

The Public School Forum's Friday Report

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State Board Eliminates Three Tests

In action taken at its June meeting, the State Board of Education approved eliminating up to three tests for the 2001-02 school year. The tests include the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills sample test for 5th and 8th graders and the Open-Ended Assessment for 4th and 8th graders. If the Department of Public Instruction receives permission from the US Department of Education, the 10th grade High School Comprehensive Tests in Reading and Math will also be eliminated. Under current policies, the test must be given in high schools that serve 10th grade Title I students.

The State Board actions come as the Department is under increased scrutiny because of recent problems with the new mathematics assessment. As part of the budget bill passed by the Senate, the entire testing program is facing a review including the number and type of tests administered. In addition to using end-of-grade scores, a Senate bill would require principals to consider additional factors in deciding whether to promote a student. The House will consider these measure during the consideration of the budget.

As part of the review of the testing program, the State Board met with officials from the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) to discuss plans for the audit. SREB President Mark Musik noted that the problems were not technical, but rather a disconnect between the technical process and the decisionmaking process. Jim Watts, SREB vice president, echoed Musik's comments observing that "sometimes as a pacesetter, you can get moving too fast."

State News...

General Assembly Confirms New State Board Members

In a joint meeting of the House and Senate, Governor Easley's first three appointees to the State Board of Education were confirmed and will begin their service at July's State Board meeting. Easley appointed Dr. Michelle Howard-Vital of Wilmington, Vice Chancellor for the Division for Public Service and Extended Education of the University of North Carolina at Wilmington; Patricia Nickens Willoughby of Raleigh, Assistant Professor in the Department of Education at Meredith College; and Wayne McDevitt of Asheville, Vice Chancellor for Administration and Financial Affairs of the University of North Carolina at Asheville.

At this month's State Board meeting outgoing Board members Eddie Davis of Durham, Bob Douglas of Asheville, and Margaret Harvey of Kinston were recognized for their service.

North Carolina Not Alone In Test Problems

At the same time North Carolina citizens were reading about problems with the scoring procedures for this year's elementary math tests, Georgians were reading about problems with their state's science tests.

Complaints about errors in the test led to a disclosure that printing errors had not been caught, leading to mistakes in two questions, which ended up not being counted in the final tabulation of the scores. Other questions on the exam were being "field-tested" and were also not counted toward final scores.

Georgia's science test is developed by Management Inc., a North Carolina-based company, which contends that its system of review by committees of subject area experts, curriculum directors and teachers was not at fault. Instead, printing mistakes made after the questions had been developed and reviewed led to the snafu.

Assurances aside, in Georgia, as in North Carolina, the testing problems point to the need for more safeguards and scrutiny of tests before they are administered – especially with tests in states like Georgia and North Carolina playing a larger and larger role in determining graduation standards for young people.

House Amends Citizenship Bill

The House began consideration of The Student Citizen Act of 2001, which mandates that local boards develop and implement character education curriculum focused around seven keys traits, and will mandate that the State Board modify the social studies curriculum to instruct students on "participation in the democratic process and to give them hands-on experience." The House began consideration of legislation and, after two hours of debate, approved four amendments including:

- requiring local boards of education to adopt dress codes for students and employees;
- permitting the Ten Commandments and other historical documents to be displayed on school property;
- making students who participate in classroom and group community service activities to be voluntarily; and
- enacts a severability clause so that if part of the legislation is ruled unconstitutional, the entire act would not be unconstitutional.

The bill passed its second reading, the third reading was objected to, and the bill will be considered again next week.

National News...

Colorado Pilots Full Day Kindergarten Program

Colorado Governor Bill Owens signed a bill into law that established a five-year-old pilot program in 17 of Colorado's under-performing schools. Kindergarteners in the 17 schools will attend a full day of kindergarten instead of the standard half day. This bill will cost about \$2.8 million dollars per year.

Governor Owens said, "For years, I have heard from educators that early education can help students do better in school whose home lives do not adequately prepare them for school." Schools involved in the pilot program will be those which receive a rating of "unsatisfactory" when the Colorado Student Assessment Program scores are announced next month.

Texas Lawmakers Cap the Number of Charter Schools

Texas lawmakers recently approved a bill that restricts the state's charter schools to 215. With 193 approved charter campuses, Texas has one of the largest charter school programs in the nation. This bill has also increased the state's supervision over charters and allowed universities to set up charter an unlimited number of charter schools. Charter schools only that serve students close to failing will be converted to open enrollment schools that accept all students. The commissioner of education's authority to close failing or mismanaged schools has also been increased by this bill. Christi Martin, executive director of the Texas Association of Charter Educators said, "Texas taxpayers and parents must be confident that all charter schools operate prudently, openly and effectively. This legislation provides that confidence, without unduly infringing on the flexibility and innovative potential of these schools."

Michigan Unveils the First in the Nation Online Evaluation System

Michigan recently debuted its new school evaluation system, which was developed by the Wall Street bond-rating firm Standard & Poor's. Michigan will pay Standard & Poor's \$10 million over the next five years to maintain the system, which will include data such as spending, graduation rates, and test scores for all Michigan schools. Some districts are concerned that the latest data on the site is from 1999, but the 2000 data will be added when it is available.

Evaluation System (cont'd)

Choices for Children, a group that advocates charter schools and vouchers, questioned the program because the information was already available and because the money could be used for improvements that would immediately benefit the children, such as developing new standardized tests and increasing teacher salaries. State officials feel the system is worth the money because the company can use the information to provide objective analysis. The site has also been criticized because comments can be posted by superintendents, but not by parents and taxpayers, who are the primary stakeholders.

Separation of Church and State and Technology

The U.S. Court of Appeals for the 7th circuit recently decided that states cannot provide funding for technology to private, religious schools without limiting the use of those funds. This decision reaffirmed a decision that stated that Wisconsin's Technology for Education Achievement (TEACH) program, which provides grants to schools for the Educational Telecommunications Access Program, was unconstitutional since it did not restrict how the money is used. This program has already provided almost \$60,000 to nine private, religiously affiliated schools and colleges. The schools are still uncertain if they will need to return the money. Calvin Potter, a member of the TEACH board, explained that the decision would only affect a small portion of the program.

Forum News...

Reminder to Forum Board Members . . .

The Forum Board meets on Monday, June 11th from noon to 3:30 pm at the Raleigh Crabtree Marriott Hotel. The meeting will begin with lunch and the Board will convene at 12:45 pm.

The *Friday Report* is published weekly by the Public School Forum of NC and is distributed to Forum Board members, members of the General Assembly, the press, and Forum subscribers. Archive issues of the *Friday Report* are available at www.ncforum.org.