

Tennessee Teachers' Perceptions of Common Core State Standards

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I. Introduction

In recent years, more and more attention has been directed toward standards-based reform (SBR) in education. Advocates of SBR propose the alignment of academic standards, or student learning expectations, with curriculum (the means by which these expectations are addressed), and assessments (the instruments or processes used to measure student progress toward standards and direct future learning). Stated differently, standards define what students should know and be able to do within each grade and subject area. One example of a Common Core third grade math standard is that students should be able to *use place value understanding to round whole numbers to the nearest 10 or 100*.¹

The Common Core State Standards originated from a 2009 agreement between the National Governors Association (NGA), the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) and 48 states plus the District of Columbia. Currently adopted, at least in part, by 46 states, Common Core Standards exist for mathematics and English/language arts. Tennessee's pathway to adoption of the Common Core Standards began in the mid-2000s, when a consensus emerged that the then-current Tennessee standards failed to adequately prepare students for post-secondary opportunities. In January 2008, the Tennessee State Board of Education adopted more rigorous standards developed in partnership with the American Diploma Project (Potts, K., 2009). The following year, motivated in part by the competitive advantage given to Race to the Top applicants who did adopt Common Core, Tennessee's governor, Phil Bredesen, and Commissioner of Education, Tim Webb, formally joined the Common Core Initiative (<http://news.tn.gov/node/2045>).

Implementation of Common Core Standards in Tennessee began in the 2011-12 school year with the introduction of both English language arts and math standards in kindergarten, and grades one and two. The following year (2012-13), most districts began the implementation of math standards in grades three through eight. That same year about half of Tennessee's districts also piloted English

Key 2013 First to the Top Survey Findings Regarding Common Core State Standards

Potential Instructional Impact:

More than two thirds of teachers suggest that the move to Common Core standards will require them to change the way they teach. A majority of respondents also believe that the move to Common Core will improve the quality of their teaching and improve student learning.

Training: The majority of teachers were trained in school- or district-wide training sessions, with 92 percent of survey respondents having participated in Common Core training by spring 2013.

Communication: More than 60 percent of respondents agree that Common Core transition plans have been well communicated, and just under that figure say the same regarding changing statewide assessments to reflect Common Core standards.

¹ This research brief is one in a series addressing findings from the Tennessee Consortium's annual First to the Top Survey. Suggested citation: Pepper, M., Burns, S., and Warach, K. (2013) Tennessee Teachers' Perceptions of Common Core State Standards. December 2013, Tennessee Consortium on Research, Evaluation and Development, Nashville, TN.

language arts standards in the same grades. Full implementation of Common Core Standards in both math and English language arts should occur in all grades across the state's schools during the current year (2013-14).

Implementation of Common Core in Tennessee has been supported by a series of teacher and administrator trainings provided by the Tennessee Department of Education (TDOE). During the summer of 2012, 13,000 educators received training on the new math standards; and during the summer of 2013, 30,000 educators received training. TDOE also trained Common Core coaches to assist districts and schools throughout implementation.

Within the past year Common Core State Standards have become the focus of heated debate, with critics viewing them as a not so subtle federal incursion into local decision-making and a change that disproportionately emphasizes the reading of non-fiction over fiction. Proponents counter that Common Core Standards were developed by states, and that curricular decisions are still made locally.

In an effort to understand teacher perceptions of Tennessee's Common Core efforts, this brief presents data from the [2013 First to the Top Survey](#). This annual survey was first administered in 2011, and is designed to capture Tennessee educators' perspectives relative to various reforms funded through Tennessee's Race to the Top grant. The almost 27,000 teachers and administrators who responded to the survey were asked questions pertaining to Common Core training and communication, as well as the potential of the new standards to impact the quality of their teaching and student learning. Roughly 3,300 randomly selected teachers also responded to an additional survey module that more deeply probed their experiences and perceptions. Survey findings are grouped as follows: 1) The Potential Impact of Common Core Standards, 2) The Coverage of Teacher Training, 3) The Quality of Communication Related to Common Core, 4) Types of Teacher Interactions with Common Core Coaches, and 5) Perceptions of Common Core Standards in comparison to their most recent predecessor, the Tennessee Standards.

