

M-STEP scores: Social Studies and English Language Arts see modest but positive gains

[By Gina Joseph gjoseph@digitalfirstmedia.com](mailto:gjoseph@digitalfirstmedia.com) and [@ginaljoseph](https://twitter.com/ginaljoseph) on Twitter

9-16-18

Social studies was never a subject that occupied the minds of educational reformers. In their yearly assessments of student achievements at the state and district level it was always mathematics and science that had their full attention. There was also great concern about English Language Arts (ELA).

Now that the world has become smaller its role is bigger. And this year, while proficiency overall was generally low, a highlight of the M-STEP test was an increase in 11th grade social studies scores, from 46 percent proficient last year to 48.5 percent this year, according to the Michigan Department of Education.



Sheila Majask, a Dakota High School social studies teacher and Chippewa Valley Schools' social studies content specialist said she's super proud of her district's M-STEP scores but especially the improvements in social studies.

By Gina Joseph gjoseph@digitalfirstmedia.com and [@ginaljoseph](https://twitter.com/ginaljoseph) on Twitter

"They never paid much attention to us," said Koskos, principal of Chippewa Valley Schools' Dakota High School 9th Grade Center. "Being a former social studies teacher, I'm especially excited about the results that we are seeing with M-STEP scores and that, social studies has taken on a greater degree of importance."

The acronym stands for Michigan Student Test of Educational Progress. First given in the spring of 2015 (replacing the former MEAP test), it provides the Michigan Department of Education with a snapshot of student achievement across the state. How are we doing as far as getting children ready to take their place in the world? It's forever challenging and the knowledge and skills that Michiganders require to enjoy a successful career continually evolve. In the 1940s boys and girls were often separated to learn their own

special jobs in life. The boys were taught to repair things such as cars and wooden benches as part of their practical training while the girls were taught home management.

Today the sky is the limit for both boys and girls who must be equally prepared for careers that range from engineering and robotics to genetic research and manufacturing management.

"To ensure students can meet these demands, Michigan's State Board of Education has adopted high learning standards that broadly outline what students need to know and be able to do in each subject and grade level to be ready for the next stage of learning," according to the MDE. "These standards also guide teachers as they develop classroom curriculum and lesson plans. Today's standards challenge students to: understand subject matter more deeply; learn how to think critically; make learning more relevant in their lives and apply what they've learned to the real world.

Engaging students

Every morning while Sheila Majask is taking attendance in her ninth-grade social studies class at Dakota High School her students are watching CNN live. "It helps to keep them up to date on what's happening around them," said Majask, who has been teaching for 20 years and as Chippewa Valley Schools' Social Studies Content Specialist coordinates staff development and provides leadership for their district-wide social studies team.

"It also gets them interested in what we are doing," Majask said, adding that one of her students tweeted, a CNN reporter, who replied to his tweet.

That kind of engagement and interest has helped bolster CVS proficiency scores in 11th grade social studies scores by 4 percent on this year's M-STEP.

Being informed and interested in what is happening around them also encourages students to become more engaged when discussing topics such as the fall of the Roman Empire, which has become a common best practice in social studies. Discussing topics rather than lecturing students seems to result in a better understanding of what they are learning. "Lecture type classes have pretty much gone away," Majask said.

With certain subjects that may be the best practice, but when it comes to social studies lectures have given way to inquiry-based learning in which students learn the facts and ask questions related to the topic or their own lives. For example: Is the United States falling? What caused the fall of the Roman Empire? Are there any similar factors going on today?

"I think it's more interesting and it raises their interest level," Majask said. "These students are different than past generations. They like to collaborate and social media has created a generation that likes to have a say in everything — good or bad."

Tension between the U.S. and Russia are pretty high as students are observing through news reports on CNN but has that always been the case? During their discussion on World War II, Majask shared a quote and ancient proverb that suggests that two opposing parties can or should work together against a common enemy, "The enemy of my enemy is my friend." This led to a discussion how U.S. and Russia came to be allies against Germany. After the discussion students had to write about the relationship and give their opinion on it.

"We try to make it more relevant to a student's life," Majask said. In doing so, students understand the subject matter more deeply no matter what the subject might be. "I am super proud of our district and how we're reaching students."

