

2014

# Taking Measure

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## Recommended Citation

Dodd, J. (2014). "Taking Measure." *The ASHA Leader* 19(9), 56-59.

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# Taking Measure

## **Comments**

This article was originally published in *The ASHA Leader*, volume 19, issue 9, in 2014.

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**FAST READ:** How do the Common Core State Standards change speech and language assessment? Mostly in terms of how we examine assessment data. The standards' emphasis on depth and semantics makes it more important to examine functional aspects of language through narrative-based assessments, student work samples and the like. Assessment of vocabulary development and pragmatic skills is also key, as is familiarity with Common Core standardized tests, and whether our students can effectively demonstrate their knowledge on them.

# TAKING MEASURE



Now that the Common Core State Standards are, well, common, SLPs are taking a hard look at what they mean for gauging students' language skills.

BY JANET DODD

**W**e knew they were coming. We wondered how they would affect our roles and responsibilities. We attended trainings to get ready for them. We read about them in journals and magazines.

And then they—the Common Core State Standards—arrived, with 46 states committed to them by 2010. Now that many states have implemented the language arts and math standards—science standards are still being developed—some of our questions have been answered. But many more have surfaced (see article on page 46). One question still foremost in many of our minds is: How will the standards change speech-language assessment practices—or will they?

## STANDARDS SNAPSHOT

The standards' basic mission is to ensure educational consistency and quality across the states. The Council of Chief State School Officers and the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices developed them to prepare all students for the workforce and college—see the 2012 ASHA Leader article “Core Commitment” ([on.asha.org/core-commit](http://on.asha.org/core-commit)) for more background. Much of the intent is to foster critical thinking from multiple perspectives, rather than just factual memorization.

Instead of specifying how students should be taught, the standards specify what students are expected to learn, broken out as follows:

- **Grade-level standards**, for kindergarten through 12th grade. English language arts and literacy standards cover reading, literature, informational text and foundational skills—writing, speaking and listening, and language. Similarly, mathematics has content-specific standards by grade level with strands in areas such as operations and algebraic thinking, and numbers and operation in base 10. Grade-level standards are denoted by their strand, grade and number (for example, RL.2.5 refers to Reading, Literature, grade 2, standard 5).
- **College- and career-readiness anchor standards** build on grade-level standards to ensure mastery of specified skills by graduation. In the area of English language arts and literacy, these standards have strands for reading, writing, speaking and listening, and language. They are identified by their strand, CCR status and number (for example, R.CCR.4). The Standards for Mathematical Practice describe expertise teachers should seek to develop in students at all grade levels and include process standards of problem-solving, reasoning and proof, communication, representation, and connections.

As students advance through the grades, tests developed by the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium assess their progress on the standards. These assessments were

field-tested this past year in 21 states, including California, Nevada, Wisconsin, North Carolina and New Hampshire.

## GREATER LANGUAGE DEMANDS

To truly master the standards, students need to master language skills, such as semantics and understanding, and using complex sentences. The standards require more work of all educators in these areas, but focusing on these and other language strands—listening, speaking and reading—is nothing new to speech-language pathologists in schools.

What is new to SLPs is the need to support students more with other aspects of the curriculum, such as math—because of the standards' emphasis on a deeper understanding of fewer, key mathematical concepts. Math—formerly an area of strength for many students with language impairment—has now become a language activity in and of itself. Students can no longer rely on their ability to memorize and recall math facts. They need to be able to explain their thinking, and they need SLPs' help with this.

Pragmatics is another aspect of language necessary to access the standards. The Common Core requires students to collaborate and participate effectively in conversations, taking into consideration others' ideas. Students also must share information in a clearly organized manner following a logical line of reasoning, while adapting speech to varying contexts and partners.

Complicating the situation for students on our caseloads is the Common Core's requirement that teachers integrate the standards in their teaching. For example, teachers will weave language standards into math lessons. This integration, of course, taps directly into the core deficits of students with language disabilities. Previous standards gave students a predictable framework to conceptualize information. But the new standards require students to take a metacognitive approach to learning. Students can no longer just learn information—now they have to think about learning. Clearly, we need to help our students with this.