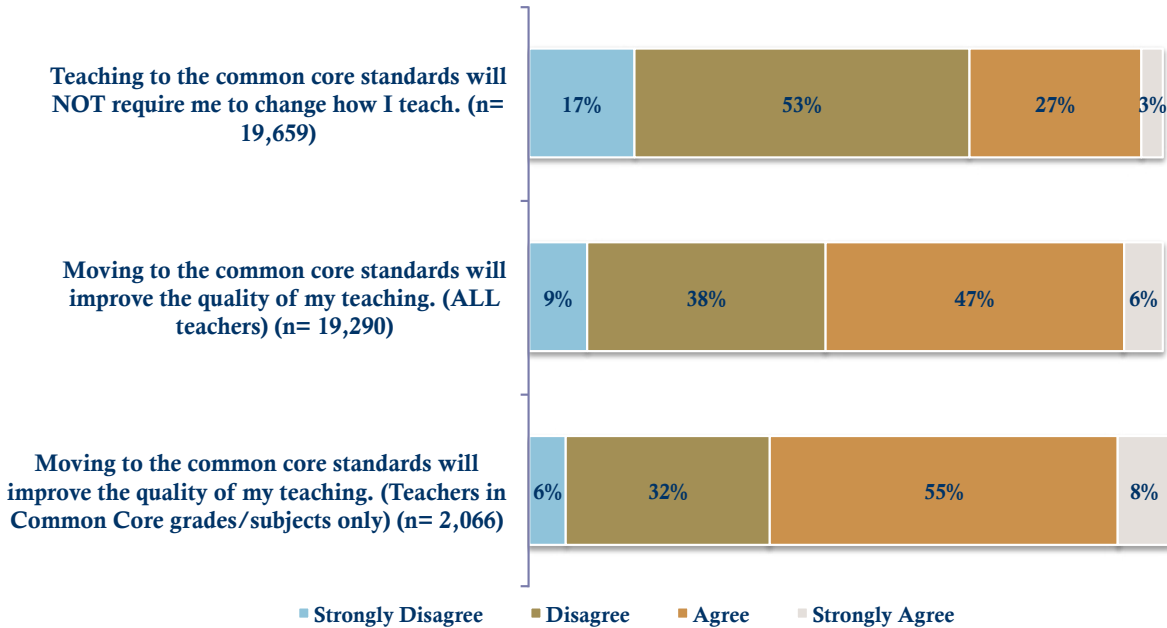
II. FINDINGS FROM THE 2013 FIRST TO THE TOP SURVEY

Teacher Perceptions of the Potential Impact of Common Core Standards

All survey respondents were invited to complete seven questions relative to Common Core. Three questions regarding the potential impact of common core standards are perhaps of greatest interest, and Figure 1 shows results from two of these questions. First, a large majority of teachers (70 percent) suggest that the move to Common Core standards will require them to change the way they teach. A majority of respondents also believe that the move to Common Core will improve the quality of their teaching (53 percent); this may be understated, however, as this group of respondents includes teachers in subjects and/or grades not directly involved in the shift to Common Core. Perhaps a more precise measure limits the sample to teachers who participated in an additional module and indicated that they were within a grade/subject directly affected by Common Core. Among this group 63 percent of respondents agree that Common Core will improve the quality of their teaching.²

