



Minnesota K-12 Academic Standards Frequently Asked Questions

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What are academic standards?

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

According to [Minnesota Statutes, section 120B.018, subdivision 2](#), "academic standard" means a summary description of student learning in a required content area under [Minnesota Statutes, section 120B.021](#), or elective content area under [Minnesota Statutes, section 120B.022](#).

According to [Minnesota Statutes, section 120B.018, subdivision 3](#), "benchmark" means specific knowledge or skill that a student must master to complete part of an academic standard by the end of the grade level or grade band.

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

Which content areas have standards?

Minnesota has state standards for these content areas:

- English language arts
- Mathematics
- Science
- Social studies
- Physical education
- The arts

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

- Health
- World Languages, using current world languages standards developed by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages
- Career and Technical Education

Why do the standards matter?

The academic standards are important because they help:

- Prepare students for success in careers, college, and civic life.
- Work toward equity: they describe the knowledge and skills that all students across the state should learn, and support a well-rounded education for all.
- Define credit requirements for graduation.
- Guide school districts' adoption and design of curricula.
- Describe how learning progresses from kindergarten to high school

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.

How are credits, graduation requirements, and standards connected?

Students must complete two requirements in order to graduate. Students must:

- Satisfactorily complete all state academic standards or local academic standards where state standards do not apply.
- Satisfactorily complete the state course credit requirements under [Minnesota Statutes, section 120B.024](#).

Students complete the academic standards by taking a course of study that equips them with the knowledge and skills they need for success in postsecondary education, highly skilled work, and civic life. In order to graduate, a student's high school coursework must include at least the minimum state course credit requirements. "Credit" means the determination by the local school district that a student has successfully completed an academic year of study or mastered the applicable subject matter. ([Minnesota Statutes, section 120B.018, subdivision 4](#)) Minnesota's academic standards are designed to align with the equivalent of one year of study.

Students must complete a minimum of 21.5 course credits. Some of those credits must be in specific content areas, including the arts, English language arts, mathematics, social studies, and science. For more detail, [see MDE's Graduation Requirements page](#).

What is the relationship between curriculum, instruction, and standards?

Minnesota's academic 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. This can be thought of as the "what" students must learn. Standards guide instruction and assessment, but are substantive enough to require more than one class period to be taught, and are broad enough to allow for educator decisions on instructional and assessment practices.

Educators make the decisions on the "how" to deliver instruction on the standards. Curriculum is the resources and plans that educators need to present the content to students. By statute ([Minn. Stat. § 120B.021, subd. 2\(b\)](#)), Minnesota academic standards do not require a specific curriculum. Districts, schools, and educators make curriculum and instruction decisions to support the teaching and student mastery of standards. Further, standards are not limiting and students may benefit from opportunities for additional challenge.

What is the relationship between academic standards and equity in education?

One of the purposes of academic standards is to help our state work toward an equitable education, by articulating the learning to which all students should have access, regardless of background or geographic

location. In practice, as with many aspects of education, the degree to which academic standards further equity relies in how they are implemented and taught. The Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) has a robust process for the revision of standards that involves many stakeholders and perspectives. And, MDE recognizes that some standards or benchmarks may play a part in maintaining inequity. MDE is working to reduce bias making the process more inclusive and the standards increasingly reflective of diverse perspectives.

In standards-based education, culturally responsive and sustaining teaching and learning beliefs and practices is critical. If standards are the learning destination, then districts, schools, and educators determine the way students get there through curriculum and instruction. MDE asks and encourages educators to identify where bias exists in academic standards and create pathways in learning that dispel these biases. Additionally, MDE asks that educators work with students and the community to craft lessons that utilize the experiences and expertise of students, families and the community to help students think critically about the standards as a part of meeting them.

What is the relationship of educator licensure to courses and standards?

Each educator license varies with regard to the specific content area(s) courses that can be taught, as well as which grade levels the teacher may teach. The Professional Educator Licensing and Standards Board (PELSB) aligns licensure areas with content areas and types of courses. For more information on educator licensing, and who can teach what content area courses, please [see PELSB's website](#). Additionally, the [MDE arts webpage](#) and [MDE science webpage](#) provide additional content-specific resources and information.

Are all standards required?

