

A PARENT'S GUIDE TO ARKANSAS COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS



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There has been a lot of talk about Arkansas's move to adopt Common Core State Standards. Last summer the state's legislators held two days of hearings on the topic. One thing is clear—there is a lot of incorrect information out there about Common Core. This guide will give you the information you need to know as parents to be informed about the issue. No attempt is being made to cover all the details. For parents who want more information, please go to the Arkansas Department of Education Website.¹ Below we respond to some of the questions that we are hearing.

What do we mean by Common Core?

The Common Core State Standards define the knowledge and skills students should have to ensure readiness for college and careers. The Arkansas State Board of Education adopted the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts/Literacy and Mathematics in July 2010. The standards are in place in Arkansas in every grade this year. They were started in the lower grades in the 2012 school year.²

What do we mean by standard?

A standard is what you have to learn and when. How teachers make that happen is still up to them. What books and materials they use are still up to individual school districts. As in past years, districts select their books with the approval of ADE.

Grade	Former Arkansas Curriculum Framework	New Common Core Standard
4 Literature	<p>Read a variety of informational texts, including comparative formats</p> <p>Read a variety of functional/practical texts including brochures, newspaper, and magazine articles.</p>	By the end of the year, read and comprehend informational texts, including history/social studies, science and technical texts in the grades 4 – 5 text complexity band proficiently, with scaffolding as needed at the high end of the range.
What does this mean in plain English?	Read text books, newspapers and magazines.	Read textbooks at the student's grade level proficiently with extra help in more difficult reading material.
6 Math	<p>Whole Number Operations: Represent and explain division as measurement and partitive division including equal groups, related rates, price, rectangular arrays (area model), combinations, and multiplicative comparison</p> <p>Computational Fluency: Develop and use a variety of algorithms with computational fluency to perform whole number operations using addition and subtraction (up to five-digit numbers), multiplication (up to three-digit x two-digit), division (up to two-digit divisor) interpreting remainders, including real world problems.</p>	<p>Perform operations with multi-digit whole numbers and with decimals to hundredths.</p> <p>Find whole number quotients of whole numbers with up to four-digit dividends and two-digit divisors, using strategies based on place value, the properties of operations, and/or the relationship between multiplication and division.</p> <p>Illustrate and explain the calculation by using equations, rectangular arrays, and/or area models.</p>
What does this mean in plain English?	Long division and how it relates to multiplication.	Long division and how it relates to multiplication.

We have always had standards. The big change with Common Core State Standards is that most states will now use the same standards on what every child should know when they finish the same grade. For example, a child who completes the fourth grade in Arkansas would know the same kinds of things as a fourth grade child in Oklahoma or Mississippi or Louisiana. In fact, forty-four states and the District of Columbia have adopted them. Most of the standards are the same in each state.

The graph above shows how things changed with the switch to Common Core. As you can see, things didn't change much. According to the Arkansas Department of Education (ADE), in some subjects there are items that were formerly learned in one grade level that are now taught in another. But for the most part it is the same. Some confusion has resulted from individuals using the word curriculum improperly. Common Core State Standards are not a curriculum. This is a good description of the difference.

Standards are expectations. For instance, we expect students to know that $2+2=4$, and why. Curriculum is the program created by local school districts to teach students to learn that $2+2=4$, and why.

Standards are statements about what kids should know. Curriculum includes many resources: activities, lessons, units, assessments, and can include publisher textbooks. Standards define what is to be learned by the end of a school year. Curriculum is the detailed plan for day to day teaching.

In education terms, decisions about standards are made at the state level, defining for teachers, school leaders and parents what students are expected to know by the end of the year. Curriculum decisions, including which textbook and programs to use, are made by local districts. Instructional decisions regarding student progress throughout the year are made in the classroom. Standards define what we want. Curriculum gets us there.³



What does the national government have to do with Common Core?

They didn't develop the Common Core standards, but they like it. And they are finding ways to encourage states to use it. The standards were developed by people from different states that met to develop the standards for each grade. Arkansas had experts at these meetings who helped develop the standards. We helped create them.

Who's for Common Core and who's against it?

