Welcome to the start of school for 2014-15!

I am State Superintendent June Atkinson and I want to welcome you to the start of a new school year.

No matter how many years I work in public education, the beginning of the school year always is exciting to me. When I was a classroom teacher, I looked forward to the new beginning each fall.

This year, I know that many of you have questions about what will be new and what will stay the same in North Carolina public schools. During the General Assembly’s short session lawmakers made decisions that affect public schools, so I can understand your uncertainty, especially when it comes to the Standard Course of Study and what will be taught in the 2014-15 school year.

One big question many of you may have as you begin the new year is:

What about the Common Core legislation?

If you teach mathematics or English language arts, you may wonder:

How does that legislation affect me?

Do I have to throw away all the work I have done to develop quality lessons to reach these standards?

What standards do I use this fall?

What do I tell my students’ parents?

If you teach other subjects, you may still may be concerned because the Common Core standards, if taught correctly, also have an impact on other subjects.

Before I answer those questions, I want to review a short bit of history about North Carolina’s Standard Course of Study and that important tradition.

In 1840, North Carolina opened its first public schools. In 1852, the Office of the Superintendent of Public Schools was created, with Calvin Wiley as State Superintendent. He wrote what was called the North Carolina Catechism, and it identified what students should know and be able to do as a result of going to school for four months out of the year. Other standards of the day came from the textbooks published out-of-state, for the most part.
Wiley’s work was the forerunner of the North Carolina Standard Course of Study. That course of study has been revised many, many times over the years.

Just as today, the 19th century standards were statements of what students should learn as a result of going to school. The standards back then – just like the standards today – were silent on things such as student testing, instructional strategies or the curriculum materials that teachers choose to use in their classrooms.

Fast forward to 2010: The State Board of Education adopted a revised Standard Course of Study, including the Common Core standards for two subjects, mathematics and English language arts. Along with the standards in science, social studies, arts, healthful living, world languages, and career technical education, the mathematics and English language arts standards were implemented in classrooms beginning the fall of 2012 and have been in place since then.

But what about Senate Bill 812:

This bill has prompted many questions because it is at the heart of what many of you do – teach English language arts and mathematics.

While I support the current Standard Course of Study – which includes the Common Core for these two subjects – I also support this review because it will help build support for strong standards in these two key subjects.

Here’s what I want you to know about Senate Bill 812:

This law does not change the Standard Course of Study at all for the 2014-15 school year. Nothing changes in math or English language arts this year. You will continue to use the same standards that you used in 2013-14 and in 2012-13. So this will be our third year with these standards in place.

During this school year, an Academic Standards Review Commission will be convened to review all English language arts and mathematics standards adopted by the State Board of Education in 2010 and to propose possible modifications.

The Commission will have 11 members appointed by the President Pro Tempore of the Senate, the Speaker of the House of Representatives, the State Board of Education and the Governor.

No one elected to statewide office or to the General Assembly can be appointed to the Commission. The law also requires that parents, teachers, principals, superintendents, business people and professors who are qualified to teach be considered as possible members.
The Commission also has been asked to consider the impact on you, North Carolina's teachers, when making recommendations to the State Board of Education.

What's the timeline for all of this?

The commission is to meet no later than Sept. 1, 2014, and is to report its findings and recommendations to the State Board of Education no later than Dec. 31, 2015.

North Carolina has a long-standing policy of reviewing the Standard Course of Study by subject each five years to determine if changes are needed. The standards review under Senate Bill 812 is close to our typical 5-year cycle.

Given that the Commission work is scheduled to be completed by Dec. 31, 2015, I would expect that the first year any revised standards could be put into place would be the school year of 2016-17. Of course, the Commission could complete its work more quickly and that timeline could move, but there are certain processes that take some time to accomplish.

Gathering public input takes time, typically at least two years.

And, an explanation about testing and accountability....

You may have heard that the Common Core State Standards brought many new tests to students and schools. In North Carolina, the Common Core did not affect the number of tests that students take. We have had end-of-grade tests in place for grades 3-8 since 1993. Regardless of our standards, we are required to measure student performance through standardized tests in order to comply with federal and state laws.

All of our standards are silent about testing. Senate Bill 812 does address testing, however, in Section 5, lines 14-23, which set out some requirements for student assessments.

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Thank you for all the work you have done since 2010 to prepare for today's Standard Course of Study. I know that many of you have participated in many hours of professional development, lesson planning and other activities to make sure you were ready to teach your students appropriately.

Again, that work will continue to pay off this year. Remember, the new law notes that the current Standard Course of Study "remains in effect until official notice is provided to all public school teachers, administrators and parents or guardians of students enrolled in the public schools of any changes made in the Standard Course of Study by the State Board of Education."
I am sure that with all of the publicity surrounding these standards, your students’ parents may have some questions. Parents, as well as other North Carolinians, trust teachers more than any other profession. It is important that you share the facts about North Carolina standards with your parents when you meet with them.

For more information about North Carolina standards, please go to www.ncpublic schools.org and click on the Standard Course of Study link.

If you have questions or comments, please send them to the following email address: nc standard course of study.dpi.nc.gov. We like to hear from you.

Best wishes for a successful 2014-15 school year.