

# Academic Standards Review

## A checklist to support State Education Agencies

States have different reasoning, timelines, and governing agencies that determine why and when academic standards are revised. Regardless, a state review of academic standards involves many components and steps—a process that can take months or years. This guide is not meant to be prescriptive or all-encompassing but to provide a checklist for state education leaders to consider when developing the various components of an academic standards review process.

### State academic content standards

The federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) requires states to develop challenging academic content standards.<sup>1</sup> These standards specify the knowledge and skills students are expected to acquire along key benchmarks throughout their K–12 education to be prepared for success in college and/or career upon high school graduation. Under ESSA, states are responsible for developing standards that reflect their individual needs and contexts. The U.S. Department of Education cannot mandate state standards.

#### Standards vs. curriculum

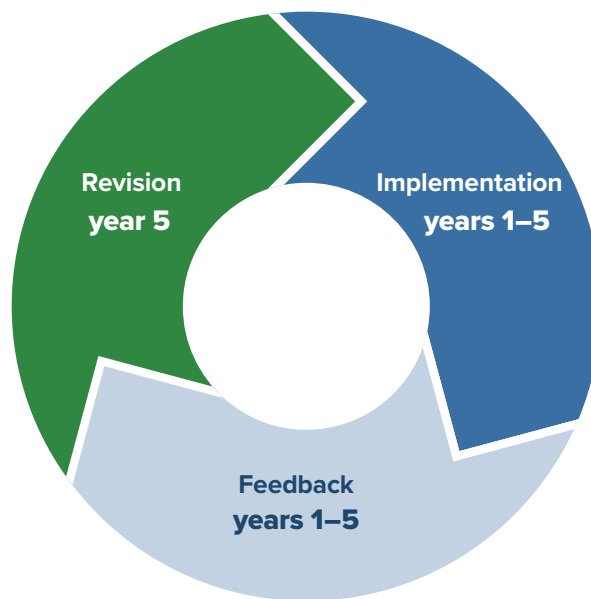
Standards are expectations for what students are to *know and be able to do* as a result of their education. Curriculum is how and with what materials the individual educational entity (e.g., schools/districts) will teach the knowledge and skills. Standards do not define actions, only outcomes.<sup>2</sup>



## Reviewing and revising academic standards

Most states have timelines to review standards consistently (e.g., every 5–7 years). States may or may not have a stated process for review (see [NC](#), [TX](#), and [OH](#)) but in general a review process will involve a synthesis of public feedback, review of content-related research, and groups of stakeholders who incorporate feedback and evidence to complete revisions. These components may occur within the year of the review or over a longer period. For example, North Carolina conceptualizes the entire 5–7 year span as an ongoing continuous improvement cycle that includes implementation, feedback, and revision (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1. Example Standards 5-Year Revision Cycle<sup>3</sup>**



Regardless of a state’s process or framework, essential steps for a standards revision include:

1. Determine a timeline for the work, incorporating any known deadlines or mandated inputs (e.g., reports due to a state board or legislative committee)
2. Define a process for collecting stakeholder feedback or other information to inform revisions
3. Identify key stakeholders
4. Identify key advisors to inform the review process
5. Define a process to synthesize stakeholder feedback, learning from implementation in the field and best evidence within the content area
6. Form working groups to draft revised standards
7. Develop a process to collect, synthesize, and incorporate public feedback on draft revised standards
8. Develop final revised standards

Below we present an example checklist for each component to help guide your state's standards revision process.

## Standards Revision Process Checklist

### Determine timeline

- Determine who within the state education agency is responsible for leading the process
- Develop and allocate a budget for the review process that may include:
  - External consultants
  - Stipends for working group members and advisors
  - Per diems for travel
- Determine in what timeframe feedback will be collected (e.g., over multiple years or within the year of revision) including any known deadlines or mandated reporting.
- Determine milestone dates for completion
  - Needs sensing/preliminary input
  - Synthesis of collected input
  - Identification of stakeholders who will provide feedback/input
  - Formation of advisory group of content area experts to support those completing the review (optional)
  - Formation of revision working group to complete the review and provide any recommended revisions
  - Completion of draft standards or components of standards
  - Collection of public feedback on draft products
  - Incorporation of public feedback
  - Production of final draft
  - Adoption of standards

### Develop process for collecting initial input to inform review

- Determine how input/needs sensing will occur:
  - Focus groups
  - Survey
  - Interviews

- Determine prompts to facilitate feedback about current standards:
  - What works effectively?
  - What needs improvement?
  - What impedes implementation?
- Develop a synthesis of best evidence related to the topic area, including third-party research, administrative data, and standards from peer states
- Determine and publicize state chief’s recommendations for revision

