

Common Core Standards & Talented Learners

Penny Britton Kolloff, PhD, has considerable expertise in assessing how educational standards relate to gifted learners. Most recently, she spent time exploring the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in English/Language Arts.

From Outcome-based Education to *A Nation at Risk*, *Goals 2000* and *No Child Left Behind*, educational standards have been a part of our national dialogue in education for at least three decades. Movements have come and gone, and now there is a new standards initiative – the *Common Core State Standards*.

What are the Common Core State Standards?

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) are a set of standards designed to bring cohesiveness to disparate sets of state standards. This national approach seeks to ensure that all students, regardless of where they go to school, are adequately prepared



for college or career when they graduate from high school. Introduced in 2010, the CCSS have now been adopted by nearly all states.

The Common Core State Standards began as an initiative by two organizations, the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and the Council of Chief State School Officers. Together with teachers, administrators and other experts, these organizations worked to provide a set of commonly accepted goals so that educators, parents and students know what knowledge and skills are expected at each grade level.

Among the concerns that prompted this latest standards effort were the perceived lack of rigor in critical areas of the school curriculum and the need for a clearly delineated set of expectations that would enable educators to plan for high-level student outcomes. Creators of the standards have responded to criticisms that students leave school unprepared for the demands of college or career and are not prepared to be competitive on a global scale.

Thus far, standards have been developed in two areas: English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects (more commonly referred to as English/Language Arts) and Mathematics. Science standards are currently being created. Once a state adopts the standards, educators work at the state, district and school levels to examine and revise their programs and curricula in light of the CCSS.

What do the CCSS mean for academically gifted learners?

Careful reading of the English/Language Arts standards reveals only two references to academically advanced students:

- 1) An acknowledgment that the documents do not address expectations

DIRECTOR'S MESSAGE

Setting the Bar High Enough

We are raising the bar for education across the nation. But are we raising it high enough for the highest achievers?

Nearly every state has adopted the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) with the hope of elevating student learning. The new standards stress rigor and depth of knowledge and skill in



two key content areas, English/Language Arts and Mathematics, to prepare students for college and career opportunities.

Overall, the CCSS have potential for benefiting gifted learners. But how can that potential be realized? What role must gifted educators and parents play in implementing the standards effectively? What is the connection between the CCSS and gifted programming standards, and how should the two sets of standards be aligned?

Whether you are already immersed in discussions on the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) or seeing the term for the first time, it is incumbent on us all to learn about them in order to advocate for gifted learners.

As we all know, talented students consistently exceed even the loftiest standards. Working together, we can ensure that the CCSS, while good starting points, do not overshadow the need for differentiation and gifted education services. As a field, we need to support the implementation of CCSS and ensure that our voices are heard. Let's not limit the height of the bar.

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for students who meet the standards before the completion of secondary school, but simply suggest that advanced work should be available.

- 2) Confirmation that the standards do not define strategies or materials for those students who are performing well above grade level.

Is it possible that these students will be overlooked?

Even without clear direction from the CCSS, schools and districts must determine how to meet the needs of their advanced students while addressing the new standards. Educators of gifted learners have a long history of effective methods. In mathematics, these include placing students in higher level courses as well as pretesting, compacting and adjusting the pace of instruction, to name several strategies.

Accommodation is more challenging in areas of English/Language Arts since coursework is not as clearly sequential as it is in mathematics. Fortunately, though, the English/Language Arts standards documents provide specific examples of literary titles, performance tasks and a body of research that supports the CCSS, with particular stress on the need for increased rigor and complexity. They provide a wealth of information to promote higher-level engagement for verbally talented learners. The lists of titles with grade placements provide a tool by which to compare current reading selections with the expected levels of the new standards and suggest appropriate revisions to the current curriculum.

A number of teachers and parents with whom I have spoken have looked at these lists and been surprised by the prominence of classic literature and the emphasis on informational materials such as non-fiction books and articles. Some have observed that books previously on reading lists for gifted and honors programs now appear as examples appropriate for all learners.

Observed overlap of what previously constituted curriculum for gifted learners and what is now expected of all learners raises the question of how programs and classes for gifted students adapt to the Common Core State Standards. As schools

and districts align their expectations for students and their curriculum with the standards, it is essential that there be collaboration between teachers in regular classroom settings and those who teach advanced learners. Implementation of the more rigorous CCSS does not reduce or eliminate the need for qualitatively different education for those who are more advanced. Effective teaching practices such as preassessment, compacting, flexible grouping, accelerated content, pace and complexity, all of which have been in place for decades, continue to be appropriate.

