

# Common Core State Standards and Implications for Special Populations

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The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) were released in June 2010 and aim to align wide-ranging K–12 state education standards into one unified set. As of October 2013, 45 states, the District of Columbia, and four territories have adopted the CCSS. Politicians, educators, community stakeholders, and business leaders from both political parties are engaged in CCSS implementation to ensure that students in every state receive an education of equitable quality and that, upon high school graduation, each student is prepared for either college or the workforce.

This brief explores the potential impact of the CCSS on special populations and gives examples of implementation targeting these populations, followed by recommendations and questions for policymakers to consider. For the purposes of this brief, the special populations discussed include students with disabilities, Native American students, and English language learners (ELLs).

## Students with Disabilities

To be effective, the CCSS should address the academic needs of students with disabilities, such as those deemed eligible under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which identifies students with the presence of disabling conditions that significantly hinder their abilities to benefit from general education (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004).

IDEA requires that students with disabilities have an Individualized Education Program (IEP). IEPs outline measurable, standards-based education goals that appropriately reflect the student's skill level and academic capacities (National Governors Association [NGA], 2013). Because IEPs also include critical life skills such as self-efficacy, critical thinking, and social and emotional skills that are not addressed by the CCSS (NGA, 2013), it is difficult to create IEPs that are meaningful to the student and still focus on CCSS-aligned academic goals.

Teachers working with special needs students report that often the academic goals outlined by the CCSS cannot be adequately or appropriately incorporated into an IEP (Samuels, 2013). Even though the CCSS allow for a multitude of diverse and non-traditional instruction methods that may help students reach the goals outlined by the CCSS (Bertrando, 2013), teachers of students with special needs claim it is impracticable to focus on reading and mathematics and overlook that some students have not yet mastered basic life skills. They assert that life skills need to be addressed first or in conjunction with academic goals (Samuels, 2013).

However, some CCSS do emphasize critical thinking and evidenced-based decision making that can be translated into life skills. For example, reading the weather report helps one determine if an umbrella will be needed. Professional development programs can help teachers think about the standards in a way that makes it easier to see CCSS-aligned elements in their current instruction and thus balance the academic and life skills goals that IEPs aim to achieve (Samuels, 2013).

CCSS implementation will also require a transition to CCSS-aligned assessments for students with disabilities. Most students with disabilities will take the same assessments as general education students. Depending on the IEP, some students may require accommodations such as extra

### Maine

In order to meet the expectation that all students will earn a proficiency-based diploma by 2018, the Maine Department of Education (MDE) developed an evidence-based, best practice professional development model. The model is designed to help align CCSS implementation with the practices of general education and special education teachers (Riley, 2013).

State, local, and regional leaders collaborated to build statewide implementation teams, identify best practices, align feedback, and share resources. Their model also includes compliance monitoring, capacity building, and professional development (Riley, 2013). The professional development component is carried out through four action steps that aim to integrate the CCSS and special education.

The four action steps outline 1) how teachers will become acquainted with students' strengths and weaknesses related to the CCSS; 2) what resources and supports the IEP goals require; 3) what professional development opportunities and resources will be needed; and 4) how to unpack the CCSS to make it more accessible to parents, teachers, and other stakeholders. The plan also requires teachers to outline how they will address the needs of students who are not at the CCSS-prescribed skill level and how their supplemental goals will still meet the rigor of the standards (Riley, 2013).

time or use of a calculator, while others may take a more appropriate alternative assessment (Frizzell, 2013). Currently, states have the option of using alternative assessments based on alternative achievement standards for the 1–2 percent of students with the most significant cognitive disabilities. States that have received ESEA waivers are required to eliminate the use of modified assessments after the 2013–2014 school year and develop their own accountability systems (Frizzell, 2013).

The two CCSS testing consortia, Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortia and Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers, will be used by states with waivers to assess the majority of students with disabilities. Both testing consortia have developed assessments specifically designed to accommodate students' disabilities with custom-tailored components that align with a student's IEP (Frizzell, 2013). The U.S. Department of Education created two additional CCSS-aligned testing consortia, the National Center and State Collaborative and Dynamic Learning Maps, to help assess students with the most significant cognitive disabilities. It will be determined by IEP teams whether a student participates in these alternate assessments (Frizzell, 2013).

### **Recommendations**

- Create IEPs that consist of supplemental goals or integrated goals that still meet the rigor of the CCSS.
- Consider how CCSS-aligned academic skills can be translated into life skills.
- Promote collaboration between general education teachers and special education specialists who can help assess students' academic skill level and identify strengths and weaknesses.
- Develop CCSS-aligned lesson plans and provide diversified instruction methods that coincide with students' identified strengths and weaknesses.
- Continually evaluate the issues and challenges being met in the classroom and provide relevant professional development opportunities and/or technical assistance to teachers working with special education students.
- Provide teachers with the necessary resources, best practices, and professional networks to allow them to better meet the needs of special education students.

