

# TAKING ACTION: REACHING OUT

Emphasize the benefits of the California Standards. Connect with your community.

## NEWSLETTER / WEBSITE ITEMS

### VALUE

These mini-articles are designed to help you drop information about the Common Core learning standards into a communication.



### METHOD

Timing is key. It is most effective to publish these snippets at regular intervals throughout the year. Publishing them all at once will overwhelm parents. Include a link to one of the videos in this Toolkit.

## #1 Goals of the New California Standards

Teachers in our schools have been working hard to help students reach the new, more rigorous academic standards called Common Core. These new Common Core learning standards tell us what students should know and be able to do at the end of each grade level, and leave it up to our teachers to decide how to get each student there.

The goal of Common Core standards is to ensure that our graduates are ready for college and jobs in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Common Core emphasizes real-world skills like working with a group, applying concepts to new situations and analyzing the quality of information being used in our work.

Common Core learning standards are giving rise to a new way of teaching and learning in the classroom. Teachers are focusing on conceptual understanding, digging deeper on subject matter areas and



building on what kids already know to help them discover the next level. Students will work to understand each other's thought process while they focus on the right answer.

Our students will not only be learning information and the answers to specific questions, they'll be developing the ability to solve problems as they arise. That's what we all need to do in real life and what businesses are looking for in the people they hire. And in a world where we don't know what the jobs of tomorrow will be, being able to analyze the situation and solve problems will be key for success.

**Parent Tip:** Encourage your child to keep a journal. Whether it's full of drawings, collages or words, the journal will teach students how to write and tell stories that go beyond just recounting the events.



## #2 Teachers Implement California Standards

Under Common Core learning standards, individual teachers will decide how to teach in their classrooms. Instead of delivering scripted lesson plans and worksheets, teachers are expected to engage their students in discussion and learn how a student is thinking about the problems that are being presented. This means teachers and students spend a lot of time listening, quoting what they've heard back to each other and asking, "Why?"

Because of the shift in teaching style, teachers have been hard at work trading ideas on new lessons and techniques. Teachers are also working together on lesson plans that can be used across departments and classes.

The key to our students' success under California's new learning standards lies in their implementation. Teachers will control the curriculum and constantly identify what works and should be kept, and which teaching techniques need to be added to build a stronger, more valuable education for our students in the long run.

**Parent Tip:** *Cook with your child. Measuring ingredients and learning to improvise in putting together a recipe will both help students understand math concepts and encourage innovative thinking.*



## #3 Parents' Role

Common Core learning standards aim to prepare students for life outside of the classroom. When you walk into work each morning, nobody warns you, "Today will be a multiplying fractions day." Instead, today's employees are expected to handle real-life situations and solve problems as they come up. There are no notes to consult as we analyze the situation and make decisions. To prepare our students for this reality, teachers are focusing more than ever on real-world skills.

Because of that focus, parents are a key part of a student's learning process. Our families are uniquely positioned to help children build a bridge between the outside world and the content they learn inside the classroom. For example, cooking with children can reinforce concepts of measurement or fractions that they may have come across in class. Mapping out a road trip or participating in the family's monthly budget can also help students understand how classroom skills translate to real life.

Parents can model skills like persistence, teamwork and patience through their own behavior. Though homework can sometimes be frustrating, students are more likely to succeed and have a positive



attitude about it if family members are encouraging them to persist. Parents can assist with research ideas, show an interest in what their children are reading and encourage kids to keep an open mind about how they learn. The key is for parents and teachers to form a strong partnership in supporting each student.

If you have any questions about how to support your child's learning this year, or about what he or she should be achieving in class, ask your child's teacher.

**Parent Tip:** *Ask your child to help you plan and budget for an event. Whether it's a lemonade stand or a birthday party, the activity will make connections between real-life and classroom concepts.*

## #4 How Group Learning Spurs Personalized Learning

Common Core learning standards are designed to ensure that each student is able to gain a set of skills before moving on to the next one. The only way our teachers can do this is by understanding each student's comprehension level, and focusing on how they learn. That's



why the standards place such high priority on understanding a learner's thought process—whether for a math problem or a classic novel.

This focus on individual student skills is why you might notice your child working on more group projects. Teachers are trying

to understand what students are saying and how they explain their reasoning to their peers. This, in turn, helps the teacher teach each student at his or her own level.

### FOR EXAMPLE:

1. The student explores a problem and comes to conclusions on their own.
2. The teacher leads a discussion about the conclusions students make. Students are encouraged to share their ideas and the teacher guides them toward the concept being taught.
3. The teacher then steps in and teaches the mathematical concept and provides exercises for students to practice.

That means that instead of a sheet of multiplication tables, teachers are helping students understand why multiplication works the way it does. Once the student has learned that, he or she will be able to apply the concepts of multiples in any situation, not just on a test.

**Parent Tip:** Help your student plan a sightseeing trip or research your family's history. The act of doing this will reinforce critical thinking and research skills, while encouraging them to pursue an interest.

## #5 Local Control of the Classroom

Common Core learning standards give far more flexibility to teachers and districts than in the past.

