



Issue Brief No. 63

January 2013

Afterschool and the Common Core State Standards

The Afterschool Alliance, in partnership with MetLife Foundation, is proud to present the first in our latest series of four issue briefs examining critical issues facing middle school youth and the vital role afterschool programs play in addressing these issues. This series explores afterschool and: the Common Core State Standards, students with disabilities and other special needs, data utilization to improve programming, and keeping children safe and supported. The briefs examine just a few of the ways afterschool programs support middle school youth, families and communities.

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 a fair and equitable manner to help close the achievement gap and raise educational attainment nationwide. Yet, the recently released Program of International Student Assessment (PISA) scores for 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? The PISA scores manifest the concerns that the National Governors Association (NGA) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) have been voicing since 2009—that more needs to be done to ensure that U.S. students are equipped with the skills and knowledge they will need to succeed in school and work, and to compete globally.

These concerns, supplemented by the belief that all states and all students should be held to the same high standards in order to best prepare them for college and careers, resulted in the development of the Common Core State Standards. The membership groups behind the Common Core—NGA and CCSSO—represent the governors and the state education superintendents in all 50 states. Thus far, 45 states have adopted the Common Core, with the majority of those states implementing the standards by this school year (2013-2014). As the Common Core State Standards begin entering more classrooms across the country, numerous surveys are highlighting the critical support still necessary to help accomplish the Common Core’s goal of ensuring that all students leave high school armed with the knowledge and skills that will help them succeed in college, career and life. Afterschool programs can be—and in many places, already are—an integral source of support for teachers, schools, children and parents. They are helping students develop the critical thinking, problem solving and communication skills that the Common Core emphasizes. Afterschool programs create engaging, fun, thoughtful and relevant learning experiences for children, allowing them to work on hands-on projects, delve deeper into content matter, collaborate with their peers, and develop perseverance and grit by focusing on the learning that takes place throughout projects, rather than solely on the end result. Working in partnership with schools and teachers, afterschool programs hold infinite potential to ensure all children are ready for college and the workforce, and have the competencies necessary to be successful, productive and engaged citizens.

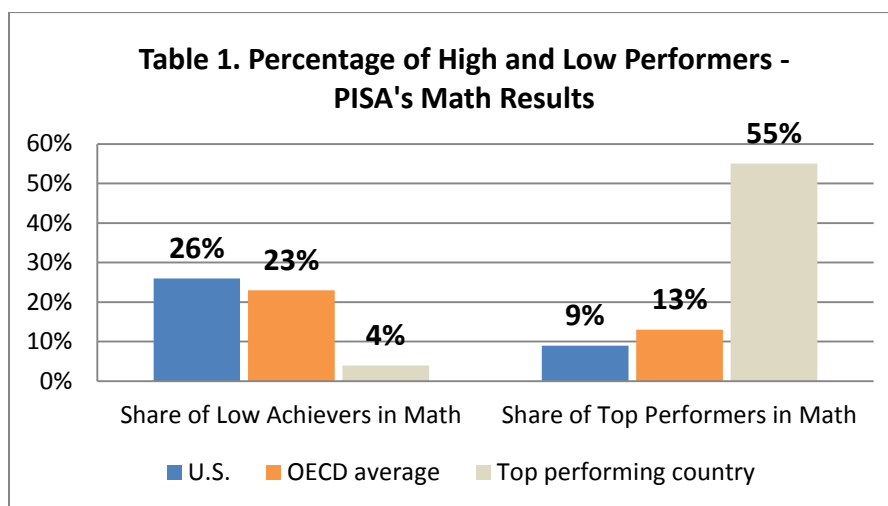
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How Do U.S. Students Measure Up Globally?

