

# The California Collaborative on District Reform

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July 9, 2010

Honorable Arnold Schwarzenegger  
Governor of the State of California  
Sacramento, California 95814

Dear Governor Schwarzenegger:

By the end of this month, California must make a decision that could improve the foundation of our education system and lead to better learning outcomes for all students in the state. We refer to the pending decision about whether we will join the growing number of states to adopt the Common Core Standards in English-language arts and mathematics recently released by the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers. The California Collaborative on District Reform—a collection of district superintendents from across the state, researchers, funders, support providers, advocates, and policymakers—met as a group on June 29<sup>th</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup> to review the Common Core Standards in depth, examine their relationship to our state's current standards, and discuss what their adoption would mean for student learning in California. After previous study and this intensive two-day meeting, the group decided collectively to encourage the adoption of the Common Core Standards. To this end, we **urge you to support the adoption of the Common Core Standards by the August 2<sup>nd</sup> deadline.**

We have not come to this decision lightly. Based on experience and after much discussion and review of the standards themselves, we believe that the Common Core Standards represent the next step in California's journey to build a rigorous and effective education system. Our current standards, which have long been recognized for their rigor, have provided a solid foundation for learning in our state for more than a decade. Indeed, these standards established the groundwork for curriculum and instruction that has moved our schools to a stronger focus on student learning and underscored California's role as an early leader in the national standards-based reform movement.

However, in the 13 years since the initial adoption of our mathematics and English-language arts standards, California educators and the field as a whole have learned much about how students learn, what content is key to prepare students for an increasingly global economy, and how to approach and implement standards-based reform. We believe that the Common Core Standards represent the next crucial step in ensuring California's education system once again leads the way in quality and rigor.

Why do we support the adoption of the Common Core? These standards are crucial to California's educational progress for several reasons:

- **The Common Core creates a better roadmap for success in California's strong standards-based system.** California's current standards, while rigorous,

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*The California Collaborative on District Reform ([cacollaborative@air.org](mailto:cacollaborative@air.org)) joins researchers, practitioners, policymakers, and funders in ongoing, evidence-based dialogue and collaborative activity to improve instruction and student learning for all students in California's urban school systems.*

are a set of discrete concepts that may, or may not, ensure a student is fully prepared for success upon graduation. The Common Core Standards were built upon a clear determination of what students need to know by the end of high school in order to be college- and career-ready. Based on this explicit endpoint, the Common Core presents a conceptually strong and developmentally appropriate progression of the standards across grades. This progression of concepts will allow teachers at all grade levels to more clearly understand how their work fits into a student's progress toward secondary and post-secondary success and will foster greater opportunities for teacher collaboration.

- **The Common Core Standards are as rigorous as California's current standards.** By starting with anchor standards rooted in what it takes to be college- and career-ready and then linking the standards across all grades back to that outcome, the Common Core maintains the rigorous expectations of California's current standards and accountability system. In addition, by benchmarking the Common Core to what other leading industrial nations expect of their students and their schools, the Common Core raises the bar to better prepare our young people for a global economy.
- **The Common Core allows teachers to explore key concepts with students more deeply to ensure students truly understand the material they need to succeed.** The Common Core represents fewer specific standards, at greater depth, than California's current set of standards. This does not mean that we expect students to learn less, but rather, to understand important concepts much more deeply. Teachers will have the opportunity to revisit standards with which their students struggle and, with more time to explore these concepts, will also have more flexibility in how to approach the material.
- **The Common Core Standards in mathematics provide clear steps across the grades to prepare students for success in algebra, a gateway course for both college and career.** These progressions can help students develop a deeper understanding of key concepts—like fractions—that are the fundamental building blocks for subsequent success in algebra. Particularly important for California, implementation of the Common Core will enable our students to succeed in algebra in 8<sup>th</sup> grade, while also creating a path to improve our overall algebra proficiency regardless of what grade students first take algebra. This flexibility would allow the state and districts to continue to work on this issue in a way that best suits students' needs.
- **The Common Core would strengthen our ability to ensure that *all* California students have equitable access to a rigorous college- and career-ready curriculum.** California has the nation's largest and most diverse student population. The Common Core provides a stronger access point for all students by providing a clear, coherent, and rigorous path to postsecondary success. For the students of color, English learners, and students with disabilities and who have historically been underserved by our education system, the Common Core provides a true pathway through the grades to college and career readiness and success.
- **By participating in the Common Core, we not only have the opportunity to strengthen the heart of our education system but also gain the advantage of participating in a consortium with other states that have adopted the Common Core.** To date, 23 states have adopted or indicated their intention to adopt the Common Core. By August 2<sup>nd</sup>, many more states will likely sign on. Sharing common standards across these states will provide a foundation for developing common, robust ways to measure progress (thus strengthening accountability and school improvement), for pooling intellectual and material resources for

curriculum and assessment development (providing an important benefit in fiscally constrained times), and for encouraging stronger and more widespread professional communities to address perplexing problems in teaching practice and student learning.

Do we feel the Common Core Standards are perfect? No, of course not. But we as a state cannot become stagnant while others strive to attain greatness. And adoption of these standards reflects the next logical step in the continuous improvement of our education system.

We recognize that there may be some important constructs that Californians believe are either missing from the Common Core or should be introduced at different grade levels. The Common Core allows for this by including room for states to augment the standards by up to 15 percent. Restricting additions ensures that we maintain the integrity, focus, and coherence of the Common Core while allowing for flexibility and experimentation. As tempting as it may be to start adding in elements from California's current standards to the Common Core, we recommend a two-stage process. We urge the state to adopt the Common Core by August 2nd, but **delay final decisions about augmentation of the standards to a later date**. This delay would allow the Academic Standards Commission to continue its important work in a less hurried environment, to obtain input at the local level, and to take the time to ensure the standards reflect the needs of our state's students. Furthermore, we **urge the state to keep any expansion of the Common Core to a minimum** so that the Common Core in California will in fact allow deeper exploration of fewer content strands.

Finally, as with any large-scale reform, simply adopting the reform will not lead to change in and of itself. We, as a state, would face key decisions about the implementation of the Common Core, including creating a feasible timeline for district adoption of the standards, providing supports for the creation of both instructional materials and assessments that are aligned to the new standards, and allowing for cross-district collaboration and learning in this process. Serious and thoughtful conversations will need to take place over the next year and beyond to ensure this process lays a strong foundation for improvement for all districts. While this work will not be easy, there is also a tremendous opportunity for cross-district collaboration, as districts work together to develop resources and supports for the transition to new standards. This type of cross-district collaboration would also assist with implementation by building infrastructure and capacity within the state, while responding to our current fiscal limitations.

Of course, planning for the implementation of these important and rigorous standards is moot if the State Board of Education does not adopt the Common Core. We must take advantage of the opportunity laid before us now, as it is not clear when we will again have this chance. Therefore, we again urge you to support the adoption of Common Core Standards by August 2<sup>nd</sup> to ensure California remains an exemplar of rigorous standards that challenge our students to learn at the highest level.

Sincerely,



Jennifer O'Day, Chair  
on behalf of the California Collaborative on District Reform

cc: Bonnie Reiss, Secretary of Education  
Kathy Radtkey-Gaither, Undersecretary of Education  
Jack O'Connell, State Superintendent for Public Instruction  
Geno Flores, Chief Deputy Superintendent of Public Instruction

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