What is new is the need to study the CCSS carefully and apply them to talented learners. This requires that the discussion include all educators and that curricular adjustments be applied to all learners. The

standards documents may serve as excellent resources for adding breadth and depth to the existing curriculum. The National Association for Gifted Children website offers more information, including answers to frequently asked questions, about the impact of CCSS on gifted education.

How are schools preparing to implement the CCSS?

Once the standards are adopted at a state level, responsibility shifts to the schools and districts. Timelines call for implementation by 2014-2015, which means that schools are currently in the process of aligning and implementing curriculum to meet the standards.

Schools and districts generally form working groups to match the current con-

Content vs. Practice — Making Sense of the Standards

Amidst all the talk about the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), the National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) has released their own set of standards — the *PreK – Grade 12 Gifted Programming Standards*. While the CCSS present *what* students should be learning, the gifted programming standards address *how* educators can develop high-level curriculum, create dynamic learning environments and design effective assessment strategies. In other words, the CCSS are to content what the gifted programming standards are to practice.

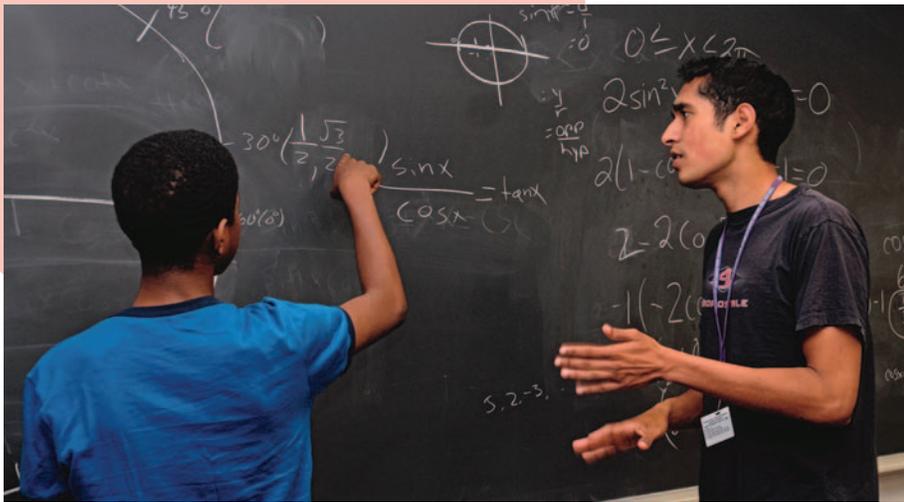
The gifted programming standards cover the following six areas: **learning and development, assessment, curriculum planning and instruction, learning environments, programming and professional development.**

Educators can use the gifted programming standards to ensure they are following best practices, while parents can consider them a tool when choosing a school or evaluating whether a school's teachers and administrators are doing all that can be done to meet gifted children's needs. To accompany the standards, NAGC has created a list of **resources** and **guiding questions** that parents and educators will find valuable, as well.

These new gifted programming standards, which have a strong **research base**, replace the initial program standards, which were developed in 1998. Within the new principles of practice, there is an increased focus on diversity and collaboration. Additionally, the new standards use student outcomes for goals, rather than teacher practices, which allows educators to measure change and impact. Used in conjunction with the CCSS, the PreK-Grade 12 Gifted Programming Standards can provide a strong foundation for a high-quality, high-impact education for gifted students.

For more resources, visit www.nagc.org and www.ctd.northwestern.edu/ctd/resources/pubs/summer12talent/#resources.●





tent and skills with the standards. Where necessary, the placement of content and skills is adjusted, and new lessons, units and performance tasks are created.

Those who work with advanced learners must play a role in CCSS discussion and planning to guarantee that the high level of the standards is applied to lessons for gifted students and to ensure they continue to be challenged appropriately and in qualitatively different ways. If, for example, implementing the new standards means that all students will now read *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* in grade 8, verbally talented students should be reading more challenging literature at that grade level. The leveled text examples included in the standards documents may offer guidance.

