the need to improve the quality of public education in communities across this country, governors, state superintendents, state boards of education, teachers, parents, and business leaders took the historic step to create a shared set of rigorous and easy-to-understand state academic standards in English language arts/literacy and mathematics from kindergarten to 12th grade (K-12). State leaders—not the federal government—drove the creation of the [Common Core State Standards](#) (CCSS). The CCSS clearly define what students need to know and be able to do, and how well they need to know or do it, at each grade level to be able to graduate high school ready for success in college or in a career-training program. These standards do not specify the curriculum, textbooks or reading materials used to achieve these goals.

The standards were developed by governors and chief state school officers and their representatives in collaboration with teachers, school administrators, K-12 and higher education experts, and business representatives. The development of the CCSS was coordinated by the [National Governors Association](#) (NGA) and the [Council of Chief State School Officers](#) (CCSSO). NGA and CCSSO encouraged, received, and acted upon feedback on drafts of the standards from individuals and national organizations representing, but not limited to, teachers, principals, postsecondary educators (including community colleges), civil rights groups, parents, English-language learners, students with disabilities, and business.

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The standards are:

- Aligned with college and workforce training expectations;
- Rigorous in content and require mastery of such skills as writing, problem solving, and communications;
- Built on the strengths and lessons of previous state standards;
- Informed by standards in top-performing countries, so that all students are prepared to succeed in our global economy and society; and
- Evidence-based, clear, and aligned across a child's education, from K-12.

As of August 2013, 49 states and territories, the District of Columbia, and all Department of Defense schools that serve the children of U.S. servicemen and women around the world had formally adopted the CCSS.

States are individually responsible for implementing the standards in whichever way best suits their unique population of students and educational and political context. Currently, states are at various stages of implementation in the following areas:

- Engaging students, parents, educators, business leaders, and policymakers in the implementation process to build a strong coalition to bring about the needed changes and maintain the high standards;
- Improving teachers' and leaders' effectiveness through changes to their standards, preparation programs, licensure, evaluation systems, and professional development;
- Leading transitions in state assessments and accountability policy; and
- Reallocating resources to fund the implementation work.

## Frequently Asked Questions

### **Did the federal government play a role in developing the standards?**

No, the federal government was not involved in the development of the standards. This has always been, and continues to be, a state-led and state-driven initiative. Upon completion of the standards, states voluntarily adopted and are currently implementing the standards on an individual basis.

### **How are each state’s educational standards established for what students should learn?**

Each state has its own process for developing, [adopting](#), and implementing standards. Typically, by state law, state boards of education have the authority to establish what students should learn and the rigor with which they should learn it. As a result of past actions by individual states, academic expectations of students have varied widely from state to state. While the CCSS were developed with broad involvement from educators across the country, each state followed its own process to consider and adopt them. Each state remains fully in control of determining its own standards and all related decisions to the implementation of those standards.

### **Is the federal government playing a role in implementation?**

No. The federal government does not have a role in the implementation of the standards. State leaders retain the authority to oversee, select, and implement state education standards. NGA has opposed and will continue to oppose conditioning any federal funding or flexibility on the adoption of any particular set of standards.

### **Do these standards dumb down what students should learn?**

No. According to the [Thomas B. Fordham Institute’s review of the Common Core State Standards](#) and each individual state’s standards, only two states and the District of Columbia had standards that were “clearly superior” to the CCSS in English language arts/literacy, and no state had mathematics standards that were “clearly superior” to the CCSS. The institute’s review went on to say that the CCSS “are ambitious and challenging for students and educators alike.” For examples of what students will learn in each grade, see the [PTA’s parent guides](#).

### **Are the standards a national curriculum for schools?**

The CCSS are not a curriculum. They are a clear set of common goals and expectations for what knowledge and skills will help students succeed in college or in a workforce-training program. States and/or local districts retain the responsibility to adopt curricula, textbooks, and reading assignments.

