

New Education Standards Pose Challenges For All

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Brianna Gibbs/KMXT

This year educators across the nation are facing new classroom standards, and Kodiak teachers are no exception. Common Core is a new educational program adopted by 45 states that seeks to increase the rigor of math and reading curriculum. Alaska didn't adopt the standards, and instead drafted its own version of Common Core, adding some areas that weren't addressed by the national program.

Christy Lyle is the math coordinator for the Kodiak Island Borough School District and said the new Alaska standards cover everything Common Core does, in addition to English and language arts. For math, Lyle said the new standards mean curriculum that was expected at a certain grade level has now been pushed to a lower grade level.

"So for example things that second graders were expected to do, they now are expected to have mastered by the end of first grade. Not everything, but a lot of things. So that's changed. Also the new Alaska standards followed the Common Core by having the standards for mathematical practice which are eight statements that indicate how students should learn mathematics. Not any longer are we trying to have students simply memorize algorithms, memorize steps, memorize lists of equations. The intent is that the students will understand the concepts behind the mathematics, the patterns that the algorithms represent and the reasons for those patterns and the reasons that the algorithms match up with the patterns that we see in real life."

She said the program has also shifted the ways in which educators go about teaching mathematics. Basically, traditional math classrooms require a teacher to be a guide or director of sorts, showing how a problem is done and having students practice repeatedly.

"Now we need math classrooms to be where the teacher is more of a facilitator, throwing out a problem solving situation and then working as a facilitator and asking questions to guide a student toward determining their own path to solving the problem. There's not one way to solve any math problem. Now certainly our goal is to have them learn efficient ways, and our standard algorithms are certainly efficient, but what we're learning is that the students need to come to an understanding of the mathematics in their own way before they can take on those algorithms and use them flexibly and actually understand them. Rather than just memorize it and forget it after they take the test, which is what many of us grow up doing."

Lyle said everyone in the district is on a huge learning curve this year and her job is to work with teachers as they learn how to teach math in this new, conceptual way.

She said the overall response from teachers is positive once they get adequate training to understand and standards and how to teach them. She admitted that there are some very frustrating things about teaching math in this way, but they are continuing to forge ahead.

However, Lyle said the new system has taken a toll on parents who are trying to help their kids with math.

“Because there’s not a list of practice problems with answers in the back of the book. Students are expected to figure out the answers, build their understanding, and then share what they learn in class with their peers, and the teacher again acting as a facilitator. Well the parent’s never did math this way so they’re really struggling to help their kids when they have a hard time in math.”

Because of this frustration, Lyle is offering evening classes for parents for the next six weeks that will hopefully help them and their students better understand the new teaching methods and expectation for learning.

“We want the parents to feel more comfortable with the math they see coming home. There’s also been a lot of research in the last 20 years on how children take on their understanding of early numeration. And I want the parents to have access to that research based information, those strategies that kids use to learn about numbers, so that they actually retain that information long term.”

The workshops are aimed at content that is learned at the elementary school level, but Lyle said the strategies for learning offered in the course could be beneficial for students of any age, especially if they are struggling. The classes are free and offered Thursday evenings at 7 p.m. in the Kodiak Public Library starting tomorrow.