

THE NATIONAL OPERA CENTER AMERICA

OPERA AND COMMON CORE: CONNECTIONS BETWEEN THE COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS AND OPERA LEARNING PREPARED BY OPERA AMERICA'S COMMON CORE WORKING GROUP SEPTEMBER 2013

States across the country have adopted the Common Core State Standards and schools are beginning to implement new curriculum this year. Opera companies continue to offer an impressive volume of K-12 programs ranging in scope, while facing increasing pressure to articulate the value of sustained arts education in schools. The opera field marks this opportunity to demonstrate how their efforts meet required curriculum standards and contribute to student achievement in the 21st century. This national statement prepares the field to navigate the new standards and articulate how opera company programs are suited to achieving Common Core learning goals.

Common Core State Standards — An Overview

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) released in 2010 “provide a consistent, clear understanding of what students are expected to learn, so teachers and parents know what they need to do to help them. The standards are designed to be robust and relevant to the real world, reflecting the knowledge and skills that our young people need for success in college and careers.” They are also meant to promote equity by ensuring all students, no matter where they live, are well prepared with the skills and knowledge necessary to collaborate and compete with their peers in the United States and abroad (National Governors, [Mission Statement](#) and [Frequently Asked Questions](#)). The Common Core State Standards Initiative is led by the National Governors Association (NGA) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO). The standards were developed with input from teachers, parents, researchers and educational experts. The federal government was not involved in its development. To date, 45 states have adopted the standards and most of these will begin implementation in the 2013-2014 school year. Assessments to test student mastery of the standards are being developed by Partnership for the Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) and the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC). These are expected to be available in 2014-2015.

The standards focus on English Language Arts (ELA) and Mathematics as foundational skill sets for studying other subject areas: history/social studies, science and technical subjects. The term “technical subjects” is defined by the standards as “[a] course devoted to practical study, such as engineering, technology, design, business or other workforce-related subject; a technical aspect of a wider field of study, such as art or music” (National Governors, [ELA Appendix A](#), Glossary of Key Terms). Standards for history/social studies, science and technical subjects are integrated into the K-5 standards. For grades 6-12, the standards provide some specificity, but primarily refer to the Career and College Readiness anchor standards and high school standards in literacy to define expectations. The [ELA standards](#) explain that “literacy standards for grade 6 and above are predicated on teachers of ELA, history/social studies, science and technical subjects using their content area expertise to help students meet the particular challenges of reading, writing, speaking, listening and language in their respective fields.” In both ELA and mathematics, the documents outline standards for content and skills with an emphasis on process-based learning; that is, students must demonstrate competency in certain areas, but with a focus on their abilities such as analyzing, critiquing, comparing, interpreting, integrating and evaluating.

Arts and Common Core

The Common Core State Standards Initiative has not created an arts-specific component, yet the arts field has responded poignantly, arguing for equity and quality of arts instruction as a part of a comprehensive education. The arts continue to be defined as a core academic subject under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA, also known as No Child Left Behind), acknowledging the relevance of the arts in a complete education and allowing the arts to be eligible for federal funding from the Department of Education. However, a 2011 national survey by the Farkas Duffett Research Group found that two-thirds of teachers say that other subjects (such as the arts) “get crowded out by extra attention being paid to math or language arts.” As reported in the 2009-2010 U.S. Department of Education’s Fast Response Statistical Survey, schools with a higher concentration of students in poverty were less likely to offer arts education (Parsad, Basmat and Spiegelman, Maura, 14 28). The results of the study were alarming enough to prompt U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan to declare the status of arts

education “an equity issue and a civil rights issue,” and to conclude that “A well-rounded education is simply too vital to our students’ success to let the teaching of the arts and humanities erode.”

In recent years, the Arts Education Working Group, a coalition of national arts and arts education advocacy organizations (including OPERA America) issued a unified statement titled “Creating Student Success in School, Work, and Life”. This statement aligns neatly with the goals of Common Core and explains that our nation needs schools to prepare students to meet the demands of the 21st century both for the students’ sake and for the sake of our economy and our society. These demands cannot be met without comprehensive arts education in our nation’s schools. It goes on to explain how “the arts equip students with a creative, competitive edge” (Arts Education, 1).