The latest release of PISA scores in December 2013 found that among the 34 OECD countries,¹ the U.S. ranked 26th in math, 21st in science and 17th in reading.¹ PISA, which administers rigorous international assessments to students in 65 countries across the world, allows countries to measure their own educational performance, compare differences in educational outcomes across countries, view differences in scores across their own country and evaluate the changes—if any—in student performance over time. The latest PISA scores also revealed that 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, as well as a smaller percentage of students performing at the highest level of PISA’s proficiency scale compared to the OECD average (*See Table 1*). In reading and science, U.S. students fair slightly better, performing on par with the OECD average.



An additional significant finding from the PISA results is that there was no significant change in the reading, math and science scores for 15-year-old students in the United States.ⁱⁱ Beginning with the first year where trends could be measured in each subject area, there has been no significant change in scores: in reading, there has been no significant change since 2000; in math, no significant change since 2003; and no significant change in science since 2006 (*See Table 2*). Despite a continued emphasis on education reform and improving the education system in the U.S., the 2012 PISA scores demonstrate that much more work remains for the U.S. to remain globally competitive.

A Need for Greater Focus on 21st Century Skills

In the OECD’s report on key findings from the 2012 PISA results, it stated:

¹ Currently, there are 34 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) member countries. The OECD brings together governments to collaborate and find solutions to problems shared across borders on topics such as the economy and the environment. Member countries work together on strategies and planning, and may produce standards, models or rules for international cooperation. In addition to member countries, the OECD conducts PISA assessments in partner countries and economies. A total of 65 countries and economies participated in the 2012 PISA assessments.

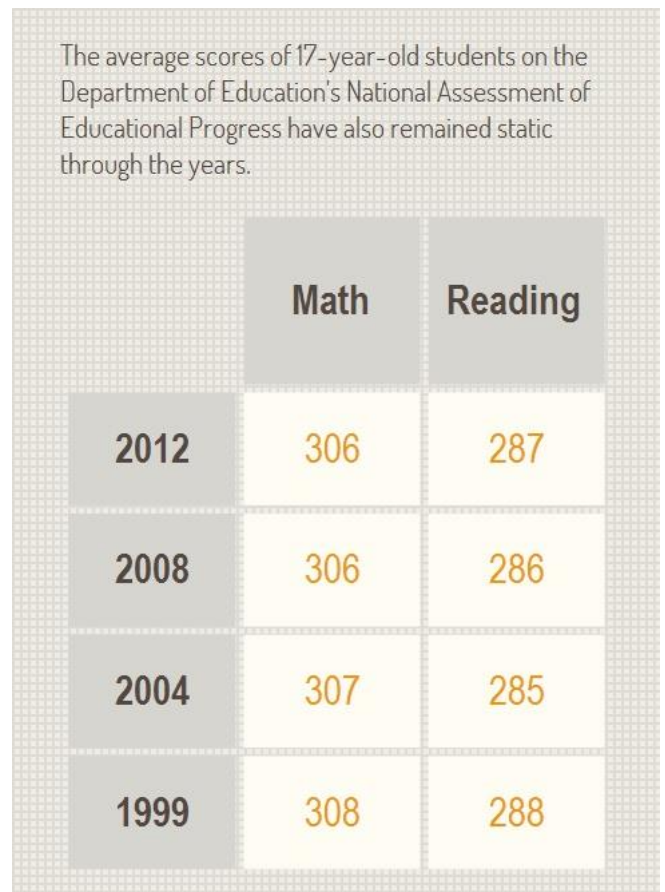
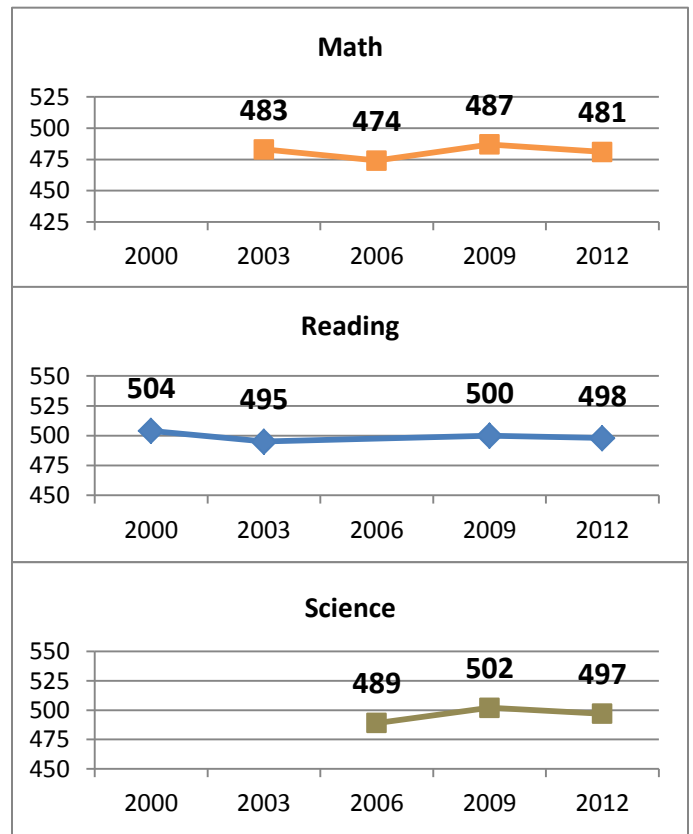
“An implication of the findings is that much more focus is needed on 21st century skills—or higher-order activities—such as those involved in mathematical modeling (understanding real-world situations, transferring them into mathematical models, and interpreting mathematical results), without neglecting the basic skills needed for these activities.”ⁱⁱⁱ

