



THE STATE
of **ALASKA**
GOVERNOR SEAN PARNELL

**Department of Education
and Early Development**

Office of the Commissioner

801 W 10th Street, Suite 200
P.O. Box 110500
Juneau, Alaska 99811-0500
Main: 907.465.2800
TTY/TTD: 907.465.2815
Fax: 907.465.4156

June 18, 2013

The Honorable Lynn Gattis
Chair, House Education Committee
Alaska House of Representatives
600 E. Railroad Avenue
Wasilla, AK 99654

Dear Chair Gattis:

This letter provides our department's responses to questions asked during the House Education Committee's hearing in Wasilla on June 3, 2013. I attached a copy of the Legislative Research Services memo comparing Alaska standards to the Common Core, because it provides a complete answer to a question on that topic. The same attachment includes a two-page fact sheet from the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium that addresses some concerns raised in the hearing.

Please distribute this to the House Education Committee. If you have further questions, feel free to contact me at 465-2802 or mike.hanley@alaska.gov. Thank you for the opportunity to hear and respond to concerns about Alaska's academic standards and assessments.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Mike Hanley".

Mike Hanley
Commissioner

1. Did the Anchorage School District receive a federal Race to the Top grant?

No. The first rounds of grants were only for states. (Alaska did not apply.) Later, there was a round of grants for districts. Sixteen applicants won grants, but none in Alaska.

2. Are there advantages to districts in adopting the Common Core State Standards?

Prior to the state adopting its new standards, some districts chose to voluntarily raise the bar by adopting the Common Core. Now there is no advantage to adopting a separate set of standards because districts are still obligated to address standards that have been adopted by the State Board of Education & Early Development.

Common Core districts do not receive more federal funds than other districts, and they do not gain eligibility for grants that other districts are not eligible for. The district-level Race to the Top grants did not require districts to adopt the Common Core specifically. There is no federal financial incentive for districts to adopt the Common Core.

3. What are the differences between Alaska's standards and the Common Core?

There are two primary differences between Alaska's English and math standards and the Common Core State Standards. The first is that Alaska's math standards include standards not found in the Common Core, primarily in the elementary grades in measurement. The second is that many standards add language to increase clarity and to further specify content. A research brief from Legislative Research Services, dated May 31, 2013, provides a detailed comparison, based on information provided by EED. It is attached.

4. What tests other than those of the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium are available to us?

The Partnership for the Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers, another state-membership consortium, is preparing assessments that we believe could work for Alaska. ACT Inc., the nonprofit company that produces the college-entrance ACT tests, is also creating ACT Aspire assessments for the Common Core that may work to assess Alaska's students. Alaska also has the option of developing our own assessment.

5. How many states are advisory to the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium?

Four: Alaska, Pennsylvania, Wyoming, and North Dakota.

6. How many states did not adopt the Common Core State Standards?

Alaska is one of five states that did not adopt the Common Core State Standards as indicated on the following website: <http://www.corestandards.org/in-the-states>

7. Will we become entangled because federal funds supported the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium?

Alaska joined the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium as an advisory state. As indicated in the Memorandum of Agreement, Alaska "has not fully committed to any consortium." Our decision to join the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium was voluntary and we can leave at any time for any reason.

8. How have our new standards narrowed the focus?

Our new math standards cover fewer topics but in greater depth than our former standards did. Our new English standards actually expand our focus to add speaking, listening, and literacy skills (comprehension and verbal skills) in social studies, science and technical subjects. The English standards expect in-depth reading and research skills. These added English skills are useful in careers and postsecondary studies.

9. How will Alaska's standards that aren't in the Common Core be assessed by Common Core assessments?

Alaska's standards are similar enough to the Common Core that Common Core assessments will be valid and reliable for our students. The Council of Chief State School Officers reviewed our

standards with that question in mind. They said our standards track closely with the Common Core. Many of the additional standards are in primary grades prior to testing age. We do not yet know if there will be Alaska standards that are not assessed in the Smarter Balanced assessments.

10. Has EED considered the use of mini-servers to help administer online testing?

Yes. We are reviewing potential testing engines from various vendors. Smarter Balanced may have to allow local caching because all of its states have some remote rural locations and issues with Internet connectivity. We will only use an assessment that we believe can adequately assess all of our designated students statewide.

11. Who will set the cut scores for the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium?

The consortium used a panel of K-12 and postsecondary educators, assessment experts, and interested stakeholders from member-states to define in detail four levels of achievement for each grade and subject to be assessed. The panel also determined the threshold scores for each level of achievement. Their initial work underwent reviews by Smarter Balanced staff, the public, and the member-states. All of the states in the consortium will use the same cut scores. That allows members to compare their students with students from other states.

12. Will the Smarter Balanced assessments ask personal information?

No. Questions will be based on standards. Practice tests are online at <http://www.smarterbalanced.org/practice-test/>

Assessed students will be identified by state ID numbers, names and date of birth, as they are for our current assessments. Smarter Balanced will not score the completed items on the assessments or produce data for Alaska. The state will use a separate contractor for that. The identification of students will continue to work as it currently does, with districts submitting individualized information to testing vendors.

