

**Sample
Newsletter
Articles**

More than half of California’s parents get their information about kids’ education from the school or district newsletter. So if your school or district has a newsletter, you’ve got an excellent opportunity to engage parents in their child’s schooling. This is especially critical when it comes to explaining how your school is implementing California’s new core learning standards.

The mini-articles below are designed to help your newsletter editor incorporate information about the core learning standards into the publication. You can simply cut and paste from here into your newsletter, or personalize these further with examples from your own classrooms or teachers.

**METHOD**

Timing is key here. It will be best to publish these snippets at regular intervals throughout the year. Publishing them all at once will overwhelm parents, while putting them out at random intervals may cause them to be overlooked.

**TIPS**

• For each topic, add in a specific example from your own classrooms or teachers.

• Use pictures of students from your classrooms and campus to make the information in the newsletter more visually appealing and personal.

• Include these snippets in your employee newsletter or listserv regularly, because every staff member—even if they aren’t in the classrooms—is on the front lines for parent questions.

• Does your school have a Twitter, Facebook, Shutterfly, Schoolspeak or Edmodo account? Try releasing this information there in short chunks, because parents frequently check-in online.

Month 1

**Why the New Standards?**

Our teachers have been working hard to help students reach the new, more rigorous academic standards set out by the state of California. These new core learning standards tell us what students should know and be able to do at the end of each grade level, and leave it up to our teachers to decide how to get each student there.

As educators and administrators, we are excited by these goals because they ensure that our graduates are ready for college and jobs in the 21st Century. The goals accomplish this by emphasizing real world skills like working with a group, applying concepts to new situations and analyzing the quality of information being used in our work.

California’s new core learning standards are giving rise to a new way of teaching and learning in the classroom. In our school’s classrooms, you’ll see teachers focusing on conceptual understanding, digging deeper on subject matter areas and building on what kids already know to help them discover the next level. Students will work to understand each other’s thought process while they focus on the right answer.

When we do this right, our students will be like chefs who’ve learned to cook for themselves with the ingredients (information) they receive. A skilled cook knows how to follow recipes, but also how to make the most with the ingredients on hand. And in a world where we don’t know what the jobs of tomorrow will be, working with the ingredients will be key for success.

**[Monthly/Quarterly] Parent Tip:** Encourage your child to keep a journal. Whether it's full of drawings, collages or words, the journal will teach students how to write and tell stories that go beyond just recounting the events.

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Month 2

**Implementation by Teachers**

Under California’s new core learning standards, individual teachers will decide how to teach in their classrooms. Instead of delivering scripted lesson plans and worksheets, teachers are expected to engage their students in discussion and learn how a student is thinking about the problems that are being presented. This means teachers and students spend a lot of time listening, quoting back to each other and asking “why?”

Because of the shift in teaching style, our school’s teachers have been hard at work trading ideas on new lessons and techniques. They’ve all spent a good deal of time over the summer going through professional development courses that will help them create innovative new programs for their students. Teachers are also working together on lesson plans that can be used across departments and classes.

The key to our students’ success under the new learning standards lies in their implementation. If we think about these standards as blueprints for a school remodeling project, each one of our educators has committed to rolling up his or her sleeves and getting to work on the renovation. We’re constantly trying to identify what works and should be kept, and which teaching techniques need to be added to build a stronger, more valuable education for our students in the long run.

**[Monthly/Quarterly] Parent Tip:** Cook with your child. Measuring ingredients and learning to improvise in putting together a recipe will both help students understand math concepts and encourage innovative thinking.Month 3

**Parents’ Role**

California’s new core learning standards aim to prepare students for life outside of the classroom. When you walk into work each morning, nobody warns you that “today will be a multiplying fractions day.” Instead, adults are expected to apply their classroom lessons to real life situations across subject areas and outside of their notebooks. To prepare our students for this reality, our teachers are focusing more than ever on real world skills.

Because of that focus, parents are a key part of a student’s learning process under California’s core learning standards. Parents and family members are uniquely positioned to help students make the bridge between the outside world and the content they learn inside the classroom. For example, cooking with children can reinforce concepts of measurement or fractions that they may have come across in class. Mapping out a road trip or budgeting for a remodeling project can also help students understand how classroom skills translate to real life.

