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# ASQ Higher Education Brief

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## Linked Learning

**Common Core State Standards connect subject areas and bridge the gap between high school and college**

Q&A by Megan Schmidt with Mary Ledbetter, [K-12 Language Arts Consultant](#)

Forty four of 50 U.S. states have adopted the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). CCSS were designed to bring national learning goals to U.S. classrooms to ensure that all students receive a similar, high-quality K-12 education that is on par with education systems in top-performing countries. CCSS aim to improve student learning by increasing rigor in subjects such as math and language arts, and by promoting critical thinking and communication skills. The goal of CCSS is to prepare students for higher education and to grow a workforce with the knowledge and skills needed to help America keep pace globally.

Supporters of CCSS believe that better student preparation in K-12 will affect the higher education system. CCSS may reduce college course remediation, increase college retention and admission rates, and even influence whether SAT and ACT exams remain the gold standard in college readiness tests.

Of course, any change in higher education depends on effective implementation at the K-12 level. Many states are struggling with aligning classrooms with CCSS, and many are questioning whether common national standards in K-12 education are even necessary.

In this month's edition of the *Higher Education Brief* (HEB), [Mary Ellen Ledbetter](#), an award-winning educator and presenter and consultant for the [Bureau of Education and Research](#), shares her views on how CCSS can transform K-12 and higher education. She also provides experience-based advice on how teachers, administrators and leaders can make CCSS implementation a success.



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## **HEB: What are your thoughts on national standards in education?**

It would be safe to assume that almost all school districts struggle with educational standards every year. Committees often are established to assess the big picture of academic achievement for their students and community. After agreeing on the criteria students should be held accountable to, subcommittees representing content areas decide the goals of each grading period. The next step, naturally, is to agree on the specific skills that will be most beneficial in achieving success. Vertical alignment of K-12 is a necessary consideration, which often results in more subcommittees. There will be discussions—usually heated ones—about the materials most teachers will find congruent with their own strategies and methods. Everyone wants to avoid the assessment aspect: Will each class have its own test, or will there be a schoolwide or districtwide benchmark to serve as an indicator of how students will fare on the state exam?

This process has been in place forever and has become more important with the emergence of state assessments and addendum programs. There have always been proponents who rely on the final curriculum for guidance and detractors who close their doors and do as they please. Developing national standards in education is no different—it's just on a larger scale. Are such standards necessary? Ponder these facts:

- A global report by education firm Pearson found that the [United States ranks 17<sup>th</sup> in the world](#) for education.
- In response to the 2012 Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) findings, U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan called the [U.S. scores “a picture of educational stagnation”](#) and urged that they “serve as a wake-up call against educational complacency and low expectations.”



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- A report by Harvard University's Program on Education Policy and Governance estimated that students in [Chile, Brazil and Latvia are improving three times faster than American students](#). Students in Hong Kong, Germany, Poland Columbia and others are improving at twice the rate. What gains U.S. students showed in recent years are "hardly remarkable by world standards," according to the report.

National standards are more rigorous and better prepare students for college and workforce. Students must understand that they can become better versions of themselves. It is education's job to break down that complex concept into manageable parts that can be followed by schools nationwide. There are incremental steps that can be taken as well as trial-and-error collaboration among states.

Holding students and teachers more accountable for a progression of skills in all content areas should be at the forefront of any movement aimed at meeting expectations of a progressive 21<sup>st</sup> century society.

## **HEB: Is there any evidence that stands out to you that shows better standards will raise student achievement?**

Educators, parents and students are waiting for evidence that CCSS can raise student achievement. Because CCSS is relatively new, the interpretation of the curricula in each subject and the strategies teachers can use are being debated. The varied and numerous forms that assessments can take have rendered data collection questionable.

Interim evidence is available from the System for [Teacher and Student Advancement \(TAP\)](#), overseen by the nonprofit National Institute for Excellence in Teaching. TAP provide a complementary



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instructional focus to the student-focused CCSS. When instructional goals of TAP standards are examined, the relationship to CCSS is evident. TAP has effectively raised student achievement, improved the quality of instruction and increased the ability of high-need schools.

