

# BALTIMORE COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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August 29, 2013

Dear Parents and Guardians,

You play an important role in your child's education, and many of you have posed questions about changes to the Baltimore County Public Schools curriculum in English/Language Arts and Mathematics. As we begin the 2013-2014 school year, we are excited to include the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in our curriculum. We're writing to give you more information about the CCSS, which are foundational to the development of our curriculum.

### ***What is Common Core?***

The Common Core State Standards are high-quality academic expectations in two core subjects, English/Language Arts and Mathematics. They were developed by and adopted for use by states that chose to work in partnership, not by the federal government. These standards were written with input from tens of thousands of educators, including educators from across Maryland, in response to recognition by states that higher standards were needed to graduate students more ready for college and careers. The CCSS list the skills and knowledge that students must master in order to be successful after high school. The standards focus on both basic skills (e.g. math without calculators) and critical thinking standards (e.g. explaining how to answer complex problems) because these are the skills children will need to compete in the modern economy. As a result of the increased rigor of the CCSS, you can expect to see students writing more in all of their classes, not just English. In math classes, they will be asked to explain how to complete a problem—not just show the correct answer. This will mean a more thorough program of study for ALL students.

Maryland has embraced the CCSS, and Baltimore County Public Schools staff use these standards as Baltimore County educators craft our county curriculum materials (the unit plans, lesson plans, and full set of comprehensive teaching and learning resources). It's important to note that neither Maryland state nor Baltimore County implementation of CCSS will lead to any new collection or distribution of personal student information.

### ***How has the Maryland Assessment Program changed?***

Maryland's state tests are being changed to match the increased demands implicit in these standards. Instead of taking the MSA or HSA for English and math, students will take PARCC in 2015; they will continue taking MSA and HSA for science and social studies. On PARCC, instead of just filling in answer bubbles, students will take the new assessments completely online, explaining why they know the correct answer and how they arrived at their answer. And because assessment will be done online, teachers will get the results much faster, so you will get to see their test results sooner. This quicker turn-around time for results will allow teachers to make more effective choices to tailor each student's instructional program.

### ***How are students being grouped in reading this year and why?***

The new Common Core Curriculum allows students to move at their own pace based on pre-assessments prior to each unit. Through ongoing informal and formal assessment, students will be flexibly grouped in small teacher-facilitated instructional groups. During each unit, there are three possible groups a student might be placed into based on the pre-assessment. Each student will participate in small group instruction, with groups designed to match instruction to student learning needs within that group. For this reason, a heterogeneously grouped class enables the students to be assessed and placed within the correct group based on specific skills for instruction in a given unit, rather than being "tracked" into a set pathway for the entire academic year.

### ***How will teachers address the vocabulary contained in some of the assigned books?***

The novels selected are more complex and offer many opportunities for deep discussion and interpretation. The themes in many are more complex than previously selected novels. Some of the books are from eras where some vocabulary may now be considered archaic. As always, the role of the teacher is to introduce the vocabulary and tie it into the context of the story. Likewise some of the books revolve around current events. Through these more

complex texts, we believe that our students will gain a deeper understanding, empathy, and connections to universal themes noted in the chosen readings. We also respect your views as parents and the desire that many may have to discuss these themes within their own homes. Please know that we are available for any questions or concerns that you may have.

#### ***What are the changes to the math instruction?***

The aim of the primary mathematics program is to ensure students demonstrate the Standards for Mathematics Practice and obtain an innate understanding of whole number relationships. In the 2012-2013 school year, the Mathematics Program that was taught in the prekindergarten, kindergarten, and grade one classrooms was aligned to the CCSS for Mathematics. In order to be aligned with the CCSS the BCPS Grade 1 Program transitioned from a “blended approach” which utilized two instructional resources of Scott Foresman Addison Wesley and *Investigations*, to only relying on one core resource, *Investigations in Number, Data, and Space*. This resource has been successfully implemented in The Kindergarten Mathematics Program for over five years and in the Grade 1-5 Mathematics Programs as part of the blended approach for five years. In the 2013-2014 school year, in order to be fully aligned with the CCSS, the BCPS Grade 2 Mathematics Curriculum will move from a blended approach, to the use of *Investigations* as the core instructional resource.