Collaboration

It used to be that a teacher would go into the classroom and close the door, typically working in relative isolation. Today there's an increased focus on opening doors and encouraging teachers to work collaboratively with teams and content specialists to ensure that the best teaching practices are used.

"We have cohort meetings with the staff to make decisions on what we might cover in a class," Majask said, of her social studies team. "So there's a consistency from classroom to classroom."

The groups might also meet to discuss how students are doing on their midterm exams. If one class seemed to score higher than everyone else in a certain area they'll look at what that teacher is doing to get those results.

M-STEP provides a broad view of how the state is doing but teachers rely heavily on their own districts and local assessments to help them improve their student's proficiency in a particular subject.

"Teachers are not working in isolation," said Sean McBrady, who is the Macomb Intermediate School District Social Studies Consultant. "There is really a collaborative culture."

Katie Walczy would agree.

"We have a team approach. We're consistent and we are strong," said Walczy, who teaches social studies at Warren Woods Tower High School. Their eleventh-graders M-STEP proficiency scores went up more than 6 percent this year and almost 14 percent in past two years. "We're working to give them skills that will help them in high school and to be better citizens and that has translated into better M-STEP scores."

Young readers

Collaborative efforts on the part of the state and early childhood education programs has also led to M-STEP gains — however modest — in third and fourth-grade scores in English language arts.

"The third and four-graders in school today are the kids who are benefitting from the investments in early childhood education programs over the past several years," said Interim State Superintendent Sheila Alles.

From a funding level of \$108 million in 2012, the state steadily increased spending in the Great Start Readiness Program and has invested more than \$243 million there in each of the last four years.

Michigan also identified early literacy gaps as a focus area for policy and program support for learners and in the last three-years established a set of initial support mechanisms to

address the learning gaps. Such support has included instructional-time grants for districts that needed to provide additional help for students who were struggling with ELA; literacy coaches at intermediate school districts (ISD) who can provide direct assistance to school districts and academies; and assessment reimbursement grants to support the use of screening and diagnostic tools that identify specific student needs.

These are a few of the programs created and funded by the state legislature and initiated by early education teachers, who created additional programs to ensure all Michiganders have the literacy skills to ready by grade three.

"Learning to read begins far before children enter formal schooling. It's so important young children have access to early childhood programs where there is a focus on the foundational areas of literacy development," said JoAnne Elkin, early childhood education teacher and literacy consultant for the MISD, which initiated several programs designed to support the state's goal or "Read by Grade Three Law."

Some of the programs include:

- Through Great Start Macomb (state funded early childhood block grant) much of our work focuses on direct services for young children and their families. "For example, we bridge the language barrier with bilingual home visits and parent cafes," said Elkin. "We work with parents in their native home language as well as in English."
- Making Macomb Transitions reaches out every year to 10,000 children in Macomb County who will be starting kindergarten. When parents visit the school to get their children signed up they're given literacy backpacks filled with items geared to give their little ones the best start possible including books and printed materials featuring literacy activities that children can do before they attend their first day of school.
- The Kindergarten Home Visiting Project allows teachers the chance to gain a better understanding of their student's home environment and to increase parents' understanding of the role they can play.

"Kindergarten teachers in three of our local school districts participate in home visiting," Elkin said.

- Early Literacy Summer Camps are attended by more than 1,000 children, who engage in motivating instruction that focuses on a variety of literacy skills including vocabulary, letter knowledge and phonological awareness.

One of the most promising initiatives is the Macomb ISD Literacy Coaching Network, which held its first meeting Sept. 11. The network works directly to support district coaches and teachers in strengthening their instructional strategies for students in K-3. "Everybody needs a coach in life," said May Manna Denha, who is one of 35 literacy coaches/literacy consultants in the ISD network. "Our focus is to enhance their coaching skills and expand their capacity in improving literacy instruction."

This year's M-STEP results do not include statewide or school-level-scores for the science tests given in grades five, eight and 11, due to a large-scale field test of the new science assessment being underway.

— Oakland Press staff writer Charles Crumm contributed to this report.