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# TAKING MEASURE



## CHANGE OUR ASSESSMENTS?

So given all these changing demands, how do our assessment practices change—or do they? In short, the answer is yes, they change—but more from the perspective of how we examine the data from our assessments. Though a good starting point, standardized assessments may fail to assess the dynamic demands of the classroom. We also need to examine functional aspects of language through narrative-based assessments, student work samples and the like.

Here are some specific suggestions to help SLPs examine assessment data through a Common Core lens:

- **Know the Common Core.** Understanding the structure and content of the standards is one of the first steps toward recognizing how our assessment results fit with them.

Have them readily available and refer to them often. (I recommend downloading them to your iPad or phone.)

- **Read education publications** to keep up with state and national standards-related developments.
- **Include narrative-based assessment** as a part of your assessment protocol if you are not already doing so. Narrative skills play a critical role in accessing standards. Narrative-based assessments give insight into a student's ability to use complex sentences in a variety of contexts. Consider a range of assessment options, including standardized tests and procedures—such as the Test of Narrative Language and the Systematic Analysis of Language Transcripts—and less formalized assessments, such as eliciting personal narratives by first telling your own story.

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## Write IEP Goals that Core-nform

Many speech-language pathologists want to know: How do you write Individualized Education Program goals that jibe with the Common Core State Standards? The answer is simple: It depends on the individual needs of the student. Here are some suggestions for ascertaining those needs:

- **Consider current grade-level language requirements** and whether the student meets them. How about the previous grade level's requirements? The student must meet the previous year's standards to move forward.
- **Identify the student's present level of academic performance** in communication and language areas.
- **Conduct a "gap assessment"** and develop goals to support the student in achieving grade-level standards.
- **Choose from several approaches** to writing standards-specific goals (find more comprehensive information in Judy Rudebusch's 2012 article, "From Common Core State Standards to Standards-Based IEPs: A Brief Tutorial," in SIG

16's Perspectives on School-Based Issues, [on.asha.org/core-ieps](http://on.asha.org/core-ieps)). The goal can reflect a single aspect of a standard or its entire content (for example, per RL.1.1, "Ask and answer questions about key details in a text"). The goal can also develop foundational prerequisite skills. For example, a student could work toward "comparing and contrasting two or more versions of a story" (RL.2.9).

Another approach is writing a goal that addresses more than a single standard. Goal banks (electronic resources to help with goal-writing, available at sites like [goalbookapp.com](http://goalbookapp.com)) can be helpful, but they have limitations—and we should always strive to develop goals based on individual needs. The common theme is to customize goals for each individual student, taking into consideration the student's current abilities and desired outcomes.

- **Recognize vocabulary demands** of the Common Core by understanding the role different types of vocabulary play across the curriculum. Be more discrete in identifying a student's difficulty with high-frequency words versus content/subject-specific words. To do so, conduct an item analysis of a student's errors (using, for example, the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test) or administer a test developed for this purpose (such as the Montgomery Assessment of Vocabulary Acquisition).
- **Gain insight into a student's pragmatic skills** related to working with peers in collaborative learning activities. Have teachers complete observations and checklists (such as Scott Bellini's "Autism Social Skills Profile") and observe students during cooperative learning activities.
- **Include student work samples** in your assessment data. Ask teachers to share students' writing samples and observe students' oral presentations.

- **Familiarize yourself with Smarter Balanced assessments.** Understand how students will be asked to demonstrate their knowledge. What types of questions will they be asked? Consider the language of the test questions themselves. Do they pose a problem for your students?

The standards have challenges but it looks like they're here to stay. Allow yourself to admit we are all still just learning as we go, which can be unsettling for many of us. The important part is to remain flexible and keep tweaking our current practices until we get the formula just right for each student. ☺

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