## **HEB: Do you think the implementation of CCSS? will help close the achievement gap?**

CCSS can affect teaching in a positive way after educators understand expectations and realize that they already have been teaching most of the skills required for proficiency. A few concerns expressed during seminars I've attended have emphasized textual support, persuasive writing in all content areas and more in-depth discussions on a peer-to-peer and teacher-to-student basis. A concentration on questions that require higher-level thinking might alter some strategies currently used in classrooms. Because synthesis and application have long been the gateway to the mastery of any concept, that change is for the better. The use of real-life connections can be a powerful tool to motivate students.

## **HEB: What are the essential elements to successful CCSS implementation?**

The essential elements of CCSS implementation are basically the same guidelines teachers have always relied on and will continue to use. If educators highlighted their most successful strategies to develop students' mastery of skills, collectively they would have CCSS implementation outlined. If such a list were made, the following considerations would be on it:

- Keep students on target to review, practice and understand the connections from one subject to another.



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- Instruct students on how to speak and write about lessons learned as well as how to state their opinions about information. It is imperative that students realize that whatever is spoken or written must be backed either by strong arguments citing specific examples from textual material or more in-depth research that occurs when lessons are used as springboards to gain a broader knowledge of a subject.
- Aid students in developing an academic vocabulary to deepen the meaning of their reading and to give credence to their content-specific speaking or writing.
- Make a common practice of connecting real-world situations to content material. Without that element, lessons become isolated and aren't viewed in any relevant context.
- Although more emphasis is being placed on informational texts, higher-level extension assignments could ask students to compare a literary piece, for example, to similar works in different content areas.
- Encourage student collaboration by wording questions about textual reading in a way that engages students in discourse with their peers and teachers.

## **HEB: What role does staff buy-in and leadership support play?**

When any new concept is introduced to a workforce, its success depends on employee buy-in. Leaders and employers usually present the change or modification of operations by outlining what is expected and how the goals will be achieved. They discuss why it is being implemented and how employees will be supported through the transition. The same holds true for staff buy-in for CCSS. Teachers must believe they can be successful in implementing CCSS. This will occur when they obtain knowledge and skills through staff development and have time allocated for work, planning and problem solving.



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Leadership support should come in various forms. Many studies have agreed on the importance of the principal in establishing a strong school culture. A 2009 study by New Leaders for New Schools concluded that “more than half of a school’s impact on student gains can be attributed to both principal and teacher effectiveness—with principals accounting for 25% and teachers 33% of the effect.” Some necessary steps to ensure effective CCSS implementation include:

- Commit to a cross-content integration of literacy to achieve more rigorous course content, which includes speaking, listening, reading and writing.
- Brainstorm ways to involve parents and the community in CCSS. Examples include back to school letters, newsletters throughout the year citing examples of exemplary work and parents’ meetings.
- Provide ongoing training for staff.
- Counter negative comments (such as not having enough time) with specific, positive examples of strategies.
- Monitor student progress throughout the year to have meaningful discussions with teachers about successes and potential improvements.
- Agree as a school or district with the CCSS belief that instead of knowing the answer, students now must be able to create the answer.

## **HEB: What is higher education’s role in promoting CCSS?**

The most important point to consider is that CCSS should be more far-reaching than its implementation in K-12. A program with the objective of helping students become more proficient at the college level should not be an end game, but a beginning and inspiration for students to become more inquisitive. A [recent publication from the New American Foundation](#) argues that colleges and universities should



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become involved in CCSS to ensure the program does more than what is intended. This statement taken alone would imply that the job of universities would be to monitor CCSS program success and failure. Lindsey Tepe, author of [“Common Core Goes to College,”](#) is an advocate of what could be referred to as CCSS extension. In other words, extension is not viewing CCSS as a checkpoint for students’ college readiness but one more step on the rungs of higher education. Aligning the standards required for higher education will pave a smoother transition to college-level course work.

Another area of alignment could be in the area of assessing students’ abilities in content areas as a means to determine their placement in college courses. CCSS could replace or offer information about college readiness. Tepe said the SATs are being revised and that ACT has adopted a longitudinal assessment that aligns with CCSS. [The American Council on Education agrees](#) that higher education must decide how to use CCSS assessments to determine mastery of content domains in college admissions and placement. A byproduct of more discourse between the two levels of education would almost certainly lead to a lessening of the number of college students needing remedial courses—an embarrassing oxymoron. A common goal that extends to higher education would be the very essence of vertical alignment, a process that should be ongoing and reassessed through the years.