This statement echoes the call from parents and communities for a greater emphasis on critical thinking skills, problem solving skills and communication skills that can be applied across subject matter and throughout a child’s school experience and in their future career experience. A 2013 PDK/Gallup poll on the public’s attitudes toward public schools found that 80 percent of Americans strongly agree that schools should teach students critical thinking skills and 78 percent strongly agree that they should teach students communication skills.^{iv}

Employers also stand behind students learning these higher-order skills in school to create a well-prepared and competent workforce. A survey by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU), conducted by Hart Research Associates in 2013, found that 93 percent of employers surveyed agree, “a candidate’s demonstrated capacity to think critically, communicate clearly, and solve complex problems is more important than their undergraduate major.”^v More than 8 in 10 employers surveyed also agree that colleges should place more emphasis on critical thinking and analytical reasoning skills, the ability to analyze and solve complex problems, and the ability to effectively communicate orally and in writing.

Employers also view these skills as becoming increasingly important over the course of time. The AACU survey found that almost all employers surveyed said their company/organization is asking employees to take on greater responsibilities and to use a broader set of skills (93 percent) while facing challenges today that are more complex than in the past (91 percent).^{vi} Additionally, a 2012 American Management Association survey of close to 800 managers and executives found that 75 percent said

Table 2: U.S. PISA Scores



that they believe 21st century 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.^{vii} Just 1 percent said that they believed the skills will become less important.

What Are the Common Core State Standards and How Can they Help Better Prepare Students?

The findings detailed above—from PISA test scores to public opinion and employer demands—illustrate that more needs to be done to prepare U.S.’s students for college and the workplace, as well as compete with their peers globally. The NGA Center for Best Practices and CCSSO worked together with a wide variety of stakeholders—such as teachers, school administrators, parents, education experts and policy makers—to develop standards in English language arts (ELA) and math that would build and bolster the skills and knowledge that students need to succeed in school, in work and in life.

The Common Core Basics

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.^{viii} To accomplish this goal, the Common Core has been designed as a set of uniform and consistent high standards in ELA and math. All states that adopt the standards will be guided by the same standards and set of expectations of students.^{ix}

What Common Core Supporters are Saying

A key argument in support of the Common Core is that it creates a clear set of expectations for students, parents and teachers across the country.^x For example, proponents make the case that a student in California will be held to the same standards as a student in Florida, helping ensure that the quality of education is uniform across states. Along the same lines, if a family moves from Washington to Maine, both the student and the parents will know what skills and knowledge the student is expected to have mastery of and what skills and knowledge they will be developing before he or she steps into the new classroom.