Many arts advocates and researchers have built on this argument to show that there is natural alignment between the goals of the Common Core State Standards and the work that arts educators and arts organizations already do. David Coleman, one of the authors of the standards, developed the “Guiding Principles for the Arts” and details how arts-learning parallels many of the defining competencies of ELA, such as skills in observation and interpretation. The National Coalition for Core Arts Standards (NCCAS) states, “The Common Core can potentially provide arts teachers with a common language with which to describe the cognitive skills that they are already addressing and cultivating through rigorous and meaningful arts experiences” (The College Board, 4). The following sections outline a framework for opera companies to identify the natural alignment between their work and the standards, and highlight language from the standards for opera companies to use when working with schools.

Opera and the Common Core State Standards

The very nature of opera, as an inherently multidisciplinary art form, has allowed opera companies and schools to develop ways to incorporate opera into the curriculum. Over the years, opera education programs have provided students with various ways to experience and engage with the art form, while supporting substantive classroom conceptual connections. Below the term “opera learning” is used broadly to describe a range of K-12 programs, which generally reflect three categories. (See Appendix A for examples.)

1. **Creating and Performing Opera:** any aspect of opera composing, libretto writing, performing and production, whether it be original work or re-imaginings of existing narrative work.
2. **Learning About Opera:** activities that are rooted in a specific repertoire including studying the composer, librettist, and primary sources. Gaining knowledge of opera history, specific opera conventions, notable singers, and historical and cultural contexts. Understanding the dramatic, technical and aesthetic aspects of production elements. Oftentimes these activities culminate in attending a performance.
3. **Opera Career Readiness:** engaging with opera professionals, including technicians, administrators and contemporary creators/performers, oftentimes with a focus on transferring learning to a work setting.

As an important part of mission fulfillment and organizational sustainability, K-12 education programs continue to be a vital and growing part of what opera companies do. Even though overall company expenses fell an average of 8% between 2009 and 2011, spending on education programs during that same time rose by 5%, totaling almost half a million dollars in additional spending toward education across the field. In 2011 alone, opera companies produced more than 1,600 events designed for children and youth, reaching more than 400,000 (OPERA America). Across the field, opera companies are devoting entire productions to serving students, with even the smallest sized companies (those with budgets of less than \$1 million) maintaining significant activity in schools.

Opera learning programs are tailored to the immediate needs of schools, students and local standards, and range in scope and scale across the country. For example, many opera companies enhance their programs for students with further professional development for classroom teachers or arts specialists. In all cases, companies make decisions as to the content and delivery of programs, influenced by season repertoire, given specialties of available teaching artists or staff, and, of course, program funding. Similarly, the Common Core State Standards do not dictate how teachers should teach or how students should be assessed. Instead, they provide a useful framework for articulating the mutual goals shared by schools and opera companies that drive the content choices and activities of opera learning programs.

* * * * *

Opera encompasses all fine arts disciplines and deals with subject matter drawn from literature, history and myriad cultural contexts. The creation and study of opera is inherently collaborative and complex. Opera performance is characterized by artistic excellence which stems from historical traditions, and continues to be reinvented through the use of modern technologies. The art form's multifaceted nature inherently allows for connections across educational disciplines and, therefore, across the Common Core Standards.

Opera and English Language Arts

At the broadest level, there is clear alignment between opera and the values embodied in the Common Core State Standards for ELA. The College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards (CCRA), provide broad definitions of the skills and understandings that all students must demonstrate. The grade-specific standards provide additional specificity. There is clear alignment between opera and the anchor standards for Reading Literature (RL), Informational Texts (RI), Speaking and Listening (SL) and Language (L). In some cases, opera is a strongly suited medium to teach that particular skill. The following standards show direct connections to the art form:

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.2.4¹ Describe how words and phrases (e.g., regular beats, alliteration, rhymes, repeated lines) supply rhythm and meaning in a story, poem or song.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4.5 Explain major differences between poems, drama and prose, and refer to the structural elements of poems (e.g., verse, rhythm, meter) and drama (e.g., casts of characters, settings, descriptions, dialogue, stage directions) when writing or speaking about a text.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.5.7 Analyze how visual and multimedia elements contribute to the meaning, tone or beauty of a text (e.g., graphic novel, multimedia presentation of fiction, folktale, myth, poem).