13. Does Alaska control what personal questions or data are collected with the Smarter Balanced assessments?

Yes. Identifiable information will continue to be shared between school district personnel, EED, and the contracted testing vendor that will process the student-level results and data as it currently is.

14. Is there an advantage to using more rigorous standards when many students didn't meet the previous standards?

Most of our students using our current assessment do meet the standards. In recent years about 80 percent of Alaska's assessed students scored proficient in reading, 75 percent in writing, and 70 percent in math. Unfortunately, our university system has been reporting that over half of our graduates aren't ready for college and need to take some type of remediation work prior to taking courses for credit. Employers have also felt that too many of our graduates were not well prepared for the work force. Both have expressed the need for the K-12 educational system to increase its expectations for students.

15. How does EED ensure that schools and teachers do their job?

In a local-control state, direct supervision for the implementation of teaching strategies as well as the teaching of locally approved curriculum falls to principals, superintendents, and local school boards. EED monitors school and district performance and provides additional support where needed.

Alaska statute and regulation specifies the following role for EED regarding academic standards: EED's role is to: 1) "encourage the school districts to envision and develop local educational plans that are unique to each district's culture, geography, and climate, and that will graduate world-class students; 2) empower the public with the knowledge that the skills and subjects included in this chapter are of great importance to education so that the public can participate in local educational planning with more authority and effect."

16. Why did we allow groups associated with the Council of Chief State School Officers to influence our standards?

Our standards deal with non-political topics such as algebra, geometry, and reading skills. When approximately 230 Alaskans, mostly educators, closely compared Alaska's previous standards with the Common Core, they looked at them strictly from the points of view of English, math, child development, and clarity. Politics did not play a role. The Alaskan reviewers dealt with such non-political educational issues as: What do we want students in each grade to know and be able to do in English and math? Does each grade's standards seamlessly flow from the grade before and lead to the next grade? Are each grade's standards appropriate to children's development at that age? Are the standards clear enough that educators will be able to use them?

17. Are there state standards for history and the U.S. Constitution?

Yes. Alaska has content standards for government, citizenship and history. The standards include understanding the U.S. Constitution, federalism, our economic system, and the Alaska Constitution. Alaska also requires that all students take Alaska Studies prior to graduating. Under Alaska's system of local control, districts are expected to determine their own curriculum for those topics. Our recent standards adoption updates only math and English. The government, citizenship and history standards are on pages 19-24 of this:
<http://education.alaska.gov/standards/pdf/standards.pdf>.

18. Is history covered in the new standards?

Alaska does have separate standards for history, as indicated above. Alaska's new standards in English and math do not include standards in history itself. Alaska's English standards complement the history standards by expecting students to be proficient in reading, writing, speaking, and researching topics in social studies, science, and technical subjects. The standards do not denigrate the study of literature, but they do place a value on students demonstrating literacy skills across content areas. Not only will this promote a higher-quality well-rounded K-12 education, but it will better prepare students for postsecondary education and careers.

19. Who is formulating the Smarter Balanced assessments?

Multiple testing vendors are writing items to be assessed by Smarter Balanced. Data Recognition Corp., Alaska's current primary assessment vendor, is one of them. CTB/McGraw Hill, the American Institutes for Research, the Council for Aid to Education, HumRRO, and the College Board are the other partners.

20. Who will score the Smarter Balanced assessments taken by Alaskan students?

An assessment vendor, selected through our state's procurement system, will be contracted to score the assessments for Alaska.

21. What steps have we taken to protect the data of Alaskan students?

We ensure that the data submittal files are protected by the federal Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act and Alaska's privacy laws. All portals holding individual-level data are password-protected and have firewall protection. Data files routinely use encryption methods to assure that intercepted data cannot be compromised. Districts submit student-level data files to secure FTP (file transfer protocol) servers maintained by our testing vendors.

22. How can Alaska use the Smarter Balanced assessments while ensuring that Smarter Balanced does not unduly influence Alaskan education?

Smarter Balanced is an assessment that measures what we are teaching. It isn't a set of standards, a curriculum, or a pedagogical strategy for teaching children. Assessments don't teach. They inform teachers, students, and parents how their students are progressing in learning what is taught. The Smarter Balanced assessments will be for English and math, just as our current assessments are. The assessments are derived from standards informed by Alaskans and adopted through a public process. The standards determine the assessments, not the other way around. We can leave the consortium any time we like.

23. How did Alaska become involved with the Council of Chief State School Officers?

The council is a non-partisan association of the states' education commissioners, similar to the National Governors Association. The council operates the National Teacher of the Year program, in which we participate. Because all states face similar educational issues and are affected by federal decisions, the council provides a way for state officials to keep abreast of issues and legislation, lobby for state authority and autonomy, and join forces to work on problems. Part of states' rights is the right to collaborate with other states.

