

## Florida Standards 'absolutely essential' to national security

**BY DONALD R. INFANTE**

Special to The Tampa Tribune

For more than three years Florida educators have been working successfully to implement K-12 English language arts and mathematics standards for our students. The standards are important because they clearly articulate what students should know and be able to do at every grade, and because they reflect the skills and knowledge students need for higher education and for the jobs that are driving our economy forward.

As a retired U.S. Army general, I hope this effort stays on track for a reason that might surprise you: I know it is absolutely essential to our national security.

The U.S. Department of Defense estimates that 75 percent of young adults between the ages of 17 and 24 cannot qualify for military service, many because they are educationally unprepared. In Florida, 29 percent of our high school students do not graduate on time, and more than one in five who do graduate cannot qualify because they cannot pass the military's exam of math, literacy and problem-solving skills.

The Florida Standards address this problem by articulating what students should know and be able to do as they move from one grade to the next. By the end of kindergarten, for example, children should be able to print many upper- and lowercase letters and count to 20, verbally and in writing. By the end of third grade, they should be able to read grade-level text orally with accuracy, accurate rate, and expression. By high school graduation, they should be able to read, analyze, and compare historically and culturally significant works of

literature and use a variety of problem-solving strategies.

The standards also help students develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills. These skills are vital for young people who want to join today's military, which requires individuals who can operate complex, high-tech systems, make sound decisions under pressure, and work well on a team. These are the same qualities that are sought by many major employers who cannot find enough skilled workers, which is bad news for our economy here in Florida and beyond.

While the standards are designed to guide instruction, they do not tell teachers how to teach. They also do not specify a curriculum; these important decisions are left up to schools and teachers themselves, in keeping with our tradition of local control in education. This is an especially important point because it highlights the critical role that our teachers are playing in the implementation of the standards. They need resources and other support to develop aligned lesson plans so students can master the skills and knowledge needed for college and career readiness.

We must also recognize that these standards can be met by our students, who ranked second in the world in reading achievement on the most recent international test of literacy, and second in the nation on gains made on the National Assessment of Educational Progress. Florida high school graduation rates also increased 22.5 percent between 1999 and 2012 — which serves as proof of our students' potential, and the ability of our teachers to inspire them.

Assessments based on the standards are vital as well. Be-

cause the standards are more rigorous than what we have had in the past, we may actually see a decrease in student test scores. But it would be a terrible mistake to reject the assessments because they bring news we don't want to hear. A better course is to recognize the standards and assessments as a smart start for the journey that prepares students for high school graduation, meaningful employment, and the opportunity to serve our nation if that is the course they choose to take.

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