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NATIONAL NEWS

Teacher Evaluations Key to State Chances for NCLB Waivers

Education Week
December 12, 2011
By: Stephen Sawchuk

http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2011/12/14/14waive-bargain_ep.h31.html?tkn=TWYFF%2BRytv9f6jQDiQw8vO05KEK29hNYYyYl&cmp=clp-edweek

Where their teacher-quality proposals are concerned, the fates of the 11 states that have bid for waivers of core principles of the No Child Left Behind Act appear to depend largely on how the peer reviewers—and, ultimately, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan—interpret their applications.

The U.S. Department of Education's criteria for teacher quality—one of four policy areas states must address in their applications—hinge on the ability of states and districts to ready new teacher-evaluation systems for statewide implementation by the end of the 2013-14 school year.

But even long-standing observers acknowledge that the Education Department's criteria for vetting the states' plans are vague in places and that it's hard to determine at this stage exactly what the peer reviewers will favor.

"We're going to have to watch it closely as it unspools," said Rob Weil, the director of field programs for the 1.5 million-member American Federation of Teachers. "It is a lot of work just to keep on top of it; [the process] seems a little discombobulated."

All of which leaves the most important question in the hands of reviewers: How likely are the states' plans to come to fruition within the waiver period—and should they be granted the flexibility in the meantime?

One challenge for the reviewers is that states and their districts are at widely divergent stages of developing new evaluation systems, ranging from Tennessee, which has an operational statewide teacher-evaluation system, to Kentucky, where nearly every detail of such a system remains undecided.

And the stakes are different from those of the Race to the Top competition, which also put a premium on teacher evaluation: Unlike that contest, Education Department officials have stressed that they want all states to apply for—and earn—the flexibility. Some, like Mr. Weil, welcome a process that could help every state eventually win breathing room from the NCLB law. But others question whether political pressure will prevent a rigorous review.

"On the first round, I think it won't be seen as too costly to kick a few of these back," said Sandi Jacobs, the director of state policy for the National Council on Teacher Quality, a Washington-based nonprofit advocacy group that tracks states' teacher policies. "I think the real question is on the second round."

Clarity Lacking

As reauthorization of the NCLB law stalled in Congress earlier this year, Mr. Duncan said he would use his broad waiver authority under the law to grant relief from some of its mandates, such as the requirement that states ensure all students can perform at grade level in reading and math by 2014. To gain the flexibility, states would have to adopt reforms roughly in line with those mandated in the 2009 economic-stimulus package.

In the teacher-quality area, the waivers, which will be granted for an initial period of three years, are based on two main principles. States must adopt guidelines for teacher evaluation, and then school districts must adopt them, flesh out the details and bargain them with unions where applicable, and begin to pilot them by the completion of the three-year initial waiver period. The NCLB law's consequences for states and districts that do not have all teachers achieve "highly qualified" status are
relatively minimal. But because the flexibility is an all-or-nothing deal, states must commit to the more-rigorous evaluation systems in order to gain leeway from the law's stringent school accountability features. Five states in the first application round—Colorado, Florida, Indiana, Massachusetts, and Tennessee—have recently passed laws or adopted regulations requiring annual performance evaluations that meet the federal Education Department's requirements. The remaining states have promised to adopt their guidelines by the end of the 2011-12 school year.

In Georgia, state officials need a law or regulation in order to implement a statewide teacher-evaluation system; currently, only 26 districts out of the state's 180 are adopting a model using Race to the Top funding. New Mexico also needs a law to replace its tiered-licensing system with annual evaluations. Kentucky and New Jersey have set up work groups or committees to outline principles for new regulations to update current teacher-evaluation strictures.

But leaders in those states say their applications should meet the teacher-quality criteria. "Unlike some states which we've had it, we've had [annual evaluation] in place since 1978, and it includes an indicator for pupil progress," said Martha DeBlieu, an associate director of the New Jersey Education Association.

The union disagrees, however, with the state committee's recommendations about how much weight to given to standardized test scores in the evaluation.