CCRA.SL.2 Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively and orally.

CCRA.L.3 Apply knowledge of language to understand how language functions in different contexts, to make effective choices for meaning or style, and to comprehend more fully when reading or listening.

There are a variety of ways that opera programs can address specific standards. For example, when studying opera repertoire, students are likely to:

CCRA.R.4 Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.

CCRA.R.9 Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.

Creating an original work is likely to involve writing exercises where students:

CCRA.W.3 Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details and well-structured event sequences.

¹ Throughout the standards each section is notated using a code. Grade-specific standards are indicated with CCSS, followed by the content section name, the content "strand" acronym, the grade level and the standard number. This example indicates Reading Literature, grade 2, standard 4. Anchor standards, which are consistent across grades, have a content acronym and a standard number. For example, CCRA SL.2 is Speaking and Listening, standard 2.

CCRA.W.4 Write routinely over extended time frames (time for research, reflection and revision) and shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range of tasks, purposes and audiences.

In addition, learning to sing and act in an opera might touch on “Reading: Foundational Skills” where students are expected to demonstrate an “understanding of spoken words, syllables and sounds (phonemes) as a part of “Phonological Awareness”. Opera companies may include writing an opinion about attending a performance which aligns with:

CCRA.W.1 Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

ELA Standard 10 (Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity) calls for a “[staircase](#)” of increasing text complexity where students build knowledge overtime and study topics or themes in depth, sourced from a broad range of cultures and time periods. The range of texts in literature includes stories, folktales and fables, as well as staged dialogue and poetry. Many operas are based on such works. Informational texts include materials on history and the arts, in addition to technical texts. Texts about opera history and technical aspects of opera production also fall into this category. See Appendix B for a list of operas based on literary texts and other opera-related texts.

The ELA standards also guide the study of other subjects such as science and history. Over the years, opera educators have grown adept at using their process-based learning activity to teach various subjects, especially social studies. Schools may find that opera companies are particularly poised to provide programs that achieve ELA standards, but in these other subject areas.

Opera and Mathematics

The standards for Mathematics also offer connections to opera learning. The NCCAS suggests that the math standards reference the four essential creative practices: imagining, investigating, constructing and reflecting. These “meta-cognitive activities nurture the effective work habits of curiosity, creativity, and innovation, critical thinking and problem solving, communication, and collaboration, each of which transfer to all aspects of learning and life in the 21st century.” (National Coalition, 2012) The following eight “processes and proficiencies” are the [Standards for Mathematical Practice](#), which form the backbone for each grade-specific standard:

1. Make sense of problems and persevere in solving them
2. Reason abstractly and quantitatively
3. Construct viable arguments and critique the reasoning of others
4. Model with mathematics
5. Use appropriate tools strategically
6. Attend to precision
7. Look for and make use of structure
8. Look for and express regularity in repeated reasoning

General alignment exists between these math practices and opera programs that help shape students’ attitudes and behaviors. For example, artistic activities that ask students to persevere in solving creative problems and critique the reasoning of others. With production-based programs, opera companies can offer opportunities where students actually apply mathematics when learning about opera sets and costumes. Students can participate in pattern making, creating set drawings and models built to scale, and modifying costumes to fit different casts of singers. These activities are geared toward meeting specific math standards, such as “Measurement and Data,” where students generate measurement data by using rulers (CCSS.Math.Content.3.MD.B.4), or need to understand concepts of “area” and “plane figures” (CCSS.Math.Content.3.MD.C.5). Although mathematics are inherent in a smaller portion of opera education activity, such programs contribute to career readiness and offer practical problem solving in real-work settings.

* * * * *

The Common Core State Standards, across all subjects, were built upon key values that prepare students for success. These values are reflected in the ELA introductory section titled "[Students Who are College and Career Ready in Reading, Writing, Speaking, Listening, and Language.](#)"

1. Demonstrating independence
2. Building strong content knowledge
3. Responding to the varying demands of audience, task, purpose and discipline
4. Comprehending, as well as critiquing
5. Valuing evidence
6. Using technology and digital media strategically and capably
7. Coming to understand other perspectives and cultures

The opera field acknowledges these values and many opera companies strive to meet these goals. The authentic connections to the Common Core State Standards allow opera staff, school administrators and all stakeholders to bolster their partnerships and refine their support of student achievement. Looking closely at the alignment between educational standards and opera programs is a valuable exercise, as it better defines the potential of an opera company's impact in their communities.

