Frequently Asked Questions: Learning Standards

What are learning standards?
The Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts (ELA) and Mathematics are Washington's K-12 State Learning Standards. Learning standards are concise, clearly articulated descriptions of what students should know and be able to do at a specific stage of their educational journey (e.g., by the end of each grade level). Common Core State for ELA and math were formally adopted in July 2011.

Are the Common Core State Standards better than Washington's previous academic standards?
Yes, the Common Core standards are more rigorous than Washington's previous learning standards in these subjects. They focus on key career and college readiness content and skills including more critical thinking and problem-solving skills. The standards are designed to build upon the most advanced current thinking about preparing all students for success in college and their careers. The standards were informed by the best standards in the United States and internationally.

How do Washington's former math standards compare with Common Core standards?
According to a Thomas B. Fordham study, our former state math standards are clear and challenging, just like the Common Core standards. However, the Common Core standards are more comprehensive because they help students connect their learning within and across grades, so each topic includes and builds on the ones before it.

Major Shifts in Math:
- **Greater Focus:** Common Core dives deeper into key concepts, such as fractions and proportions, to ensure students establish a strong foundation before moving to the next level of difficulty. More focus allows students to practice real-world math problems in high school and beyond.
- **Coherence:** Common Core asks students to connect back to learning they have previously mastered in order to reinforce concepts.
- **Rigor:** Common Core requires a balance of concept mastery, procedural skill and fluency, and real-world application. Although memorization is required, students will also be asked to work beyond memorization and communicate the thinking behind answers.

How do Washington's former English language arts standards compare with Common Core standards?
The Fordham study found that our former English language arts state standards are weaker than the Common Core standards. The Common Core English language arts standards (which include reading, writing, and communication) will improve student learning with higher expectations that are aligned to college-entrance requirements. They also complement what students are learning in other subjects like social studies and science.

These standards provide students with more opportunities to build knowledge through content-rich fiction, nonfiction, and informational texts (such as scientific articles or historical documents). Students will use the facts and evidence from the text as the basis for their reading and writing practice, and learn how to understand both complex texts and academic vocabulary.

How will teachers support English language learners in meeting Common Core?

OSPI is working with school districts to train teachers, share resources and apply best practices that support English language learners. Washington state formally adopted new English Language Proficiency Standards to support language instruction grounded in the English language arts and math. These new standards will help teachers support the language development of our English language learners.

Here are some ways teachers can support English language learners while keeping the high expectations of the Common Core standards:

- Foster a learning environment that is visual, hands-on and interactive;
- Celebrate and incorporate the cultures and languages of English language learners in the classroom;
- Teach English language arts and math vocabulary explicitly;
- Create materials that help English language learners apply grade-level work to their lives;
- Track their progress and adjust teaching strategies to meet students' needs;
- If needed, provide English language learners with extra time to complete exams or class work;
- Provide English language learners with different options to show their understanding of a concept;
- Give English language learners more opportunities to interact with proficient English speakers;
- Help English language learners develop their understanding of concepts and usage of academic language by asking them to practice speaking and interacting with peers in class.

How will teachers support students with special needs in meeting Common Core?

OSPI is teaming up with school districts to provide teachers with more information, training, and support so that we can help our students with special needs. Here are some ways teachers can support students with special needs in accessing Common Core:

- Align a student's Individualized Education Plan goals with the Common Core each year;
- Deliver high-quality, research-based instruction that accommodates students' needs;
- Present information in multiple ways and allow students to express their responses in diverse ways;
- Help students access and use technology devices and services that support their work with the general education curriculum and the Common Core.