The full realization of the Common Core State Standards includes the development of standardized assessments for English/Language Arts and Mathematics. The assessments are being developed by two consortia of states. Upon adoption of the standards, each state has elected to work with one or both of the consortia as they proceed to implementation.

The process of moving from earlier state standards to the CCSS is incremental and requires planning, experimentation, assessment and revision on the way to final implementation. At each point in the process, administrators and teachers of all students will evaluate the outcomes and, if necessary, make adjustments in response to student performance.

What role do parents have?

As districts and schools begin to discuss their plans for the Common Core State Standards, parents of high ability students should become aware of the plans and acquaint themselves with these initiatives. Familiarity with the standards will prepare parents to understand local implementation plans, ask questions about how the standards affect the education of their children and participate in the dialogue surrounding them. Many schools and districts will invite conversation and hold meetings to provide information at various points in the extended process, and it is essential that parents of high ability students be engaged in these meetings and offer their perspectives.

Once the CCSS have been implemented in a school district, parents of gifted learners may want to gauge student growth relative to previous years and compare the expectations for these students with those of students in regular education programs under the new standards. Although test scores are not generally disaggregated by ability level, parents may wish to inquire about test performance of talented learners in order to assess the impact of curricular changes on those students.

For parents who choose to be closely involved in their children's educational development, the National Parent Teacher Association offers a Parents' Guide to Success. This resource contains parent-

friendly information about the English/Language Arts and Mathematics standards, suggestions for reinforcing skills at home and advice for discussing student progress with teachers. The documents on this site are available in both English and Spanish.

On the Common Core State Standards site for English/Language Arts, the lists of literary text examples by grade level may help parents suggest reading materials to their children. I must interject a personal story here. When I was in high school, my mother was concerned that assigned reading in my English courses was not rigorous or broad enough, so she created a summer reading list for me for three years. Although I resented it immensely at the time, I credit her with making sure that I read *A Tale of Two Cities*, *David Copperfield*, *Rebecca*, a book by Richard Halliburton the title of which I cannot recall (sorry, Mom) and a number of additional books that certainly enriched my knowledge base and prepared me more adequately for college.

Challenge and Opportunity

Common Core State Standards will shape K–12 education for years. The goals are impressive and, if achieved, will ensure that when students across the country exit our educational system, they have the requisite knowledge and skills for college and career. The needs of talented learners must not be overlooked, however, as schools concentrate efforts to raise the level of learning for all. The voices of educators and parents are necessary to maintain focus on appropriate expectation and education for those with high potential and high achievement.

Dr. Penny Kolloff is past president of the Illinois Association for Gifted Children, retired faculty member at the University of Illinois, former board member of the National Association for Gifted Children and serves on advisory boards for the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, the Gifted Education Resource Institute at Purdue University and Center for Talent Development. ●



NEWS, DATES & OTHER IMPORTANT CTD INFORMATION

Northwestern University's Midwest Academic Talent Search (NUMATS)

gives students in grades 3 through 9 access to tests ordinarily used for high school placement (EXPLORE®) and college entrance (ACT® & SAT®) to help them demonstrate their academic abilities. After testing, the NUMATS Toolbox provides extensive information and resources for families and educators. Registration for the 2012-2013 school year is scheduled to open in July.

Gifted LearningLinks (GLL) nine-week session of online enrichment courses for students in K - grade 8 starts on September 15. Credit bearing Honors, Honors Elective and AP® courses begin on the 15th of every month.

Saturday Enrichment Program (SEP) fills your child's Saturdays with fun and excitement! The eight-week fall session begins on September 29 for students age 4 through grade 9. Locations: Evanston, Chicago, Naperville, and Palatine, Illinois.

Accelerated Weekend Experience

(AWE) programs for students in grades 5 through 8 are offered in several locations. Explore fascinating topics in science, technology or engineering with an expert in the field. Visit www.ctd.northwestern.edu/sep/program/awe/.

Fall Conference: Educators are invited to register now for the CTD Fall Conference on Saturday, October 13 in Evanston. **Dr. Joyce VanTassel-Baska, Professor Emerita at College of William & Mary** will discuss Common Core State Standards.

Upcoming State Gifted Conferences:

Wisconsin Association for Talented and Gifted, October 11-12, 2012 in Sheboygan. More information: www.watg.org.

Ohio Association for Gifted Children, October 14-16, 2012 in Columbus. More information: www.oagc.com. ●

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