Districts are required to offer all standards. Most of the state standards are achieved through the benchmarks. Schools must offer and students must achieve all benchmarks for an academic standard to satisfactorily complete that standard. Districts are required to have plans for instruction and achievement for all students ([Minn. Stat. § 120B.011, subd. 2\(b\)](#)).

For courses in a content area for which there are locally developed standards, schools must offer all benchmarks in order for students to satisfactorily complete those standards.

Who is responsible for ensuring students meet the standards?

Teachers and administrators are responsible for providing standards-based curriculum and instruction, and assessing students' achievement of standards. School boards are the local authority responsible to ensure all students in their district are meeting all required standards and benchmarks for all content areas. In rare cases, after all other local avenues have been explored, MDE may work together with a district to ensure it offers all required standards.

Should districts use power/priority standards?

Minnesota K-12 academic **standards** are summary descriptions of student learning, and **benchmarks** are the set of basic skills and knowledge that each student in the state must master by the end of each grade level or grade band. While the process of identifying power standards was not meant to eliminate the expectations of teaching and assessing any standards or benchmarks, this is sometimes a concerning outcome. When organizations use power standards, it is likely that the process contributes to inequitable opportunities and outcomes for Minnesota students as well as perpetuates some current beliefs and practices fueling Minnesota's persistent opportunity and achievement gaps.

When educators at one grade level or building identify power standards using assumptions that are different from those used by educators at another grade level or building to identify different power standards, the result is likely to:

- Provide an incoherent experience for students from grade level to grade level.
- Disrupt the learning progressions as intended.
- Provide different educational experiences from one site or system to another, an issue especially problematic for students who transfer from one setting to another.

Integration or bundling of standards and benchmarks is one way to gain efficiency of time and learning. Bundling¹ is the incorporation of multiple related benchmarks into a single unit of study. Within and across content areas, the curriculum can be arranged in bundles so that units of instruction can be built using approaches such as themes, authentic processes, problem-based learning, essential questions, or big ideas. Done well, integrated or bundled instruction and curriculum supports students in developing knowledge and skills in more than one standard at the same time.

A related aspect of integration is finding efficiencies and opportunities in approaches to assessment. For example, performance assessments could be designed to measure multiple benchmarks in one product or task. An additional benefit is that the student is engaged in synthesis of multiple concepts and skills, leading to authentic and relevant learning.

How often are standards reviewed? When will they be reviewed next?

State standards are reviewed and revised on a schedule approved by the Minnesota State Legislature on a 10-year cycle. The implementation year for each content area's new standards is identified during the rulemaking

¹ *Bundling has been described by the Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS) as the "iterative process of developing a bundle of [standards and benchmarks] for purposes of both instruction and assessment" and defines a bundle as "a group of performance expectations that have been brought together to organize instruction" for which documentation "identifies an underlying rationale and assumptions about the relationships between the performance expectations that have been grouped together." (NGSS Lead States, 2016, Page 2)*

process, and takes into account multiple considerations, including the degree of revisions and whether complimentary statewide assessment must be developed.

Minnesota’s K-12 academic standards are reviewed and revised on a schedule approved by the Minnesota legislature, in one content area per year, following the schedule specified in [Minnesota Statutes, section 120B.021, Subdivision 4](#). The schedule is as follows:

Current Review	Implementation Year	Next Review
2006-07	Mathematics 2010-11	2021-22
2016-17	Physical Education 2021-22	2022-23
2017-18	Arts 2021-22	2027-28
2018-19	Science 2023-24	2028-29
2019-20	English Language Arts 2024-25	2029-30
2020-21	Social Studies (to be determined)	2030-31

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 and the public.

The process begins with the formation of a standards committee. Anyone may apply to serve on a standards review committee. The committee must have representation from the following groups: parents, licensed teachers, principals, higher education faculty, school boards, the business community, and the Tribal Nations Education Council (TNEC). The commissioner chooses 25-45 people from the pool of applicants and posts the roster on the specific academic standards content area webpages.

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 geographic regions, district sizes, and school types (e.g., urban, suburban, rural).
- Representation of a community or stakeholder group.
- Racial and gender diversity.
- 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.
- Criteria for quality standards are used to craft clear, developmentally appropriate, assessable, and accessible standard and benchmark statements.

Then, the draft standards are released publicly for a second time, with the invitation to provide feedback online and in some cases at additional meetings of stakeholders and town halls.