OPERA America's Common Core Working Group

Jill Burnham, Los Angeles Opera
Stuart Holt, The Metropolitan Opera Guild
Barbara Lynne Jamison, Seattle Opera
Sam Lowry, Sarasota Opera
Ruth Nott, San Francisco Opera
Erika Rauer, New York City Opera
Cerise Sutton, Florida Grand Opera
Andrea Walters, The Santa Fe Opera
Jessica Weber, Chicago Opera Theater

Leah D. Wilson, Director of Learning and Engagement, OPERA America
Brandon Gryde, Director of Government Affairs, OPERA America
Jackie Schiffer, Audience Development Project Coordinator, OPERA America

Works Cited

- Arts Education Working Group. "Arts Education: Creative Student Success In School, Work, and Life." May 30, 2013. Americans for the Arts. 1 August 2013 <http://afa.3cdn.net/8e3a2547433204e8e8_x0m6bny11.pdf>.
- Coleman, David. "Guiding Principles for the Arts: Grades K-12." New York State Education Department. 1 August 2013 <<http://usny.nysed.gov/rttt/docs/guidingprinciples-arts.pdf>>.
- National Core Arts Standards: A Conceptual Framework for Arts Learning. Unpublished manuscript. 2012. (Appears in The College Board, 2012.)
- National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers. Common Core State Standards. Washington D.C.: National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010.
- Parsad, Basmat and Spiegelman, Maura. "Arts Education In Public Elementary and Secondary Schools 1999-2000 and 2009-10." National Center for Education Statistics, Insititute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. Washington, D.C. 27 August 2013 <<http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED530715.pdf>>.
- OPERA America. "Professional Opera Survey." Fiscal Years 2009-2011.
- The College Board. "The Arts and the Common Core: A Review of Connections Between the Common Core State Standards and the National Core Arts Standards Conceptual Framework." New York: December 2012. 1 August 2013 < <http://nccas.wikispaces.com/Common+Core+Alignment>>.

APPENDIX A: Examples of K-12 Opera Education Programs

[Music!Words!Opera! Create Your Own Opera](#) (Creating and Performing)

Opera companies throughout North America host professional development programs for classroom teachers and music specialists. Teachers learn from opera teaching artists about how to create an original opera with their students. The process involves researching an original story (often based on curriculum in other areas such as history or science), drafting a libretto and composing the score. The opera companies are committed to helping teachers implement the program with their students. Projects have gone on to full productions where students collaborate to build sets, design costumes and perform a staged final performance. Contact [OPERA America](#) for a list of companies offering *Music!Words!Opera!* workshops.

[Opera is Elementary](#) (Learning About Opera)

Opera is Elementary at New York City Opera introduces young children to the world of opera through the study of an age-appropriate work each year. Teaching artists collaborate with teachers to demonstrate the basics of music and drama during a series of two in-school workshops, and then encourage students to create their own interpretations of the story through original poems, songs or art projects. Finally, students attend a performance of the opera and participate in culminating projects and an optional follow-up visit with a teaching artist. In 2012-2013, the piece was *Alice in Wonderland* by Unsuk Chin, based on the novel by Lewis Carroll (an illustrative text for grades 4-5 listed in the standards), and this year the piece is Tobias Picker's chamber opera, *Fantastic Mr. Fox*, based on the children's novel by Roald Dahl.

[In-School "Informances"](#) (Opera Career Readiness)

Florida Grand Opera (FGO) staff or artists from the Young Artist Studio travel to schools to share their talent, knowledge and career path with students in middle school or high school. For students interested in onstage performance, two singers and a coach give an in-depth presentation on the musicology and the performance of songs from operas, operettas, Broadway and concert repertoire. They also help students discuss careers in the fine arts. For students interested in backstage production, a member of FGO's production team meets with students and gives an overview of the profession, types of jobs available and skills needed to work in the industry. This program can be tailored to specific school interests, including set design, set and prop construction, lighting design and use of lighting instruments.

