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Wyoming mulls national teaching standards

By JACKIE BORCHARDT - Star-Tribune staff writer | Posted: Monday, April 5, 2010 7:42 am

When students move between states, they often find themselves behind or ahead of their new classmates.

Differing expectations can be stressful for students and families. Additionally, teachers have to stretch beyond their curriculum so the student will perform well on state assessments. Without a national set of standards, or targets for knowledge and skills students should know, states create and adopt their own.

That could change if states follow standards being developed by the Common Core State Standards Initiative, an effort by the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers, or CCSSO.

Forty-eight states -- including Wyoming -- two territories and Washington, D.C., signed on to support development of the standards but not necessarily to adopt them. National standards in math and language arts for kindergarten through 12th grade were released March 10. The standards were available for public comment until Friday and a final draft is expected in May.

The standards align closely with Wyoming's standards and are clearly written, said Kay Persichitte, dean of the college of education at the University of Wyoming.

"It only makes sense that we have some platform of expectations in terms of rigorous common standards in core subjects across this nation if we're going to be able to reasonably compare achievement, progress and learning," Persichitte said.

Incentives

There are incentives for states that adopt common standards. The standards were a consideration in the national Race to the Top grant competition, which will award \$4.35 billion to states that demonstrate commitment to education reform. Wyoming, which did not receive any money in the first round of funding, scored points for joining the initiative but lost points for not describing how and when the standards might be adopted.

However, the national common core standards weren't released before the Race to the Top application was due in January. When the state applies for the second round in June, the plan is to have some commitment to adopt the standards from the state Board of Education, said Alan Moore, director of the standards and assessment unit of the state Department of Education.

The department set standards for math, science, language arts, social studies, foreign language, health, physical education, fine and performing arts and career and technical education in 2008. The standards "define what students are expected to know and be able to do at each grade level and upon graduation."

Standards are reviewed in an 18-month process every five years on a rotating cycle. The math and language arts standards time line was bumped up in response to the grant competitions and upcoming reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, more commonly known as the No Child Left Behind Act.

Testing

Every state purchases and administers a different, state-based test to measure performance under the No Child Left Behind Act. The state tests don't allow for comparisons between fourth-graders in Wyoming and fourth-graders in Massachusetts.

The closest thing to a national test are tests from the National Assessment Educational Progress (NAEP). But those tests are only given in two grade levels, every other year, to a sample population.

The NAEP tests can't be used to compare, said Jim McBride, state superintendent of instruction.

"It's difficult to have a national assessment," McBride said. "There's an effort at having national standards so there can be international benchmarks and career skills and a standard measurement against standards."

Wyoming has the Proficiency Assessments for Wyoming Students, or PAWS, for which Wyoming teachers come up with many of the test questions.

But in Wyoming, there is no state-wide curriculum -- curriculum decisions are left to districts. In the Natrona County School District, each school chooses its curriculum. National standards describe what should be taught but not how it should be taught.

"It allows each state and each school district to be responsive in the ways they meet those standards through their own independent choices about curriculum, instructional strategies and support services," Persichitte said.

Math problems

The national math standards look tougher than Wyoming's standards because they are, Moore said. The high school standards are higher than Wyoming's and trickling down, that pushes skills up one or two grade levels.

Wyoming, like many states, based its math standards on recommendations from the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics. Those standards differ from the proposed common core standards.

The proposed national standards miss essential skills currently taught, such as probability, said Pia Hansen, an educational consultant and former teacher.

"Spinning a spinner, reaching into a bag and pulling a blue tile -- those are very interesting investigations for children, especially because what's supposed to happen doesn't always happen," Hansen said.

Hansen was pleased with the effort to develop common standards, but said developers need to include more algebra

"We need to make sure we're developing problem solving, reasoning and communication skills along with increasing some of the content from our state standards," Hansen said.

The state Department of Education asked teachers and administrators to comment on the national standards with an online survey through the end of April. That information, including the feedback from Wyoming commenters, will be considered when math and language arts committees meet in May.

The goal is to have math and language arts standards done before fall 2011 -- six months ahead of schedule -- despite the short comment period on the national standards.

"This whole thing has been a high-speed express train," Moore said.

"Ultimately it's the state board's decision. We're not going to rush them to make a reasoned decision."

Reach education reporter Jackie Borchardt at (307) 266-0593 or at jackie.borchardt@trib.com. Read her education blog at tribtown.trib.com/reportcard