

Reviewing the basics about the Common Core and testing

The mission of the New Hampshire State Board of Education is to advocate for public education and, along with the department of education, implement the statutes passed by the Legislature. Here is my review of the statutes we implement in setting academic standards and doing annual assessments.

Setting academic standards

The New Hampshire state board has set academic standards since the 1990's. The standards have always been a minimum, subject to adoption or enhancement by local school districts. They still are.

But it's also true that the Legislature has, as required by our New Hampshire Constitution, put statutes in place to assure that every child gets an adequate education. [RSA 193-E](#) opens with a wonderful statement promising to provide all students with the knowledge and skills for life and "an education that is consistent with the curriculum and student proficiency standards specified in state school approval rules and New Hampshire curriculum frameworks."

The statutes carry out that mandate in the New Hampshire way, saying that the standards and guidelines the State sets are the "framework for the delivery of educational services at the local level" and that "School districts then have flexibility in implementing diverse educational approaches tailored to meet student needs."

[RSA 193-E:2-a](#) goes into great detail, saying that the Legislature "requires the state board of education and the department of education" to maintain curriculum frameworks "called for by the academic standards for each area" and "The curriculum frameworks shall serve as a guide and reference to what New Hampshire students should know and be able to do in each area of education." But it is still up to local schools to use "approaches best suited for the students in their communities."

There is no ambiguity in our statutes. [RSA 193-C:3](#) relies on "state-established standards." And [RSA 186:8](#) tells the state board that we must adopt rules that set "Minimum curriculum and educational standards for all grades of the public schools."

The state board and department of education have been rigorous in implementing these constitutional and legislative mandates.

Assessments

Education is a state responsibility and the State contributes almost a billion dollars to help communities provide the opportunity for an adequate education required by the New Hampshire Constitution. Parents and voters must be able to hold our

schools accountable for their constitutional obligation and state financial support they receive.

[RSA 193-C](#), the “Statewide Education Improvement and Assessment Program,” is the primary New Hampshire statute that implements that responsibility, saying that the annual assessment is “an important element in educational improvement” and “an effective measure of accountability” when done right.

[RSA 193-H](#), “School Performance and Accountability,” expands on this requirement, saying that schools “shall ensure that all pupils are performing at the basic level or above on the statewide assessment” and “shall meet statewide performance targets.”

In addition, the Federal government sends New Hampshire about \$200 million per year to help students at risk and with special needs. If schools agree to accept those funds, they agree to be held accountable.

Since 2001, that requirement has been part of [ESEA section 1111](#) of the No Child Left Behind act, which requires “a single, statewide State accountability system” that is “the same accountability system the State uses for all public elementary schools and secondary schools or all local educational agencies in the State.” That section goes on to say that the State must use “the same academic assessments...to measure the achievement of all children.” Specifically, it requires that the State implement “...a set of high quality, yearly student academic assessments...” and that the assessments must be “...the same academic assessments used to measure the achievement of all children.”

There can be no serious doubt that the state board and the department are faithfully implementing state and federal law when we require all school districts to administer the same assessment.

Fortunately, the U.S. Department of Education paid for the development of the Smarter Balanced Assessment, a new kind of assessment that meets the requirements of both state and federal law. Smarter Balanced is a big step forward and a much better test than we could have afforded on our own.

Opting Out of the Annual Assessment

No one likes tests – especially not standardized tests like the annual math assessment or the driving test. But they are part of life whether a child is going on to college, the military or straight into a 21st century job.

And in New Hampshire, [RSA 193-C:6](#) says, “All public school students in the designated grades shall participate in the assessment...” Federal law, [ESEA section 1111](#) again, also requires full participation, defining that as 95% of the children. So

if our statute were changed to encourage opting out and that resulted in low participation, the result could be a [loss of federal funding](#).

Beyond state and federal accountability requirements, low participation on the annual assessment would deprive parents, voters, teachers and school boards the information they need to know how well their children are progressing and how to help them do better.

Performance Assessment for Competency Education (PACE)

There is no federal waiver that would allow districts to choose their own assessments. There would be no comparability across the State and, therefore, no accountability for school performance.

However, New Hampshire has received special permission from the U.S. Department of Education to carry out a pilot assessment program in Sanborn, Epping, Rochester and Souhegan school districts. These New Hampshire districts are the only four in the country not giving their students identical statewide annual assessments this year.

With department guidance, PACE districts have worked together for many months to create locally managed competency-based assessments. [Here is the department's page](#) explaining PACE.

New Hampshire has been on the path to competency-based education since 2005 and those competency statutes provide the basis for the PACE project. [RSA 193-H](#), "School Performance and Accountability," is written entirely in terms of competencies, defined as, "student learning targets that represent key content-specific concepts, skills, and knowledge applied within or across content domains."

[Section 1-a](#), the purpose, says, "Students best learn at their own pace as they master content and skills, allowing them to advance when they demonstrate the desired level of mastery rather than progressing based on a predetermined amount of seat time in a classroom will assure that students will reach college and career readiness."

It goes on to say, "Competency-based strategies provide flexibility in the way that credit can be earned and awarded and provide students with personalized learning."

This statutorily mandated personalized learning is, indeed, the direction in which our schools have been moving over the past 10 years. And the PACE districts are leading the way.

But this is just the beginning. If all goes well, there will be four more districts next year and many more after that.

We are working toward the time that parents and educators seek, reducing the need for standardized testing and, instead, allowing our classroom teachers to do meaningful assessments that are assets rather than obstacles to learning.

Conclusion

It may seem at times as if the New Hampshire State Board of Education and Department of Education create policy. We do not. We implement the policies passed by our Legislature. If you would like easy access to the statutes I have referred to here, I have posted a full length version with all the links on the department web site at:

http://education.nh.gov/state_board/authorityforstandardsandassessments.htm