

Guest opinion: Montana Common Core standards benefit students

BY ANNA BALDWIN

As a high school teacher I work with a wide range of students, from those who have never read a book to seniors in college-prep writing courses. Some are prolific writers of fantasy and poetry, while others are profoundly uninterested in pen and paper. With all of teaching begins with its challenges: Finding that perfect first book for a student to read, helping a non-writer find her voice, or showing an academically accomplished student different ways to express himself.

I meet my students' needs with culturally responsive and engaging materials, and incorporating Montana's indigenous heritage into their coursework isn't difficult, thanks to Indian Education for All. This directive, written into Montana's constitution and codified into our education law, requires teaching all students about Montana's first people at every grade level and in every subject, in authentic and sensitive ways.

One of the most beautiful — and useful — aspects of this forward-thinking, multicultural initiative is that it encourages the incorporation of multiple perspectives, encourages use of primary sources, and requires the routine exercise of critical-thinking skills. The same critical thinking, literacy skills, and use

of evidence to support assertions are required by the Montana Common Core Standards. This alignment gives Montana teachers the unique opportunity to use one well-designed curricular guide to inform and enhance the other.

The Montana Common Core literacy standards are a carefully planned, supported pathway for moving students forward on their journey to career and college readiness. By addressing those standards with a curriculum we design to be faithful to Indian Education

for All, Montana teachers can ensure that our students are educated, astute members of our democracy, with the skills they need to succeed.

Montana Common Core Standards won't only help students; they will also benefit teachers. For instance, when covering the history of Indian-white interactions, mainstream history books often don't include how events like the Marias Massacre or documents like the Hellgate Treaty looked from a tribal perspective. This provides the ideal impetus for teachers to locate and present stories from multiple perspectives, so students learn to consider information from different primary sources, weigh the facts, and think critically before drawing

conclusions about what happened.

Finding high-interest, relevant readings and weaving them into units my students will relate to are techniques I use every day, and much of my success as a teacher stems from using them. In 2011, I was recognized as educator of the year in my district by the tribes of my community, and in 2013, I received the Teaching Tolerance Award for Culturally Responsive Teaching, a national honor. These awards recognize the importance of building culturally relevant materials into our classroom work.

There is so much more to teaching than curriculum. Teachers must build relationships with our students and communities, learn to evaluate and use data to inform our instruction, and connect with others in our profession. But a strong curriculum, such as one represented by the integration of Indian Education for All and the Montana Common Core Standards, is a logical starting place for Montana's teachers to make even more of a positive difference in the lives and futures of our students.

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