

# Foreword & Executive Summary

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For the first decade of Fordham’s existence, starting in 1997, reviewing state academic standards was our bread-and-butter. We would gather trusted subject-matter experts, request that they read all fifty sets of standards, and then ask them to offer their opinion. But the pattern was always the same: A few states had done a commendable job of identifying the knowledge and skills that students needed to master, grade-by-grade, to be considered on track for success. But most state standards were horrendous: poorly written, disorganized, and replete with dubious ideas. We would say so, and encourage these wayward states to adopt the exemplars as their own. Whether they took our advice was another story.

All that changed in 2010, when we read the final drafts of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). Our [\*State of State Standards—and the Common Core—in 2010\*](#) found that the CCSS were clearer and more rigorous than the English language arts (ELA) standards in 37 states and stronger than the math standards in 39 states. Naturally, we encouraged those states to adopt the CCSS instead of starting from scratch.

This time, states took notice. Within a year, all but four had climbed aboard the Common Core train. But of course, it wasn’t just that we had suddenly become more persuasive and influential. Lots of states had helped to develop the Common Core, so they were already “bought in” and happy to adopt them. And there were also those federal Race to the Top funds; states that adopted “common” college- and career-ready standards had a better shot at winning a piece of that tantalizing pie.

Even at the time, that last bit was rather worrisome. We had argued forever that “national” standards were a good idea—but would only be politically palatable if they avoided the stigma of “federal” involvement. Still, for several years, all was quiet. States started to implement the CCSS, and we were lulled into believing that we’d never need to evaluate state standards again. It was the “end of history”—at least when it came to battles over national standards.

Or so we thought.

As readers know, by 2013 the country was engulfed in a full-fledged culture war over the Common Core, with a loose coalition of populist conservatives teaming up with educational progressives in a push to dump the standards (and get out from under testing). Some states responded by “un-adopting” the Common Core; others tweaked, renamed, or rebranded them. But in general, the end of history was, alas, short-lived. So here we find ourselves, once again, evaluating state ELA and math standards.

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Why bother? What’s the purpose of a review of state standards in 2018?

Quite simply, even the steadfast states have room for improvement. No matter how good they are, every state’s academic standards need to be updated periodically to reflect the latest advances in content and pedagogy, as well as the lessons learned during their implementation. So the overarching goal of this report is to provide helpful guidance to states as they look to modernize their standards in the years ahead.

Because many states have kept the CCSS (or a variant thereof), this report—unlike our previous “state of the state standards” reports—does not formally review standards in all fifty states. Instead, it focuses on the subset of states that have made the *most* substantive changes to the CCSS, as well as those that never adopted them in the first place. By taking a close look at the standards in these states, plus a fresh look at the CCSS, it seeks to identify those changes and ideas that are worthy of broader adoption, as well as mistakes to avoid.

With those ends in mind, we assembled two teams of highly respected subject matter experts—one for ELA and one for math—with deep knowledge of the content standards in their respective fields.

Because these teams worked independently, their paths inevitably diverged. For example, because the ELA team saw evidence of substantive changes to more states’ standards, it formally reviewed standards in fourteen states, while the math team limited itself to ten. And the two teams took different approaches to summarizing their findings. For example, the math team identified four “positive trends” that it attributed to the enduring influence of the CCSS—as well as important exceptions to those trends. However, our ELA reviewers were more inclined to see unwanted patterns in the data, as demonstrated by the six “persistent shortcomings” they identified, which include several areas where they see evidence of “backsliding” since the adoption of the Common Core.

Due to the differences between our review teams, as well as the inherent differences between English language arts and math, we advise against comparisons between or across the two subjects, and against simplistic or reductive readings of either team’s findings. Ultimately, what matters most is where states go from here—and what they do with the information and recommendations in this report.

## ELA Results

Although no set of ELA standards received a perfect score, the CCSS-ELA once again earned a 9 out of 10, reflecting the consensus among our reviewers that they are generally a “strong” set of standards that states can and should continue to implement (Table 1).

Our reviewers also rated seven states’ ELA standards “good” because they earned scores of 7 or 8 (Indiana, Kansas, New York, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia) and were worthy of implementation with “targeted revisions.” Of the standards in this group, our reviewers found Indiana’s to be particularly commendable.