24. Who decided to have new standards in Alaska?

A state statute requires EED to have standards in reading, writing, and math; a statute requires the State Board of Education & Early Development to set state educational goals. The State Board governs EED. Thus, the Alaska Legislature has given EED the responsibility and duty of setting state K-12 standards.

The impetus for reviewing our standards, to determine if they were rigorous enough, was overwhelming evidence that we were not expecting enough from our students. More than half of our high school graduates who attended the University of Alaska were taking remedial (high school level) courses in English and/or math. Many students left UA without a degree. Employers said they were not satisfied with our graduates. While 74 percent of our fourth-graders were scoring proficient on our state reading test, about 34 percent were scoring proficient on a national test.

In late 2009, EED convened a summit of about 400 Alaskans, educators and non-educators. One of the tasks was to determine the outcomes we wanted our high school graduates to have. The

outcomes included broad knowledge, communication skills, technology skills, thinking skills, health, creativity, citizenship, and enthusiasm for learning. Among the actions called for by the summit was to review the state's standards to determine alignment with 21st century skills and our graduation outcomes. EED began the process of reviewing our former standards in 2010.

25. The Smarter Balanced memorandum of understanding says that states agree to identify existing barriers in state law that would prohibit the implementation of the assessment and work to remove the barrier. What are Alaska's barriers?

On the signed MOU we stated that Alaska has no anticipated barriers to be addressed.

26. Was there any public input prior to the adoption of our new standards?

The adoption process for Alaska's new English and math standards took over two years and included the following steps:

- From February 2010 to November 2011, 230 representatives from across Alaska in K- 12, the university system, career and technical education, and Alaskan industry met to review our previous standards and consider how best to revise them.
- A draft of new English and math standards went out for public comment in December 2012 for an extended period of 5 months.
- Over 100 state organizations from across Alaska including chambers of commerce, Native corporations, and business and industry organizations received invitations to comment on the draft standards.
- Open, public community meetings were held in March and April 2012 in Mat-Su, Fairbanks, Bethel, Juneau and Anchorage.
- Legislative hearings with the House Education Committee were held during the 2012 session and each State Board of Education & Early Development member met with at least one House Education Committee member specifically regarding the standards.

The following notices were placed in the EED Information Exchange, which is sent by email weekly to about 800 subscribers as well as media statewide and all superintendents. The notices seek comments for the proposed standards. The public comment period extended through January, February, March, April and half of May. The comments received are public documents.

- **Jan. 3, Jan. 6:** The State Board of Education & Early Development, meeting December 15-16 in Anchorage, sent out for public comment proposed new standards in English language arts and mathematics. The standards would apply to public school students from kindergarten through high school. "I am confident that these standards will prepare our students to be college ready and career ready," said Alaska Education Commissioner Mike Hanley. "The standards set high expectations for students and for their futures. In aiming for these higher goals, districts and schools will continue to choose the best routes and strategies to meet students' needs and connect them to their learning. I look forward to seeing best practices modeled in a variety of strategies, from immersion programs to theme-based approaches to traditional models." The State Board set an extended period of public comment, through 4 p.m. May 12, 2012, during which time the Department of Education & Early Development will widely publicize the standards and invite comments. See <http://www.eed.state.ak.us/standfaqs.html>.

- **Jan. 13, Jan. 20, Jan. 27, Feb. 3, Feb. 10, Feb. 17, Feb. 24, March 2, March 9, March 23, March 30, April 6, April 13, April 20, April 27, May 4:** The State Board of Education & Early Development, meeting December 15-16 in Anchorage, sent out for public comment proposed new standards in English language arts and mathematics. The standards would apply to public school students from kindergarten through high school. The State Board set an extended period of public comment, through 4 p.m. May 12, 2012, during which time the Department of Education & Early Development will widely publicize the standards and invite comments. See <http://www.eed.state.ak.us/standfaqs.html>.
- **Jan. 27, Feb. 3:** The Department of Education & Early Development will host multiple webinars to examine the proposed Alaska Standards in English/Language Arts and Mathematics. The repeated webinars will be offered throughout February, March and April. The first series of webinars: February 6 at 3:30 p.m., an overview of the proposed standards; February 8 at 3:30 p.m., an in-depth review of the English/Language Arts Standards; February 9 at 3:30 p.m. an in-depth review of the Mathematics Standards. For registration information and a list of future webinar dates, see: <http://www.eed.state.ak.us/calendar/home.cfm>. For detailed information about the proposed standards contact eric.fry@alaska.gov or visit the department's website at <http://www.eed.state.ak.us/tls/assessment/2012AKStandards.html>.
- **Feb. 10, Feb. 17, Feb. 24, March 2, March 9, March 23, March 30, April 6, April 13:** The Department of Education & Early Development will host multiple webinars to examine the proposed Alaska Standards in English/Language Arts and Mathematics. The repeated webinars will be offered throughout February, March and April.