

The Common Core is a frequent topic of conversation among educators, educational experts and policy makers. However, much more needs to be done to familiarize students and parents with the standards, and teachers and schools require additional supports to ensure that their students are able to meet the standards that are aimed at preparing them for college and career. Afterschool programs are a valuable space to foster academic and socio-emotional support for children and have much to offer students, teachers and families as the Common Core enters classrooms around the U.S.

2014 marks the 12th anniversary of No Child Left Behind—legislation aimed at making certain that resources for children, teachers and schools are allocated in an attempt to level the playing field and help close the achievement gap and raise educational attainment nationwide—yet the recently released Program of International Student Assessment (PISA) scores for the U.S.’s 15-year-old students raises the question: **are students any more prepared to be successful college students, workers and citizens than they were 12 year ago?**

How Do U.S. Students Measure Up Globally?

The latest release of PISA scores found that U.S. students are performing below average in math and on par with the OECD average in reading and science, however, U.S. scores have remained static:

- Among the 34 OECD countries, the U.S. ranked 26th in math, 21st in science and 17th in reading.
- The U.S. has a higher percentage of students performing at the lower levels of PISA’s proficiency scale in math than the OECD average.
- There was no significant change in the reading, math and science scores for 15-year-old students in the U.S.

A Call for a Greater Focus on 21st Century Skills

A key finding from the 2012 PISA results stated: “An implication of the findings is that much more focus is needed on 21st century skills—or higher-order activities...understanding real-world situations, transferring them into mathematical models, and interpreting mathematical results...” This echoes a call from parents and business leaders for a greater emphasis on critical thinking and communication skills that can be applied both in school and later in their career:

- A public attitude poll toward public schools found that 80% of Americans strongly agree that schools should teach students critical thinking skills and 78% strongly agree that they should teach students communication skills. (PDK/Gallup, 2013)
- A survey of close to 800 managers and executives found that 75% said that they believe the skills and competencies (critical thinking, communication skills, collaboration/team building, and creativity and innovation) will become more important to their organizations in the next 3 to 5 years. (American Management Association, 2012)

What is the Common Core?

Currently adopted by 45 states, the primary goal of the Common Core State Standards is to ensure that students have the skills and knowledge they will need for their future success in college and career. To accomplish this goal, the Common Core has been designed as a set of uniform and consistent high standards in English language arts and math to be adopted by participating states. The Common Core focuses on developing and deepening students’ knowledge and skills—also referred to as “habits of mind”—that will provide the necessary foundation for students to succeed academically, in work and in life.

Common Core’s Habits of Mind

English Language Arts Standards:

- Demonstrate independence
- Build strong content knowledge
- Respond to the varying demands of audience, task, purpose and discipline
- Comprehend and critique
- Value evidence
- Use technology and digital media strategically and capably
- Come to understand other perspectives and cultures

Mathematics Standards:

- Make sense of problems, persevere in solving them
- Reason abstractly and quantitatively
- Construct viable arguments and critique the reasoning of others
- Model with mathematics
- Use appropriate tools strategically
- Attend to precision
- Look for and make sure of structure
- Look for and express regularity in repeated reasoning

The aforementioned findings illustrate that more needs to be done to prepare the U.S.'s students for college and the workplace, as well as compete with their peers globally. The Council of Chief State School Officers and the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices worked together with a wide variety of stakeholders—such as teachers, parents, education experts and policy makers—to develop standards in ELA and math that would build and bolster the skills and knowledge that students need to succeed in school, in work and in life.

Supporters of the Common Core state that it creates a clear set of expectations for students, parents and teachers across the country, and also creates a standardized set of *high and rigorous* expectations for the skills and knowledge that students must learn. It focuses on developing and deepening specific “habits of mind”—that will help ensure that U.S. stu-

dents are equipped with the skills and knowledge they will need in college and career.

Concerns raised about the Common Core primarily revolve around implementation and cost—specifically, the lack of pilot testing before their introduction into classrooms across the country, the ambitious timeline to introduce the standards and associated assessments into schools, and the costs associated with the new assessments. A 2013 American Federation of Teachers survey found:

- More than 75% of teachers did not believe their district had done enough in regard to planning time for understanding the standards or putting the standards into practice.
- More than half shared that they either had not received training on the Common Core or the training they received was inadequate.

HOW AFTERSCHOOL CAN HELP

The afterschool field has long embraced an approach to learning focused on creating a highly engaging environment for students, and includes encouraging students to be active learners, to collaborate and communicate clearly with peers, and to work in a low-stakes environment where mistakes and failures are used as learning opportunities to grow from and persevere through. Afterschool programs are an ideal partner to support teachers and schools in their work with the Common Core State Standards, and many across the country have already found ways to incorporate the standards into their curriculum in an intentional and explicit manner:

- **Bridge the Gap College Prep’s Afterschool Extended Learning Day Program (BTGCP)** in Marin City, California, *focuses on supporting students’ socio-emotional development and tying lessons to their personal interests.* They tie academic lessons to students’ personal narratives, community service opportunities and career exploration; focuses on group dynamics; promotes peer-to-peer teaching; and exposes students to new and different environments, such as college campuses and cultural events. Since the program began tracking their students in 2010, 100% of their students have graduated high school.
- **The Baltimore Urban Debate League Middle School Competitive Debate Program (BUDL)** in Baltimore, Maryland, *uses the challenge of competition and debate to build the habits of mind promoted by the Common Core.* Serving more than 300 students in 17 low-income, urban public schools, BUDL works with students to research evidence to support their positions, develop deep content knowledge of subject matter, and evaluate and critique the merit of stances on subject matter. BUDL’s middle school students performed better on Maryland School Assessment tests than their peers who did not participate in the program.
- **Raising Expectations** in Atlanta, Georgia, *offers customized lessons and individual attention to students during the out-of-school hours* using student report cards, teacher input, test scores and the program’s own student assessments to provide individualized academic support to students. More than 9 in 10 student participants met and/or exceeded expectations in reading and English language arts and during the 2012-2013 school year, 100% of the program’s seniors graduated from high school and 93% enrolled in college.

Read the full *Afterschool and the Common Core State Standards* issue brief at:
http://www.afterschoolalliance.org/issue_63_common_core.cfm

