

The following was submitted by State Superintendent June Atkinson and State Board of Education Chairman Bill Harrison on March 1, 2011.

Dear Editor,

In the coming days, the NC Senate will take up the issue of high school testing, with an eye on eliminating four high school tests.

The proposal on the table is to eliminate the high school end-of-course tests in US History, Civics and Economics, Physical Science and Algebra II courses that help us measure progress for high school students. Some organizations also have offered additional ideas such as moving the state to a commercial off-the-shelf nationally normed test.

These moves certain to win popularity of others overlook some very important changes that have been in research and development and that we are poised to implement in the next two years. The State Board of Education began a complete overhaul of the states curriculum standards and assessments in 2008 a response to the 27 recommendations provided by the Blue Ribbon Commission on Testing and Accountability, a group of state business leaders, educators and legislators convened to review and guide education innovations. The NC Department of Public Instruction and State Board of Education are prepared to field test the new standards and assessments in 2011-12. This overhaul is designed to deepen the curriculum and to identify what is most essential for students to learn.

One of the most exciting changes is the states adoption of the Common Core State Standards and the corresponding assessments that are being developed by the national Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium of 31 states. The Common Core and accompanying assessments in English language arts and mathematics will be North Carolinas new curriculum standards and assessments in these two subjects. This effort, led by the governors and state education superintendents in the participating states, will give us state-to-state comparisons and a standardized set of learning standards. In the meantime, we have been working to improve our states tests to use more technology and to allow students to give more expansive answers rather than the pencil-and-paper bubble sheet approach that most of us know. In the US History test, we will begin using questions based on historical documents to challenge students to apply the facts they have learned.

The new high school accountability model will focus on student achievement, high school graduation rates, career readiness, and community college and university readiness. A national college admissions examination will be an important part of this. Current state end-of-course tests are an important bridge to take us from where we are today to where we need to be in accountability.

While it sounds simple to purchase a nationally normed off-the-shelf test for students, that option is likely to cost more than North Carolinas current testing program. Current price checks show that nationally normed reading and mathematics tests are at least twice the cost of North Carolinas current tests. Commercial replacements for the high school subject tests would be equally expensive. In order to comply with federal requirements, any off-the-shelf test would have to be customized to align with North Carolina curriculum standards. Nationally normed tests, by virtue of their structure, always report about half of the students above the norm and about half below the norm. In contrast, North Carolinas own tests developed in conjunction with the University of North Carolina - categorize student performance based on how well students have met the requirements for grade level proficiency. Not only are North Carolinas tests inexpensive, in-state development keeps these tax dollars within our state.

The NC Supreme Court has sanctioned the states accountability system as the means of assessing whether all students are receiving an equal opportunity for a sound, basic education. Eliminating four high school end-of-course tests will diminish key measures of how our high school students are doing in key subjects. In addition, it minimizes efforts to include student performance as part of the teacher evaluation process an important part of the new teacher evaluation model.

There are some important improvements ahead for testing and accountability in North Carolina schools. The research and development phase is complete. Abandoning state tests or replacing them with commercial tests may not prove to save money and will leave us with more questions than answers. We agree that it's time for change. We've been preparing for and building that change. Let's give it a chance to work.

June St. Clair Atkinson
State Superintendent of Public Instruction

William Harrison
Chairman
State Board of Education