These standards set out what each student is expected to know by the end of the school year. However, the standards do not tell the teacher how to teach. The curriculum, specific books, lesson plans and classroom exercises are left up to each district to decide on its own. By doing this, California's Common Core learning standards are allowing individual communities to tailor learning exercises and lessons to their own students and histories.

Previous standards had sometimes provided teachers with standard scripts to read and encouraged them to stick to the textbooks. The new standards allow those decisions to be made at the district level, much closer to the frontlines of teaching.

District officials and teachers are working in professional learning teams across the region to compare notes and ideas and to learn from one another.



If you have questions about your child's homework or about a particular book or assignment, ask the teacher about why the district chose this particular work and the intended learning. Because these decisions are made locally, the teacher will likely be able to tell you exactly how it relates to both the standards and to your child.

**Parent Tip:** Ask your child to help you comparison shop. You can compare the prices of phone plans, groceries or sports tickets. Doing this will reinforce concepts of measurement, budgeting and evidence-based thinking for your child.

## #6 Literature in California's Common Core Learning Standards

The idea behind Common Core learning standards is that our children are ready for careers and life in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Common Core sets students up to truly understand what they read, so they enter college and the workforce with strong critical thinking and problem-solving skills. That's why the standards emphasize depth over breadth in reading.

At a practical level, that means students in English classes will still be reading literary classics and engaging with them more deeply, taking the time to do more than just follow the storyline. The questions will be around why things happened, not just what happened. They're going to be asked to show they have really thought through what it means. And more often, they will also read paired nonfiction books that help them to understand a novel's historical setting. If we can teach our students to do that with one book, they will have a skill they can apply to any text.

Students will be asked to read more in most classes, including interesting and challenging informational articles that have rich vocabulary and can deepen students' content knowledge. In the end, these skills will better equip our children to take on the challenges of tomorrow's workforce.

**Parent Tip:** *Explore slogans you see on television or in stores with your child. Looking more deeply into marketing that they encounter every day can encourage them to focus on the implications of language, why certain messages resonate (and with whom), and refine their critical thinking skills.*



## #7 "Take a Quick Look"

When you write a report or email, have you ever asked your spouse or colleague to, "Take a quick look," at it? When you do, you're asking for a "formative assessment."

Formative assessment is the ongoing process of collecting data on what people know or don't know, and changing track accordingly. At school, the idea is that with a clear vision of the progress each student is making, teachers can adjust their lesson plans and provide necessary interventions to improve individual achievement.

Common Core learning standards urge teachers to engage in formative assessment instead of waiting until the end-of-semester final to gauge a student's progress. The standards are aimed at "building children's capacity to think, analyze, communicate and reason." To test that, teachers need to find out where the students are when grappling with complex ideas. Is the idea beginning to consolidate? What does the teacher need to do to go deeper and really help them get it?

To get a full picture of student understanding, teachers ask open-ended questions and push students to explore ideas aloud. They listen in when kids are working together. They even encourage students to assess each other and themselves.

Checking in with children to figure out whether they've understood a concept or lesson is more important than ever.

**Parent Tip:** *Be your child's book club. Ask your child what he or she is reading and why certain characters are behaving the way they are. Help them understand the historical or real-world context behind the story and where it fits.*

## #8 Smarter Balanced Assessments

People across the country have asked about whether the new learning standards set out by the Common Core framework will be effective. The only way to answer that question is to measure students' progress under the new teaching methods. That's why, at the end of the year, all 3<sup>rd</sup> through 8<sup>th</sup> graders and 11<sup>th</sup> graders will be tested under the new Smarter Balanced assessments. The old STAR system has been retired in California. The new system is called the California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP).

The new tests will indicate the level of preparation for careers or college courses. Students will see fewer multiple-choice questions and will need to provide more short answers and extended responses that focus on their thought process. Like the Common Core learning standards, the tests are designed to push students' critical-thinking and real-world problem solving skills.



The tests are designed to provide flexibility for individual student needs. They're conducted on computers, which give students access to things like scratch pads and calculators. By putting the assessments online, we will get results back

quickly and schools can use them to plan for teacher professional development and to improve the curriculum and instruction.

A child's score on new tests will NOT determine whether he/she goes on to the next grade. However, the results will be compared over time to measure progress.

This year's test results may initially be lower than STAR results in previous years. This doesn't mean that students have learned less or fallen behind. Instead, it reflects the higher expectations under the Common Core learning standards. The assessments are new, as are the lesson plans. It will take a bit of time to put the whole process in place.

We are confident that, over time, the new teaching and testing



methods will help us learn a lot more about how our children learn and how schools can better prepare students to be more successful in higher education and on the job.

**Parent Tip:** *Have your child plan a summer road trip or determine what it costs the family to travel to work, school and shopping each week. Researching destinations and calculating distances and costs will get them excited and show them how to use classroom skills in real life.*



## POSTER



[Click here](#) to download a Common Core poster. Post as "refrigerator art" or use as a handout at parent meetings. You can also have a professional printer enlarge it for posting at a meeting.