

Quick Definition

Setting rigorous academic standards, measuring student progress against those standards, and holding students and educators accountable for meeting them are the essential components of the standards-based reform movement.

A standard is something established by authority as a rule for the measure of quantity, weight, extent, value or quality. A standard defines the broad expectations for an area of knowledge in a given domain and may include an expectation of the degree to which a student expresses his or her understanding of that knowledge.¹

Curriculum refers to the content of an instructional program. It often includes a description of expected learner outcomes, the sequence of lessons and activities used in the classroom, and a plan for assessment. A curriculum is typically designed to meet the specifications of academic standards.

¹ Georgia Department of Education. “Georgia Performance Standards (GPS) Glossary.” Retrieved from <http://www.doe.k12.ga.us>.

Relevancy to Georgia

As required by the state's Quality Basic Education Act of 1985, Georgia must maintain a curriculum that specifies what students are expected to know in each subject and grade. The state's standardized tests must be aligned with that curriculum. The 1985 law led to the creation of the Quality Core Curriculum (QCC), Georgia's statewide public school curriculum. In January 2002, a Phi Delta Kappa audit concluded that the QCC not only lacked depth and could not be covered in a reasonable amount of time, but it did not even meet national standards. Based primarily on the results of the curriculum audit, the State Board of Education and then State Superintendent Kathy Cox embarked upon the task of completely overhauling Georgia's curricula framework. The new Georgia Performance Standards (GPS) were developed over many months of work by teacher teams, state and national experts, and consultants, considering standards from high performing states and nations.

In an effort to prepare Georgia's students to compete nationally and globally, Georgia again decided to revamp its curriculum standards. In July 2010, Georgia became one of now 46 states to adopt the Common Core Standards in mathematics and English language arts. Former Governor Perdue was selected by the National Governors Association to co-chair the initiative. The new Common Core Georgia Performance Standards (CCGPS) "represent a common sense next step" from the current Georgia Performance Standards (GPS).² The CCGPS include much of the current GPS, suggesting a cohesive transition for teachers and students.

The Common Core Standards are beneficial to Georgia because they allow for consistent academic expectations and measures of student achievement across states. They will also save taxpayer dollars by using common assessments, textbooks, and other resources developed throughout the country. Georgia began training teachers and principals on the CCGPS during the 2011-12 school year, with classroom implementation beginning in 2012-13. The first common assessments are projected to begin in 2014-15.

Georgia's High School Graduation Requirements

In conjunction with national policy trends toward higher academic expectations and the implementation of the Georgia Performance Standards, Georgia's State Board of Education updated the graduation requirements in September 2007. Georgia's curriculum and graduation requirements will help students graduate from high school with the knowledge and skills they need to be successful in college and the workplace

² Georgia Department of Education, Common Core Georgia Performance Standards. Retrieved August 12, 2011 from <http://www.gadoe.org>.

Table 1. Academic Requirements for Georgia High School Diploma

Course	Number of Credits Required
English/Language Arts	4
Mathematics	4
Science	4
Social Studies	3
Health/Physical Education	1
Foreign Language/CTAE/Fine Arts	3*
Additional Electives	4
Total Credits	23

* Students planning to enter or transfer into a University System of Georgia institution must take two units of the same foreign language.

Source: Georgia Department of Education. "Georgia Graduation Rule Revision." Retrieved from <http://www.doe.k12.ga.us>.

In addition to changes in the course requirements, Georgia's graduation rule also altered the state's high school diploma system. The previous "tiered" diploma system has been eliminated. Before the implementation of the current rule, students could earn one of four diplomas, each with different requirements: College Preparatory, College Preparatory with Distinction, Technology/Career and Technology/Career with Distinction. The current rule has established one common set of requirements for all students, yet allows for various options to meet those requirements, including advanced courses such as Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, and post-secondary options and career-oriented courses offered under the Career, Technical and Agricultural Education (CTAE) program division

The National Perspective

The debate over what should be taught in public schools is as old as schools themselves. In 1892 the National Education Association appointed a “Committee of Ten” to study school curriculum. The committee decided that all students should master the same, rigorous curriculum. By 1918, the position shifted to a focus on the “whole child”, encouraging different curriculums for different students.³ Over the course of the century, reform efforts vacillated between variations of these two perspectives.

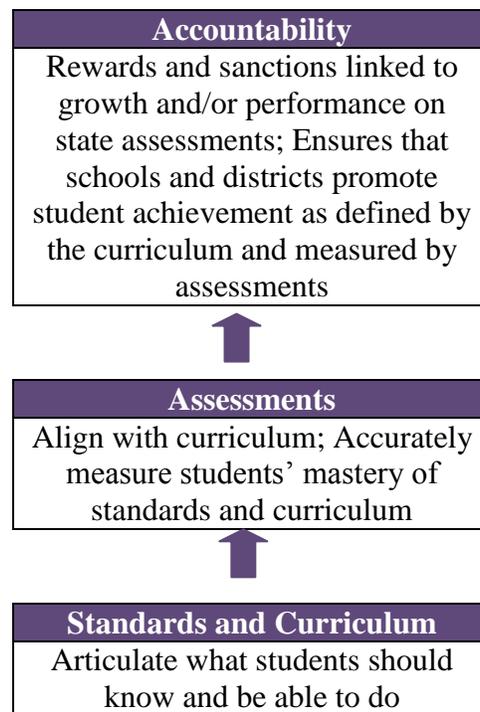
Over 100 years after the meeting of the Committee of Ten, the debate continues. Yet, of all the education reforms that have emerged over the past 15 years, none has been more powerful and enduring than the push to establish challenging academic standards for students. In the 1990s, almost all states established statewide content standard documents that set out the statewide goals for what students should know and be able to do in core academic subjects in K-12 education.⁴ Today, every state has academic standards that articulate the core knowledge and skills students should learn from kindergarten through grade 12. These standards play an important role in states’ education systems. They guide the development of curriculum and instruction; they provide the foundational framework for student assessments; and they serve as the basis of accountability systems that reward and sanction schools according to their academic performance.⁵ Figure 1 illustrates the theory of standards-based education.

