



# Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Core?

The Common Core Standards and Out-of-School Time Programs

Suzanne Marten, Sara Hill, and Anne Lawrence

"I have kids breaking out in tears over homework this year! That never used to happen before."

"Yeah, I know; we have had that happen too. Kids are stressed, teachers are stressed, and now I feel like we are getting stressed. It seems like a lot of the pressure is coming from the Common Core Standards."

"We are not school, so what do these Common Core Standards have to do with us?"

"And what is wrong with the work we do with kids anyway?"

These and similar comments and questions bubbled to the surface at the beginning of a networking meeting sponsored by the Robert Bowne Foundation for out-of-school time (OST) providers in New York City in the fall of 2013. This meeting, organized by the Center for

Education Options and facilitated by Suzanne Marten, was entitled "Introducing the Common Core Learning Standards: What Are They? What Do We Need to Know?" The response was so great that a second session

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**SUZANNE MARTEN** is a literacy and learning specialist with the Center for Educational Options, a small New York City nonprofit that provides professional development to school, OST, and community-based organizations. She has worked with the Robert Bowne Foundation for more than 10 years on several OST professional development and networking projects.

**SARA HILL** is the editor of the OST Hub at Kennesaw State University's Center for Sustainable Journalism. She has conducted research on community-based youth programs in the U.S. and Belarus and has published articles and edited a book in the areas of literacy, afterschool, and community-based education. She worked on a team that documented innovative practices in 21st Century Community Learning Centers for the U.S. Department of Education. She can be reached at [sara@sarahill.net](mailto:sara@sarahill.net).

**ANNE LAWRENCE** began working for the Robert Bowne Foundation in 1987 and became the program officer in 2002. In 30 years in adult and youth education, she has served as associate director of education for Literacy Partners of New York City and has managed professional development, evaluation, and adult literacy programs at the Literacy Assistance Center, the City University of New York, and the New York Public Library Centers for Reading and Writing.

had to be added to accommodate all the people who wanted to attend, a clear indication of the interest of OST providers in getting to know the standards, considering what to do about them in their programs, and sharing their questions and concerns.

The Robert Bowne Foundation supports the development of quality programs that offer literacy education in the out-of-school hours to children and youth of New York City, especially young people from disadvantaged communities. The foundation's networking meetings, now in their 10th year, offer quarterly forums in which participants from a wide variety of programs across the city can share their work, develop new ideas for their programs, and discuss important issues in the field.

The process of gathering topic ideas from the previous year's networking meeting evaluations and from meetings with the foundation's grantees revealed that the Common Core Learning Standards—New York's version of the Common Core State Standards—were on many OST providers' minds. Funders are increasingly asking grantees how their OST programs are supporting the standards—even though the standards were designed explicitly for in-school education, not for OST. Providers are concerned about being asked to meet academic standards designed for school while still pursuing the traditional focus of OST programs on positive youth development. How can OST programs support academic progress while pursuing their goals, traditions, and mission? This article will demonstrate how understanding the Common Core Standards can support the work of OST providers and the youth and families they serve. In fact, in many ways, the work OST programs do every day is already aligned with the standards.

## The Controversy Over the Common Core

Even in the arena of in-school education, the Common Core Standards are the subject of debate (Ravitch, 2013). How should they be implemented? What training and support should teachers receive? How should the standards be taught to children, using what curriculum? How should they be assessed, using what standardized test? This debate is not so much about the standards themselves as about teacher professionalism and high-stakes testing. The effect of the standards on academic achievement remains to be seen.

Meanwhile, OST providers face the challenge of finding ways to support the academic achievement of children and youth while recognizing that OST programs are not—

and should not be—school. OST programs have traditionally engaged young people in positive youth development through the arts, sports, civic engagement, and youth leadership. Though much of this work supports academic learning, it is designed to provide children and youth with enriching experiences they may not find elsewhere. School budgets have cut back sharply on the arts, sports, socio-emotional learning, and other enrichment activities in favor of preparation for high-stakes testing, including for new tests that are advertised as being aligned with the Common Core. In light of this reality, the experiential and hands-on nature of many OST programs can complement school-day academics. OST programming has been seen as an “extended platform” that is “uniquely situated to provide targeted opportunities for students to deepen their learning by applying new concepts through enrichment activities” (Givens, 2014, p. 4).