### **Native American Students**

The Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) adopted the CCSS and plans for full implementation in all BIE-funded schools by the 2014–2015 school year (Bureau of Indian Education [BIE], 2012).

Although several federal policies are in place to support Native education—such as the Native American Languages Act, the Esther Martinez Native American Languages Preservation Act, and Title VII of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act—the decision to adopt the CCSS was controversial among Native American leaders who worried that the standards would inhibit studies focused on native culture, history, and language (Butrymowicz, 2013).<sup>1</sup> Because teachers of Native American students worry that the CCSS will inhibit traditional lessons and teaching methods, they are seeking creative ways to weave and infuse Native culture throughout CCSS-aligned curricula (Butrymowicz, 2013). To help quell these concerns, the National Indian Education Association has prioritized research around implementing CCSS in a way that respects Native culture (National Indian Education Association, 2013).

Despite the opposition, the BIE and many state-level officials view the CCSS as an opportunity to accelerate the academic success of Native American students and as a step toward narrowing the achievement gap (Breiseth, 2013; Butrymowicz, 2013). Native American students are among the most disadvantaged in the country, with high levels of poverty, high rates of grade repetition, and

#### **South Dakota**

The Oceti Sakowin Project is a result of the 2007 Indian Education Act that mandated the development of course content in South Dakota American Indian history and culture (South Dakota Office of Indian Education [SDOIE], 2012). The project vision is that encouraging Native American students to embrace their identity will promote cultural understanding among non-Native students and teachers and this will ultimately address the Native American achievement gap (WoLakota Project, 2013).

The project will create a curriculum that is based on Oceti Sakowin Essential Understandings (OSEU) and Oceti Sakowin Core Concepts (OSCC)—both developed by educators of Native American students, Native American content experts, and state Department of Education staff—and that ultimately blends traditional teaching methods and lesson content with CCSS teaching methods and lesson content. The project's curriculum will be accessible online to serve as an example to other communities of how tribal standards, state standards, and CCSS can be taught together (SDOIE, 2012).

To ensure effective implementation of these blended standards, trained mentor-teachers will be paired with new teachers. Mentor-teachers will promote cultural sensitivity and will support the embedding of OSEU and OSCC into practice in a manner that complements the CCSS (WoLakota Project, 2013).

<sup>1</sup> For more information on the policies affecting Native American education, please see McREL's policy brief, *Native Language Education: Addressing the Interests of Special Populations within U.S. Federal Policy*. <http://ow.ly/rB1dQ>

lower graduation rates than all other racial groups (Butrymowicz, 2013).

Less funding to BIE-funded schools may also affect CCSS implementation. Many schools serving Native students have already lost \$60 million in Impact Aid due to federal sequestration (Morales, 2013). These cuts resulted in larger class sizes, fewer teachers, poorer facilities, and fewer buses to transport students to schools serving large geographic regions (Morales, 2013). These issues may make it increasingly difficult to focus attention and energy on the new standards and may reduce the effectiveness of CCSS implementation.

### ***Recommendations***

- Understand the cultural and linguistic priorities of Native populations and protect these priorities during CCSS implementation by incorporating culturally sensitive and relevant lessons into CCSS-aligned curriculum.
- Identify traditional Native teaching methods and how these methods can be maintained in CCSS-aligned curriculum.
- Provide professional training on cultural sensitivity to non-Native teachers working with Native American students.
- Share best practices and create a supportive professional network for teachers working in Native American schools.

## **English Language Learners (ELLs)**

Tailoring CCSS-aligned curricula to serve ELL students entails addressing the academic needs of a diverse population. Sufficient mastery of language and content knowledge will be required in order for ELLs to adequately perform at the CCSS academic level and to be successful in corresponding assessments (Dolge, 2013).

The CCSS require greater language skills for students than most states' former standards (Dolge, 2013). The standards for mathematics and English language arts ask students to demonstrate comprehension of lesson material through written evaluations, analysis, and constructive argument (Common Core State Standards Initiative [CCSSI], 2013). In order to adequately do so, students will need a strong grasp of the language in which these tasks are carried out.

When English is not a student's first language or when a different language is spoken at home, this could impact the student's word choice, syntax, organizational patterns, and even logic patterns (Fenner, 2013). These differences may be slight but still significant enough to preclude the student from achieving CCSS skill levels.

