

# Implementing the Common Core State Standards in California

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APRIL 2014

## SUMMARY

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS)—adopted in 2010—are similar to California’s current K–12 standards, but their emphasis on conceptual understanding and problem solving will require changes in classroom instruction. California’s transition to the CCSS has gotten off to a slow start. Survey data suggest that many teachers will deliver the new standards for the first time in 2014–15—the first year of CCSS-based testing. Like other states, California will probably see a drop in test scores under the new standards. But as the transition continues beyond 2014–15, the hope is that the new standards and tests will create incentives that lead to higher student achievement.

### THE COMMON CORE STANDARDS ARE CHANGING CALIFORNIA SCHOOLS

California is one of more than 40 states that have committed to using the Common Core State Standards, which were developed by the Council of Chief State School Officers and National Governor’s Association. Two multi-state consortia are developing tests based on the new standards; California joined the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC). While the standards cover mathematics and English in all grades, new assessments are being developed primarily for grades that must be tested under the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB).

California’s public schools have been following state-developed standards in mathematics, English, science, and history since the late 1990s. Starting in 2003, student performance was assessed using the California Standards Tests (CSTs). Until this year, tests in mathematics and English were administered in grades 2–11; science and history were tested in grades 9–11 and selected lower grades.

In 2010, the state opted to switch to CCSS starting in 2014–15, and in 2011 it joined the SBAC. To facilitate the transition to the new standards and tests, legislation passed in 2013 eliminated the CSTs in most grades and subjects. Instead, students will participate in pilot SBAC tests in spring 2014.<sup>1</sup> In 2014–15, SBAC tests will be administered in grades 3–8 and grade 11 in mathematics and English.

**The hope is that the new standards and tests will create incentives that lead to higher student achievement.**

An independent review found that California’s old standards are pretty similar to the CCSS.<sup>2</sup> The new standards cover fewer topics at each grade but require a deeper understanding than the old state standards. There are important differences, too. The new standards shift some material to different grades compared to California’s 1997 standards.<sup>3</sup> The CCSS also stress reading and understanding informational texts, whereas the 1997 standards put a greater emphasis on literature.<sup>4</sup> And the CCSS promote a

deeper understanding of mathematical concepts and the use of skills to solve practical problems. Teachers tend to be excited by the opportunities afforded by the CCSS but worried about the higher performance expectations—and some will need extra training to teach the high-level skills.<sup>5</sup>

Given these differences, it makes sense that the new tests will take a somewhat different approach than the CSTs. As the experience under NCLB shows, teachers respond to assessments—especially when they are attached to rewards and sanctions.<sup>6</sup> The new tests, in other words, will shape the way teachers implement the standards. The table below offers a comparison of the approaches taken by the CSTs and the SBAC tests. The sample SBAC question is more challenging in both content and form. First, it asks students to do a multi-step calculation

Supported with funding from the Evelyn and Walter Haas, Jr. Fund



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to determine the fraction of three sandwiches remaining for Oscar, whereas the CST involves one step. Second, students are required to write down the answer instead of choosing from among four possibilities. This makes it very difficult for students to guess the correct answer.

A COMPARISON OF 4TH GRADE MATHEMATICS TEST QUESTIONS	
Sample CST question	Sample SBAC question
<p>Megan bought a package of 10 erasers. If 3 of the erasers are pink, what fraction of the number of erasers in this package is pink?</p> <p>A. <math>\frac{3}{7}</math>            B. <math>\frac{1}{3}</math>            C. <math>\frac{3}{10}</math>            D. <math>\frac{1}{10}</math></p>	<p>Five friends ordered 3 large sandwiches.</p> <p>James ate <math>\frac{3}{4}</math> of a sandwich.            Katya ate <math>\frac{1}{4}</math> of a sandwich.            Ramon ate <math>\frac{3}{4}</math> of a sandwich.            Sienna ate <math>\frac{2}{4}</math> of a sandwich.</p> <p>How much sandwich is left for Oscar?</p>

SOURCES: California Department of Education; Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium.

The SBAC tests will depart from California’s past assessments in two other ways. First, SBAC tests will be administered electronically. (Districts that are not ready to administer testing on computers or electronic tablets will have access to “paper and pencil” tests for up to three years.) Second, SBAC tests are “adaptive,” meaning that the difficulty of each question is adjusted according to how a student fared on previous questions. Adaptive testing is designed to zero in on what each student does and does not know—while also generating comparable proficiency scores for all students.

States that are further along in the implementation process have found that the switch to new standards and tests significantly reduced student scores. Kentucky and New York have already tested students on the CCSS and experienced sharply lower levels of student proficiency.<sup>7</sup> Californians should expect something similar when the SBAC tests are first administered. Lower performance is one cost of retooling standards and testing. If successful, the changes will create long-term incentives to develop curricula and teaching methods that promote the deeper learning sought by the CCSS.

