UNLOCKING THE COMMON CORE

THE NEW SCHOOL STANDARDS HAVE CREATED EXCITEMENT AND CONTROVERSY. BUT WHAT DO THEY MEAN FOR YOUR KIDS?

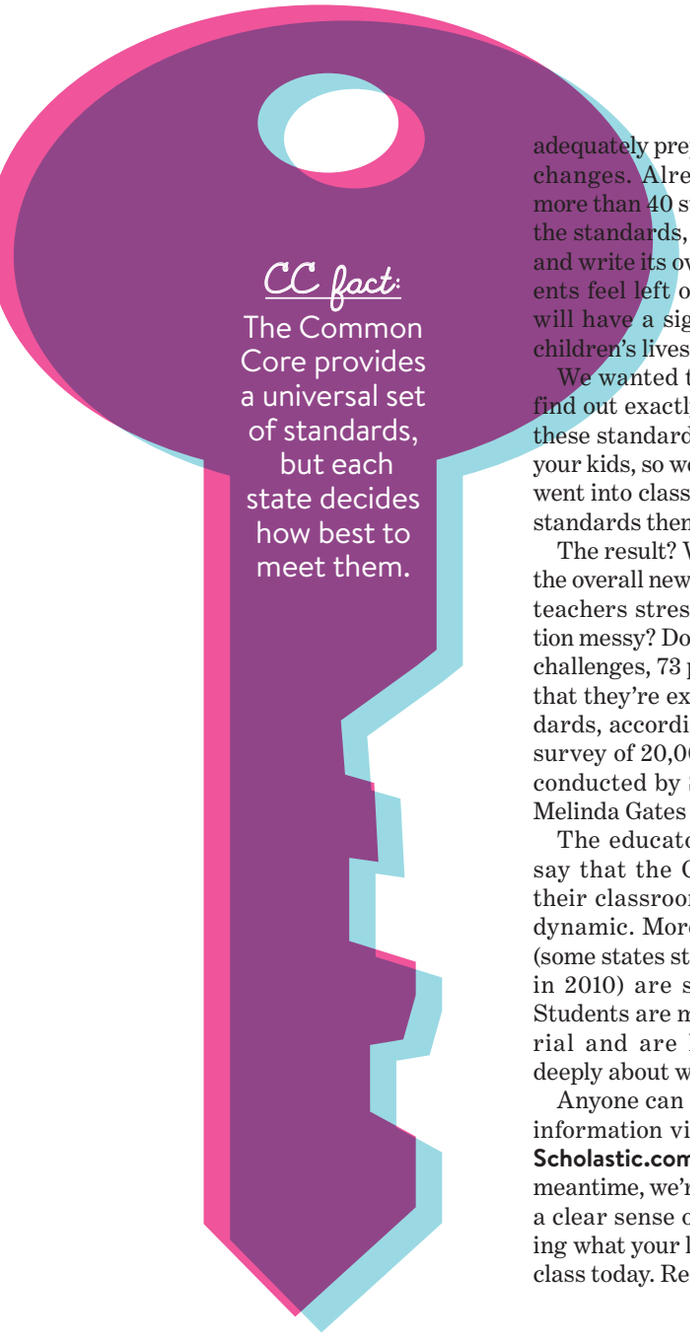
BY SHARON DUKE ESTROFF

THE COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS INITIATIVE is one of the biggest educational reforms in decades, and its goals are lofty.

The sweeping new set of educational benchmarks for kindergarten through high school not only aim to prepare students for college—they're designed to turn them into big thinkers who can compete in the global job market. Another driving force behind the states-led initiative: a belief that having a common set of standards—and a more streamlined testing process—will help raise the quality of public education for all American kids.

Although few would argue against the Common Core's overall objective—to raise achievement—that hasn't stopped controversy and criticism from bubbling up, particularly over the way the standards are being implemented.

Many teachers say that they have not been given the time, resources, and training that they need to



adequately prepare their students for the changes. Already, Indiana, one of the more than 40 states that initially adopted the standards, has decided to drop them and write its own. Meanwhile, many parents feel left out of a conversation that will have a significant impact on their children's lives.

We wanted to take a deep breath and find out exactly how teachers feel about these standards and what they mean for your kids, so we talked to instructors. We went into classrooms. We pored over the standards themselves.

The result? We're happy to report that the overall news is surprisingly good. Are teachers stressed? Yes. Is implementation messy? Double yes. Yet despite these challenges, 73 percent of teachers report that they're excited about the new standards, according to Primary Sources, a survey of 20,000 public school teachers conducted by Scholastic and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

The educators that P&C spoke with say that the Common Core has made their classrooms more interesting and dynamic. Moreover, the early adopters (some states started using the standards in 2010) are seeing positive changes: Students are more engaged in the material and are learning to think more deeply about what they're learning.

Anyone can review the standards (for information visit Corestandards.org or **Scholastic.com/commoncore**), but in the meantime, we're here to provide you with a clear sense of how they're transforming what your little student is learning in class today. Read on!

The key changes in Reading

BEFORE CC Fiction was the centerpiece of teaching literacy. Traditional lessons consisted of kids reading from a storybook, novel, or basal reader, then answering a few questions on a worksheet. "Everything was a who, what, or where question," says Ali Berman, a fifth-grade teacher in Atlanta. "Who was the main character? What were they doing? Pretty much just recapping the story." And nonfiction was but a blip on the reading radar screen (about 3.6 minutes per school day for the average first-grader, according to a study by researchers from the University of Michigan).

