

Washington's proposed math rules to be released Tuesday

The Oregonian

3 Dec 2007 pbs

Education | The standards have been rewritten to clarify learning priorities

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THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

SEATTLE — When the public gets its first peek at Washington's proposed new grade-by-grade math learning requirements, what they'll find most surprising is how easy they are to understand, the consultant managing the revision effort has promised.

No drastic changes are on the horizon — kindergartners will still learn to count, not multiply and divide — but some philosophies about teaching math are changing, said Kathy Seeley, senior fellow at the Charles A. Dana Center at the University of Texas.

"It's a pretty significant rewrite, but it's not dismissing what was there before," said Seeley, who has been guided in her work by a committee of Washington educators.

The problem with the old standards was not so much the content, but how difficult they were to use by both parents and teachers, Seeley said. The old standards left everyone in the dark about the learning priorities for each year, so teachers had to do some guessing about what to emphasize, and most parents didn't have a clue.

Seeley wouldn't share many specifics about the new learning requirements before the draft is released on Tuesday, but she did offer some examples about the way the teaching of math is evolving in Washington and around the nation.

The current math learning standards offer a spiral of learning — a number of concepts are taught over a number of years with more depth added over time. The new standards will shorten the length of time students are given to master a concept such as fractions, but during the years in which fractions are a major emphasis, teachers will spend more time and make more of an effort to ensure that every child understands the concept thoroughly, Seeley said.

"We're really trying to get past the spiral, so students don't get stuck spinning around," she said.

At every grade level, there will be three or four big hits. For example, grade three will focus on multiplication, division with whole numbers, fractions and early geometry.

A list of the computational skills that need to be learned and the reasoning and problem-solving ideas that go with each concept will be included. Following that will be a list of smaller concepts or supporting ideas that should also be taught at that grade level but not emphasized as much as the big hits, such as learning to tell time, use money or do measurement. Some smaller concepts will become big hits in later years.

Since the Legislature adjourned last spring, the Washington Board of Education has worked with the office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction and consultants such as the Dana Center to revise the way math is taught and learning is assessed in Washington.

The goal is to realign what is being taught in the classroom with what is being tested on the Washington Assessment of Student Learning so that by the time the math section of the WASL becomes a graduation requirement in 2013, the test makes more sense as an assessment of math learning and more students will pass it. Both the learning requirements and the WASL will be revised by 2013.

Currently, only about half of Washington's 10th-graders pass the math section of the WASL each year, even with retakes, while passage rates on the reading and writing tests are more than 80 percent. This year's seniors are the first class to be required to pass the reading and writing tests to get a diploma. The Legislature removed the math test from graduation requirements earlier this year.

The first step of the revision process happened this past summer, when another consultant worked with the state Board of Education to assess Washington's math expectations. The recommendations written by Linda Plattner of the Maryland-

based education research firm Strategic Teaching, with plenty of public input, guided the Dana Center and the math standards committee in its work.

The committee and the Dana Center spent the past two months writing the draft learning requirements and will spend the next two months gathering public input on the draft and rewriting as needed.

When the office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction put out a call for educators and community members to participate in the committee, 157 people applied in about a week.

"I was just blown away by the fact that the response was so tremendous and immediate," said George Bright, a former University of North Carolina professor who came out of retirement to coordinate the math standards project.

That enthusiasm has never flagged, and Bright said that speaks well for Washington's education system and of the prospects for the revision process. He expects a similar response to the state's call for public input on the draft, which will be taken in person at several public forums in January and over the Internet on the project Web site where the draft will be posted on Tuesday.

The committee is looking for specific input, such as suggestions on wording that should be changed or opinions on standards being too difficult or too easy or at the wrong grade level and rationale for making the change.

"We really need as specific information as people can give us about what changes can be made so that the standards address the needs of Washington students," Bright said.

Education officials say six years is not a lot of time for making these revisions, but critics of the WASL and the office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction counter that classroom learning and the graduation test should have been aligned a long time ago.

"The process is pretty complex and pretty intense given the short timeline," Seeley said.