

NH schools grapple with introducing new teaching standards

By: Michael Cousineau – June 8, 2013

School officials across the state are rewriting curriculum to meet new educational standards, shifting funds in their budgets to cover professional development costs and counting how many computers they may need to buy in the lead-up to a nationwide assessment test.

Here are the highlights - some crib notes, if you will - of what you should know:

- . The Common Core State Standards, a math and English language arts/literacy curriculum intended for use across the country, was adopted by New Hampshire in 2010. It is described as a road map that districts can follow to ensure all public school students get the education they need to prosper in life.

- . School districts are not required to follow the Common Core standards. They can choose to adopt it entirely, pick just the parts they like, or not use it at all.

- . Districts will decide how much they want to spend on implementing Common Core.
- . Students statewide will be required by federal law to take a new assessment test - called Smarter Balanced - that incorporates the Common Core standards. Computers will be needed to take the tests.

Some details

The total cost for implementing the more rigorous educational standards remains elusive. By one estimate, the cost could be as high as \$46 million during a one- to three-year transition to bring the new standards into Granite State classrooms, according to the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, a conservative education think tank.

The Smarter Balanced test will be taken by about 100,000 New Hampshire students - in Grades 3 through 8 as well as 11 - on school computers starting in spring 2015.

School districts are not required to purchase new textbooks or instructional materials, but often do when they redesign their curriculum, according to Heather Gage, the chief of staff at the state Department of Education and director of its Division of Instruction. Common Core provides a recommended reading list, which includes works by poet Emily Dickinson and novelist Lewis Carroll.

The new standards, Gage said, "give teachers a much better sense of what we're looking for in what (students) should know and be able to do."

A lawmaker's concern

Rep. Rick Ladd, R-Haverhill, said the state Board of Education approved the standards too quickly, in 2010.

"The procedure, I don't believe, gave us enough time to vet those Common Core State Standards to the public, to parents, to teachers and to administrators," said Ladd, who serves on the House Education Committee.

Ladd said he worries local districts collectively will need to absorb tens of millions of dollars in costs, and many in New Hampshire don't necessarily want the same standards as other states.

"We lose a little bit of New Hampshire, and we lose a little bit of local control," said Ladd, a former principal in Maine and Alaska.

But Mark Joyce, executive director and treasurer of the New Hampshire School Administrators Association, said districts are free to pick and choose which standards to write into their curriculum, which serves as a road map for teachers to help students achieve certain levels of competency in a given subject.

"I think that's where some folks get a little confused and concerned," Joyce said.

Some examples

Common Core standards call for students to learn concepts earlier and more in-depth than the previous state standards, according to Nicole Heimarck, director of curriculum and professional development in SAU 39, which comprises Amherst, Mont Vernon and Souhegan High School.

Students would learn topics earlier under Common Core than under the previous New Hampshire standards, Heimarck said. "At some grade levels, it's a half-year (earlier) and in some cases it's one-and-a-half years," she said.

Heimarck said her district had been reviewing its math curriculum at the same time Common Core was being developed, and her district incorporated changes earlier than others.

She said new math textbooks and online material were purchased as part of revising the curriculum.

One example of change will be seen in Nashua. Currently, Nashua fifth-graders typically learn about the topic of area of a surface, say the side of a milk carton, and then progress to the topic of volume, which is how much milk the carton holds, according to Lillian Barbetta, a fifth-grade teacher at Main Dunstable Elementary School.

Common Core calls for students to learn about area earlier, in Grades 3 and 4.

"They'll do a lot more with area," she said. "That allows us in fifth grade to go more in-depth with volume. We don't have to rush it ... so students understand what volume is, not just the calculations."

Chip McGee, assistant superintendent for curriculum and assessment in Bedford, said

his district "cherry-picked" certain Common Core standards to allow students "to be most successful in life."

"For example, one of the things that's really good in the Common Core is it asks students to read multiple documents, multiple writings and to evaluate the difference in the authors' perspectives," McGee said. "That's what real life is."

Fifth-graders recently were working on writing biographies. "That's a form of informational writing, and that's there in part because we were already working toward better writing and in part because the Common Core" puts a heavy emphasis on nonfiction works, McGee said.

Common Core "has helped them push a little further than we would have otherwise," he said.

SAU 39's Heimark said she wants her district's standards to surpass Common Core's.

"Common Core State Standards still come up short compared to international expectations, so in five years down the road, we plan to be aligned beyond the Common Core and closer aligned with learning standards that are in place internationally," she said.

