

Schools look to Common Core to set standards for learning

By Kaitlin Mulhere Sentinel Staff | Posted: Monday, July 30, 2012 12:15 pm

Too often, students graduate from high school unprepared for college or careers, officials say. A few years ago, educators and leaders from several states aimed to solve that by developing a nationwide set of more challenging academic standards to sharpen kids' skills.

It's been two years since New Hampshire adopted those standards, and the phasing in of the Common Core State Standards — along with the resulting curriculum changes — is in full swing in local school districts.

The academic standards were developed to solve three national problem areas: a demand for better-educated workers as the job opportunities for unskilled laborers shrink, a high number of students needing to take remedial courses at the college level, and a difference in expectations across the country that made switching schools difficult on students who moved.

“What we're really doing with the Common Core is we're making school relevant to the 21st century that students have to operate in,” said Patricia Bradley Ewen, an early childhood consultant with the N.H. Department of Education who has helped explain the standards to school officials.

Leo P. Corriveau, superintendent for the Monadnock Regional School District, said there are fewer standards for each grade level under the Common Core program than what New Hampshire teachers are used to, but the expectations are much more strict.

That's exactly the premise that the Common Core standards were built upon — being clear and concise so parents and teachers know what's expected, as well as competitive with international benchmarks.

N.H. School Administrative Unit 29 Superintendent Wayne E. Woolridge said the unit's districts began implementing the math standards last year and will pilot the English language arts standards in the upcoming school year.

Unit 29 covers Chesterfield, Harrisville, Keene, Marlow, Marlborough, Nelson and Westmoreland.

Woolridge said the standards, especially in math, are focused on practicality. When students learn math skills under the new standards, they should be able to understand when and how to use those skills in a real-world setting, he said.

For example, a carpenter would use proportions and ratios to read a blueprint or accurately measure materials.

When Unit 29 school officials looked at the Common Core expectations, they found that they needed to ramp up the rigor of districts' curriculum in math in particular, Woolridge said.

Now every student leaving the 8th grade will have some mastery of basic algebra. Before, there were several students who weren't seeing algebra lessons until the 9th grade, he said.

Students might notice that classes are more demanding, but teachers will certainly notice a change in the timing of the material, Woolridge said. What was once expected in the middle of 4th grade will probably be bumped up to the beginning of 4th grade, he said.

And Woolridge said teachers are excited for these changes because they mean students will leave the schools better prepared.

"I'm not getting any resistance as I did when the NCLB (No Child Left Behind law) came in ... when there was a feeling by a number of educators that what we were doing was better than what was being recommended by the state," he said.

The plan at Unit 29 is to be completely aligned with Common Core by the 2013-14 school year, so students are prepared to be tested based on the new standards, Woolridge said.

New Hampshire students will take the New England Common Assessment Program (NECAP) test this fall and next. But in the spring of 2015, students will take the first national assessment test based on the Common Core.

Susan J. Taft, curriculum coordinator for the Hinsdale School District, said the transition so far has been fairly easy in the sense that the new standards aren't too different from New Hampshire's previous standards.

In Hinsdale, teachers and administrators have had workshops to familiarize themselves with the new standards, and teachers have focused on adding writing and reading comprehension across all the grade levels and subject matter, Taft said.

Much of the English language arts standards are based on the idea that understanding information-heavy texts like research articles requires different comprehension skills than literature. People may have known that in the past, but it's never been explicitly spelled out, Taft said.

In that sense, the standards branch out from language arts to other subjects, where those teachers also will be responsible for improving literacy.

That worked nicely in Hinsdale because the district was already revising the science and social studies curriculum, Taft said.

Forty-five states have formally adopted the Common Core standards, which were coordinated by the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and the Council of Chief State School Officers.

Virginia, Texas, Nebraska and Alaska have chosen not to adopt the standards, and Minnesota chose to adopt only the English language arts portion.

Taft said with so many states participating, there's an abundance of resources available. She's used materials from the state education department and regional groups, but she's also drawn from New York, Utah and Oregon.

"Fortunately, there's a lot out there," she said. "I think the biggest challenge is sifting through the material."

Ewen, with the state education department, said the unique thing about the Common Core is the way it was designed. The creators asked, "where do our students need to be when they graduate high school," took those skills, and planned from there, she said.

The standards are easy for teachers to understand but leave room for creativity when planning lessons, she said.

One of the geometry standards for 6th-grade students is determining the area and degree of angles in triangles, quadrilaterals and polygons. But teachers could use sports, like finding the size of a baseball diamond, or incorporate technology by having students take photos of polygons around town and then measure each angle, Ewen said.

Taft echoed that sentiment, saying that as more people learn about the standards, she thinks the satisfaction will grow.

"It's really not about the content. It's about the skills of learning."

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