

# Introduction and National Findings

This study examines the English language arts (ELA) and mathematics content standards of the fifty states and the District of Columbia, and compares their rigor and clarity to those recently published by the Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSSI). The bulk of this report provides detailed reviews of 104 sets of standards (fifty states plus the District of Columbia, plus the Common Core standards times two—for ELA and math). In the next few pages, we provide a brief overview of the study’s methodology and our national findings.

Please note that this report focuses solely on the quality of the standards themselves, not on whether they are being effectively implemented in the schools or driving improvements in student achievement. We are critiquing the cookbook, so to speak, not the dish itself.

## Methodology

Our approach, as in past Fordham reviews of state standards, is straightforward. We gather the most recent versions of academic standards from all the states and ask trusted content experts to apply a set of criteria to them. We’ve already described (in the *Foreword*) our reviewers and their updated criteria for 2010. (More on this can be found in the Appendices.) It’s worth saying a few words about the standards documents themselves.

Identifying a state’s ELA or mathematics standards is no easy task, because there is very little state-to-state consistency about what materials constitute the essential academic “standards.” In some states, a concise list of expectations suffices. Elsewhere, states deliberately pair standards with assessment frameworks. And in a few places, standards and assessment frameworks are accompanied by a third set of documents—curriculum frameworks—that are meant to be viewed together to paint the complete picture of what students should know and be able to do.

What’s more, states use this terminology interchangeably. In some places, traditional standards documents are called “curriculum frameworks” or even “assessment frameworks.” Adding to the confusion, standards documents can be slippery. In many states, they are live documents, posted clearly on websites, but subject to change—sometimes often and without notice.

Because our purpose was to analyze each state’s most recently adopted standards and compare them to the Common Core, it was vital to navigate this confusion. So, beginning in spring 2009, Fordham staff searched state department of education websites and downloaded all of the relevant and up-to-date standards documents posted. (Twice during the study period, most recently in May 2010, Fordham staff re-checked available standards, updating states that had adopted new standards since the initial collection, and making every effort to review each state’s most-recently adopted standards.) Then, we contacted content-area experts in every state department of education to verify the accuracy of what we had found.

This exhaustive search yielded, for some states, hundreds of pages worth of documents, consisting of everything from standards to assessment materials to curriculum guides. All of these documents were sent to our expert reviewers for their consideration.

Working together with the Fordham team, our expert reviewers—Sheila Byrd Carmichael for ELA, and W. Stephen Wilson and Gabrielle Martino for math—identified the following broad guidelines to determine which of those documents would be reviewed as part of this standards analysis:

1. The documents are readily available or distributed to teachers for use in the classroom;
2. The documents are meant to guide instruction and not simply test preparation or assessment; and
3. The documents are used to define student outcomes and are not focused primarily on guiding pedagogy.

These were the documents we examined, as designated in each of the state reviews. To the best of our knowledge, they were current as of May 2010.

Our content experts then applied a set of criteria to the standards. (The criteria themselves are available in Appendix A.) They assigned two scores to each set of standards: one for “Content and Rigor,” the other for “Clarity and Specificity.” Content and Rigor is scored on a 0-7 point scale while Clarity and Specificity is scored on a 0-3 point scale.

To get full points for Content and Rigor, standards had to be top-notch in terms of the content chosen. Furthermore:

The coverage of the subject is suitable, good decisions have been made about what topics to include, and nothing of importance has been overlooked. (No more than 5 percent of the content outlined in the subject-specific content expectations is missing.)

In ELA, for example, the standards would include specific expectations for reading excellent literary and non-literary texts. And in mathematics, for example, the standards would expect high school geometry students to understand proofs, including the Pythagorean Theorem.

To get full points for Clarity and Specificity, standards had to be coherent, clear, and well organized. Furthermore:

The scope and sequence of the material is apparent and sensible. They provide solid guidance to users (students, teachers, curriculum directors, test developers, textbook writers, etc.) about the content knowledge and skills required to do well on the exam. The right level of detail is provided. The document(s) are written in prose that the general public can understand and are mostly free from jargon. The standards describe things that are measurable (i.e., can lead to observable, comparable results across students and schools). The standards as a whole clearly illustrate the growth expected through the grades.