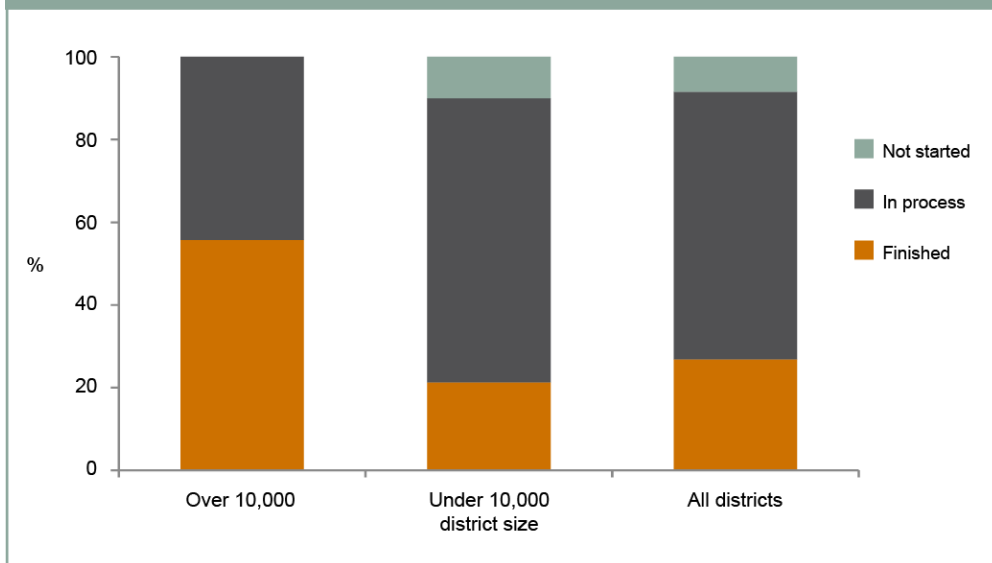
### **MOST DISTRICTS ARE IN THE EARLY STAGES OF IMPLEMENTATION**

Implementing CCSS requires districts to make changes primarily in two areas. The first is curriculum and instruction: educators need to become familiar with the new standards, purchase new or adapt existing instructional materials, develop new curricula, and train teachers. In the second area, technology, districts must ensure that school buildings have the necessary Internet capabilities and hardware to administer SBAC tests.

Data from two surveys show that implementation of CCSS was at an early stage in many districts. A spring 2013 CDE survey asked districts to describe their progress in preparing for the new standards. Only a quarter of districts reported the completion of a plan for the transition, and most of the rest were still developing local plans for implementing the new standards. The CDE survey found sharp differences between large and small districts. More than half of districts with more than 10,000 students had completed planning, whereas only 21 percent of districts with fewer than 10,000 students had finished the planning process.<sup>8</sup>

**The new standards cover fewer topics at each grade but require a deeper understanding than the old state standards.**

### DISTRICT CCSS IMPLEMENTATION PLANNING STATUS, SPRING 2013

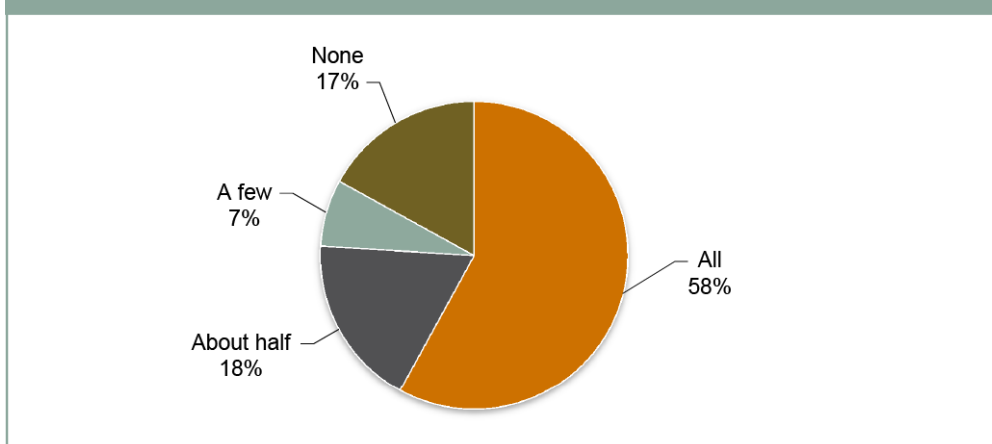


SOURCE: California Department of Education, Superintendent's Common Core Systems Implementation Survey Report: Summary Report for Spring 2013 Administration and Comparison of Fall 2012 and Spring 2013 Administrations, Sacramento, California, October 2013.