During this round of review, **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.

The standards committee then incorporates feedback from the public and expert reviewers 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 reviews and approves them, then begins the 11-24 month process of adopting the standards into administrative rule.

How does the Minnesota Department of Education measure implementation of the academic standards?

In order to evaluate equitable implementation of the academic standards across districts and schools, two standards-based accountability assessments are administered statewide: The Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment (MCA) and Minnesota Test of Academic Skills (MTAS). These assessments are criterion-referenced, which means they are designed to measure a snapshot of learning with respect to a clearly defined domain of knowledge and skills: the Minnesota Academic Standards. As academic standards are revised, a new series of assessments is developed to align with the updated standards. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), and [Minnesota Statutes, section 120B.30](#), require that public school students be assessed in reading, mathematics, and science.

While the statewide assessments are a critical component to evaluating equitable implementation of the standards across the state, they are designed to show a broad snapshot of student learning. A teacher needs more fine-grained, curricular-specific information for differentiating and informing instruction that can only come from classroom assessments. Classroom assessments are designed to provide teachers with actionable data they can use for planning and adjusting instruction, and to monitor and communicate progress of student mastery of the academic standards. The methods used for assessing student learning of the standards and benchmarks at the classroom and district level is determined locally by districts and charter schools to ensure that all students meet the standards in all required content areas.

When do statewide assessments take place?

- Students enrolled in grades 3–8 and 10 take a reading test.
- Students enrolled in grades 3–8 and 11 take a mathematics test.
- Students enrolled in grades 5 and 8 take a science test. High school students also take a science test when they complete their life science instruction (usually a biology course).

Most students take the MCA, but students who receive special education services and meet the [Minnesota Test of Academic Skills \(MTAS\) eligibility requirements](#) may take the MTAS. Students take one test in each subject.

Standards-Based Accountability Assessments Overview

Test	Subject	Administered in Grades	Academic Standards Alignment
MCA-III	Reading MCA	grades 3–8, 10	2010 Standards
MCA-III	Mathematics MCA	grades 3–8, 11	2007 Standards
MCA-III	Science MCA	grades 5, 8, once in high school*	2009 Standards**
MTAS-III	Reading MTAS	grades 3–8, 10	2010 Standards

Test	Subject	Administered in Grades	Academic Standards Alignment
MTAS-III	Mathematics MTAS	grades 3–8, 11	2007 Standards
MTAS-III	Science MTAS	grades 5, 8, once in high school*	2009 Standards**

* Students in grades 9–12 take the Science MCA or Science MTAS once in high school.

**The Science MCA-IV, based on the 2019 Minnesota Academic Standards, will first be administered in 2023–24; a redesigned alternate assessment (in place of MTAS) will also be administered in science beginning in spring 2023–24.

How should MCA and MTAS results be used?

Since these assessments are criterion-referenced assessments (meaning they measure performance against a fixed set of criteria, the Minnesota Academic Standards) and summative assessments (meaning they provide data about student performance from one point in time), the results are designed to be used as a “system check” at a school, district, and/or student group level:

- These assessments provide one data point that should be considered in context when making decisions. While data on statewide assessment results provides a useful starting point, the most robust evaluations of district and school performance occur when this information is paired with information from local, district, and classroom assessments.
- Districts can use summary assessment data provided by MDE to look at overall student proficiency for a given year and over time.
- Examining changes in overall proficiency between student groups can lead to important considerations for district, school, and classroom-level decision-making, including evaluation of the overall alignment of course curriculum to the standards being measured.
- Examining the percent of students by achievement level within a subject or grade level can provide additional evidence when districts and/or schools evaluate the rigor of curriculum and classroom assessments, as well as the alignment of skills across grade levels.
- At an individual student level, these assessments are not designed to provide the same fine-grained information about student learning that classroom assessments can give. Classroom assessments provide the very specific information teachers need to adjust and differentiate instruction for their students.

How are Minnesota’s statewide tests developed?

Since the Minnesota assessments are designed to measure implementation of the Minnesota K-12 Academic Standards, all test content is aligned to an appropriate benchmark in the academic standards. The test development process involves several educator and community review committees that continuously meet to review and update test content to ensure grade level appropriateness and cultural relevance. The review committees include community members and teachers who represent subject and grade level expertise, expertise in English learner and special education instruction, gender, racial and ethnic diversity, and statewide geographic representation.