Some observers say the federal Education Department's guidance for the peer reviewers could have been more detailed. "We would have liked a stronger, more forceful definition on what it means when you say you're going to use evaluations for continuous improvement. Words like 'professional development' are a throwaway," said Mr. Weil, who was considered as a reviewer but won't participate in the first round due to the small number of applications received. "For lack of a better word, if you're going to have a national framework to do these evaluations, you have to be clear about it."

Plans that look good on paper can prove difficult to implement in reality, said Ms. Jacobs, pointing to the challenges Hawaii, an RTT winner, has faced in reaching an accord with its teachers' union over performance evaluation. "I'm hoping the department will free to let the experts use not just their subject expertise, but also what they know about where states are and what's realistic and doable," said Ms. Jacobs.

But Raegen T. Miller, the associate director of education research for the Center on American Progress, said that the Education Department's guidance should help reviewers ask the tough questions. "The questions they're asking are the right ones: Can you actually bring these down to a district level and have parties engaged mutually in seriously implementing them," he said. (Mr. Miller is not a peer reviewer, though CAP Vice President for Education Policy Cynthia G. Brown was selected as an alternate.)

**Evaluation Consequences**

An element that remains somewhat unclear is how the proposals will mesh with laws that specify whether teacher evaluation falls under the scope of collective bargaining. In all but Indiana and Tennessee, evaluation is a permissible subject of bargaining. The Department of Education took pains to note in its application guidance that the waivers do not give school districts any new legal authority they did not hold beforehand.

Where not spelled out in state law or regulations, such factors as procedures for conducting teacher observations, pre- and post-observation tools, and so on, must still be individually negotiated. That is the case in New Jersey and Massachusetts, among other states.

The peer reviewers will also be instructed to check whether the systems will be used to inform personnel decisions, which could mean such policies as pay, promotion, and tenure-granting. Yet few of the states provided details. For some states, those features are now spelled out in new state laws. Colorado's SB 191, passed in 2010, for instance, requires teachers to be deemed effective on the evaluations before they are granted tenure. Florida's law, passed in March, requires the evaluations to factor into layoff decisions.

But for others, such as Kentucky, those features remain an unknown area. "Current legislation places authority for personnel decisions at the local level," Lisa Gross, the director of the division of communications and community engagement, wrote in an email. Legislative or regulatory changes in those areas are possible, but any such decisions "will be made later in the process," she said.

The thorniest issue of all, dismissal, could prove challenging for peer reviewers to make sense of. While most states have laws on the books for dismissing teachers for incompetence, the criteria are often not detailed, or must be interpreted via case law. Such laws are "a long way down from saying that classroom ineffectiveness based on these evaluations is grounds for dismissal," Ms. Jacobs said.

**Following Through**

Still unclear is how the department will intervene in those states and districts that win the waiver flexibility—but face challenges translating plans into reality. The first major hurdle for states is to adopt the statewide teacher-evaluation guidelines by the end of this school year. Education Department officials said that states approved under the condition that they do so could have their flexibility terminated if they do not meet that deadline.

But beyond that, they declined to specify exactly under which circumstances the department might revoke the flexibility. "I don't think I could answer that hypothetically," said Elizabeth Utrup, an Education Department spokeswoman. "Each state's plans would lay out milestones for how to achieve it, and they'd have to miss those milestones.

"Obviously, this might not just be in the evaluation area," she added. "They're very comprehensive plans."
Fewer students are being required to pass exit exams to graduate from high school, but high school testing is increasing because more states are requiring college- and career-readiness tests, according to a study released today.

Those are a couple of the key takeaways from a study released by the Center on Education Policy. It is the 10th in a series of annual reports that examine trends in high school testing. Its findings are echoed in states' applications for waivers from the No Child Left Behind Act, as well.

My colleague Caralee Adams gives us the lowdown on the CEP study in her blog, College Bound. Among the findings: In 2010-11, 25 states—down from 28 the previous year—require students to pass a comprehensive exam or end-of-course tests to earn a diploma.