### **Develop process to synthesize initial input**

- How will input be presented?
  - All input presented
  - Input summary or synthesis presented
  - Is some input (e.g., public comment, the state chief, the advisory group) prioritized, or is it all considered equally?
- Does input necessitate a complete rewrite of the standards?
- In what areas does the input align to existing standards?
  - Do these aligned components need to be made more explicit in the standards?
- In what areas does the input indicate gaps in the standards that need to be addressed?
- Does the synthesized best evidence align to the current standards?
- Identify the overall themes within the collected input that are essential to share with the advisory group for input

## Identify key stakeholders

- Who are key stakeholders to provide feedback?
  - Students
  - Teachers
  - Parents
  - Community members
  - Union representatives
  - School board associations
  - PTAs
  - Tribal representatives
  - State education staff
  - State chief of education
  - Experts in the content area
  - Education officials from other states
  - Representatives from other collective advocacy organizations
  
- How are different groups of stakeholders involved?
  - Focus groups
  - Surveys
  - Interviews
  
- Do different groups of stakeholders have different foci?
  - Implementation
  - Content area experts
  - Public perception and reception

## Identify any key advisors or subject matter experts who will support the work

- Will advisors be included in the revision working groups or present advice separately?
- Will advisors synthesize the feedback?
- Will advisors draft specific standards language or just provide recommendations for areas of focus?
- Will advisors recommend resources for the revision working group to consider?
- Will advisors recommend other state academic standards to use as models?
- Will advisors review the work of the revision working group prior to public comment?
- How will advisors engage with the working group?

## Form working groups to draft revised standards

- Who are the members of the working group?
  - Students
  - Teachers
  - School administrators
  - Community members
  - State education agency staff
  - Advisory group members
  - External content experts
  - Legislators
  
- Make the working group's responsibilities explicit
  - Revise standards focusing on specific components (e.g., wording, reducing the number of standards, specifics in the content)
  - Rewrite standards to better meet the needs identified in synthesized feedback
  - Use specific states as models
  - What is to be revised?
    - Standards only (e.g., only the language detailing what students are to know and be able to do)
    - The full standards document including introductory text and appendices
      - Text describing standards for each grade level
      - Vertical alignment tables
      - Book lists
      - Other
  
- What is the structure of the working group?
  - Small groups focused on grade levels
  - Small groups focused on standard strands
  - One large group focused on the entire set of standards
  - Rotating groups based on revision task (e.g., language revision, vertical alignment, etc.)
  
- What is the expectation for the working group transparency?
  - Does all work have to be completed in a public forum?
  - Can work be completed outside of a public forum but made accessible at milestones?
  - Can work be completed outside of a public forum with only a final version made available to the public?

- Do the working groups work independently or are facilitators needed?
  - Are facilitators needed only for whole group work or for smaller working groups?
  
- Does the working group meet in person or work virtually?
  - What does the budget support?
  
- In what format will working groups record their work?
  - Has the working group been involved in developing the format?
  - Has a consensus been achieved among the group that the format meets their needs?
  - Does the format allow for the public reviewers to easily see how the revisions are different from previous versions of the standards?
  - Does the format allow public reviewers to easily see how feedback was incorporated?
  - Is a platform available for hosting discussions, meeting materials, and outputs such as working drafts?

## **Collect and incorporate public feedback**

- Have draft standards documents been made fully accessible for all audiences?
  
- How will public feedback be collected?
  - Online survey
  - Town hall meetings
  - Interviews
  - Email
  - Phone calls
  - Presentations
  
- Are there sufficient methods in place to give all citizens equal access and opportunity to provide feedback?
  
- How will the opportunity to give feedback be advertised?
  
- Over what period will public feedback be collected?
  
- How will public feedback be synthesized?

- How will public feedback be incorporated into the standards?
  - Who decides what is incorporated and what is not?
  - Who incorporates the feedback?
    - State education agency staff
    - Revision working group
    - Advisory group
  
- What is the final format for the standards?

### **Submit final version of standards**

- Who approves the final version?
  - Chief
  - State board of education
  - Legislature
  
- How will the final version be delivered?
  
- Develop a plan for implementation (e.g., [Colorado's 2020 plan](#))

## **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> <https://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/essa/essa-flexibilities-document-for-publication.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <https://education.ohio.gov/getattachment/Topics/Learning-in-Ohio/Standard-Revision-Overview/StandardsRevisionProcess.pdf.aspx?lang=en-US>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.dpi.nc.gov/ncscos-manual-april-2023pdf/open>