[Opera Time](#) (Multifaceted)

Seattle Opera fosters literacy in and through the arts with *Opera Time*, a curriculum enrichment program for early readers in grades Pre-K through 2 and ELL students. This reading and literacy program is delivered by a teaching artist/singer during a 30-minute session, and aligns closely with Common Core ELA standards. Students learn a signature "At the Opera" song, that describes the opera experience. The teaching artist then reads a story. The story serves as inspiration for the students to create their own original scenes or arias exploring character and scenario.

[Opera for All](#) (Multifaceted)

Chicago Opera Theater's program brings Teaching Artists into Chicago Public Elementary Schools to educate students about music, singing and opera. *Opera For All* allows kids to understand the art by participating in it, both in production and in performance. Every student takes part in the creation and performance of an original opera. Past iterations of the program have included attending a dress rehearsal of a mainstage performance, an in-school performance by the teaching artists of an original opera, a field trip to research the subject matter for producing an original work (a trip to a planetarium for an opera about space, for example) and lessons with many different types of opera professionals.

[In-School Opera Programs](#) (Multifaceted)

Los Angeles Opera conducts multi-week residencies, at elementary and secondary levels, teaching students how to perform in an opera along-side professional opera singers. These original works draw upon both mainstage operas and school curriculum (for example, *Figaro's American Adventure* is adapted from *The Barber of Seville* and set in the American Revolution). Students learn the fundamentals of music, vocal technique and staging and put it into practice when Los Angeles Opera comes to the school with portable sets, equipment, crew and professional opera singers who perform alongside the students for their peers, parents and invited community. Students then attend a performance of the student matinee at the opera house.

APPENDIX B: Illustrating the Complexity, Quality and Range of Student Reading

Operas Based On Literary Texts

Grades K-1	<i>Goldilocks and the Three Bears</i> by Robert Southey (1837), opera by E. Hemenway*
	<i>Babar the Elephant</i> by Jean de Brunhoff (1931), opera by N. Berezowsky*
	<i>Chicken Little</i> by Marjorie Hartwell (1958), opera by T. Benjamin*
Grades 2-3	<i>Johnny Appleseed</i> (folktale), opera by S. Foster*
	<i>The Emperor's New Clothes</i> by Hans Christian Andersen (1837), opera by D. Moore*
	<i>Charlotte's Web</i> by E.B. White (1952), opera by C. Strouse*
Grades 4-5	<i>Little Women</i> by Louisa May Alcott (1868), opera by M. Adamo
	<i>The Secret Garden</i> by Frances Hodges Burnett (1910), opera by N. Gasser
	<i>A Wrinkle in Time</i> by Madeleine Engle (1962), opera by L. Larson*
Grade 6-12	<i>Macbeth</i> by William Shakespeare (1606), opera by G. Verdi
	<i>A Midsummer Night's Dream</i> by William Shakespeare (1600), opera by B. Britten
	<i>Of Mice and Men</i> by John Steinbeck (1937), opera by C. Floyd

*Listed in OPERA America's [Opera for Youth Directory](#)

Opera-Related Texts (Informational)

Grade K-1	<i>The Great Poochini</i> by Gary Clement (1997)
	<i>Opera Cat</i> by Tess Weaver and Andrea Wesson (2002)
	<i>The Magic Flute: An Opera By Mozart</i> by Krya Teis (2008)
Grade 2-3	<i>Behind the Curtain</i> by Christian Thee (1994)
	<i>Sing Me A Story</i> by Jane Rosenberg (1996)
	<i>The Barefoot Book of Stories from the Opera</i> by Shahrukh Husain (1999)
	<i>The Young Person's Guide to the Opera: With Music from the Great Operas</i> by Anita Generi and Nicola Barber (2001)
	<i>La fanciulla del West</i> Children's Book by Monica E. Lapenta (2010)
Grade 4-5	<i>Bravo! Brava! A Night at the Opera: Behind the Scenes with Composers, Cast, and Crew</i> by Anne Siberell (2002)
	<i>Benjamin's Ring</i> by Roz Goldfarb (2012)
	<i>Music!Words!Opera!</i> AIDA and HANSEL AND GRETEL , commissioned by OPERA America (2012)
	<i>Verdi for Kids: His Life and Music with 21 Activities</i> by Helen Bauer (2013)

This list is not meant to be comprehensive. It provides examples of individual titles that are representative of such texts that are aligned with ELA Standard 10.