Respected leaders, practitioners, and researchers in the field disagree about the place of the Common Core Standards in OST programming. A recent article in *Youth Today* (Simonton, 2014) highlighted the controversy. It quotes Jodi Grant, executive director of the Afterschool Alliance, as saying that the new standards take an approach to learning that is well suited to afterschool programs. “There’s a lot we can do” to align with the Common Core, she said (as quoted in Simonton, 2014). Meanwhile, Professor Robert Halpern of the Erikson Institute disagrees. It is the role of schools to deal with academics, he said. “There is no reason afterschool programs should have to relate to standards focused on what schools need to accomplish” (as quoted in Simonton, 2014).

Nevertheless, OST practitioners want to see children and youth thrive academically. Most realize that OST programs play an important role in academic success. Given that the Common Core Standards are now a reality in young people's academic lives, what can—or should—OST programs do to help children and youth meet those standards? The first step to answering that question is to understand just what the standards entail.

## What Exactly Are the Common Core Standards?

The Common Core State Standards were initiated in response to the failure of No Child Left Behind to raise the quality of education consistently across states. The National Governors Association (NGA) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) appointed representatives,

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including educators, to work toward consensus on what the U.S. educational system needs to do to ensure that all youth are “college and career ready.” The group articulated standards for pre-K through 12th grade, beginning with English language arts (ELA) and mathematics (NGA & CCSSO, 2008). The substantial federal funding attached to what have been framed as national standards creates a powerful incentive for states to ratify them (Ravitch, 2013), though states are free to accept or reject the standards. As of December 2013, most states had formally adopted the standards, with a few exceptions. In New York, state education officials tweaked the language in a few places and adopted the result as the Common Core Learning Standards.

### **Habits of Mind**

The Common Core Standards go beyond traditional academics and content to include *habits of mind*: “knowledge, skills, and dispositions that operate in tandem with the academic content” (CCSSO, 2011, p. 5), as illustrated in the box on this page. The standards have a strong focus on achieving 21st century skills, such as “cogent reasoning and evidence collection skills that are essential for success in college, career, and life” (“English Language Arts Standards,” 2014). This emphasis benefits OST programs, as it reflects “skills that youth organizations have long championed (e.g., problem-solving, perseverance, independence, understanding other cultures)” (Devaney & Yohalem, 2012, p. 5).

OST programs often can “accelerate” (Givens, 2014) and support learning because they have more flexibility in their programming and staff than schools do. Indeed, the habits of mind are in line with OST programs’ current practices, traditionally focused on positive youth development, enrichment, youth leadership, and civic engagement. Youth must be able to understand other perspectives and cultures in order to be productive and positive group members. They must be able to respond to varying demands of audience, task, purpose, and discipline to be effective leaders. They must be able to comprehend as well

### **ELA HABITS OF MIND**

According to the ELA Common Core State Standards, “students who are college and career ready in reading, writing, speaking, listening, and language” demonstrate “these capacities of the literate individual”:

1. They demonstrate independence.
2. They build strong content knowledge.
3. They respond to the varying demands of audience, task, purpose, and discipline.
4. They comprehend as well as critique.
5. They value evidence.
6. They use technology and digital media strategically and capably.
7. They come to understand other perspectives and cultures.

Source: Common Core State Standards for ELA, 2010

as critique in order to be engaged in their communities. Focusing on habits of mind “that are now considered instrumental competencies for college and career readiness should increase the relevance of programs and demonstrate their value to school partners” (Devaney & Yohalem, 2012, p. 7).

### **How the Standards Are Structured**

The Common Core State Standards document is a thick tome that requires time and thought to digest. Since the Robert Bowne Foundation’s grant making focuses on literacy development, the net-

working meeting focused on the Common Core Standards for ELA. These standards are grouped according to grade: pre-K–5, 6–8, and 9–12. They fall into sections that generally run across grade ranges: writing, reading literature, reading informational text, and speaking and listening. At the elementary level, an additional section on reading foundations encompasses phonics and basic conventions of English.

As shown in Table 1 (next page), the Common Core Standards can be read “down,” going through all the skills and strategies expected for an age group. The language is consistent across sections. For example, a reading standard asks sixth graders to identify the main idea and supporting details in a text. A writing standard asks that same age group to present a main idea or claim and support that claim with evidence. Similarly, a speaking and listening standard asks sixth graders to orally articulate a position or claim and back it up with reasons, evidence, or details.