³ PBS. “School: The Story of American Public Education. Timeline: Testing and Standards Controversy.” Retrieved August 19, 2011 from <http://www.pbs.org>.

⁴ Toye, C., Blank, R., Sanders, N., & Williams, A. “Key State Education Policies on PK-12 Education: 2006.” Council of Chief State School Officers, 2007.

⁵ Achieve, Inc. “Closing the Expectations Gap 2008.” February 2008.

Figure 1. Standards-based Reform: Aligning Standards, Assessments, and Accountability



Source: A+ Education Foundation, “Accountability, Assessments and Standards,” *Alabama Education Policy Primer: A Guide to Understanding K-12 Schools*.

Common Standards Movement

In spring 2009, governors and state commissioners of education from across the country committed to joining a state-led process to develop a common core of state standards in English language arts and mathematics for grades K-12. The Common Core State Standards Initiative is jointly led by the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices (NGA Center) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) in partnership with Achieve, ACT, and the College Board.

In March 2010, the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) released the first official public draft of the K-12 Common Core State Standards. The standards define the knowledge and skills that will prepare K-12 students for college and the workforce. Currently, the standards only cover English-language arts and mathematics, but once these standards are developed, the CCSSO plans to create standards for science and possibly other areas as well. State and international standards inform the Common Core standards so that students are prepared to compete both nationally and globally. Many policy makers are in favor of national standards because they provide clear, consistent, rigorous expectations and they allow for accurate comparisons of progress and achievement across

the country.⁶ States' participation in the adoption of these standards is voluntary, and the creation of these standards has been a state-led movement. Currently, 46 states have adopted the Common Core Standards.

The current federal administration heavily supports common standards, giving favorable consideration to those states that incorporated a plan for common standards in their Race to the Top Applications. Although there are concerns that common standards will lead to the formation of a national curriculum and federal control over education, the final authority on how to educate students still lies with the states.

⁶ Common Core State Standards Initiative. Retrieved April 21, 2010 from <http://www.corestandards.org>.

Research Tells Us

The move towards national standards helps to address concerns about whether or not states' standards are adequately preparing students for future success. Supporters argue that those nations that consistently outperform the U.S. on standardized tests all have national standards. On the other hand, many countries that perform worse than the U.S. have national standards as well.⁷

The results of one study show that the content of a student's education has a greater impact than the method of instruction or any accountability system. Nations that consistently perform better than the U.S. on the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)—an international assessment of reading, science, math, and problem solving given to 15 year-old students—offer their students a comprehensive education heavily focused on liberal arts and science instruction. This study further argues that the increased focus on basic skills may be detrimental to U.S. students.⁸

A recent study comparing the Common Core standards with current standards in 31 states found that there is considerable difference in the content of the Common Core and state standards. The Common Core is also different from the standards of high performing nations and they are different from what teachers in the U.S. currently teach. The study determined that, on average, the Common Core standards in math are more focused than states' standards, but they are not more focused in English language arts and reading (ELAR). For both math and ELAR, the Common Core is more focused than the standards in certain states, and less focused than the standards in others.⁹

⁷ McCluskey, N. "Behind the Curtain: Assessing the Case for National Curriculum Standards." *Policy Analysis*, 661. Cato Institute, February 17, 2010.

⁸ Common Core. "Why We're Behind: What Top Nations Teach Their Students but We Don't." 2009. Retrieved from <http://www.commoncore.org>.

⁹ Porter, A., McMaken, J., Hwang, J., & Yang, R. "Common Core Standards: The New U.S. Intended Curriculum." *Educational Researcher*, 40(3), 103-116, April 2011. Content analysis of math standards was conducted for 27 states and content analysis for English language arts standards was conducted for 24 states.

For More Information

Achieve, Inc.
www.achieve.org

Achieve partners with states in improving academic standards, graduation requirements, assessments, and accountability.

Common Core State Standards Initiative
www.corestandards.org

The Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSSI) seeks to formulate a clear, consistent framework for academic standards across states that will prepare students for college and careers.

Georgia Performance Standards
www.georgiastandards.org

GeorgiaStandards.org (GSO) is an interactive website designed to enhance and support teaching and student learning based on the Georgia Performance Standards. It includes information on the recently adopted Common Core Georgia Performance Standards (CCGPS).