The aim of the intermediate mathematics program is to ensure students demonstrate the Standards for Mathematics Practice and obtain a deep understanding of fraction concepts and foundational mathematics skills required for success in middle school mathematics and Algebra 1. The Common Core Standards for Mathematical Practice requires students to analyze how to solve more complex and multi-step real-world problems. Parents may notice more complex mathematical tasks as part of the intermediate mathematics program. In the 2013-2014 school year, the Grades 3-5 Mathematics Programs are aligned with the CCSS. These grades will continue to use the two instructional resources, Scott Foresman Addison Wesley and *Investigations*, in a blended approach. Parents and students may notice that the order of concepts taught will vary among each grade. For example, The Grade Three Mathematics Program is now beginning with multiplication instead of place value. Parents and students may also notice a deeper study of fraction concepts beginning in third grade and developing over the intermediate grades.

#### ***What happened to the English/Language Arts GT curriculum?***

Rather than just teaching a few novels, the current program is embedded in Baltimore County’s new reading curriculum. The acceleration instructional group replaces what was formerly the GT curriculum. The novels are very complex and the skill development will require students to stretch their understanding and learning daily. However, as stated previously, students will be placed in the accelerated group based on their pre-assessment task, not a predetermined identification process. Students do not have to be identified as “gifted” in order to participate in this curriculum and instruction; conversely, students who are identified “gifted” will not automatically access this pathway. Teachers will use diagnostic data and student observation to determine the most appropriate pathway for each student. This model represents a collaborative effort between the Department of English Language Arts and the Office of Gifted and Talented Education.

The current GT Review and Referral process is being revised during the 2013-2014 school year. The use of the term “diagnostically placed in the GT curriculum” is no longer being used for Reading/Language Arts.

#### ***What happened to the Mathematics GT curriculum?***

This year students who are identified as GT math students in grade 3 will use the BCPS Grade 3 Mathematics Curriculum aligned to the grade 3 CCSS. Students will be provided opportunities for building deeper understanding of content through enrichment and acceleration. It should be noted that many of the previous Maryland Grade 4 Standards are now part of the Grade 3 CCSS. Next year these students will use a mathematics curriculum aligned to CCSS grade 4.

This year students who are identified as GT math students in grade 4 will use the BCPS Grade 5 Mathematics Curriculum aligned to the grade 5 CCSS. Next year these students will use a mathematics curriculum aligned to CCSS grades 5 and 6. This year students who are identified as GT math students in grade 5 will use the BCPS Grade 6 Mathematics Curriculum which is aligned to the current state standards and supplemented with Common Core like activities. Next year these students will use a mathematics curriculum aligned to CCSS grades 7 and 8.

***Where can I learn more?***

We will provide on-going information about the CCSS and the transition to the PARCC assessments over the coming year. To begin, we are providing the two handouts (one on mathematics and one on English Language Arts). Another excellent set of resources has been developed by the national Parent Teacher Association.

- **The attached handouts.** These handouts provide more information about the specific skills and knowledge present in the CCSS.  
<http://www.achieve.org/files/AchievingCCSS-MathFINAL.pdf> (math)  
<http://www.achieve.org/files/AchievingCCSS-ELAFINAL.pdf> (English language arts)
- **Using PTA resources.** The National Parent Teacher Association has some excellent parent guides to the Common Core, including activities you can do at home with your children to give them the best chance at success. These resources can be found under the “For Parents” tab at [www.PTA.org](http://www.PTA.org). The guides are available in English and Spanish.

The transition to use of the CCSS within the larger Baltimore County Public Schools curriculum means that your children will be prepared for college or career and globally competitive after graduation. We are excited to be a part of the new journey that our school system is on as we embrace the instructional shifts necessary to meet the needs of 21st century learners. Thank you for partnering with us in this important work.