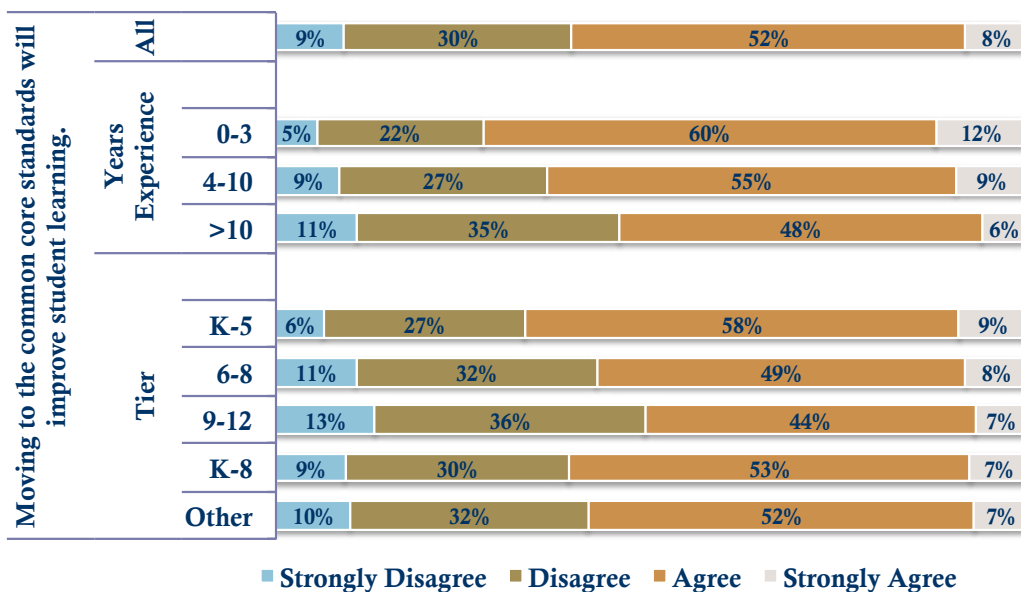
² There is little difference in responses to the first question when results are distinguished between teachers who self-identify within a grade/subject affected by Common Core.

Figure 1. Teacher Perceptions of Common Core Impact on Their Teaching



The third question of interest is a summative one that asks teachers their level of agreement with the statement *Moving to the common core standards will improve student learning*. Figure 2 shows that, overall, three out of five teachers agree with this statement. Small differences in the level of agreement exist by tier and by years of teaching experience.

Figure 2. Teacher Perceptions of the Impact of Common Core on Student Learning: All, by Tier, by Years Experience (n=19,100)