Some of that shift came from places like Georgia, North Carolina, and Tennessee, which used to require exit exams, but now incorporate the scores from those tests into students' grades in a course they must take to graduate.

The downward trend in required exit exams, though, is being offset by a rise in other kinds of tests. The CEP study shows that states are responding to the national pressure to prepare students for college and work and to figure out a way to gauge how well they've done that.

So what are states using as gauges? The CEP report is heavy on names you already know: the SAT or PSAT, ACT's college-admissions exam and its PLAN, EXPLORE, or WorkKeys tests. (While students are required to take these tests in some places, they're not required to "pass" or reach a certain score to graduate.) The newness of this trend shows in the numbers: Of the 11 states that currently require, or plan to require, college-entrance exams, five started doing so as recently as 2009-10.

Of course, this isn't too surprising, given the high profile of the national debate on college readiness. It's been a drumbeat of the Obama administration from the get-go. And so it's no surprise that you can see the college- and career-readiness testing trend woven through states' applications for waivers from NCLB, too. I saw this recently when I curled up with the applications to take a look at states' plans to implement "college- and career-ready" standards and assessments, as desired by the U.S. Department of Education.

My colleagues Michele McNeil and Alyson Klein provide an overview of the waiver program in this story, and in this one. Michele details the 11 state applicants' plans to revamp their accountability systems under the program, including new college- and career-readiness indicators some of them are building into those systems. We'll have more stories on other aspects of states' plans on our website soon, including one from me on states' standards-and-assessment plans.

To give you an advance flavor of how states are gearing up to assess teenagers' readiness for work and college, here are a few highlights from the applications:

• Georgia has gone particularly heavy into career-readiness indicators in its accountability system, including things like the percentage of students earning industry certificates or the ACT's Work Ready Certificate.

• Kentucky's higher education system has agreed to allow students who meet the ACT's college-readiness benchmark to skip remedial courses.

• With its higher ed. system, Florida has designed a new test (the cheerfully named PERT) that allows students to go straight into credit-bearing courses in public colleges and universities if they reach the agreed-upon cutoff score. It will also use this test, as well as SAT and ACT scores, as a "readiness" gauge in its accountability system.

• Minnesota's state colleges and universities have deemed its math standards and test cutoff scores sufficient to allow students to skip remedial work upon entry.

• Indiana will try using the ACT and SAT suites as a gauge of college readiness until the common assessments are ready in 2014.

How valid are these tests for measuring what states want them to measure? There are varied views on that, and many eager to see what this increasingly large-scale experiment produces.
LONDON — Not that long ago Salman Khan thought YouTube was only “for cats playing the piano. No place for serious mathematics.” With more than 3.5 million students watching his educational videos every month, the founder of Khan Academy has long since changed his mind.

While living in Boston Mr. Khan began the online academy as a way of tutoring his cousins in New Orleans in mathematics. It has grown exponentially, helped by hordes of grateful parents whose dim memories of algebra or trigonometry are not enough to help with their children’s homework. While Khan Academy is the most widely known, there are a host of similar Web sites aimed at students and teachers.

When Bill Gates told the 2010 Aspen Ideas Festival that he watched Khan Academy videos with his children, the site’s traffic spiked higher overnight. At the time Mr. Khan was still making short films out of a closet in his home. Nine months after taking a year off from his job as a hedge fund analyst, he was “beginning to think about polishing my résumé.”

Instead, with backing from the Gates Foundation and Google, whose $2 million donation is paying for his material to be translated into 10 languages, Mr. Khan now hopes to change the way students learn from kindergarten all the way to graduate school. Mr. Khan calls his revolutionary idea “the flip” and the basic premise — that classroom lectures followed by homework followed by exams is a recipe for educational failure — is gaining momentum.