Intertwined with proponents’ argument that the Common Core creates a standardized set of expectations for students is that it also creates a standardized set of *high and rigorous* expectations for the skills and knowledge that students must

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 and 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

Source: National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and the Council of Chief State School Officers. (2010). Common Core State Standards, English Language Arts Standards and Standards for Mathematical Practice.

“If our country is not just to compete, but also win in that global environment, we must continue to shake off the educational status quo and reinvigorate our schools and students with innovative ways of thinking, learning and doing. Put simply, the nation’s future depends upon our willingness today to create a new educational framework, one that raises academic expectations of all children and provides them the skills, tools and resources needed to succeed.

— William S. White, CEO and President, C.S. Mott Foundation

learn. As written, 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^{xi} (See sidebar). All states participating in a 2013 Center on Education Policy survey agree that the Common Core is “more rigorous than the previous state standards” as well as agree that the Common Core “will lead to improved student skills” in math and English language arts.^{xii} The standards do not focus on prescribing how teachers should deliver content, rather, they detail the skills and understanding students need to demonstrate by the end of each grade, with each grade-level standard building on the previous standard.^{xiii}

Supporters of the Common Core also highlight that the standards are grounded in research, internationally benchmarked and based on a variety of sources—including academic articles,

surveys of skills students will need when they enter college and/or join the workforce, standards from high-performing states, National Assessment of Education Progress frameworks for reading and writing, and Trends in International Mathematics and Science studies.^{xiv}

Critiques of the Common Core

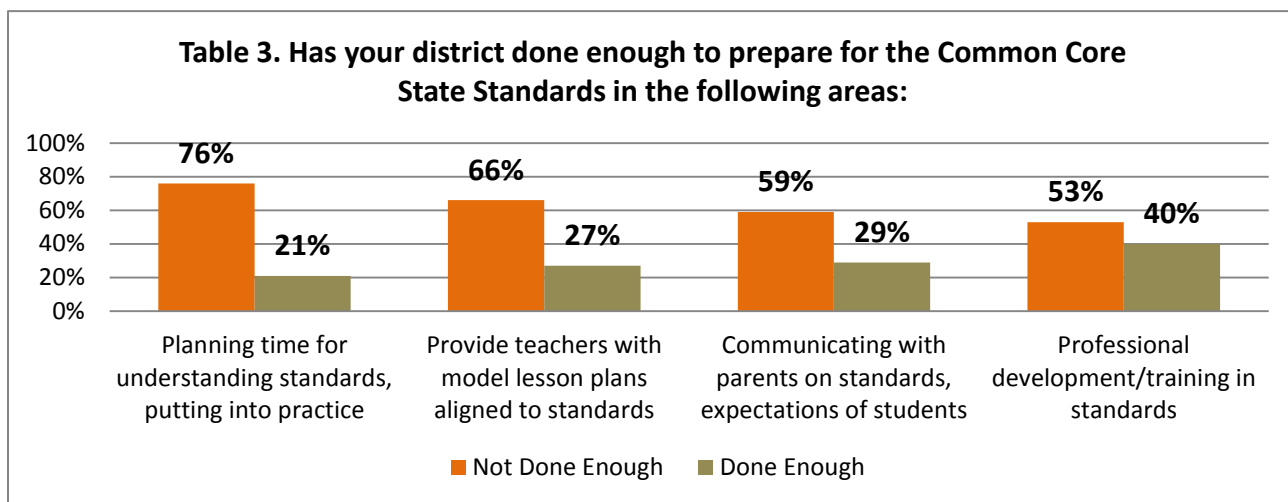
Concerns raised about the Common Core primarily revolve around implementation and cost.^{xv} Opponents of the Common Core are concerned with the standards’ lack of pilot testing before their introduction into classrooms across the country, as well as the ambitious timeline to introduce the standards and associated assessments into schools. Of the 45 states that have adopted the Common Core States Standards—many of whom adopted them as early as 2010—more than 60 percent expect to implement the Common Core by the 2013-2014 school year.^{xvi} Despite an aggressive timeline, a 2013 survey of states that have adopted the standards found that a majority have completed implementation plans for professional development (36), curriculum guides or instructional materials (29), or teacher-evaluation systems (29).^{xvii}