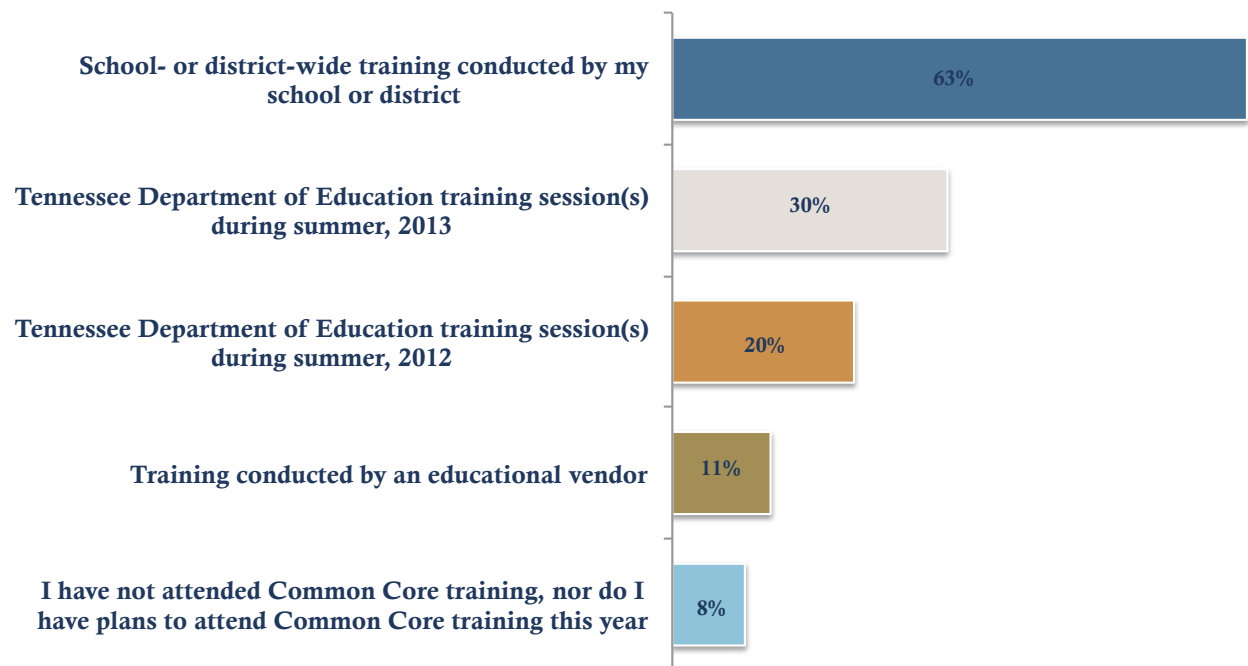


Common Core Teacher Training

Another survey question examined the source of Common Core trainings for teachers. As indicated in Figure 3, only 8 percent of participants reported that they had not participated, nor were they planning on participating in some form of training during the 2012-13 school year. Note that answer options are not mutually exclusive, so a teacher was able to indicate more than one training type within his or her answer. The majority of respondents (63 percent) report that they attended or planned to attend a school- or district-wide training session.

When examining differences across district size, respondents in large urban districts appeared to rely more heavily on school- or district-wide training, and teachers in districts with fewer than 10,000 students relied more heavily on training from the Tennessee Department of Education. Finally, the breakdown of training options by tier was similar to overall patterns, though, as would be expected based on the state’s implementation strategy, a greater percentage of respondents in elementary grades received Common Core training than did their colleagues in middle grades and high schools.

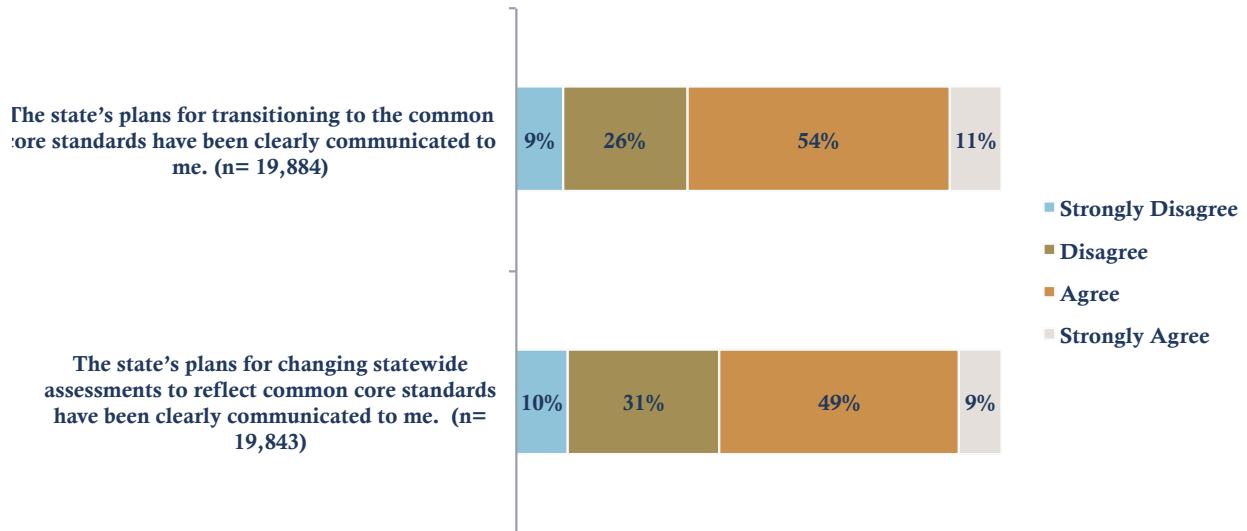
**Figure 3. Common Core Teacher Training
 2012, 2013 (n=22,860)**



Communication Around Common Core

Yet another group of questions investigated teacher perceptions of communication clarity relative to transitioning to the Common Core Standards and to statewide assessments that reflect the standards. As seen in Figure 4, 65 percent of respondents agree that transition plans for Common Core Standards have been well communicated, and 58 percent say the same regarding changing assessments. Examination of responses by tier suggest that teachers in elementary and middle grades are more positive about the clarity of communication than their colleagues in high school.