AFTER CC The biggest change is the emphasis on nonfiction of all kinds—informational texts, narratives, articles, and more. In fact, the new standards require that 50 percent of reading material in elementary school be nonfiction. But whatever kids are reading, they must also analyze text in a more complex way.

"Today it's all about the hows, whys, and what-ifs," says Berman. Students don't simply read a chapter or article once. A practice called "close reading" teaches kids to return to the text again and again. This might sound tedious, but it trains them to learn to interpret the author's tone and word choice, as well as to see how one book connects to another.

In other words, they become what teachers refer to as "text detectives." In

HOW TO HELP AT HOME

Kids today are learning complex concepts right from the start. These tips can help reinforce what they're learning at school—and help them have a little fun to boot!

- **Read, read, read** And front-load the nonfiction. Ask questions as you go, but don't drill too much. At home, reading should be *enjoyable* first.
- **Break out a deck** Card games like Blackjack and 31 are a super-sneaky way to practice math facts.
- **Ask why their math answers make sense** Kids need to be able to explain why their solutions are correct. If your child can walk you through how she solved that tricky word problem, you'll know she's on track.
- **Help develop their "academic vocabulary"** These are the words that kids need to know to understand texts across subject areas but that don't tend to come up in everyday conversation. (Think: peninsula, coast, paleontologist, and legend.) Nonfiction books are good vocab sources, but so are things like maps.

Melinda Butler's Marietta, GA, first-grade class, we watched as she donned a Sherlock Holmes cap while students read about Lewis and Clark. They're being reading sleuths, she explains later, as they hone in on details and provide evidence for their answers.

"What do you think Lewis and Clark ate during their expedition?" she asks the class.

"I know!" says a tiny girl with blonde pigtails. "They ate fish."

"And . . ." says Butler.

"And I think this is true because they were traveling on the Missouri River, so it would have been easy for them to go fishing!"

Teachers aren't the only ones asking the questions, either. Kids are encouraged to come up with their own juicy book-related questions for one another, too, which helps give the entire Common Core reading experience an exciting, book-clubby feel that teachers *and* students love.

And though there's been some backlash against the emphasis on nonfiction, many teachers find it's actually freeing for kids.

"Our students' eyes are open to the whole library now," says Beth Fuller, a teacher in Louisville, KY. "They understand reading isn't just for entertainment; it can be purposeful and intentional."

Since Fuller's school is in a lower-income area, many students don't get to do things like visit museums or travel over breaks. The nonfiction they read becomes a window onto the world for them, she says.

The key changes in

Writing

BEFORE CC While kids honed their writing skills across subject areas with book reports, science projects, and homework assignments (write a paragraph using your spelling words), when it came to Language Arts, the focus was on descriptive writing—think personal narratives ("What I Did Over Summer Vacation") and creative tales ("The Day It Snowed Ice Cream").

AFTER CC Today, writing lessons focus on teaching kids how to communicate their ideas effectively through persuasive arguments based on evidence from original texts and other sources.

A tall order? Yep. But it's a communication skill that experts believe will serve kids in every area of their life—from the playground right on up to the boardroom. One mom told us her 10-year-old used the writing techniques she was learning in class to make a presentation about why she should get an iPhone 5s. (One of her key points: "S is for safety"!)

"In the past, it was enough to write 'I like the butterfly,'" says Steven Hinkle, a kindergarten teacher in Chattanooga, TN. "Now students must back up their opinions with fact-based reasons, like 'I like the butterfly because it's colorful and lives in the flowers.'"

Many teachers are especially thrilled about the way the new writing standards are woven throughout the curriculum. Kids use these same skills over and over again to present strong arguments in reading (perhaps explaining why Ramona

CC fact:

Over 40 states have signed on, but the Common Core *isn't* federally mandated.

isn't *really* a pest), math (showing *why* 15 + 13 = 28), and throughout the school day. "In my class, three fact-based supporting points make for a strong argument, written or otherwise," says Butler. "That holds true for every subject."

The key changes in Math

BEFORE CC Previously, curriculums put heavy emphasis on rote memorization, and concepts were often presented as isolated entities (*This week we're learning place value; next week, decimals*). While the scope of concepts covered was broad, it wasn't particularly deep. Word problems were straightforward and usually involved one type of calculation.

AFTER CC While some drilling is still considered critical (especially in the early grades), the primary focus of the new standards is turning out empowered thinkers who can forge their own path through a problem.

"Common Core wants kids to get more creative in their problem solving," says Berman. "They learn multiple ways to find a solution and are encouraged to use whatever strategies will fit their style." Some children draw pictures; others make charts; still others act out questions with wooden blocks. And some even use the "old" algorithms that we learned as kids. Which is just what we saw Berman's fifth-graders do with this little doozy:

There were 9 girls on the bus. Each girl had 5 cats. Each cat had 2 kittens. How many legs were on the bus, including the bus driver's? Write the steps you took to get your answer.

"Oh, it's hard for them all right," says Berman. "But not calculus-hard. It's more exhilaratingly hard—and they're 100-percent capable of doing it." Indeed, an excited buzz fills the room as the students discuss possible strategies. (The answer? 560.)

Ultimately, this multipronged approach to problem solving fosters a much richer understanding of what numbers mean and how they work together. Kids feel confident taking them apart and putting them together in infinite combinations. Eventually, this kind of flexible thinking will serve them in all parts of their lives—in school and beyond.