### **How will students’ progress towards the standards be measured?**

In 2010, two consortia of states were created to develop high-quality

assessments to measure students' progress towards being prepared for college or a career-training program as defined by the Common Core State Standards. The two consortia are the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC), which includes 20 states and territories, plus D.C., and the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC), which includes 26 states and territories. The state-governed testing consortia are each developing K-12 assessments in reading, writing, and math. Each testing consortium will provide teachers with timely information to improve their instruction and their students' learning. Many states are field testing the assessments this school year, and all of the member states of each consortium are scheduled to fully implement the new assessments in the 2014-15 school year.

### **How much will the consortia tests cost states?**

SBAC estimates that its complete assessment system—including mid-year and end of year tests for reading, writing, and math—will cost \$27.30 per student each year. PARCC estimates its performance-based assessment and end-of-year assessment in reading, writing, and math will collectively cost \$29.50 per student each year. States which choose not to use PARCC or SBAC assessments, will have to determine what tests they will use, how they will be developed and paid for, how to ensure that they are high-quality, aligned to CCSS, and comparable to other states.

Current state expenditures on English language arts and math tests vary. A study conducted by SBAC found that costs ranged from \$7 to \$110 per student (combined for both ELA and math) with an average of \$31 per student for the 32 states that were reviewed. A PARCC survey of member states found that the median cost of current assessments is \$29.95 per student for reading, writing and math. All told, a majority of states will save money by using the new consortia-developed assessments: two-thirds of states in SBAC and one-half of states in PARCC will realize savings. Those estimates are also solely price comparisons and do not take into account that the new PARCC and SBAC assessment systems are offering higher-quality tests with greater value than existing state assessments.

### **Is the federal government playing a role in the assessment consortia?**

The federal government has provided funding to states that have voluntarily adopted the CCSS and come together in two state-governed coalitions to develop assessments to measure the standards. Regardless of the funding source, state leaders make up the governing boards of the two consortia and they retain the ultimate decision on whether or not to use the assessments once completed. No representative from the federal government sits on either consortium's governing board.

### **Why do states need more rigorous standards?**

Current performance of U.S. students is not strong enough to keep up with the changing economy—far too many individuals lack the education to get a job that pays a livable wage, and far too many well-paying jobs go unfilled. More specifically:

- Only [34 percent of fourth-graders in reading](#) and [35 percent of eighth-graders](#) in math scored proficient or advanced on the 2011 National Assessment of Educational Progress, the Nation's Report Card.
- U.S. 15-year-olds [ranked](#) 14th in reading, 25th in math, and 17th in science out of the 34 countries.
- States, students, and their families are spending an increasing amount on remedial classes in 2- and 4-year postsecondary institutions. Unfortunately, the research is finding a higher likelihood that as a student spends more time in remedial classes, their likelihood of graduating decreases.

### **Does the federal government collect academic and other information about individual students?**

No. The Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008, No Child Left Behind law amending the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the Education Reform Sciences Act of 2002, and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act prohibit the creation of a federal database with students' personally identifiable information. The federal government does not have access to the student-level information housed in state data systems. Adoption of the Common Core State Standards, and/or participation in the related assessment consortia, does not authorize the sharing of student data among states or with the federal government.



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## Appendix C: Resources from the Council of the Great City Schools

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### Council of the Great City Schools: Common Core Works

The Council of the Great City Schools developed the [Common Core Works website](#) to provide member districts with quick access to reliable information, tools, and resources for implementing the Common Core State Standards in English language arts/literacy



and mathematics, and the Next Generation Science Standards. The site includes updates on current common core initiatives, projects, conferences, and opportunities to network across districts to support quality instruction and raise student achievement.

Features of the website include:

- Parent Roadmaps to the Common Core State Standards (K-8, High School):

English Language Arts ([English](#) / [Spanish](#))

Mathematics ([English](#) / [Spanish](#))

- Videos:

[Common Core Overview Video](#) (English and Spanish, 3 minutes)

[Public Service Announcement](#) (English and Spanish, 30 seconds)

[ELA / Literacy Videos](#)

[Mathematics Videos](#)

- [Calendar of Questions, 2013-2014](#)
- Information about [next generation assessments](#), including Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) and Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC)
- [Web buttons](#) to publicize and link to Common Core Works from other websites
- Plus numerous other implementation tools and resources



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