It takes at least two years to create and evaluate new test content before it is ready to be included in an assessment. Each step of the process makes an important contribution to the reliability and validity of the assessment. The steps below outline the test development process.

1. The academic content standards are revised and defined. Minnesota teachers and content experts write the Minnesota Academic Standards that delineate the knowledge, skills and abilities students at each grade level should possess within each content area.
2. Test specifications are developed after the new standards are approved.
 - a. Test specifications outline the content and format of each subject and grade-level assessment, and part of the test specifications process is defining which academic content standards will be assessed. Committees of teachers and content experts define the format of the assessment and further define the content standards that are assessable on a statewide assessment and identify those standards that can only be assessed within a classroom.
 - b. Test specifications also describe the types, number, and constraints of questions that may be asked on the assessments. Since test specifications are intended to remain consistent from year to year, the content of the tests aligned to these test specifications is similar from one year to the next.
3. Test questions are developed and reviewed. The service provider is responsible for question development, publication, scoring, and reporting for the MDE-developed Minnesota Assessments. Adhering to universal design principles, Minnesota Assessments are designed and developed to allow participation of the widest possible range of students, in a way that results in valid inferences about performance for all students who participate in the assessment. Test questions are intentionally designed for maximum readability and comprehensibility in order to be linguistically accessible to all students.
 - a. Contracted item writers are specifically trained to develop items to meet Minnesota’s mathematics and reading test specifications. For reading, contracted passage finders seek out high-quality reading passages that reflect the diversity of Minnesota students, are free of bias and sensitivity concerns, and amenable for item development.
 - b. Minnesota science educators are trained to develop phenomena, items, and simulations to meet Minnesota’s science test specifications.
 - i. All test content is subsequently reviewed by Minnesota educators and community members (Educator and Community MCA Review Committees). These committees advise MDE on whether each question should be approved, edited or rejected based on the appropriateness of each question’s benchmark alignment and rigor; whether passages are age and grade appropriate; and whether questions and passages are fair and equitable for all students by reviewing for bias and sensitivity.
 - c. A test question is not included in a student’s score until after it has been field tested by students and its data reviewed again by an Educator Review Committee. If the question is approved for use, it is then put into the operational pool of test content the following year.
 - d. More information about participating in [MCA Review Committees](#) is available on the MDE website ([MDE/Districts, Schools and Educators/Teaching and Learning/Statewide Testing/Register for MCA Review Committees](#)).
4. The test is constructed. Once test questions have been approved, MDE and the service provider construct a test form or build an adaptive test using an algorithm that matches the test specifications. For example, if the mathematics test specifications require that Strand 4 (Data Analysis) make up a

particular percentage of a test’s points, the appropriate number of Strand 4 questions will be included on the test. MDE assessment specialists review all aspects of the proposed test questions.

Once a new test is given to students for the first time, MDE selects an outside vendor to work with a committee of teachers to determine how well content on the test align to the academic standards. MDE employees are not involved in these meetings to avoid influencing the participants. 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.

Are there any other required statewide assessments?

According to state statute, the commissioner is forbidden to develop statewide assessments for academic standards in social studies, health and physical education, and the arts ([Minn. Stat. § 120B.30, subd. 1a](#)). However, there is a civics test requirement. In 2016, the Minnesota Legislature passed a law requiring Minnesota students in public schools to pass a civics test. The test consists of 50 out of the 100 questions in the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) Naturalization Test. [Read the Civics Test Questions Frequently Asked Questions \(FAQ\)](#) for more information.

If I have more questions about a specific content area, who do I contact?

Who do I contact if:	Contact information:
I want to know about the content of the standards and the review process?	MDE content area webpages and Content Specialists at MDE
I want to know if my child is being taught the standards?	Teacher, school district, school board, MDE
I want to support my child in learning the standards?	Teacher, school district, MDE
I want to give feedback on the standards?	Look for public feedback opportunities in the standards review cycle via the MDE content area webpages.
I have questions about licensure?	Professional Educator Licensing and Standards Board (https://mn.gov/pelsb/)
I have questions about statewide assessments?	MDE Statewide Assessment Division (https://education.mn.gov/MDE/dse/test/) Testing 123 site (https://testing123.education.mn.gov) TEST/index.htm