

DISPELLING THE CONFUSION SURROUNDING THE COMMON CORE.

DESIGNED BY: HANNAH ERICKSON

The Iowa Core Standards are very similar, though not identical, to the national Common Core standards, Rep. Ron Jorgensen, the chair of the education committee in the Iowa House, said. The Common Core is designed to help students develop skills in reasoning and logic.

Jorgensen said that the less frequent use of multiple-choice questions is one of the ways the Iowa Core curriculum encourages more reasoning in students.

"The world is changing rapidly and if we don't keep pace with it we're in trouble," said, Ruthie Paper, a retired eighth grade earth and physical science teacher from Sidney, Iowa.

“One of the things I get frustrated with is the misinformation

surrounding the Common Core," said Noelle Tichy, the Executive Director of Teaching and Learning for Des Moines Public Schools. "Very few parents understand what the Core is."

Paper also noticed that parents and other people outside of the education system often seem to struggle with the idea of the Iowa Core.

Burdick thought it would be nice if the school district would explain the goals of the Core and give clear definitions of the terms used to describe the curriculum to the parents when their kids start school.

"I don't know anything [about the Iowa Core]," Danette Lebon, whose six-year-old son goes to first grade Perkins Elementary, said. Lebon also said she would like to learn more about the Iowa Core. "Parents need to do their part," Lebon said, adding that parents have to be involved in the school and vice-versa.

"I think it is important for students to learn logic and critical thinking," Burdick said. She said she thinks kids will learn more from logic and critical thinking than they will in a curriculum where they memorize the answers to problems.

The Iowa Core was implemented in 2008 when Iowa became the 42nd state to approve a version of the Common Core. Currently, 42 states, four territories and the District of Columbia are using the Common Core State Standards. Iowa was one of the last states to approve the Core curriculum.

Iowa has "lagged in setting state standards" in the past, Jorgensen said. However, he hopes that the Iowa Core works to improve kids' test scores as the guidelines become more integrated into the Iowa K-12 curriculum.

Test scores in Iowa have not changed much since the Iowa Core has been implemented, because, as Jorgensen explained, "They haven't

been in place long enough."

"It is important to note the amount of time it takes to implement new standards," Tichy said. Teachers spent the first few years after the Iowa Core was passed trying to tie what they were currently teaching back to the Core, Tichy noted.

Now the curriculum taught is focused on meeting the goals of the Core. "All of our literacy and math is centered around the Iowa Core," Tichy said.

Though educators are still working to interpret the standards, the Iowa Core is in its sixth year as a part of the Iowa education system.

"[The standards] are very clear to us in K-8," Tichy said, explaining that the expectations students faced look like stairs, with the goals for each grade building on the last.

The Core curriculum for high schools is not as clear. The students' ability to choose the classes they want makes the curriculum, and the goals they are expected to reach, less clear, Tichy said. Teachers are given more autonomy to build their own standards, but it makes switching from one high school to another more difficult for students since the expectations are not uniform.

Tichy said she would like to see more uniformity in expectations in high schools across the state to ease the transitions between schools and to make sure each student is fully prepared for life after high school.

A uniform interpretation of the standards from school to school is important. Having uniform standards will make transitions from one school to another anywhere within the state easier for kids to make, since they will face the same expectations no matter which school they are attending, Tichy said. The Iowa Core is meant to make those interpretations clearer.

Paper noticed the differences between what schools teach in her own classroom when students would transfer to her class in the middle of the school year. Teachers will do what they think teaches the material best, Paper said.

Her husband was the high school science teacher in Sidney, so they would work together to make sure they were covering everything that they thought was important the kids learn.

"I used the Common Core," Paper said, though she didn't know if she followed all of the guidelines. "There might have been something in the Common Core I never covered."

Paper didn't cover some of the things in the Common Core because she didn't want to repeat things covered in other classes. The standards put the expectations for physical sciences and earth sciences together, but Sidney split the subjects up.

The goal of the Iowa Core, and the Common Core, is not just to raise the test scores of students in the state - educators are concerned with trying to teach everybody something, said Catherine Gillespie, the assistant dean of the school of education at Drake University. In K-12, teachers access the students so they can group them based on their strengths and weakness in each area of study.

The Core standards are meant to act as guidelines for teachers, allowing them the freedom to shape the curriculum in the way they think is best for their students' learning styles, according to the Common Core State Standards Initiative's website.

Tichy said one of the biggest misconceptions about the Iowa Core she sees is the belief held by parents that the Core is a teaching methodology. "The Common Core is just a set of standards and expectations," she said, noting that

the schools, school districts, and the state all need to get better at communicating with parents. She also said that there is still work to do to align the understanding teachers, students, and parents regarding the curriculum.

The Iowa Core does not tell teachers how to teach, Paper said. She recalls asking herself "What should I do first and where should I go first?" when she was creating the class schedule for the year.

A good school curriculum should focus on teaching the way kids learn, Lebon said.

While the assessments at the beginning of the year serve to group students with others at a similar stage in learning, there is currently no assessment to determine whether the Iowa Core standards are being met in each classroom.

Jorgensen said that he would like to see an assessment at the end of every school year to show whether students are meeting the standard recommendations for their grade level. There is currently a bill in the Iowa House of Representatives that would begin to implement these assessments during the 2016-17 school year.

The assessments would allow the curriculum to be tweaked so the Iowa Core's recommended standards are met.

Iowa currently has a week-long assessment period, called the Iowa Assessments, which takes place at the end of March.

"I believe that we need accountability," Tichy said, agreeing that assessments are needed. However, the Iowa Assessments are not measuring what the Common Core teaches.

Tichy blames the disconnect between what is being taught and what the students are being assessed

for as part of the reason the test scores of Iowa students have not changed much over the last ten years. She supports the creation of an assessment program that measures what the students are being taught in the Iowa Core curriculum. The new assessment should "reflect 21st century learning," Tichy said.

"Standards affect what we teach an enormous amount," Gillespie said, referring to the education school's curriculum. However, state standards are not the only goals teachers are striving to meet in the classroom. The standards act as a baseline accomplishment level with teachers

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going beyond the standards in the content areas of math and language arts, as well as covering things not included in the Iowa Core curriculum.

"I think I had higher standards than the Common Core," Paper said. "You don't have to just skim the surface." She also said that kids' natural desire to learn made going deeper into a subject area easy.

The focus of teachers beyond the basic standards set by the Common Core is also evident in the way future teachers are taught at the University level. Drake University, and other colleges in the state, is required to cover the Common Core and the

Iowa Core.

The students in the education school are taught the Common Core in three levels of specificity and depth. First-year students receive some of the basics their first two semesters, reaching the "proficient" stage by the time they begin student teaching, Gillespie explained.

Current teachers were also required to learn about the goals of the Iowa Core. "We have never offered training on 'what is the Common Core,'" Gillespie said. The training is focused on "teaching teachers how to interpret the standards" and helping them understand how to track student progress, Tichy said.

Paper would often hear about changes in standards at gatherings where other educators from across the state of Iowa were present. Her husband also took classes over summer where the subject of standards was brought up in conversation.

"We were well aware of changes in standards," she said. "Especially in science."

Paper's husband also kept in touch with college professors from Iowa and the surrounding states to make sure they were teaching students everything they needed for college.

Student progress is the main goal of the Iowa Core, but changes in the curriculum will not happen overnight. Tichy concluded that continuing "business as usual" will not help kids to improve their ability to learn. "[The standards] are really high expectations for kids," Tichy said.

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