

Positive reform for school testing and accountability

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For those of you who believe that students spend too much time testing and not enough time learning, you will be pleased to know that some members of the South Carolina House of Representatives are working on a proposal to fundamentally change the way students are tested.

Most of the complaints I hear from principals, teachers, and parents about testing are directly aimed at the Palmetto Achievement Challenge Test (PACT). The PACT is largely unpopular because the PACT takes too much time away from classroom instruction, the results take too long to get back, and once the results are received they contain no useful diagnostic information to help a teacher teach a child.

The challenge for our state is to look to the future. The performance of our public education system is crucial to our state's ability to compete for jobs for our citizens. Our education system needs to reflect the right mix of skills assessment and adaptability to insure that our efforts produce the maximum benefit for the students.

South Carolina's current testing and accountability policy has been identified as being too static, not allowing flexibility based on interim assessments or not reflecting growth that occurs throughout the year. The result is that teachers are not given the tools and encouragement to monitor and adjust their instruction to respond effectively to the present and evolving educational needs of their students.

Dr. Jim Rex, SC Superintendent of Education, has proposed specific changes in a proposal that is incorporated in the "Education Accountability Act of 2008," expected to be filed in the House of Representatives this week. The bill improves the quality of instruction and learning in our schools by moving to a better system of accountability. If passed, the provisions of the bill could be in place as early as the 2009-2010 school year.

Among its reform measures, the bill would reduce testing in schools and replace current tests with ones -- like the Measure of Academic Progress (MAP) testing -- that better assist teachers in assessing each student's strengths and weaknesses and responding instructionally to the student's needs. Furthermore, the tests will be administered in ways that will reduce the time it takes to receive and act on results.

It is important for the community to know how schools are performing. Unfortunately the current report cards are confusing and often misleading. This bill simplifies the School Report Card by giving each school only one rating, instead of the two currently given. The new report cards will also contain National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) information which will allow citizens to compare our schools' performances to others states and the nation.

Currently teachers must complete student academic plans for the current year based on the previous year's accountability assessment results in English/language arts, Mathematics, Science, and Social Studies. The bill will allow for adjustments in the academic plans based on ongoing feedback throughout the school year from interim assessments.

The bill also proposes to look for more ways to eliminate unnecessary testing by requiring a feasibility study to explore the use end-of-course assessments as a replacement for the state's current high school exit exam in English/language arts and Mathematics. In addition, a feasibility study will also consider the inclusion of students who finish high school in five or six years and GED and Adult Education diplomas when reporting graduation rates.

Our South Carolina schools need supportive leadership from our legislators that will help our students achieve for their benefit, as well as that of our communities and our state. I am proud to be a co-sponsor of this legislation because I want to see positive reform in our schools that will assure our children of a better future through an education that is responsive to their needs and goals.