

Minnesota's K-12 Academic Standards

Frequently Asked Questions

1. What are academic standards?

The Minnesota K-12 Academic Standards are the statewide expectations for student achievement in K-12 public schools. The standards identify the knowledge and skills that all students must achieve in a content area by the end of a grade level or grade band.

Minnesota has state standards for these content areas:

- English language arts
- Mathematics
- Science
- Social studies
- Physical education
- The arts, but districts may choose to develop their own arts standards.

School districts must develop their own district standards for these content areas:

- Health
- World Languages
- Career and Technical Education

School districts determine *how* their students will meet the standards by developing courses and curriculum and choosing teaching methods.¹

2. Why do they matter?

The academic standards are important because they help:

- Prepare students for college and careers.
- Define credit requirements for graduation.
- Guide school districts' adoption and design of curricula.

All students—including students with unique learning needs—must meet the credit requirements and satisfactorily complete all state and local standards in order to graduate. Learn more at <http://education.state.mn.us/MDE/EdExc/StanCurri/index.html>.²

¹ Minn. Stat. §§ 120B.02, 120B.021-120B.022

² Minn. Stat. §§ 120B.02, 120B.024

3. How does Minnesota develop academic standards?

Each content area is on a standards review and revision schedule. The review and revision process usually takes one year and includes input from many stakeholders, such as:

- Parents
- Teachers
- Principals
- School boards
- College/university faculty
- National experts
- Business representatives
- Community members

The process begins with the formation of a standards committee. Anyone may apply to serve on a committee. The commissioner chooses 25-45 people from the pool of applicants and posts the roster on the Minnesota Department of Education website (education.state.mn.us).

The commissioner considers these factors when choosing standards committee members:

- Content area expertise.
- Discipline expertise in the content area (e.g., Civics, economics, geography and history are disciplines in the content area of social studies).
- Representation from all school regions, sizes, and types (e.g., urban, suburban, rural).
- Representation from teachers of all grade levels (K-12 must be represented).
- Teacher experience teaching multiple grade levels or disciplines.
- Teacher experience teaching Advanced Placement or honors courses and students with special needs.
- Teacher experience instructing English language learners, low-income students and/or urban and rural students.

The standards committee's first task is to determine the strengths and weaknesses of the current standards by:

- Examining public feedback about the current standards collected online and from other sources.
- Comparing the Minnesota standards to national standards and where available, national assessment frameworks.
- Reviewing reports of national significance and scholarly research on new developments in disciplinary knowledge or teaching methods.
- Analyzing student achievement and other kinds of data.
- Comparing the Minnesota standards to exemplary or "model" standards from other states and/or countries.

Once the committee determines the strengths and weaknesses of the current standards and the changes that need to be made, they draft a new copy of the standards. They post the revised draft online and collect public input on it through online comments, meetings with stakeholder groups, and town hall meetings held across the state.

The committee then considers the public input and writes another draft. The draft standards are examined for:

- **Vertical alignment:** the smooth progression of knowledge and skills in a topic area from one grade level to the next, K-12.
- **Horizontal alignment:** the “fit” among the standards from all topic areas at a grade level.

Then, **expert reviewers** analyze the revised standards. Expert reviewers are people who have been nationally recognized for their expertise in K-12 standards and/or their knowledge of special issues related to K-12 standards in the content area.

A **special education review team** also reviews the revised standards. The special education review team ensures that the standards are accessible for students with disabilities.

The standards committee then incorporates feedback from the expert reviewers and the special education review team into the draft standards.

Steps of this process are often repeated as the committee works toward completing the final draft. The committee sends the final draft to the commissioner, who begins the 11-18 month process of adopting the standards into administrative rule.³

4. How does Minnesota measure whether students are meeting the academic standards?

All public school students must be assessed in **reading and mathematics** in grades 3-8 and once in high school. All public school students must be assessed in **science** in grades 5, 8, and once in high school. All public schools in Minnesota administer the following tests:

- Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments (MCA)
- Minnesota Test of Academic Skills (MTAS) in reading and mathematics

MCA

The **MCA** measures student achievement on the Minnesota K-12 Academic Standards.

- ✓ The grades 3-8 and 10 Reading MCA-III assessments are aligned to the 2010 Minnesota K-12 Academic Standards in English Language Arts.
- ✓ The grades 3-8 and 11 Mathematics MCA-III assessments are aligned to the 2007 Minnesota K-12 Academic Standards in Mathematics.
- ✓ The grades 5, 8, and high school Science MCA is aligned to the 2009 Minnesota K-12 Academic Standards in Science.

Approximately 97 percent of Minnesota students take the MCA.

³ Minn. Stat. §§ 120B.02, 120B.021, 120B.023

MTAS

The **MTAS** is a performance-based assessment in reading, mathematics and science for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities and is available in every grade in which the MCA is available. It is an alternate assessment based on alternate achievement standards that are much less complex than the Minnesota K-12 Academic Standards.

Test materials include task administration manuals, presentation pages and response option cards that incorporate the use of pictures and symbols. The reading MTAS includes brief passages that are available in two formats and may be read aloud to students. The mathematics and science MTAS includes object lists that provide guidance regarding permissible objects for students who need this type of support.