Besides the teaching, though, parents can model skills like persistence, teamwork and patience through their own behavior. Though homework can sometimes be frustrating, students are more likely to succeed and have a positive attitude about it if family members are encouraging them to persist. Parents can assist with research ideas, show an interest in what they’re reading and encourage students to keep an open mind about how they learn. The key is for parents and teachers to form a strong partnership in supporting each student.

If you have any questions about how to support your child’s learning this year, or about what he or she should be achieving in class, please reach out to your child’s teacher to ask.

**[Monthly/Quarterly] Tip:** Ask your child to help you plan and budget for an event. Whether it's a lemonade stand or a home remodel, the activity will make connections between real-life and classroom concepts.

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Month 4

**How Group Learning Spurs Personalized Learning in our Classrooms**California’s new core learning standards are designed to ensure that each student is able to master a set of skills before moving on to the next one. The only way in which our teachers can do this is by understanding each student’s comprehension level of the subject matter, and focusing on how they learn. That’s why the standards place such high priority on understanding a learner’s thought process—whether that is for a math problem or a classic novel.

This focus on individual student skills is why you might notice your child working on more group projects this year. Teachers are trying to understand what students are saying and how they explain their reasoning to their peers. This in turn helps the teacher teach each student at his or her own level.

The “gradual release of responsibility” method is one that you can also use with your child at home.

**You Do:** The student explores a problem and comes to conclusions on his or her own.

**We Do:** The teacher leads a discussion about the conclusions students make. Students are encouraged to share their ideas and the teacher guides them towards the concept being taught.

**I Do:**  The teacher then steps in and teaches the mathematical concept and provides exercises for students to practice.

That means that instead of a sheet of multiplication tables, our teachers are helping students understand why multiplication works the way it does, for example. Once the student has learned that, he or she will be able to apply the concepts of multiples in any situation, not just on a test.

**[Monthly/Quarterly] Parent Tip:** Help your student research and plan a sightseeing trip or your family's history. The act of doing this will reinforce critical thinking and research skills, while encouraging them to pursue an interest.

 Month 5

**Local Control of the Classroom**California's new core learning standards give far more power to teachers and districts than any that have come before them.

These standards set out what each student is expected to know by the end of the school year. However, the standards do not tell the teacher how to teach those things. The curriculum, specific books, lesson plans and classroom exercises are left up to each district to decide on its own. By doing this, the core learning standards are allowing individual communities to tailor learning exercises and lessons to their own students and histories.

Previous standards had sometimes provided teachers with standard scripts to read and encouraged them to stick to the textbooks for structuring learning in their classrooms. The new standards allow those decisions to be made at the district-level, much closer to the frontlines of teaching.

That's why we've spent so much time working with our teachers, not to hand out new tests and textbooks, but rather to help them develop new and creative ways to get the material across. District officials and teachers are working in professional learning teams across the region to compare notes and ideas and to learn from one another.

If you have questions about your child's homework or about a particular book or assignment, ask your teacher about why the district chose this particular work and what the intended learning is to be. Because these decisions are made locally, he or she will likely be able to tell you exactly how it relates to both the standards and to your individual student.

**[Monthly/Quarterly] Parent Tip:** Ask your child to help you comparison shop. You can compare the prices of phone plans, groceries or sports tickets. Doing this will reinforce concepts of measurement, budgeting and evidence-based thinking for your student.

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 Month 6

**Literature in California’s new Core Learning Standards**The idea behind California’s new core learning standards is that our students are ready for careers and life in the 21st Century. Our instruction has set students up to truly understand what they read, so that they enter college and the workforce with strong critical thinking and problem-solving skills. That’s why the standards emphasize depth in reading over breadth.

At a practical level, that means students in English classes will still be reading many of the literary classics we first read in school. But, they may read fewer of them because they will be engaging with them more deeply, taking the time to do more than just follow the storyline. The questions they get will be around why things happened, not just what happened. They’re going be asked to show they have really thought through what it means. And more often, they will also read paired nonfiction books that help them to understand a novel’s historical setting, for example. If we can teach our students to do that with one book, they will have a skill they can apply to any text.

