



October 24, 2013

RE: Common Core, API, AYP, PI, STAR and SBAC

Dear MMCA Families,

During the first couple months of school, I have received several inquiries from parents about the new Common Core state standards that will be fully implemented in California next year, and in particular, how they will impact our program at MMCA. Truthfully, at the state level, there are a lot of changes coming to public education, and I'd like to take this opportunity to discuss these changes with you and talk about our state accountability metrics. There's A LOT of information below. If you have any questions or concerns about these topics, please feel free to email me at brent@mmcharter.org.

California's Implementation of the "Common Core" state standards

In 2010, as a part of the "Race to the Top" federal education funding application, California committed to changing its existing CST content standards to the "Common Core" state standards. Approximately 45 states have agreed to adopt these standards next year. The primary motivation behind "common" standards nationwide is to establish consistent and common expectations for all students regardless of the state where they reside.

Advocates of the Common Core standards believe they are internationally benchmarked "high standards." Compared to most states' existing standards, the Common Core standards are more rigorous than most states' existing language arts and mathematics standards. Historically, California's CST standards have been recognized via numerous sources to be among the most rigorous educational standards in the United States – in the aggregate, more rigorous than Common Core. With the exception being the new writing standards for lower elementary students within Common Core, I believe the overall rigor of the Common Core standards is somewhat lower than the existing language arts standards, and significantly lower than the existing math standards.

In math, for example, the current expectation for 8th grade students is a goal of Algebra I, or if the student is not ready for Algebra I, Pre Algebra. Advanced students in math have the opportunity to take Geometry in 8th grade. With Common Core, essentially Pre Algebra is the new 8th grade "standard", and advanced students may have the opportunity to take Algebra I. For us, our past practice (and what we're still doing this year) is that our advanced math group in 6th grade does Pre Algebra. At this point our plan would be to allow those students to get through Geometry in 8th grade, as has been our previous prior practice. It is unclear to me at this time if we (or any other public school within California) will be able to continue to offer Geometry as an option for our advanced students – if it is legally possible for us to do so, we will.

The main difference between the Common Core and the CST standards is not the standards themselves, but rather the approach for how we should be teaching the standards and the most appropriate way for students to relay their knowledge. With regards to how the standards are to be taught, it is very similar to our existing Montessori methodology. Both empower students to:

- Demonstrate independence
- Build content knowledge across a wide range of subjects
- Gain the ability to comprehend and apply knowledge
- Value evidence
- Understand other perspectives and cultures

Regardless of adopted state or national standards, the Montessori approach to education and the components of a Montessori classroom remain unchanged. Our teachers will continue to:

- Facilitate student learning and foster independence at the student's pace
- Cater to different learning styles through Montessori and supplemental materials
- Assess and monitor student progress by checking for comprehension and understanding
- Present individual and small group lessons based on student ability within the core subjects
- Teach critical thinking to challenge students at all levels
- Allow for self-discovery and love of learning

Our students will be given the opportunity to continue to:

- Demonstrate respect for self, others, and the environment
- Take ownership of learning
- Embody independence/self-confidence
- Apply leadership skills in various roles
- Demonstrate self-disciplineⁱ

Copies of the new Common Core standards are available at many places, including here: <http://www.corestandards.org/>

What is M.M.C.A. doing to get ready for the Common Core?

With the new writing expectations of Common Core, from a curricular strategy standpoint, we are implementing a new writing program this year in all of our classrooms. It's called the Step up to Writing program. Second, with the electronic assessment component of Common Core, we are currently doing our homework regarding purchasing multiple mobile technology carts that will have approximately 30 laptops. Currently campus-wide, we have a student to computer ratio of about 6:1 – we will be cutting that ratio in half within the next two years. Third, we are also researching different computer fluency-oriented programs, as I believe the new “Smarter Balanced Assessments” (discussed in detail below) are testing computer fluency as much as content knowledge. Finally, we will be changing our report cards next year to reflect the Common Core standards (versus the existing CST standards). We're working on what these report cards will look like, and most likely a couple classrooms will be piloting a “common core” based report card beginning with our March 2014 report cards.

2013 Accountability Performance Index for M.M.C.A.

“Accountability Performance Index”, or API, for approximately the past twelve years has been California's numerical assessment of each public school in the state. The state's goal is to have every school rated as “high performing”, which it has defined as an API proficiency score of 800 or above. Last year, M.M.C.A.'s API was 879. For the second consecutive year, the California Charter Schools Association ranks M.M.C.A. as an “excelling school” based on exceeding the state's proficiency score goal and having more than 30 points growth over the past three years.

When parents ask me about API, I have always emphasized a couple of key points: 1) Given our “whole child” educational approach, which includes ability grouping the core subjects, MMCA does not “teach to the test” like you will most likely find at our neighboring traditional school districts; 2) We have a very diverse student demographic, with students coming from as far away as Colfax to Sacramento, and everywhere in between, so it's not necessarily a good comparison. For parents that are really interested in the numbers comparison, I encourage them to compare their child's scores versus their neighborhood school, as they should compare fairly well.

With the state developing the new accountability framework, there is not going to be API scores for schools next year, and most likely, not the following year either.

2013 Adequate Yearly Progress for M.M.C.A.

“Adequate Yearly Progress”, or AYP, is based on the same data that is used to calculate the API, and has a similar purpose as the API, just from a federal perspective as part of the “No Child Left Behind Act” (NCLB). For 2013, MMCA met all of its AYP goals.

2013 Program Improvement Status for M.M.C.A.

“Program Improvement”, or PI, is a federally-based benchmark related to proficiency benchmarks of students by group and sub-groups within the AYP calculations. Even though MMCA has consistently met all state-based API criteria, two sub-groups in the 2010-11 and 2011-12 school years did not meet their AYP proficiency target in math, which creates the Program Improvement designation. We are always looking to improve our school, and again, all sub-groups met AYP goals in 2012-2013.

2014 STAR Testing

Governor Brown recently signed legislation that discontinues most STAR tests effective immediately. As of right now, the only STAR tests California public elementary schools will be administering in Spring 2014 are the 1) 5th grade science test, 2) 8th grade science test, and (possibly) the 8th grade social studies test. Instead of doing STAR testing, the new law mandates that public schools in California participate in the pilot testing of the new standardized assessment system for Common Core, which is being developed by the “Smarter Balanced Testing Consortium.” As a part of this pilot testing, some of our kids will be taking the pilot math test, some the pilot language arts test. None of the results of these tests will be reported to either the school or the parents of the kids taking the test. This situation remains very fluid – U.S. Department of Education Secretary Duncan has threatened major sanctions on California if the state does not do full standardized testing this year. These sanctions include the loss of all Title I funding for California, which is worth billions of dollars to the state.

“Smarter Balanced Testing Consortium”

With the implementation of the new Common Core standards, the eventual goal of the new standardized testing platform is that all students in California will be assessed electronically on a computer via an adaptive computer-based assessment. The Consortium has published their current “draft” tests for each grade level in both language arts and mathematics, and they are available at this link: <https://sbacpt.tds.airast.org/student/>. I HIGHLY encourage you to go to this website and look at these tests. While I am not overly concerned about the conversion from the CST standards to the Common Core standards, if the new assessments look anything like the current “draft” assessments on the Smarter Balanced website, frankly, I will be very concerned. The instructions on the assessments, for example, read like 1990’s Microsoft DOS instruction manual. The questions are not very clear, and on a lot of levels, I’m concerned that they are assessing computer fluency more than content knowledge.