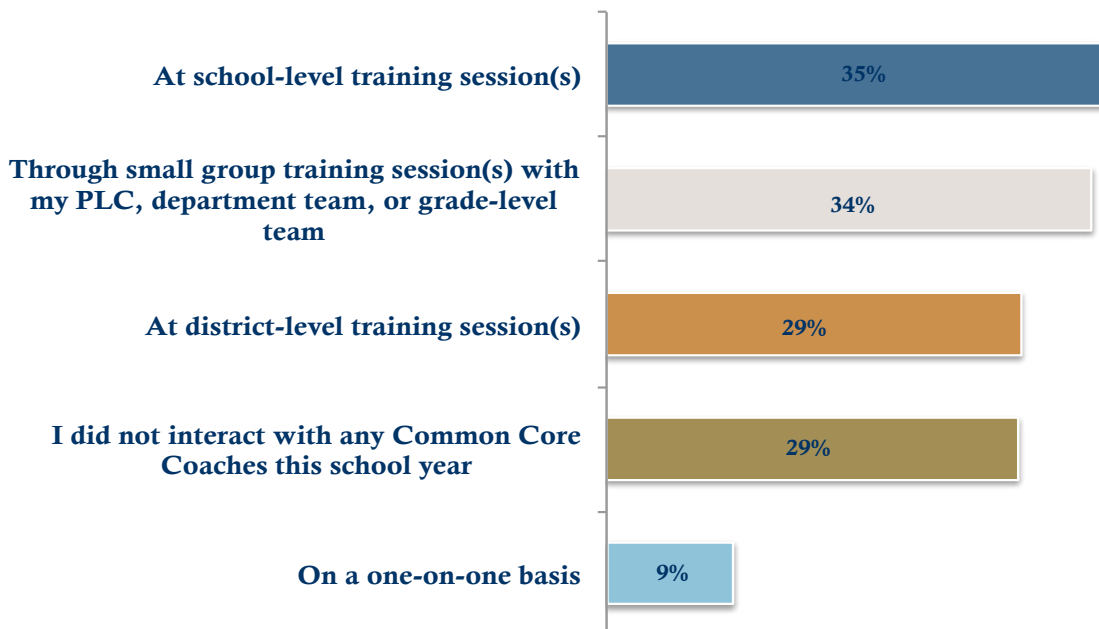
Figure 4. Teacher Perceptions of Communication Around Common Core Standards



Teacher Interactions with Common Core Coaches

The survey also probed how teachers interacted with Common Core coaches, those individuals trained to assist districts and schools with the implementation of the Common Core Standards. Again, note that answer options are not mutually exclusive. As seen in Figure 5, the most frequent interactions occurred at school-level training sessions and small group training sessions. Only nine percent of respondents interacted with coaches on an individual basis, and 29 percent had no interaction with Common Core coaches at all.

