

A Common Problem

Examining new standards for Oregon students

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Zig Engelmann of the National Institute of Direct Instruction. Photo courtesy Zig Engelmann.

When Macey France's second-grade son brought home his math homework, France couldn't believe that he was already working with fractions. "The sad thing is, my eight-year-old doesn't know what a fraction is yet," she says, "and he's reading it out loud, saying, 'one and then a line and then a four,' and I realized, oh my goodness, they're asking for a quarter of something."

France, chief operating officer of Parent Led Reform Oregon, is drawing attention to a set of new achievement standards that are coming to Oregon schools, including Lane County, as well as across the nation. Teachers around the state are modifying their classroom strategies to meet these new standards — sudden adjustments that parents are surprised to see. "People

have compared it to the Affordable Care Act," she says. "It hit, and it's too much, too fast."

Known as the Common Core State Standards, this set of benchmarks specifies the target knowledge and proficiency in math, reading and writing that children should attain in grades K-12. Along with the change in standards comes a change in testing. Starting in the 2014-15 school year, students will leave the Oregon Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (OAKS) testing behind and transition to the more rigorous and expensive Smarter Balanced assessments, designed to measure student progress in meeting the Common Core standards.

Oregon and 44 other U.S. states adopted the Common Core, but not everyone is on board with the changes, including France, who has two children in the Lebanon school system. Other states have encountered issues in implementing the tests, pointing out that the standards are confusing, the transition time too short and the material too vast to cover while still addressing other subjects like social studies and science. Regardless, 4J, Springfield and Bethel students will take the new tests in spring of 2015, and while that seems far away, the changes are already happening.

According to the Oregon Department of Education's website, common standards "help ensure that all students, no matter where they live, are prepared for success in postsecondary education and the workforce" by making standards the same from state to state, easing the transition for kids who change schools while leveling the playing field after graduation, with every student required to meet the same educational goals.

Oregon Department of Education (ODE) officials say that old standards were not sufficiently rigorous enough to prepare high school graduates for college or careers, and results were too variable from state to state. The Common Core seeks to diminish those differences so that students from states as diverse as Oregon and New York can easily transition from one school to another without falling behind or being too far ahead of the curriculum. When students from both states graduate, the standards are meant to serve as common ground, eliminating a difference in achievement goals as a barrier to college.

Crystal Greene, communications director for ODE, says that Smarter Balanced is different from OAKS in that it moves away from multiple-choice questions. "In Oregon, [Smarter Balanced] is more similar than what other states have transitioned from," she says. "Oregon has a history of online adaptive assessments, meaning it's not a fixed-form test. The test adapts to the level of the student, so that student should be constantly feeling challenged. It's a much more precise way of knowing what a student can do."

Greene says that Smarter Balanced will more accurately assess greater levels of cognitive complexity, not only asking a student what

the correct answer is, but why they know it and how they learned it. “It’s a much more constructed response, where students have to write out material and explain things, which is much more like the real world,” she says.

Because Smarter Balanced testing moves away from multiple-choice questions, more human grading is required to score the tests, which raises the cost. OAKS testing costs about \$13 per student, while the Smarter Balanced test costs about \$27 per student, including additional assessment tools and resources not provided by OAKS, according to Derek Brown, director of assessment at ODE. He says a mix of state and federal funds will cover the additional costs.

Greene says the Smarter Balanced assessment will be field-tested this spring, with 20 percent of students from representative districts around Oregon participating.

In spring of 2013, New York state rolled out its new tests that correspond to Common Core State Standards. According to a November 2013 *Washington Post* online article, only 30 percent of the third through eighth graders who took the test actually passed, which was predicted ahead of time by the commissioner of education in New York. Critics like New York University professor and education expert Diane Ravitch say this is because the material is radically different from previous tests and was never tested with children before implementation. Teachers now must develop curriculum to accommodate the content in the test instead of the other way around.

“The standards themselves are confusing, vague and open-ended,” France says. “They’re developmentally inappropriate, especially K-3 math and reading. The point is to have the standards in Oregon match the standards in North Carolina,” she says as an example, “but each teacher will still interpret the standards how they will.”

Zig Engelmann, a long-time education professor at the UO and founder of a learning model called direct instruction, says that the Common Core represents “a new level of stupidity” for education practices. He says the standards include confusing buzzwords that don’t make practical sense in the classroom. He uses the example of Kindergarten Writing Standard 3, which states that kindergarteners should, “with prompting and support,” be able to “use a combination of drawing, dictating and writing to narrate a single event ... tell about the events ... and provide a reaction to what happened.”

Engelmann points out that in an actual classroom setting, the standards need some clarification. “You’re a teacher with 26 kids in a class, and you’re supposed to do this standard,” he says. “How do we get them to go through their drawing so it’s the right way? Do we work one-on-one with these kids because they’re going to be dictating? Why would we have them do that if they’re supposed to be writing? One way or another, that’s one hideous bit of work there.” With large class sizes, Engelmann says teachers don’t always have time to work with kids on an individual basis, as the standard seems to require.

Besides the content of the standards themselves, other worries include an ever-widening achievement gap between white students and students of color, made worse by the new testing. “In kindergarten, you may have some kids in the class that can do it,” Engelmann says. “But are the Common Core standards designed to be an elitist program that only 15 percent of the kids can do? If you’re trying to close the achievement gap, then you should be doing something that is much more carefully grounded in what’s possible and what’s reasonable for kids in a particular grade level.”

Tad Shannon, president of the Eugene Education Association, says that while the local teachers’ union has no official consensus on whether the standards are good, he worries that with the current strain on teachers in a broken system that is struggling, now is a poor time to implement a set of ambitious new standards. More specifically, the Common Core does not cover subjects like science and social studies, and when teachers must provide additional time and resources to meeting new standards in English and math, other subjects lose priority. “I am a social studies teacher, and I’ve seen resources devoted to social studies dwindle,” Shannon says. “There’s no test for it. If you’re not tested and you have high-stakes accountability that’s tied to these subject areas being tested, then everything else takes a back seat.”

As the testing dates grow nearer, parents like France say they want more transparency in how education strategies are changing to accommodate the Common Core. She says her goal is to make sure parents are more informed on the changes happening in homework and grading, encouraging more involvement and making sure parents know they can opt their children out of the testing. “We’d like to pause or halt the implementation, take a look at the standards and see what needs tweaking,” France says. “Parents are not teachers, but we’re pretty valuable. We know what works for our kids.”

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