The standards can also be read “across,” looking at how a particular skill or strategy develops from kindergarten through 12th grade, as illustrated in Table 2 (next page). Shifting from one age-level descriptor to the next, the language indicates new levels of independence and sophistication. In Table 2, the description of the skill for kindergarten includes the words “with prompting and support.” In first grade, children are expected to use this skill without help. By second grade, children are expected to be able to give more specific information in their an-

**Table 1. Reading “Down” Grade 6 Standards**

Category	Sample Grade 6 Standard
Reading Literature	Determine a central idea of a text and how it is conveyed through particular details; provide a summary of the text distinct from personal opinions or judgments.
Writing	Write arguments to support claims with clear reasons and relevant evidence.
Speaking and Listening	Delineate a speaker’s argument and specific claims, distinguishing claims that are supported by reasons and evidence from claims that are not.

Source: New York State P–12, 2011

swers. To take another example, by high school, a skill descriptor would include the phrase “opposing viewpoint”; identifying opposing viewpoints would not be expected in earlier grades. The same standards thus are addressed at all age levels, with more sophisticated expectations for older students. This structure helps educators to understand children’s development and plan curriculum accordingly.

The language of the standards is quite general, reflecting thinking skills rather than academic content. What is often misunderstood about the Common Core Standards is that they are *not* a curriculum. They do not tell teachers or practitioners what materials to use. The door is open to a variety of themes and approaches to the standards’ skills and strategies. OST staff are free to develop their own activities to help young people learn and practice to meet the standards.

### Relating the Common Core to OST Programming

The initial reaction of participants in the Bowne Foundation’s networking meeting was that the language of the Common Core Standards was not easy to grasp. Participants were not clear on how they should work with the standards. One participant noted that the standards were “high.” Another, looking at a writing standard for second grade, said, “My kids are not here!” She felt that the standard described work her second graders were unable to do. However, when she looked at the continuum of the standard both “across” and “down,” she saw where the children she serves do fit in.

### How OST Programs Are Already Addressing the Standards

Participants felt that the language of the standards was unnecessarily dense and academic, obscuring the meaning.

**Table 2. Reading “Across” Literature Standard 1**

Grade Level	Wording of Reading Literature Standard 1: Details in Text
Kindergarten	With prompting and support, ask and answer questions about key details in a text.
Grade 1	Ask and answer questions about key details in a text.
Grade 2	Ask and answer such questions as who, what, where, when, why, and how to demonstrate understanding of key details in a text.

Source: New York State P–12, 2011

They saw terms not often used in OST, such as “narrative” and “multi-modal.” However, as they translated the standards’ language into more common OST terms, they saw that they were fostering these skills and strategies in program activities every day. For example, “collaborative discussion” in the standards for kindergarteners becomes “snack and chat” in an OST program. “Narrative” really means a sequenced story—and OST programs often engage children in storytelling and reading books. A cloud lifted as participants began to see that the standards could be translated into the language of OST culture.

With their new grasp of the Common Core language, participants looked at their own lessons and activities. They were quickly able to identify how the standards aligned with what they were already doing. In fact, working from their own activities and lessons allowed participants to see the standards in action. Then they used the language of the Common Core Standards to describe the work of their OST programs. They realized that OST programs are doing quite a lot in support of the Common Core Standards. For example, participants from Hudson Guild shared the lesson excerpt shown in Table 3 (next page). We added the standards addressed by each component. As shown in the second column of Table 3, the lesson touches on many habits of mind and aligns with several Common Core Standards in the areas of reading literature and of speaking and listening—and these are excerpts from only one lesson! Using this example as a model, participants in the networking meeting began to see what their OST programs could do to support children in meeting the Common Core Standards.

### **Questions and Tensions**

Participants in the networking meeting learned that, with intention and careful thought, OST programs can align their work with the Common Core Standards, supporting the work of schools and helping young people to prepare for college and careers. In order to succeed in this endeavor, the field needs to address the questions and tensions that emerge as providers look for points of alignment and try to design activities that support the Common Core Standards.

### **The Focus on “Text” in the Core**

The term “text” is used consistently across the Common Core Standards at all levels. The common understanding of “text” is written materials: books, articles, online materials such as blogs, and the like. In OST, commonly used texts include films, recipes, games, and art objects, among others. In addition, students participate in highly experiential activities, such as community service and sports. In these activities, they often engage in the work of analysis, com-

pare and contrast ideas or elements, and describe and assess their work. We need to learn to define “text” broadly and to draw clear and intentional connections between the Common Core and the texts and activities used in OST.