Further down the spectrum, five states earned overall scores of 5 or 6 and were thus deemed to have “weak” standards (Arizona, Nebraska, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Texas). Our reviewers recommend that these standards be significantly revised before educators and policymakers devote any more effort to their implementation.

Finally, two states—Missouri and Virginia—earned overall scores of 4, indicating that their ELA standards are “inadequate” and should be completely overhauled as soon as possible.

## Math Results

Overall, the pattern for math is similar to that of ELA. Again, no set of standards received a perfect score (Table 2). However, both the CCSS-M and Texas’s math standards earned a 9 out of 10, reflecting the consensus among our reviewers that they are “strong” and worthy of implementation.

Below those two exemplars are three states that earned overall scores of 7 (Indiana, Tennessee, and Virginia), meaning their standards are “good” and should be implemented with “targeted revisions.”

Further down the spectrum are five states (Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Carolina, and Oklahoma) that earned overall scores of 5 or 6. According to our reviewers, these states’ math standards are “weak” and should not be implemented without “significant revisions.”

Finally, one state—Pennsylvania—earned an overall score of 4, meaning that its math standards are “inadequate” in the eyes of our reviewers and should be completely re-written.

As Table 1 and Table 2 make clear, most states that “un-adopted” or made non-trivial changes to the Common Core replaced them with standards that were substantially weaker in both subjects. In general, these states would have been better off if they had simply adopted the Common Core without making any revisions.

Table 1. State Standards Ratings: English Language Arts

	Content & Rigor (out of 7)	Clarity & Specificity (out of 3)	Total Score (out of 10)	Overall Rating
Common Core ELA	6	3	9	Strong
Indiana	6	2	8	Good
Kansas	6	1	7	Good
New York	5	2	7	Good
North Carolina	5	2	7	Good
Oklahoma	4	3	7	Good
Pennsylvania	4	3	7	Good
West Virginia	5	2	7	Good
Arizona	4	2	6	Weak
South Carolina	4	2	6	Weak
Texas	5	1	6	Weak
Nebraska	3	2	5	Weak
Tennessee	4	1	5	Weak
Missouri	3	1	4	Inadequate
Virginia	2	2	4	Inadequate

Table 2. State Standards Ratings: Mathematics

	Content & Rigor* (out of 7)	Clarity & Specificity* (out of 3)	Total Score (out of 10)	Overall Rating
Common Core Math	7	2	9	Strong
Texas	7	2	9	Strong
Indiana	5	2	7	Good
Tennessee	5	2	7	Good
Virginia	4	3	7	Good
Minnesota	4	2	6	Weak
North Carolina	5	1	6	Weak
Missouri	4	1	5	Weak
Nebraska	3	2	5	Weak
Oklahoma	3	2	5	Weak
Pennsylvania	3	1	4	Inadequate

\* Referred to more broadly as Content and Communication in the mathematics standards reviews.

## National Trends in ELA Standards

After completing their reviews, our ELA reviewers identified two positive trends in state ELA standards:

1. **More states are prioritizing writing, including foundational writing skills** such as printing, keyboarding, phonics, and spelling.
2. **More states are emphasizing vocabulary development** including word meanings, roots and affixes, context clues, and connotation and denotation.

Unfortunately, these positive developments are at least partially overshadowed by six persistent failings, though note that (for the most part) these criticisms do not apply to the majority of states that adopted the CCSS-ELA and chose not to make substantive revisions to their standards in recent years. The failings identified by our reviewers include:

1. **A marked retreat from rigorous quantitative and qualitative expectations for reading and text complexity**, a development that leaves educators in the dark about what types of texts students should be reading, and at what levels.
2. **A lack of disciplinary literacy standards** showing how literacy skills extend beyond the English classroom into other subjects such as history, science, and mathematics.
3. **A lack of clear skill progressions between grade levels, especially at the high school level**, and a lack of strong college- and career-readiness (CCR) standards to anchor K-12 expectations.
4. **Insufficient guidance on the specific types of literary and informational texts and genres/subgenres to which students should be exposed**, such as drama and literary criticism, or satire and epic poetry.
5. **A focus on writing processes rather than measurable student outcomes**, which leaves educators with insufficient guidance regarding the frequency, length, and type of writing assignments.
6. **A dearth of supporting documents that are critical to implementation**, such as glossaries of key terms, specific guidance for determining text complexity, and lists of exemplar texts.