Consequences

Gage said local districts are free to adopt some, none or all of the new standards. But if they don't adopt Common Core, they risk seeing their students perform poorly on the Smarter Balanced test. The poorest performing districts in each state will invite more state Education Department scrutiny in an effort to improve future scores, just as districts doing poorly in the current New England Common Assessment Program (NECAP) assessment tests do, Gage said. NECAP tests writing, math and reading. School districts will not lose federal funds if they test poorly, Gage said.

Gage said most school districts already have technology budgets and line items for professional development for teachers, so many districts will be able to shift money in their existing budgets to cover at least some of the costs.

She said state officials "are in general agreement" with the Fordham report, which gave cost estimates ranging from nearly break-even under a bare-bones approach to \$46 million statewide if the new curriculum relies heavily on new textbooks.

"Any time you change standards or update your standards because the world changes, there's going to be additional costs for that," Gage said. "We're not saying it's free."

The test

The Smarter Balanced test will be required for students in Grades 3 through 8 as well as 11 for math and English language arts/literacy. As of last October, more than 101,000 students were enrolled in those grades. Science assessment will remain a NECAP test for students in Grades 4, 8 and 11. There are about 45,000 students in those grades.

Gage said Smarter Balanced predicts the math test will take about three hours for third-

to fifth-graders, 3.5 hours for sixth- through eighth-graders and four hours for 11th-graders.

English language arts/literacy should take about four hours for Grades 3 through 8 and 4.5 hours for 11th grade. She said the total testing time is close to NECAP's commitment. Gage said not all students in the same grade will need to take the test at the same time. Smarter Balanced offers a 12-week testing window.

Students will be tested on school computers, but during the test's first three years they will be permitted to use paper and pencil if computers aren't available, Gage said. She said "a lot of schools already" teach keyboard skills prior to the third grade, which will be the first year of the Smarter Balanced tests. Common Core standards call for teaching such skills in the third grade, she said.

Heimarck said it's too early to say whether SAU 39 will need to buy more computers "because we're two years out from the first test administration" and "we're probably better off than many other districts."

Union concerns

Laura Hainey, president of the New Hampshire chapter of the American Federation of Teachers, which represents about 3,000 teachers, said the union wants to delay the Smarter Balanced tests to give teachers sufficient time to understand the standards and develop their curriculum.

Each district will establish how student test scores will count toward a teacher's evaluation, and unprepared students could reflect poorly on teachers, she said.

"If the school district adopts half the (Common Core) standards, and (students are) tested on 100 percent of the standards, why is the teacher being penalized on that if the student does poorly on the test but it's not required to be taught?" Hainey said.

Manchester and Nashua

In Manchester, the school board in April approved an \$83,900 contract for a Boston-based company to train teachers in the elementary and middle schools in the Common Core standards.

Michael Tursi, the assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction, said that money was part of a professional development budget and would have been spent in other areas if not on Common Core.

Manchester aldermen recently approved a \$2.8 million bond to fund technology and security upgrades in the schools. He said the district would have purchased the computers regardless of the new assessment tests.

In Nashua, Althea Sheaff, assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction, said school employees are developing a chart to determine how many laptops will be needed for every class in each school. She said administrators haven't decided on purchasing textbooks and online materials.

The Nashua School District is using multiple approaches to educate teachers on the Common Core standards and curriculum changes, according to Sheaff.

"We will have teachers going to workshops. We'll have in-house presentations. We'll be using faculty meeting time for presentations," she said. "We'll be offering after-school workshops. It's not just one approach. We've got to find many different ways to reach the many teachers in our districts.

The district already budgets funds for workshops and professional development.

Ann Marie Banfield, an education liaison with Cornestone Action, the lobbying arm of a conservative advocacy organization, spoke against Common Core last month at a Manchester school subcommittee meeting.

"Keep the standards local and work at the state level to improve existing state standards," Banfield said in an interview.

She said better "transparency and communication" was needed to keep parents informed of the changes.

About 45 states have adopted the Common Core standards, but a handful have slowed down their implementation, according to Neal McCluskey, associate director of the Center for Education Freedom at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank.

"I think a lot of people would like to step back and see what these standards are, see if they're any good, and how much are they going to cost." McCluskey said. "There doesn't seem to be much empirical evidence that top-down standards lead to superior educational outcomes."

Last month, Indiana Gov. Mike Pence signed a bill requiring a comprehensive review of the Common Core State Standards, according to a news release from his office.