Additionally, the costs associated with the new assessments, as well as the implementation of the assessments and tying Common Core assessments to teacher and school accountability systems have been causes for concern.^{xviii} A March 2013 American Federation of Teachers (AFT) survey of teachers found that 73 percent “worry that rushing into new assessments means that testing and test prep, not teaching and learning, will be the focus of implementation” and 83 percent favor “establish[ing] a moratorium on high-stakes consequences for students, teachers, and schools until the Common Core standards and related assessments are fully in use for one year.”^{xix}

Is Everyone Ready for the Common Core?

Districts and schools across the country are preparing to implement the Common Core, providing professional development and training for teachers and educators through lectures, conferences, and collaborative training sessions with colleagues and professional learning communities. However, the same AFT survey found that overall, teachers did not feel fully prepared or supported to teach the Common Core.^{xx} Close to 2 out of 5 teachers felt that their district was either “just somewhat” or “not prepared” to successfully implement the Common Core, more than three-quarters did not believe their district had done enough with regard to planning time for understanding the standards or putting the standards into practice, and more than half shared that they either had not received training on the Common Core or the training they received was inadequate.

Just as teachers believe that their districts can do more to help them prepare for the Common Core, they also believe that their districts should do more to help parents better understand what the Common Core is and what it means for their children. The AFT survey found that 59 percent of teachers surveyed said that their district had not done enough to communicate with parents on standards and expectations of students.^{xxi} Teachers’ observations seem to paint an accurate picture of the lack of familiarity parents, as well as the general public, have with the Common Core. PDK/Gallup’s 2013 poll found that 62 percent of Americans have never heard of the Common Core.^{xxii} Of public school parents who had heard of the Common Core, close to 1 in 4 shared that they were not knowledgeable about the standards.^{xxiii}



How Afterschool Can Help

A shared view that becomes evident when reviewing both sides of the Common Core debate is that the standards—which are already being implemented in schools—are an approach to education that requires additional support for teachers, schools and school districts to ensure that all students will meet its high expectations. Afterschool programs—many of which already focus on engaging students in hands-on learning experiences and long-term projects that require students to ask questions, dive deeper into content, experiment with concepts and think critically about problems—are an ideal partner to support teachers and schools in their work with the Common Core State Standards.^{xxiv}

Out-of-school time is a fitting and opportune chance to incorporate the Common Core principles and further build the skills and knowledge expected of students. While there are strong examples of schools and expanded learning programs collaborating on implementing Common Core, there is great untapped potential for future collaboration to ensure that students succeed under Common Core. In a survey of school principals, while a significant majority integrated and aligned school day practices with the Common Core, just 27 percent said that they connected the Common Core work with expanded learning opportunities in their school, and 26 percent shared that they used expanded learning opportunities to support Common Core implementation.^{xxv}

The Afterschool Field Takes Charge

Statewide afterschool networks are playing a lead role in reaching out to schools and teachers and are finding ways to align afterschool programming with the school day. For instance, the Rhode Island Afterschool Plus Alliance hosted information sessions and presentations about the Common Core for Rhode Island afterschool programs, including discussions of the many ways afterschool programs' work currently aligns with the Common Core, and worked with the Rhode Island Department of Education on joint professional development with school day teachers and afterschool program providers on the Common Core.^{xxvi}