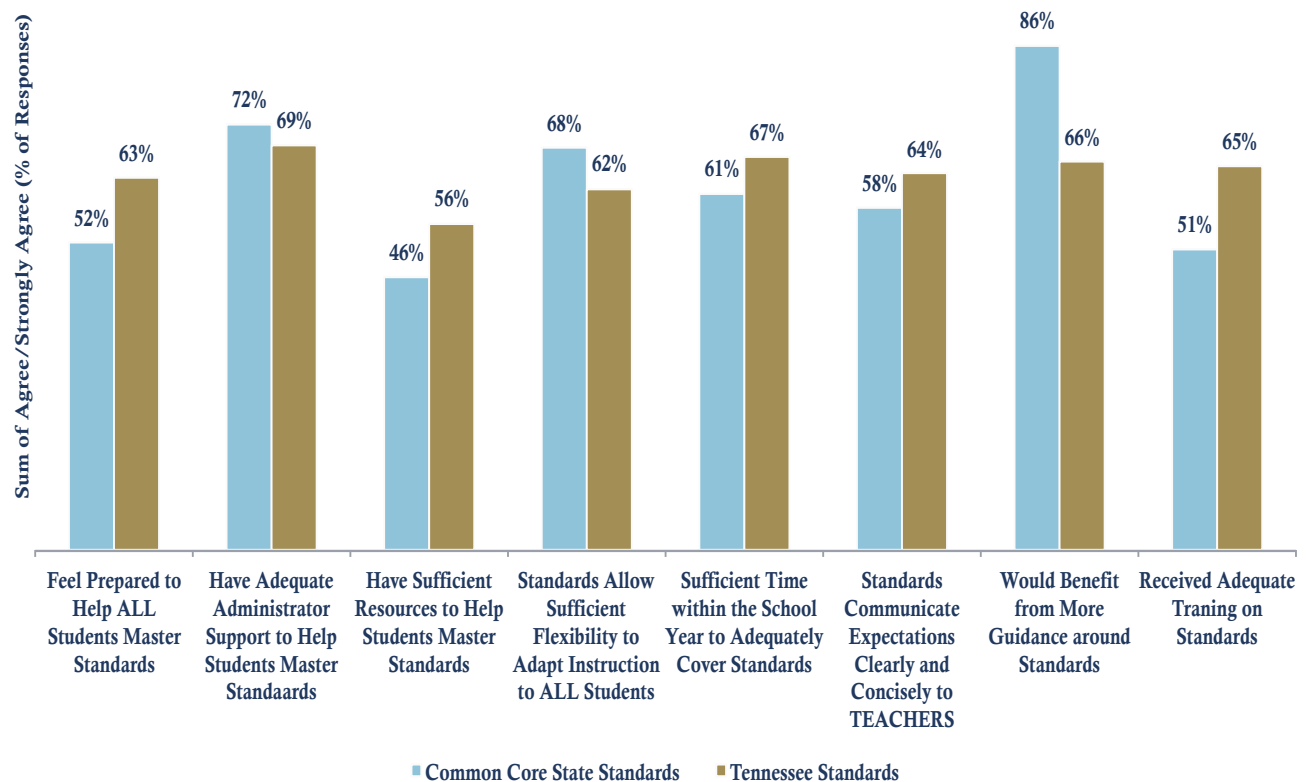
Figure 5. Teacher Interaction with Common Core Coaches, 2012-2013 (n=22,860)



Findings from Module Questions Addressing Teacher Perceptions of the Common Core Standards and the Tennessee Standards

An additional set of questions regarding standards and assessments were explored with a smaller sample of teachers using the *Standards and Assessment & Knowledge of and Attitudes Toward Reform* module of the 2013 First to the Top Survey. Prior to implementation of the Common Core Standards, the Tennessee Standards were used to guide instruction. This final set of questions examines teacher perceptions of the Common Core and Tennessee standards by asking identical questions in regard to both (See Figure 6). Generally speaking, respondents indicated a greater level of preparedness and support for the Tennessee standards – not surprising given that teachers have used these standards for several years. A majority of respondents also indicated that they felt prepared to help all students master the Tennessee standards (63 percent), and they received adequate training to implement them (65 percent). In contrast, only half of respondents feel prepared to help all students master Common Core standards (52 percent) and believe that they received adequate training to implement them (51 percent). Finally, respondents indicated that additional guidance around Common Core Standards would be beneficial, and that they have a need for additional resources to help students master the standards regardless of which standards are being used.

Figure 6. Teacher Perceptions of Common Core and Tennessee Standards



III. Concluding Observations

Findings from the 2013 First to the Top Survey suggest that transition to the Common Core State Standards in Tennessee has begun positively. The majority of teachers who responded to the survey report that communication has been clear regarding the transition, and that the same is true for information provided about changes to assessments brought on by the new standards. Additionally, 92 percent of survey respondents reported that they have participated in some type of training related to Common Core.

When examining teacher perceptions of the impact of Common Core Standards, more than two thirds believe that the move to new standards will require them to change the way they teach. Indications are that respondents see this change as a positive one with a majority suggesting that the move to Common Core will improve both the quality of their teaching and student learning.

Finally, responses from a smaller sample of teachers responding to a survey module suggest that the majority of teachers are generally comfortable with standards-based instruction. A large majority of the module's respondents suggest, however, that additional guidance and resources would be beneficial, particularly in regard to Common Core Standards.



Tennessee's Consortium on Research, Evaluation, and Development is an independent research and development center based at Vanderbilt University's Peabody College, and funded largely through Tennessee's Race to the Top grant. The Consortium and its partners engage in research studies, program and policy evaluations, and subsequent development activities to promote results-oriented decision-making. The views expressed in this research brief do not necessarily reflect those of the sponsoring agencies, and any errors remain the sole responsibility of the authors.

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