### **How Much OST Programs Should Focus on the Core**

The primary mission of OST programs is to help children and youth develop a wide range of skills and abilities and to promote positive youth development. OST programs focus on the whole child rather than solely on academic outcomes. Robert Halpern points out that “children and young people have a variety of developmental needs that schools don’t address” (as quoted in Simonton, 2014). Halpern (2005) identifies a number of ways that OST support young people, developing “capacities and dimensions of self such as creativity, aesthetic sense, growing skill in specific domains, self-expression, interpersonal skill, sense of agency and voice, identification with home and community culture, individuality and relatedness, compassion, and physical vitality” (p. 212). He warns that many OST programs do a disservice to their mission if they say that they will deliver major changes in academic achievement (Halpern, 2005).

The development of social and emotional competencies is a particular strength of the OST field. A solid body of research shows that a focus on socio-emotional learning, rather than just on academics, has a positive causal relationship with school success (Durlak & Weissberg, 2007). This finding suggests that OST programs can address the Common Core while remaining true to their traditions and mission. The question is how to achieve balance between academic progress and socio-emotional development.

### **Collaborating with Schools to Address the Common Core**

OST providers are sometimes considered to be a “second shift” after the school day (Givens, 2014). The problem with the metaphor is that “second shift” staff are rarely trained as teachers, nor are they compensated equitably with the “first shift,” the school teachers. Givens (2014) calls for “regularly scheduled collaborative sessions” that would share learning “across the implicit boundaries between teachers and OST providers, thereby building a comprehensive and cohesive alignment between the adults who are educating and supporting all students” (Givens, 2014, p. 5). In some places, this collaboration has begun to take place (CCSSO, 2011; Devaney & Yohalem, 2012). Since the standards are intended to be addressed in school, communication with schools could help OST providers develop awareness of what children are being exposed to in school so that they can make explicit connections between what they do and what happens during the school day. However, little research documents how districts

**Table 3. OST Lesson Components and Common Core Standards**

Activity Description	Common Core Standards Addressed
<p>Group leaders will act out a funny skit using two famous characters. When participants hear the key words (<i>friend, frustrated, and passionate</i>), they will do a pre-assigned physical movement associated with that word. Participants will have a group discussion on how these two characters are similar. Questions will include “What do they have in common?” “How do you think each character would solve that scenario?” and “How do you relate to the character?”(10 minutes)</p>	<p><i>Participants are comparing characters as they develop an understanding of the skit and think with their peers about similarities and differences.</i></p> <p><b>Habits of mind:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>2) Build strong content knowledge</li> <li>4) Comprehend as well as critique</li> </ul> <p><b>Grade 3 reading literature standards:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>3) Describe characters in a story (their traits, motivations, or feelings)</li> <li>6) Distinguish their own point of view from that of the narrator or those of the characters</li> </ul>
<p>Participants will be broken up into two groups for two different plays. Group leaders will each take a group. Group leaders will assign specific roles to participants in their group. Play 1 is “Pocahontas and the New World.” Play 2 is “Christopher Columbus and the New World.” Groups will plan, rehearse, and perform their skit for the group. (23 minutes)</p>	<p><i>Participants are demonstrating independence and effective collaboration as they prepare the play and compare characters. They are performing a play for an audience of their peers.</i></p> <p><b>Habits of mind:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) Demonstrate independence</li> <li>3) Respond to varying demands of audience, task, purpose, and discipline</li> </ul> <p><b>Grade 3 speaking and listening standards:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly</li> <li>6) Speak in complete sentences when appropriate to task and situation in order to provide requested detail or clarification</li> </ul> <p><i>Participants are building strong content knowledge about plays by viewing and then performing them themselves; they are also developing knowledge of characters.</i></p> <p><b>Habit of mind:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>2) Build strong content knowledge</li> </ul> <p><b>Grade 3 reading literature standard:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>3) Describe characters in a story and explain how their actions contribute to the sequence of events</li> </ul> <p><i>Participants are answering questions and using evidence to support what they say.</i></p> <p><b>Habit of mind:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>5) Value evidence</li> </ul> <p><b>Grade 3 reading literature standard:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) Ask and answer questions to demonstrate understanding of a text, referring explicitly to the text as the basis for the answers</li> </ul> <p><b>Grade 3 speaking and listening standard:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>2) Determine the main ideas and supporting details of a text read aloud or information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally</li> </ul>

(continued)