The New Jersey School-Age Care Coalition (NJSACC) launched Supporting Student Success (s3), a pilot program that provided 10 afterschool programs with individualized guidance and technical assistance to better understand the Common Core and determine how the standards relate to their programs. In addition to working with New Jersey afterschool programs, NJSACC worked with local schools and identified areas where the school and afterschool programs could collaborate and further integrate the Common Core into afterschool program activities.^{xxvii} In New York, the New York State Afterschool Network (NYSAN) created a number of resources for afterschool program providers on the Common Core, including a document that outlines the various ways afterschool programs can more intentionally align their curriculum with the Common Core.^{xxviii}

“Many afterschool and summer learning programs are well positioned to support learning practices and conditions that accelerate the ‘habits of mind,’ which represent the capacities and practices students should exhibit while learning the Common Core...”

— Taliah Givens, Former Program Director, Council of Chief State School Officers

Afterschool Programs as an Ideal Space to Encourage Development of Habits of Mind

The afterschool field has long embraced an approach to learning that focuses on creating a highly engaging environment for students, and includes encouraging students to be active learners, to collaborate and communicate clearly with their peers, and to work in a low-stakes environment in which mistakes and failures are used as learning opportunities and as experiences to grow from and persevere through.^{xxix} Afterschool programs across the country have already found ways to incorporate the Common Core in an intentional and explicit manner into their curriculum, providing extra support to schools and teachers in a variety of key ways:

Focusing on high-needs students and delivering additional attention to those who may struggle with their school-day lessons.

L.A.C.E.R. (Literacy, Arts, Culture, Education and Recreation) Afterschool Programs in Hollywood, California, provides critical, free academic, artistic, recreational and supportive services to approximately 2,000 at-risk middle school students—90 percent of whom qualify for the federal free or reduced price lunch program. L.A.C.E.R. students, 45 percent of whom are limited English proficient, are able to take part in the program’s Word Wizard, a vocabulary game and competition that focuses on engaging and exciting kids about vocabulary, while simultaneously offering supplemental support in English language arts. Word Wizard does not focus solely on spelling, rather, students concentrate on learning the meaning of each word and mastering how to use words correctly in a sentence. L.A.C.E.R. also encourages their students to participate in writing and poetry workshops, essay writing contests, and a journal club to build on Word Wizard lessons and support overall academic success. Similar to the Common Core language standards, L.A.C.E.R. works to improve students’ language comprehension, and help students understand the relationship between words and word context. During the 2012-2013 school year, more than 9 in 10 students participating in the Word Wizard program improved their English grades by at least one grade point, 67 percent improved their word definition scores and students receiving a D or F grade decreased by 61 percent.

Offering customized lessons and individual attention to students during the out-of-school hours.

Raising Expectations in Atlanta, Georgia, is a youth development and prevention organization that over the course of just one year provides at least 385 hours of mentoring and personal development support, 270 hours of tutoring and academic support, and close to three dozen home and school visits to children in 3rd through 8th grade through the program’s Project D.R.E.A.M. (Developing Raised Expectations for Adolescent Minds). The Academic Tutorial Academy is a focal point of Project D.R.E.A.M. and provides individualized academic support to students in the program—which includes academic learning plans and education goals specific to each student. Student report cards, teacher input, test scores and the program’s own assessments of students are regularly evaluated and used to inform instruction for each student. Raising Expectations also employs a low student-teacher ratio of 2:1, giving much-needed personalized attention to students who come from low-income and underserved neighborhoods. Middle schoolers in Raising Expectations performed exceptionally well in English language arts, with more than 9 in 10 students meeting and/or exceeding expectations in reading and English language arts (95 percent and 91 percent, respectively). More than three-fourths of middle school students met and/or exceeded expectations in math. Additionally, during the 2012-2013 school year, 100 percent of Raising Expectations’ seniors graduated from high school and 93 percent of graduates enrolled in college.

“Zip codes might be great for sorting mail, but they should not determine the quality of a child’s education or success in the future workforce...With common standards and assessments, students, parents, and teachers will have a clear, consistent understanding of the skills necessary for students to succeed after high school and compete with peers across the state line and across the ocean.”