As the length of this list suggests, there is substantial room for improvement in some states' ELA standards. However, in many cases, the shortcomings our reviewers identify could be addressed through straightforward additions and clarifications, rather than a complete overhaul of existing standards.

## National Trends in Math Standards

Like the ELA team, the math team identified several trends in state standards, all of which are at least partly attributable to the enduring influence of the CCSS-M. These include:

1. **A stronger focus on arithmetic in grades K-5**, where the priority should be ensuring students' mastery of foundational skills, such as counting and flexibly computing with whole numbers, decimals, and fractions, as well as their understanding of the place value principle.
2. **More coherent treatment of proportionality and linearity in middle school**, including rates and ratios, slope, and linear relationships and functions (e.g.,  $y = mx + b$ ).
3. **An appropriate balance between conceptual understanding, procedural fluency, and application**, each of which is an essential dimension of mathematical thinking.
4. **Better organization and teacher supports**, including focused introductions for individual grade levels and courses, mathematically coherent organizational approaches that highlight the connections between standards, and helpful ancillary materials.

All of this counts as good news. However, as suggested by the low scores that some states' math standards received, there are more exceptions to these trends than one would want to see. For example, some states do not explicitly require students to know their addition and multiplication facts from memory, while others make no mention of proficiency in the standard algorithms for the four major operations. Similarly, some states still have incoherent (or partially coherent) middle school progressions that fail to make the appropriate connections between interrelated

standards and topics. And some give short shrift to conceptual understanding at all grade levels. Finally, some states have poorly organized standards, while others fail to include process or practice standards that describe the “essential mathematical habits of mind” that all students should learn—or fail to connect those habits to content.

## For States that Kept the Common Core

Specific recommendations for those states that made the most significant changes to the Common Core (or that never adopted it in the first place) can be found in the individual reviews that comprise *Section IV*. In nearly every case, the simplest “fix” would be for these states to adopt (or re-adopt) the Common Core. However, since there would be little point in restarting that fight, the individual reviews meet these states halfway by describing the *specific* changes they could make to address the weaknesses in their current standards. States with weaker standards are encouraged to make changes based on this information.

But what of the majority of states that have kept the CCSS, or a close facsimile thereof? In general, the question facing these states is not whether to scrap their standards but how to build on them. So with that mind, we have three broad recommendations for states that are part of this group, including subject-specific guidance as appropriate.

### 1 Focus on implementation.

Insofar as they have chosen to stick with the Common Core, most states now have excellent ELA and math standards. So, policymakers would do well to remember the most famous principle of sound medicine: “First, do no harm.” Any improvements to ELA or math standards in these states are likely to have (at most) a minor impact on student achievement, and recent experience suggests that ill-advised revisions have the potential to do considerable damage.

To be clear, the CCSS are not perfect, and states that have stuck with them can and should learn from the minor revisions and additions that other states have made. But the need for revisions is not urgent. So in addition to considering the recommendations below, we advise states with solid standards to devote their resources to implementing them well. Replacing the general “all-purpose” professional

development that many teachers currently receive with sustained, coherent, and *subject-specific* professional development focused on ELA and math content (and pedagogy) would be a good first step.

### 2 Adopt the improvements that other states have made to support implementation.

In recent years, numerous states have embellished the Common Core with a wide variety of supporting documents and minor additions—in most cases, without attempting a fundamental rewrite. Although the quality of these innovations varies, some of them are well done. In particular, the efforts of California and Massachusetts are worth highlighting.

On the ELA side, Massachusetts has added over 100 grade-specific examples to its grade level content standards, in an effort to make them more concrete. In general, the quality of these examples is high, and their presentation is straightforward and user-friendly. Similarly, California has made some useful additions to its standards for Writing. For example, students are now expected to “write routinely over extended... and shorter time frames” starting in grade 2 rather than grade 3, and the standards for higher grades include more detailed expectations related to thesis statements (grade 6) and dealing with counterarguments (grade 7). Additions to the Speaking and Listening standards also emphasize logic and critical thinking. For example, fifth-grade students are expected to “identify and analyze any logical fallacies” in a speaker’s presentation.

