

School districts spend summer prepping for full Common Core rollout

LAS CRUCES — A high school sophomore transferring from Illinois to New Mexico used to encounter vastly different graduation requirements and state tests.

The Common Core State Standards seek to change that.

Forty-five states and the District of Columbia have adopted the new academic guidelines, seeking to standardize education across much of the country and ensure teachers prepare students for college and careers rather than "teach to the test."

New Mexico implemented the new reading and math standards in kindergarten through third grade last school year. This year, grades fourth through 12th will join in.

With the first changes in state standardized testing coming this spring, school districts in southern New Mexico are buckling down this summer, training teachers and buying new materials to prepare students and educators for the Common Core.

"Everything we did this summer was about the Common Core," said Thea Hand, coordinator of Las Cruces Public Schools' professional development.

What is the Common Core?

Most school districts in New Mexico started taking steps to implement the Common Core two years ago after the state adopted the standards in 2010.

Under the standards, students will be required to explain how they solved a math problem, for example, rather than simply selecting an answer on a multiple choice test.

Full implementation in New Mexico, including a new state standardized test, won't take place until the 2014-2015

school year.

The test, the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers assessment, will replace the current New Mexico Standards Based Assessment that year. The PARCC assessment will also be taken online.

A "bridge assessment" will be implemented this year, however, that will transition from the NMSBA to the PARCC test.

How are districts preparing teachers?

LCPS designed a summer academy for teacher training, including week-long institutes on the Common Core for middle and high school teachers. Workshops also focus on everything from creating quality lesson plans to using new math materials.

All training over the summer is elective, with teachers earning \$15 per hour.

About 2,000 spots were filled during the last session, Hand said.

Professional development will continue into the school year, including school-specific training.

Deming Public Schools couldn't afford to pay teachers for summer professional development, so most training occurred throughout the past school year when students had half days, said Dana Irby, the district's associate superintendent of instruction.

Silver Consolidated School District is holding two-day trainings for principals and teachers and another two-day training on a new reading and writing comprehension program.

"We're training a lot," Superintendent Lon Streib said. "We've got a long way to go, but we're making progress."

Most districts are also putting in place new pacing guides, which map out what standards need to be covered to what depth in which grade.

Are there new materials and tests?

All local districts face challenges purchasing new materials that meet the standards while state allocations remain thin.

"Paying for materials competes with the money used for salaries," LCPS Superintendent Stan Rounds has previously said.

The district will receive \$1.3 million from the state this school year for instructional materials, which includes textbooks, learning programs and other resources. That \$1.3 million is less than half of what the district requested.

"In the last five years, our funding for instructional materials has been cut by 50 percent," Irby said of DPS's resources.

To make do, Deming is looking at buying class sets of textbooks for children to check out. The district had considered electronic books, but many children don't have access to computers at home, Irby said.

In Silver, buying new math textbooks came at the expense of other purchases, such as new English materials or more expensive professional development, Streib said.

"It's kind of like triage: We decide what's most important," he said.

School assessments and quizzes are also changing in response to the new guidelines. Out with true or false questions; in with extended response questions.

"A lot of our old assessments that didn't include higher-level thinking skills need to be redone," Streib said.

LCPS schools are also working to standardize quizzes across each grade, Deputy Superintendent Steven Sanchez said.

LCPS will offer community-wide information sessions on the Common Core once school starts.

For more information on the Common Core State Standards in New Mexico, visit newmexicocommoncore.org.

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