Scores for Content and Rigor and Clarity and Specificity were added together and translated into letter grades as follows:

**Table 4: Grading Scale**

Grade	Points
A	10
A-	9
B+	8
B	7
C	5 or 6
D	3 or 4
F	0, 1, or 2

One major objective of this study was to make fair comparisons between the CCSSI standards and those currently in place in each of the states. We decided that our criteria and grading scale were not sensitive enough to declare, with confidence, that a set of standards earning just one point more than another set was clearly superior. So we adopted the following decision rule: To be considered “clearly superior,” standards had to best another set of standards by at least two points.

As a result, the Common Core ELA standards, which earned eight points, or a B-plus, are “clearly inferior” to state standards that earned a ten (or a straight A), “clearly superior” to those that earned a six or lower (a C, D, or F), and “too close to call” for those that earned seven, eight, or nine points (B, B-plus, or A-minus). And the Common Core math standards, which earned nine points, or A-minus, are “clearly superior” to those that earned a seven or lower (a B, C, D, or F), and “too close to call” for those that earned eight, nine, or ten points (B-plus, A-minus, or A). (In math, no state’s standards were “clearly superior” to CCSSI.)

## Findings

The Common Core standards are clearly superior to those in place in the vast majority of states. But there are some notable exceptions, as detailed in Tables 5 and 6.

**Table 5: 2010 Grades for English Language Arts Standards**

Jurisdiction	2010 Grade
California	A
District of Columbia	A
Indiana	A
Massachusetts	A-
Tennessee	A-
Texas	A-
<b>Common Core</b>	<b>B+</b>
Colorado	B+
Georgia	B+
Louisiana	B+
Oklahoma	B+
Virginia	B+
Alabama	B
Arizona	B
Florida	B
Hawaii	C
Idaho	C
Kansas	C
Maine	C
Maryland	C
Minnesota	C
Nevada	C
New Hampshire	C
New Jersey	C
New Mexico	C
New York	C
Ohio	C
Oregon	C
South Dakota	C
Utah	C
Washington	C
Arkansas	D
Connecticut	D
Illinois	D
Kentucky	D
Michigan	D
Mississippi	D
Missouri	D
North Carolina	D
North Dakota	D
Pennsylvania	D
Rhode Island	D
South Carolina	D
Vermont	D



States whose ELA standards are **“clearly superior”** compared to the Common Core.



States whose ELA standards are **“too close to call”** compared to the Common Core.



States whose ELA standards are **“clearly inferior”** compared to the Common Core.

Jurisdiction	2010 Grade
West Virginia	D
Wisconsin	D
Wyoming	D
Alaska	F
Delaware	F
Iowa	F
Montana	F
Nebraska	F



States whose ELA standards are **“clearly inferior”** compared to the Common Core.

**Table 6: 2010 Grades for State and Common Core Mathematics Standards**

Jurisdiction	2010 Grade
California	A
D.C.	A
Florida	A
Indiana	A
Washington	A
<b>Common Core</b>	<b>A-</b>
Georgia	A-
Michigan	A-
Utah	A-
Alabama	B+
Massachusetts	B+
Oklahoma	B+
Oregon	B+
Arizona	B
Delaware	B
Idaho	B
Minnesota	B
New York	B
West Virginia	B
Arkansas	C
Colorado	C
Hawaii	C
Iowa	C
Louisiana	C
Maine	C
Mississippi	C
Nebraska	C
Nevada	C
New Jersey	C
New Mexico	C
North Dakota	C
Ohio	C



States whose math standards are **“too close to call”** compared to the Common Core.



States whose math standards are **“clearly inferior”** compared to the Common Core.

Jurisdiction	2010 Grade
South Carolina	C
South Dakota	C
Tennessee	C
Texas	C
Virginia	C
Alaska	D
Connecticut	D
Illinois	D
Kentucky	D
Maryland	D
Missouri	D
New Hampshire	D
North Carolina	D
Rhode Island	D
Kansas	F
Montana	F
Pennsylvania	F
Vermont	F
Wisconsin	F
Wyoming	F



States whose math standards are **“clearly inferior”** compared to the Common Core.