Teachers of ELLs may aid in students' success by assessing how culture impacts the way in which they approach logical equations, construct argumentative and narrative texts, analyze, or perform other CCSS-related tasks. This may require working with ELL specialists to create collaborative lesson plans and to diversify or scaffold instruction (Fenner, 2013). Teachers can further aid all of their students by ensuring they have access to relevant academic material and are using these resources in a manner that advances their skill level (Dolge, 2013).

### ***Recommendations***

- Promote collaboration between general education teachers and ELL specialists to design and implement CCSS-aligned lessons and activities that are appropriate for ELL student's academic skill level and language acquisition.
- Provide professional development to help teachers identify opportunities for meaningful linguistic activities that correlate with one or more of the CCSS standards.
- Allow teachers flexibility to interpret CCSS standards and deliver CCSS-aligned lessons in diversified ways.
- Continually evaluate the issues and challenges being met in the classroom and provide relevant professional development opportunities

### **Commonwealth of Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI)**

CNMI classrooms contain a high proportion of ELLs or others "in need of English language development." To aid in the success of these students, teachers focused on providing ELLs with opportunities to have meaningful discussions and verbal collaborations with other students. McREL developed an academic language framework to help general education teachers discover and provide their students with those opportunities.

The framework helps general education teachers create an activity around a Common Core standard. Then, with the assistance of ELL specialists, teachers can identify ways to make that activity linguistically meaningful. ELL specialists can help general education teachers realize what the student's vocabulary, grammar, and sentence structure skill level needs to be in order for the student to successfully participate in the activity.

To ensure the availability of ELL specialists, districts have selected a cohort of general education teachers to receive ELL training and certification. The certification process is administered by CNMI Public School System and uses research-based best practices surrounding the linguistic demands of CCSS and addresses how to practically apply them in CNMI classrooms.

General education teachers and ELL specialists are encouraged to continually discuss the academic language accompanying the content of CCSS-aligned lessons and to collaborate through coaching, modeling, and co-teaching in the classroom.

and/or technical assistance to teachers working with ELLs.

- Ensure students have access to relevant academic material and are using these resources meaningfully.

## Limitations of CCSS and Implications for Working with Special Populations

The CCSS' goals have several embedded assumptions that create implications for special populations. For example, the foundational standards in writing skills only address composition—spelling, writing letters, or constructing sentences are not mentioned. The absence of these lower-level skills assumes that students either already know how to demonstrate these skills or that these skills are easily learned and therefore do not need to be included within the context of achieving higher-level skills. Because higher-level goals can never be achieved unless the student acquires the basics first (RTI Action Network, 2013), this presents a disconnect between what is expected of the students and what may be practical and achievable. It then falls on the practitioner to integrate the CCSS into lessons that actually conform to students' capacities (RTI Action Network, 2013).

Teachers working with special populations may need to be especially sensitive to students who are not at the CCSS-expected academic skill level by spending extra time with these students to establish basic-level academic capacities. Studies have shown that when foundational skills are addressed, future lessons are significantly more successful (RTI Action Network, 2013).

### Conclusion

The goal of the CCSS is to address the academic needs of all students and prepare them for college and the workforce. For the standards to be effective, teachers also need to be effective. Focused attention on special populations as well as CCSS implementation guidance and professional training for teachers requires thoughtful consideration. While CCSS allow teachers to diversify instruction and to structure lessons around students' strengths and weaknesses, this effort can also be enhanced through collaboration between general education and special instruction teachers.

Policy Issue	Questions for Policymakers to Consider
Developing a CCSS-aligned curriculum for special populations	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What evidence-based best practices are cited in the development and implementation of the curriculum?</li> <li>2. What consideration has been given to the time and capacity needed to design individualized lesson plans for special populations? Do these plans include supplemental goals to meet the rigor of CCSS?</li> <li>3. What resources need to be available to ensure all students have adequate support to meet CCSS? What resources currently exist?</li> <li>4. What challenges do special populations face in the district, school, or classroom? What professional development opportunities and resources can be made available to address those challenges?</li> </ol>
Preparing teachers for teaching CCSS-aligned curriculum to special populations	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. With respect to special populations, what expertise is currently available? Are experts collaborating with those directly working with special populations?</li> <li>2. Are teachers currently able to accurately assess the skill level of special population students?</li> <li>3. What evidence-based best practices and/or successful examples can be used to guide teacher instruction and lesson planning?</li> <li>4. What professional networks are currently available? Are teachers sharing information on instruction, student learning, and student data?</li> </ol>
Supporting cultural values for Native American students and ELLs	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What are the cultural and linguistic priorities of those populations?</li> <li>2. Can CCSS implementation support dual-language learning environments? Are there sufficient resources and personnel to support dual-language instructional approaches? What are the pros and cons of such a learning environment?</li> <li>3. How can CCSS-aligned lessons benefit from or be improved upon from multi-cultural perspectives?</li> </ol>

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