**Table 3. OST Lesson Components and Common Core Standards (continued)**

Activity Description	Common Core Standards Addressed
<p>Participants will work in assigned pairs to compare and contrast how they relate to a character of their choice that they observed in either skit. (10 minutes)</p>	<p><i>Participants come to an understanding of perspective, distinguish between their own perspective and that of the character, and critique the “text” in order to relate to and compare themselves to a character.</i></p> <p><b>Habits of mind:</b></p> <p>4) Comprehend as well as critique 7) Come to understand other perspectives and cultures</p> <p><b>Grade 3 reading literature standard:</b></p> <p>6) Speak in complete sentences when appropriate to task and situation in order to provide requested detail or clarification</p>

“who are hard-pressed to meet the standards in isolation” (Gonzales, Gunderson, & Wold, 2013, p. 20) assume leadership to engage OST programs in planning and implementing activities to meet the Common Core Standards.

**Supporting All Children’s Development**

Many children, particularly in low-income communities, need specific supports. Some need English language learning. Others have learning differences or gaps in their educational experience that mean they do not meet academic expectations for their age. OST programs don’t have adequate funding, resources, or expertise to address the full range of children’s needs.

However, one of the advantages of OST is that staff create an environment in which children have a different, often richer, experience from the one they have at school. Children for whom academic work does not go smoothly can experience themselves as capable athletes, musicians, artists, and community members. These experiences contribute to the development of the whole child. The field needs to consider how OST providers can, despite their limited resources, use their strengths to support children who need help to catch up academically.

**From “Huh?” to “Aha!”: Reflections and Recommendations**

Participants in subsequent Robert Bowne Foundation networking meetings about the Common Core noted changes in their thinking. One program director reported that she approached the standards initially with some trepidation. However, she found that her funding sources required her to delve into them. Through the networking meetings, she realized that she could use the Common Core to articulate her program’s practices and outcomes.

The language of the Common Core also gives us a way to address families’ questions about what their children are

learning and teens’ concerns about what it means to be college and career ready. Some of the media coverage and talk in schools about the Common Core Standards has been fueling panic. However, OST programs could be a voice of reason and clarity in talking to families. The standards also give the field a way to talk with schools about what they do, what we do, and how we support each other.

Another critical question is, “How can we get OST staff on board?” Staff need professional development that helps them to understand what they need to know about the Common Core Standards and how to integrate them into their practice. The response to the Robert Bowne Foundation networking meetings is evidence that OST staff need help in exploring the standards, translating them into plain language, and connecting them to their current practice. Staff also need long-term, in-depth professional development in designing curriculum and planning lessons that align with the Common Core Standards in ways that are appropriate for OST programs’ goals and mission.

Some researchers have suggested that this professional development should be supported by the schools. Givens (2014) notes that “states and districts can structure frequent and robust opportunities for teachers, principals, and OST program staff to learn and work together” (p. 5). Gonzales and colleagues (2013) suggest that districts invite OST staff to grade-level planning sessions and share information and resources on the Common Core Standards. Devaney & Yohalem (2012) recommend that OST practitioners “become knowledgeable” about the standards, “communicate with school staff about academic alignment” and “consider joint training and planning time” (p. 6).

These recommendations mirror previous calls for better and more systematic strategies to improve the partnership between OST programs and schools (Little,

2009, 2013), but the relationship remains tenuous and problematic. Even if OST programs incorporate the Common Core Standards, there is no guarantee that this problematic relationship will improve or flourish. The work of building the relationship is an ongoing task that generally falls on OST programs. Meanwhile, schools are spending considerable funds on staff development that could also include OST practitioners as partners in working to meet the Common Core Standards.

As OST programs continue to negotiate the balance between their overall mission of positive youth development and their desire to also support academic achievement, the Common Core Standards can have a place in the discussion. However, OST practitioners must start with a close look at the work they already do to see what might align with the standards. As one OST provider said following the first networking meeting, “In two hours we went from ‘Huh?’ to ‘Ah, I get it!’” She and her fellow meeting participants discovered that the Common Core Standards are nothing to be afraid of. The standards are both understandable and relevant to the OST community. Looking at programs’ curriculum, activities, and lessons alongside the Common Core Standards reveals that OST programs are already doing high-quality, standards-aligned work with children and youth.

Some of the media coverage and talk in schools about the Common Core Standards has been fueling panic. However, OST programs could be a voice of reason and clarity in talking to families. The standards also give the field a way to talk with schools about what they do, what we do, and how we support each other.

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