Only students whose IEP team determines that they are eligible may take the MTAS.⁴

5. How are Minnesota's tests developed?

The Minnesota assessments are designed to test students' mastery of the Minnesota K-12 Academic Standards, so it is important that each test item is aligned to an appropriate benchmark in the academic standards. The test development process involves several advisory panels that are important to the integrity of the system. The advisory panels include members who represent subject and grade level expertise, gender balance, ethnic diversity and statewide geographic representation.

First, a panel develops **test specifications** for each subject and grade in collaboration with panels of content expert teachers. The panel decides which strands, standards and benchmarks are appropriate for statewide testing and in what percentage of the test.

The panel also considers these factors:

- Depth of Knowledge (a measure of cognitive complexity).
- Reading text complexity and passage word count.
- Type of item (multiple choice or technology enhanced).
- Other quality factors.

Once the test specifications have been developed, vetted and accepted, an assessment vendor creates **test items** for each benchmark. MDE trains vendor content specialists and item writers on the Minnesota K-12 Academic Standards.

The writers write the test items and submit them to the vendor specialists who check that they are aligned with the appropriate benchmark. The vendor specialists submit the test items to MDE content specialists for further review of alignment and overall quality. Items are accepted, rejected, or sent back for edits.

⁴ Minn. Stat. § 120B.30

Writers, vendor specialists and MDE content specialists follow this process until the test items are ready for review by panels of Minnesota teachers. Every item is reviewed by two panels before appearing on a test:

- A **new item panel** that reviews the items for adherence to standards and benchmarks and overall quality. The panelists can also decide to accept, reject or accept with edits.
- A **bias review panel** of Minnesota stakeholders representing different ethnic groups that reviews the items for content that may be offensive or misunderstood. An organization representing the blind and vision-impaired also reviews the items for anything that would introduce bias.

The test items that make it through this process are field tested; they are administered to students but do not count toward the test score. Field test data is analyzed for expected statistical performance and bias that may adversely affect one group over another. Results of the analysis are presented to another panel of teachers who decide if the item should be accepted or rejected, and whether it is aligned properly.

The test items that pass all the reviews go into an item pool from which assessments are formed. Alignment to benchmarks and standards is checked every time an item is selected for inclusion in an assessment.

Once a new test is given to students for the first time, MDE selects an outside vendor to work with a panel of teachers to determine how well items on the test align to the academic standards. MDE employees are not involved in these meetings to avoid influencing the panelists. The vendor prepares a report that is posted on the MDE website.

Each new assessment must also be reviewed by a panel of national experts who judge alignment to grade-appropriate academic standards. MDE must submit extensive documentation to the U.S. Department of Education that alignment to standards was considered at every step of the test development process. The U.S. Department of Education then approves the test or asks for more documentation. To date, all of Minnesota's tests have been approved.⁵

6. What is the “Common Core?”

The Common Core State Standards Initiative was established as a multi-state effort to develop clear, concise and rigorous K-12 academic standards in English language arts and mathematics. Led by the Council of State School Officers and the National Governors Association, the Common Core standards were developed by representatives from many states, K-12 educators, content experts, researchers, national organizations and community groups. Minnesota teachers and department staff were involved in writing the Common Core English language arts and mathematics standards.

⁵ Minn. Stat. § 120B.30

The Common Core standards are aligned with college and career expectations. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) requires states to choose whether to adopt the Common Core standards or develop their own college- and career-readiness standards.⁶

Most states, the District of Columbia, four territories, and the Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA) have adopted the Common Core State Standards in English language arts and mathematics. For more information about the Common Core standards, visit <http://www.corestandards.org/>.

7. Has Minnesota adopted Common Core standards?

Minnesota is not considered a full Common Core state, and is not a member of the two national testing consortia related to the Common Core standards; instead, Minnesota has developed our own assessments aligned to the standards.

In 2010, Minnesota **did adopt the Common Core English language arts standards** and added some supplementary content. Public schools in Minnesota were required to implement the 2010 standards no later than the 2012-2013 school year. The standards are known as the 2010 Minnesota K-12 Academic Standards - English Language Arts. Link to standards: <http://education.state.mn.us/MDE/EdExc/StanCurri/K-12AcademicStandards/LangArts/index.html> (See pages 2-3 for information about how the standards were developed.)

Minnesota **has not adopted the Common Core mathematics standards**. The 2007 Minnesota K-12 Academic Standards in Mathematics were written prior to the development of the Common Core mathematics standards, and are not up for revision until 2015. Academic standards are revised according to a schedule specified in state statute.⁷ The Legislature would have to change the statute to adopt the Common Core mathematics standards before 2015. Link to standards: <http://education.state.mn.us/MDE/EdExc/StanCurri/K-12AcademicStandards/Math/index.html>.

8. How are Minnesota students' scores shared with the federal government?

Student testing data is provided to the U.S. Department of Education (USED) at a **summary level**. Individual student data—such as a child's name, contact information, photo, grades, test scores, disabilities and disciplinary records—are not currently, nor will they be, shared with USED.

The federal government is prohibited from establishing a student-level database that would contain assessment data for every student. The Minnesota Department of Education, local school districts and charter schools retain control over student assessment data and comply with all state and federal laws and regulations with regard to the protection of student privacy.

⁶ Title I section of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)

⁷ Minn. Stat. § 120B.021, Subd. 4