— Gov. Bob Wise, President, Alliance for Excellent Education

Focusing on supporting students' socio-emotional development and tying lessons to their personal interests.

Bridge the Gap College Prep's Afterschool Extended Learning Day Program (BTGCP) in Marin City, California, is located in a public housing development and provides comprehensive support to students from low-income families, many of whom struggle with food insecurity and housing instability. BTGCP works to engage their students and support their holistic development by tying academic enrichment to students' lives and their socio-emotional growth. In addition to basic academic skill-building in math and literacy, BTGCP connects 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. Similar to the Common Core's English language arts emphasis on actively taking part in conversations with peers, contributing clear and relevant information and ideas, analyzing and distilling ideas presented by others, and understanding other perspectives and cultures, BTGCP empowers their students by encouraging each student to share their stories, develops students' sense of self-awareness, and promotes tolerance and acceptance through group collaboration and listening. The program's student evaluation found that during the 2012-2013 school year approximately 40 percent of students in the program saw improvements in their GPA and all students who attended the program for the entire year demonstrated good behavior or improved behavior. Since the program began tracking their students in 2010, 100 percent of their students have graduated high school and 100 percent have been accepted into colleges or post-secondary institutions.

Using the challenge of competition and debate to build the habits of mind promoted by the Common Core.

The Baltimore Urban Debate League Middle School Competitive Debate Program (BUDL) in Baltimore, Maryland, prepares at-risk inner-city students for future success in college and career, serving more than 300 students in 17 low-income, urban public schools. Eighty-five percent of BUDL's students are low-income and one-fourth has special needs and/or disabilities. The afterschool program explicitly connects skills students develop in their debate program to the skills and habits of mind promoted by the Common Core, including critical thinking and valuing evidence. Leveraging the challenge and excitement of debate for students, BUDL works with students to develop arguments for both sides of an issue, research evidence to support their positions, develop deep content knowledge of subject matter, actively listen to the arguments presented by others, and evaluate and critique the merit of stances on subject matter. Middle school students in BUDL performed better on Maryland School Assessment tests than their peers who did not participate in the program. BUDL students' average reading score was 88 percent compared to 72 percent for non-participants and BUDL students' average math score was 79 percent compared to 62 percent for non-participating students. In 2012, 95 percent of BUDL's seniors attended college—35 percent were accepted into a 2-year college and 60 percent were accepted into a 4-year college.

Helping students get ahead of the curve and preparing them for the Next Generation Science Standards.

While the Common Core is limited to English language arts and math, the rationale behind Common Core has spurred the development of similar standards in other subject areas, such as the Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS). While the NGSS are newer and states are still

planning implementation, there are afterschool programs that are already aligning their programming with the NGSS. For example, the **Connecticut Pre-Engineering Program (CPEP)** in Middletown, Connecticut, offers science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) programming to approximately 1,500 students each year. Supporting the NGSS framework of standards of practice, the afterschool program encourages students to ask questions and define problems, develop models and test their theories, collect and organize data, draw conclusions, and communicate their findings and apply them to new situations. A CPEP evaluation of its program found a 60 percent increase in students indicating a desire to pursue a STEM career and 90 percent of students were accepted into a 2-year or 4-year college.

Conclusion

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 they are able to raise student achievement to meet the standards of the Common Core. Expanded learning 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.

Recognizing the importance of supporting a child academically, socially and emotionally, afterschool and summer learning programs have long valued a learning environment that reflects many of the themes emphasized by the Common Core, such as active learning, collaborative environments, projects that promote perseverance, and creative and critical thinking. Collaboration between schools and afterschool and summer programs will complement learning under the Common Core and can help prepare children for whatever their future may hold for them, and help them to thrive in all aspects of their life.

ⁱ OECD. (2013). *Strong Performers and Successful Reformers in Education: Lessons from PISA 2012 for the United States*. OECD Publishing. Retrieved from

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