

Gazette opinion: Don't be afraid of Montana Common Core

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Alarmed that United States has fallen behind other nations in student achievement, some American business leaders convinced state leaders to take action. The National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers led the development of new standards, spelling out what English and math skills students should learn at every grade level from kindergarten on up.

Forty-four states (including Montana) and the U.S. Department of Defense, which operates schools for military members' children, adopted the math and English Common Core standards.

State-led movement

"It was a state-led movement," said Denise Juneau, Montana superintendent of public instruction.

Then the politicking started. President Barack Obama made adoption of Common Core standards one prerequisite for states to receive the new federal Race to the Top grants in his education improvement program.

Obama critics seized on that requirement and pronounced the Common Core a federal mandate and worse, an Obama mandate. The myths about Common Core would fill several textbooks, so we aren't going to enumerate them here.

Instead, let's look at the facts.

The U.S. Chamber of Commerce, not known for its leftist leanings, supports Common Core and has a website that provides myth-busting information. One item on the website is a video in which Jeb Bush, Bobby Jindal, Mike Huckabee, Jan Brewer and other prominent Republicans state their support for the Common Core standards.

Montana Common Core standards were adopted in 2011 by the Montana Board of Public Education. The standards set a floor, the minimum knowledge that students should have at every grade level, said Tobin Novasio, Lockwood Schools superintendent. Schools may add to that as local boards decide.

The Smarter Balanced tests that Montana public school students in grades 3-8 and 11 took online this month are aligned with the Montana Common Core standards. They replaced the pencil-and-paper English and math MontCAS tests developed under a requirement of the No Child Left Behind Law backed by President George W. Bush.

This year's Smarter Balanced tests were a test of the tests. Students and schools won't receive scores.

Billings Superintendent Terry Bouck said there were some glitches with the computerized test, but added: "There are always issues with a new test."

"For years I've heard 'we need some common benchmarks nationwide so when a student goes from state to state there's a common measurement.' I am very impressed with the standards. But I expect they will change over time. These standards certainly aren't perfect."

The goal is "pushing kids to be the best they can be," Bouck said. Schools need to show kids that what they are learning is relevant to their lives. That's why the standards emphasize problem solving and hands-on learning.

The Common Core doesn't dictate curriculum, nor what text books or teaching materials will be used. Local control remains intact.

"We're putting professional judgment back into the hands of teachers," said Juneau, a former high school teacher.

Those of us who haven't had a kindergartner in the family in the past couple of years will see that these children are learning and expected to learn a lot more than they used to.

Higher expectations

"Whatever expectations you put in front of kids, they are going to rise to meet them," Juneau said.

"Common Core is like rules of the game," Novasio said. "Different teams will have different strategies, but they will always have nine on a team and three strikes out."

Common Core standards are supposed to be achieved across the curriculum. For example, science classes should be helping students meet the reading and math standards as those skills are used in science.

The cross curriculum approach is key to upgrading science, technology, engineering and math education. Billings Public Schools has adopted STEM curriculum at the Career Center for bioscience and pre-engineering classes. The district plans to launch an elementary STEM pilot project in five schools,

The differences between the old standards and the new are obvious on the Office of Public Instruction website. The new standards have detailed expectations for each grade. (See Kindergarten Standards box.) The old standards still in place for science are comparatively vague and only say what students are supposed to know by fourth, eighth and 12th grade.

Folks who are worried about Montana Common Core standards ought to take this advice from Juneau:

"Go talk to your student's teacher. No standard will ever take the place of good teaching. Read the standards. There's nothing spooky about them."

Check out kindergarten standard

This is the first Montana Common Core Language Standard for kindergartners:

1. Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking.
 - a. Print many upper-and lowercase letters.
 - b. Use frequently occurring nouns and verbs.
 - c. Form regular plural nouns orally by adding /s/ or /es/ (e.g. dog, dogs; wish, wishes).
 - d. Understand and use question words (interrogatives) (e.g. who, what, where, when, why, how).
 - e. Use the most frequently occurring prepositions (e.g. to, from, in, out, on, off, for, of, by, with).
 - f. Produce and expand complete sentences in shared language activities.