NOTE: There were 380 survey respondents—38 percent of all districts in California.

A survey conducted in fall 2013 by the California County Superintendents Educational Services Association (CCSESA) obtained similar results.<sup>9</sup> More than half of districts reported that all teachers had examined the standards in detail. Fewer than one in five reported that all teachers had completed the planning and lesson designs needed to teach the new standards. While most other districts reported that some teachers were working on these implementation steps, more than 15 percent of districts said that teachers had not started CCSS lesson planning. The report concludes that while substantial planning and implementation activities are occurring in most districts, classroom teaching based on the new standards is much less common. While the CDE data suggest that larger districts are further along than the smaller ones, the CCSESA findings make clear that many teachers will be implementing the new standards for the first time in 2014–15, the same year testing based on the CCSS begins.<sup>10</sup>

### IN MANY DISTRICTS NOT ALL TEACHERS HAVE EXAMINED CCSS IN ENGLISH



SOURCE: California County Superintendents Educational Services Association, "Common Core State Standards: Statewide Summary of Results from the Implementation Survey," November 6, 2013.

NOTE: There were 818 survey respondents—about 80 percent of all districts in California.

As they grapple with curriculum and instruction challenges, districts must also prepare for computer-based testing. They need to ensure that schools have enough computers or tablets that can access SBAC assessments. A spring 2013 CDE survey indicates that about two-thirds of districts believe they will be ready for computer-based testing. About a quarter were somewhat confident they would be ready, and the remaining 6 percent were not confident. Many districts reported a need for additional equipment and expanded connectivity, training, staffing, and facilities. In this area, larger districts were less likely to think they would be ready for testing (59%).<sup>11</sup>

### **IMPLEMENTATION WILL CONTINUE WELL PAST 2014–15**

Our description of CCSS implementation at the local level does not fully capture the broad range of planning, training, and curriculum development that has occurred in the past few years. In addition, the state provided \$1.25 billion in one-time funding for CCSS transition activities as part of the 2013–14 budget. The additional funds will support the purchase of staff training, materials, and computer purchases. Revising standards is a major undertaking because they create the foundation for so many other practices and policies. At the local level, implementation remains a work in progress, with a significant proportion of districts still in the early stages. It seems likely that the standards will have only a tentative foothold in California schools in 2014–15, and that student scores on the new tests will be relatively low. This means that CCSS implementation will continue over the longer run. Districts will need to help teachers develop an in-depth understanding of the standards and improve instructional approaches to help students master the more complex concepts and skills.

The state, too, needs a long-run strategy for helping districts implement the new standards. CCSS and other state policy changes have altered the CDE's ability to influence district practices. For instance, the SBAC has assumed responsibility for state tests, and CDE regulation of instructional materials has been undercut by the national market for textbooks that CCSS has spawned. In our companion report, *California's Transition to the Common Core State Standards: The State's Role in Local Capacity Building*, we describe the impact of these changes on CDE and outline some ways the state can serve as a hub for information and technical assistance for the administrators and teachers who educate California's students.

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### **NOTES**

The authors would like to acknowledge the time and assistance of Tom Adams of the California Department of Education, Karen Kidwell of the Kentucky Department of Education, Emily Barton of the Tennessee Department of Education, and Mary Cahill of the New York State Education Department. The report benefited from the comments and feedback of Eric McGhee, Ashley Jochim, Hans Johnson, Dave Leshner, and Lynette Ubois. Any errors are our own.

1. Assembly Bill 484 (Chapter 489, Statutes of 2013, by Assembly member Bonilla).
2. William H. Schmidt and Richard T. Houang, "Curricular Coherence and the Common Core State Standards for Mathematics," *Educational Researcher* (American Educational Research Association, 2012).
3. Sacramento County Office of Education, "Analysis of California Mathematics Standards to Common Core Standards" (2010).
4. California Department of Education, "A Look at Kindergarten through Grade 6 in California Public Schools: Transitioning to the Common Core State Standards in English Language Arts and Mathematics" (2011).
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8. California Department of Education, Superintendent's Common Core Systems Implementation Survey Report: Summary Report for Spring 2013 Administration and Comparison of Fall 2012 and Spring 2013 Administrations, (October 2013).
9. California County Superintendents Educational Services Association, *Common Core State Standards Implementation Survey: Statewide Summary of Results* November 6, 2013.

10. A March 2014 survey by the Association of California School Administrators suggests that local implementation will continue in 2014–15, reporting that many districts feel more funding is needed for coaching, collaboration time, technology purchases, teacher training, and instructional materials.
11. California Department of Education, “Implementing the Smarter Balanced Assessments in 2014–15: Findings from the California Department of Education Technology Preparedness Survey” (October 2013). The survey was administered largely before AB 484 was amended to require districts to participate in pilot testing in 2014.

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