To see what that learning looks like over time, [take a look at this graphic that shows the breakdown of literary and informational texts by grade level](http://www.greatschools.org/catalog/images/infographics/nonfiction_full.jpg).

And let’s not forget, we will also see students being asked to read in classes other than English, and not just textbooks, but interesting and challenging informational articles that have rich vocabulary and can deepen students’ content knowledge. In the end, these skills will equip the next generation to take on the challenges of tomorrow’s workforce.

**[Monthly/Quarterly] Parent Tip:** Explore slogans you see on television or in stores with your child. Looking more deeply into marketing that they encounter everyday can encourage them to focus on the implications of language, why certain messages resonate (and with whom), and refine their critical thinking skills.

 Month 7

**Formative Assessment**When you write a report or essay, have you ever asked your spouse or colleague to "take a quick look" at it? Whenever you do that, whether you knew it or not, you're asking for a formative assessment.

Formative assessment is the ongoing process of collecting data on what people know or don't know, and changing track accordingly. At school, the idea is that with a clear vision of the progress each student is making, teachers can adjust their lesson plans and provide necessary interventions to improve individual achievement.

California's core learning standards urge teachers to engage in formative assessment instead of waiting until the end-of-semester final to gauge a student's progress. The standards are aimed at "building children’s capacity to think, analyze, communicate and reason. To test that, teachers need to find out where the students are with grappling with complex ideas. Is the idea beginning to consolidate? What does the teacher need to do to go deeper and really help them get it?

Assessing kids as we go through the year, though, doesn't have to mean more tests. Instead, to get a full picture of student understanding, teachers ask open-ended questions and push students to explore ideas aloud. They listen in when kids are working together. They even encourage students to assess each other and themselves.

Checking in with your student to figure out whether they've understood a concept or lesson is more important than ever. Think about what you can do at home to assess where they are and how they're learning.

**[Monthly/Quarterly] Parent Tip:** Be your child's book club. Ask your student what they're reading and why certain characters are behaving the way they are. Help them understand the historical or real-world context behind the story, where it fits.

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Month 8

**Smarter Balanced Assessments**A lot of people across the country have expressed concerns about whether the new learning standards set out by the Common Core framework will be effective. The only way for us to answer that question is to measure our students' progress under the new teaching methods. That's why, at the end of the year, all 3rd through 8th graders and 11th graders will be tested under the new Smarter Balanced system. The old STAR system has been retired in California.

The new tests will indicate the level of preparation for careers or college courses. Students will see fewer multiple-choice questions and will need to provide more short answers and extended responses that focus on their thought process. Like the new core learning standards, the tests are designed to push students' critical-thinking and real-world problem solving skills.

The tests are designed to provide flexibility for individual student needs. They're conducted on computers, which give students access to things like scratch pads and calculators. By putting the assessments online, we will get results back quickly and can use them to plan for teacher professional development, improve the curriculum and so forth this summer.

The pilot tests that we rolled out last year provided us with a great practice run for what to expect this year. Unlike last year, though, this year's results will be recorded. Your child's score will NOT determine whether or not he goes on to the next grade. However, the results will be tracked over time as a measure of progress and a consistent baseline.

We strongly suggest that parents avoid drawing comparisons between a student's results this year and his or her STAR test results in previous years. Here’s why: This year's results will be lower than STAR results in previous years. That doesn't mean that students have learned less or fallen behind. Instead, it reflects the higher expectations under the new core learning standards. The assessments are new, as are the lesson plans. It will take a bit of time to put the whole process in place.

We are confident that, over time, the new teaching and testing methods will help us learn a lot more about how our students learn and what we can work on to make sure we are building tomorrow's leaders right here in our classrooms.

**[Monthly/Quarterly] Parent Tip:** Have your child plan a summer road trip. From researching destinations to calculating distances and fuel costs, this activity will get them excited and show them how to use classroom skills for summer fun.

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Month 9

**Testing Process**

[We suggest that you use this final month's snippet to explain how your school will be handling the end-of-year testing, tech concerns and other tips for parents to help them prepare their child for the examination.]

**[Monthly/Quarterly] Parent Tip:** Talk to your child about the end-of-year tests. Clarify any concerns or questions that he or she might have, and/or approach your student's teacher to help clear those up.