

Myths vs. Facts: Montana Common Core State Standards

Myth: The federal government has required Montana to adopt the Common Core State Standards.

Fact: The Common Core State Standards initiative is a state-led, bipartisan effort that is not a requirement of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) or any other federally-funded program. Individual states made their own decisions about whether to adopt the standards.

Montana was the last of 46 states to adopt the standards because we wanted to make sure they were right for Montana students. As is the process with all of our state content standards, educators, school administrators, and business leaders from across the state participated in reviewing the standards, and 12 public meetings were held over a two-year period before the Montana Board of Public Education voted to adopt them on November 4, 2011.

Myth: These standards amount to a national curriculum for our schools.

Fact: Standards are not curriculum; they are a clear set of shared goals and expectations for what knowledge and skills students need at each grade level. Curriculum is set at the local level by locally-elected school boards. Montana's state constitution leaves curriculum development to local school districts.

Local teachers, principals, superintendents, and school boards will decide how the standards are to be met. Teachers will have the freedom to devise lesson plans and tailor instruction to the individual needs of the students in their classrooms. Additionally, Montana integrated learning about the distinct and unique heritage and contributions of American Indians into its standards.

Local school districts have asked the state to provide examples of curricular materials that are aligned with the new academic standards, and the state plans to provide examples to meet district requests. However, it remains up to each local school district to select curriculum, not the state or federal government.

Myth: Adopting common standards will bring Montana's standards down to the lowest common denominator, which means states with high standards will be taking a step backwards if they adopt the Standards.

Fact: The standards set rigorous benchmarks at every grade level, which will result in moving even the best state standards to the next level. The Common Core State Standards ensure that

all students, regardless of where they live, will graduate ready for college and careers. Colleges and universities, as well as the business community, have told us that students who have mastered these standards will be prepared for postsecondary education and the workforce. This is critical as we work to reduce Montana's college remediation rates and ensure our students have the knowledge and skills that our business community is looking for in today's workforce.

When Montana's previous standards were compared to the Common Core State Standards, the new standards were found to be higher, clearer, and more rigorous than our previous English and math standards. Our previous standards only provided benchmark goals at 4th grade, 8th grade, and upon graduation. These new grade by grade standards are an accountability tool not only for teachers, but for parents and students.

Myth: The standards only include skills and do not address the importance of content knowledge.

Fact: The standards recognize that both content and skills are important.

In English Language Arts and Literacy, the standards require certain critical content for all students, including: classic myths and stories from around the world; America's founding documents; foundational American literature; and Shakespeare. In addition to content coverage, the standards require that students systematically acquire knowledge in literature and other disciplines through reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Montana's Indian Education for All resources provide for inclusion of rich content that specifically supports the constitutional provision for all Montanans to learn about the unique cultural heritage of our state.

In mathematics, the standards lay a solid foundation in whole numbers, addition, subtraction, multiplication, division, fractions, and decimals. Taken together, these elements support a student's ability to learn and apply more demanding math concepts and procedures.

The middle school and high school standards call on students to practice applying mathematical ways of thinking to real world issues and challenges; they prepare students to think and reason mathematically. The standards set a rigorous definition of college and career readiness, not by piling topic upon topic, but by demanding that students develop a depth of understanding and ability to apply mathematics to new situations.

Myth: The standards suggest teaching "Grapes of Wrath" to second graders.

Fact: The English Standards suggest "Grapes of Wrath" as a text that would be appropriate for 9th or 10th grade readers. Evidence shows that the complexity of texts students are reading today does not match what is demanded in college and the workplace, creating a gap between what high school students can do and what they need to be able to do. The Montana Common

Core Standards create a staircase of increasing text complexity, so that students are expected to both develop their skills and apply them to more and more complex texts.

Myth: The standards don't have enough emphasis on fiction/literature.

Fact: These standards require knowledge of classic myths, American literature, Shakespeare as well as literature from around the world. Appropriately, the crucial decisions about what content should be taught are left to local schools. In addition to content coverage, the standards require that students acquire knowledge in literature and other disciplines through reading, writing, speaking, and listening.

Myth: These standards do not prepare or require students to learn algebra in the 8th grade, as many states' current standards do.

Fact: The standards do accommodate and prepare students for Algebra 1 in 8th grade by including the prerequisites for this course in grades K-7. Students who master the K-7 material will be able to take Algebra 1 in 8th grade.

Myth: The standards are not research or evidence-based.

Fact: The standards are more evidence-based than previous standards. The evidence base includes the following: scholarly research; data on what knowledge and skills are required of students entering college and workforce training programs; assessment data identifying college and career ready performance; and comparisons to standards from high-performing states and nations.

In English Language Arts and Literacy, the standards build on the firm foundation of the NAEP Frameworks in Reading and Writing, which draw on extensive scholarly research and evidence.

In mathematics, the standards draw on conclusions from TIMSS and other studies of high-performing countries that traditional mathematics curriculum in the United States must become substantially more coherent and focused in order to improve student achievement; addressing the problem that curriculum is "a mile wide and an inch deep."