

Opinion: A test for the governor's study commission

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IN RESPONSE to growing concerns from legislators, parents, educators and advocates about the new Common Core standards and PARCC tests, Governor Christie last week issued an executive order establishing a study commission to “review the effectiveness of all K-12 student assessments administered in New Jersey.”

Too often such commissions are where pressing public issues are sent to disappear into unread reports and ignored recommendations.

Following are a series of steps to ensure that doesn't happen here:

-- Appoint educators and parents to the commission: The governor's executive order was largely a response to overwhelming legislative and grassroots support for a bill (A3081/S2154) that would have delayed some uses of the new tests and established a task force to review Common Core implementation plans. The governor should look to that bill for the make-up of his study commission. Without full participation from parents and educators, the commission will have little credibility.

-- Hold public hearings: The commission should hold a series of hearings that provide opportunities for public testimony and a measure of transparency. Grassroots input from local schools and communities is essential to an honest evaluation of New Jersey's testing landscape.

-- Review the reliability and quality of the PARCC tests: PARCC, the Partnership for the Assessment of College and Career Readiness, is the federally funded consortium that is overseeing development of the new Common Core tests. The consortium has given the testing giant, Pearson Inc. — which has a long history of testing errors and mismanagement — a \$1 billion contract to develop and administer the tests. PARCC originally included 24 states and the District of Columbia. But now only nine states, including New Jersey, plan to give the PARCC exams next year. The commission should develop clear criteria for quality control and public review of the PARCC exams.

-- Scale back non-mandated high school testing: PARCC requires six new high school exams, each with multiple parts. This exceeds federal mandates, which require annual testing in Grades 3-8 but only once in Grades 10-12.

While the state Department of Education has proposed suspending graduation testing during the transition to PARCC, it has not yet put forward regulations to implement this policy or address the use of PARCC scores for student grades, course credit, college admissions decisions or student transcripts. The commission should review these policies, scale back plans to add a battery of end-of-course exams and remove high stakes from the PARCC high school tests.

-- Document the costs of the new state mandates. New Jersey's implementation of standards and assessments has always been tied to efforts to equitably fund our public schools. But there have not been any credible studies of the resources required to provide all students with the opportunity to achieve the Common Core's "college and career ready" standards, even though districts are already spending hundreds of thousands of dollars on technology for PARCC's computer-based exams.

Raising standards without providing — or even identifying — the resources needed to deliver them sets schools and students up for failure instead of success.

-- Examine the role of standardized testing in New Jersey schools: Many districts have added their own layers of testing to federal and state mandates, and PARCC is developing tests for kindergarten through second grade. The commission should document the costs and impact of this added testing and propose ways to reduce it.

A parental testing notification bill pending in the Assembly (A3077) offers ways to begin this process. Another bill pending, A3079, would ban standardized tests in Grades K-2. The commission should endorse both.

-- Promote alternatives to standardized testing: Pearson's PARCC tests will still be mostly standardized, multiple-choice exams. There are better ways to evaluate student and school progress.

Alternate approaches

In New York, a waiver from the state has allowed "performance consortium schools" to develop alternative assessment approaches with external review. These schools have had success raising academic performance and improving college participation rates among urban students of color, including special needs populations; over-age, under-credited students, and English language learners. Other states have encouraged "portfolio assessments" of student work or onsite "quality school reviews."

The commission's recommendations should include options for schools or districts to pursue such alternatives as part of an innovative, multiple pathways approach to student success and school improvement.

The misuse and overuse of standardized tests is hurting children and wasting public dollars. The proper role for educational standards and assessments is to help identify the programs and supports students need to succeed, not to create new categories of failure.

If the governor's study commission is to serve a constructive purpose, it must heed the growing chorus of voices calling for a reduction in testing and a more student-centered approach to supporting and improving our public schools.

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