On the math side, Massachusetts has added a description of the Mathematical Practice Standards by grade band that includes specific examples of connections between the content and practice standards (in addition to revising and updating its glossary and bibliography). However, perhaps the most important innovations are at the high school level, where California and Massachusetts have effectively integrated the CCSS-M high school standards (which are presented by conceptual category) with *Appendix A* of the CCSS-M (which provides options for organizing those standards into courses), thus providing a coherent and thorough treatment of high school content and pathways that is ideal for implementation. (The Golden State also includes excellent standards for AP Probability and Statistics and for Calculus courses, while the Commonwealth includes model Precalculus and Advanced Quantitative Reasoning courses.)

### 3 If possible, take the next step by precisely addressing specific limitations of the CCSS-ELA and CCSS-M.

In addition to adopting the improvements identified above, some states should consider taking the next step by addressing some of the other weaknesses our reviewers identify—especially if doing so involves making well-conceived additions, rather than disturbing the delicate internal logic of the existing standards. Specifically, states that feel confident in their ability to manage this process should take the following steps:

#### a *Develop disciplinary literacy standards for Speaking and Listening, and for Language, and further develop the disciplinary literacy aspect of the ELA standards for grades 6–12.*

Each discipline uses language in particular ways to create, disseminate, and evaluate knowledge. So it's important that students develop an understanding of these differences. As noted in our updated review, however, the Literacy Standards in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects (i.e., the Common Core's "disciplinary literacy" standards) could be strengthened, especially in grades 6–12. Most obviously, states could develop specific standards in Speaking and Listening, and in Language, since both of these domains are omitted entirely from the current disciplinary literacy standards.

#### b *Define the differences in expectations between 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade and between 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade in ELA.*

At the high school level, the CCSS-ELA standards are divided into two-year grade bands (9–10 and 11–12) "to allow schools, districts, and states flexibility in high school course design." However, reviewers found that this lack of specificity resulted in redundancies across grade levels, making it difficult for teachers to know which standards to cover in which grade, or how the rigor of individual standards ought to increase from one grade to the next. Consequently, states should consider creating grade-specific English language arts standards for high school such that each grade has specific expectations.

#### c *Articulate clear pathways in high school math that are explicitly aligned with specific post-secondary and labor market outcomes.*

Currently, most states list standards for specific high school math courses, but are not clear about how these courses fit together and what they prepare a student to do post-graduation. Ideally, standards would indicate which pathways prepare students for STEM or other quantitative college majors, for the intellectual demands of completing college with a non-STEM major, and for technical and non-technical fields that may not require a four-year degree. Regardless of the path they choose, all students should learn algebra, geometry, and statistics and probability—and every student should take four years of high school math.

#### d *Take another look at the alignment between K–12 and pre-K.*

Although a comprehensive review of states' pre-K standards is beyond the scope of this report, both review teams noted that a few states (including Massachusetts) had made a conscious effort to align their pre-K and K–12 standards—something that is clearly desirable in principle. Because it has been more than a decade since most states adopted their pre-K standards, the potential for some sort of misalignment is considerable. Consequently, states that have yet to do so may want to take another look at this issue in consultation with early childhood experts.

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## Acknowledgments

Our reviewers, as well as those of us at Fordham, believe that the Common Core standards have aged well. Still, we must remember that standards are only words on paper if they don't inspire great instruction in the classroom. And on that front, there is clearly more work to be done, as we have learned from various implementation studies, including Fordham's own *Reading and Writing in America's Schools* (2018).<sup>1</sup>

Confusion still reigns in too many places: Do the standards expect young students to learn history, science, and other subjects in order to become better readers? (Yes.) Do they require high school English teachers to ditch classic works of literature? (No.) Do they want young children to master their math facts? (Yes.)

The standards, we believe, are clear and on target, on these and other important points. But something is getting lost in translation. Fixing that problem is as urgent as ever.

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1. D. Griffith, *Reading and Writing Instruction in America's Schools*, Thomas B. Fordham Institute (2018), accessed from <https://edexcellence.net/publications/reading-and-writing-instruction-in-americas-schools>