Two national groups helped the representatives from individual states with developing the standards: the National Governors Association (NGA) Center for Best Practices and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO). Governor Mike Beebe is part of NGA and Arkansas's Commissioner of Education is a member of CCSSO.

Against Common Core. Some parents and organizations oppose Common Core because they think it takes away from local control (which it doesn't). Others oppose Common Core because they think President Obama developed it (he didn't). Many of those who oppose it do so because of wrong information provided by outside groups. Some of those against Common Core think it's too hard while others are against it because they think it isn't hard enough.

For Common Core. Most of the business community, including the Arkansas State Chamber of Commerce, supports Common Core. Other groups that support Com-

mon Core include our colleges and universities, the Walton Family Foundation, and Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families. There is a letter from former Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee supporting Common Core that was entered into the record of the 2013 summer hearings on Common Core. These groups have at least one thing in common. They are all concerned about Arkansas's ability to compete for the best jobs in the future.

What about teachers?

Both state teachers' organizations support Common Core. These groups are the Arkansas Education Association (AEA) and the Arkansas State Teachers Association (ASTA). Both groups want ADE to get teacher input as Common Core is put in place. Last year AEA told the legislature that while some states use standardized tests for teacher evaluation, Arkansas's new teacher evaluation law "avoids that trap." That's important to know. Arkansas's teacher evaluation program is different than what you may have heard about in other states. Our program has less of a teacher's evaluation based on how students perform than other states.

Teachers have been asked by their school districts to make changes in how they teach some topics. Common Core doesn't require that. But ADE does provide professional development for teachers so they can be better at helping students learn. Teaching methods have always changed as we learn new and better teaching methods. This will continue whether or not we have Common Core. Some teachers embrace change and some may resist it.

What about testing?

Arkansas hasn't switched tests yet. We are still using the Benchmark exams that were in place with the old standards (also called curriculum frameworks). The new standards are like the old in many ways, but it would be better to have a new test that better measures what the standards or expectations are now. ADE plans to switch to a new test next year. This won't be an additional test, but it will replace the current Benchmark exams. If we don't switch, we will continue to use tests that don't match completely with what has been taught.

The new test is called PARCC.⁴ It was developed the same way the standards were. Representatives from member states and testing experts have worked to develop the new test that reflects the new Common Core State Standards. This year will be different from future years in that almost



all school districts will give both the PARCC test and the statewide Benchmark test. The PARCC is only being given as a trial to find any problems that may occur. This will help identify any changes needed before next year when it is the only test.

There are three reasons why developing our own test is not a good idea and (why we should use PARCC)

- It would be unreasonably expensive. We should build on the work we have already done with other states.
- It would take too long to start over now. Starting over now would mean the test would not be ready next year.
- We would not be able to see how Arkansas is doing compared to other states using the same standards. We need to know if Arkansas students are learning as well as other states, to evaluate our education strategies.

What about high-stakes testing?

Here's a great example of an issue where Arkansas is in a completely different situation than other states. Arkansas does not have high-stakes tests for student graduation. Act 1081 of 2013 eliminated high-stakes testing. Students still must take end-of-course exams and be remediated if they don't perform proficiently, but the results do not have an effect on graduation.

What's it mean for graduation requirements?

Arkansas requires 22 credits for graduation. Many districts add one or more credits to the state requirement. A local school board could require passing a standardized test such as the End-of-Course or its PARCC replacement. The state doesn't, but it is possible because of local control for a district to do that. ADE is not aware, at this time, of any district doing this.

Is it good for kids?

Yes. Raising Arkansas's educational standards to the same level as other states is good for kids. But experts agree Common Core State Standards are more difficult than those Arkansas was using. It will be tougher for our kids to meet the standards. It will be important to hold school officials' feet to the fire to make sure they provide struggling students with programs they need to be successful such as after-school and summer programs. Another important support will be quality pre-K programs. Getting all our children started in kindergarten on a level playing field will be critical.

Notes

¹ <http://www.arkansased.org/divisions/learning-services/common-core-state-standards>

² Ibid.

³ <http://excelined.org/2013/06/common-core-fact-of-the-day-standards-v-curriculum/>

⁴ PARCC is the acronym for Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers.

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