



# Preparing Our Students for Success: Higher Expectations = Greater Achievement

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a voice for kids a voice for kids

## **Common questions about the 'Common Core'**

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Pennsylvania's effort to set higher goals for learning, teaching and testing has been well under way for more than a decade, but some misconceptions linger about what these goals mean for our students, schools and taxpayers.

### **What are Pennsylvania Common Core Standards, and why do we need them?**

They are a set of learning goals and expectations - not a curriculum - that outline what students should know at each grade level. Setting high, uniform expectations helps ensure all Pennsylvania students are college and career ready when they receive their high school diplomas, regardless of where they attended school.

### **Isn't 'Common Core' just another federal government mandate?**

No. It's not a mandate or a federal idea. The standards were created by educators, parents and experts in English and math, along with governors and other state-level leaders. Pennsylvanians helped develop the standards, and our state - along with 45 others - voluntarily adopted them.

### **Why did states do this together?**

For years, each state set its own standards for what students should know, but having different academic standards from state to state didn't ensure every graduate across the country was prepared for college, the military, job training or the workforce. To fix this disparity, states worked together to create the Common Core, which sets unified standards in English and math.

### **Isn't this just another new education fad?**

No. Pennsylvania developed its first statewide academic standards in the 1990s under Gov. Tom Ridge. The Common Core state standards were adopted in July, 2010.

### **Is this effort a requirement of 'No Child Left Behind?'**

No. In fact, the Pennsylvania Common Core Standards and aligned assessments, including the Keystone Exams, could free the commonwealth from some of the mandates of No Child Left Behind (NCLB). Pennsylvania can have more flexibility and control - not less - over how our students learn. If we halt progress on our standards, we undermine our efforts to obtain an NCLB waiver and, in turn, hamper efforts to help our kids achieve.

### **How do Keystone Exams fit into these standards?**

Keystone Exams are high school level tests that align with the Pennsylvania Common Core Standards in English composition, literature and Algebra I (exams in biology and civics/government also will be offered in the future). Keystone Exams assess students' knowledge at the end of the course rather than two or three years later, when it is too late to help struggling students catch up.

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**Why does Pennsylvania need to make these changes?**

For too long, Pennsylvania school districts have been giving diplomas to students who failed to show proficiency on state tests in reading and math. Statewide, more than one-third of students who graduated in 2011 - about 46,500 kids - did not score proficient or advanced on their PSSAs. These students attended high schools across the commonwealth, not just in our most distressed schools.

**There are so many tests in schools, it sometimes seems like we just teach kids to take tests. Aren't Keystone Exams just another test that takes away from actual learning?**

A test is not meant to be a teaching tool. It's a measuring tool to see if a student has learned what is being taught and is on track to learning what he or she needs to know at each grade level. Because Keystone Exams are aligned to Pennsylvania's academic standards, they are the ideal measuring tool. Keystone Exams will replace the 11th grade PSSAs, so we won't be layering more tests on students.

**I've heard Keystone Exams described as 'high stakes' tests – don't pass and you can't graduate.**

Keystone Exams are not "high stakes" tests. They are given at or near the end of a student's course work, when content is fresher and more relevant to the student. And students who fail to show proficiency on a Keystone Exam get additional instruction and are re-tested to ensure proficiency. Even students who don't pass a Keystone Exam after multiple attempts can show proficiency through other types of assessment. To help schools get the job done, the state is providing model curriculum and diagnostic tools that schools can choose to use (neither is mandated).

**Will this lead to the state Department of Education dictating things like classroom lesson plans and textbook selection?**

No. The standards are not a classroom curriculum, and they don't dictate how teachers instruct students. Your local teachers, principals and school district leaders will decide how the standards will be met – just as they always have. Teachers can continue to craft their own lesson plans, and local control remains when it comes to selecting curriculum, textbooks or other learning materials.

**What does it mean when educators talk about 'aligning' academics?**

Imagine a system of interconnecting gears. All the gears must be aligned to work together effectively. The same rule applies when it comes to ensuring our children are learning: If one part of our education system is misaligned, the entire effort fails. To build an education system that prepares our children for college, military, job training or the workforce, Pennsylvania needs to align high academic standards (the Pennsylvania Common Core Standards) with quality instruction and tests (Keystone Exams). These tools, along with other efforts like improved teacher evaluations, will help our classroom educators be more effective in raising student achievement.