“If I just want to tell you stuff, a lecture is very useful, but if I really want you to learn something it’s not that useful,” said Richard Baraniuk, professor of electrical engineering at Rice University and founder of Connexions, an open source Web site for college textbooks. Though Mr. Baraniuk prefers the term “reverse instruction,” he sees Khan Academy as fitting into an approach pioneered by Carl Wieman, a Nobel laureate in physics serving as an adviser to the White House. In a paper titled “Why Not Try a Scientific Approach to Scientific Education?” Mr. Wieman cited data showing that students who take an introductory physics course typically know less physics when they finish — and that “if anything, the effect of taking an introductory college chemistry course is even worse.” Traditional teaching methods simply do not allow “enough time to develop the long-term memory structures required for subject mastery,” Mr. Wieman wrote.

Mr. Khan agrees. “In a traditional classroom, what’s fixed is the amount of time you spend on a subject. The variable is how well you learn it,” he said during an interview on Skype. “But when you think about all the things you learn outside a classroom — riding a bike, sports, playing an instrument — what you want to achieve is a certain mastery.”

There is nothing flashy about Mr. Khan’s path to mastery. The earliest videos, such as the one devoted to finding the least common multiple, show a blank chalkboard slowly filling with jerky figures while Mr. Khan’s voice explains the problem. More recent examples, like the one on the physics behind hitting a baseball over the Green Monster, the fabled baseball outfield wall at Fenway Park in Boston, move a little more briskly. None of them show Mr. Khan’s face, yet they have made him an object of devotion. “I started getting letters saying ‘My family prays for you every month,’” he said. “Remember, I was working at a hedge fund.”

The videos, however, are only the beginning. From the start Mr. Khan was writing software that allowed him to track the progress his cousins were making. Underlying the whole enterprise is a knowledge map — a chart offering exercises leading, step by step, from simple addition to linear algebra. In a speech last month, Mr. Khan explained: “Each square is a different concept. The videos are there if you need help. The idea is you keep doing the problems till you’ve mastered the concept, and then you go on to the next concept. It’s how every video game works.”

The software lets teachers and parents see where students excel — and where they need help.

Invited to pilot his approach by the Los Altos, California, public school district, Mr. Khan discovered that students were able to progress further and with more confidence by “flipping” the sequence of activities — asking students to try the problems online before class, and then having teachers work individually or in small groups on just those areas students found difficult.

“But they were all still working in lockstep,” he said, adding that ideally “you would have students all working at their own pace,” helping each other in class and online, allowing the teachers to use class time far more effectively.

Some critics have claimed Mr. Khan is trying to make teachers obsolete. “That’s not what we’re about,” he responded.

Marshall Smith, who served as undersecretary of education in the Clinton Administration, said that technology “gives teachers room to go deeper.” Recently retired as program officer of the Hewlett Foundation, Mr. Smith is an admirer of Khan Academy. But he warned that innovation would not come easily.

“There are a lot of higher education institutions where the teaching just isn’t very good, where the teachers rattle on as they’ve been doing for years, and where, especially in the sciences, the teachers just don’t keep up,” he said.

Helping teachers to keep up was one of the driving forces behind PhET, a Web site at the University of Colorado founded by Mr. Weiman that uses interactive computer simulations to teach physics, chemistry, biology and earth sciences. Initially aimed at college students, PhET, which stands for Physics Education Technology, attracts 25 million visitors a year. Like Khan Academy lectures, the simulations “can be used off-line,” said Katherine Perkins, the project’s director. “We have schools in rural Africa
where they don’t have an Internet connection, where teachers use our material,” she said. PhET also lets anyone adapt or incorporate their material under a creative commons license.

Mr. Smith said the effect has been “pretty egalitarian. This gives everybody a shot at understanding science, even if they don’t have X dollars to spend.”

He also sees a need much closer to home. “You have community colleges where the students work all day, then drag themselves to class pretty exhausted.”

Mr. Baraniuk argues that anything beyond the first few rows is “distance learning.”

“If you have a class of 250 students, the first three rows are getting a high quality experience,” he said. “Everybody else is just watching.”

For Mr. Baraniuk, a key issue is quality control. “PhET happens to be founded by a Nobel Prize-winning physicist. So he probably knows physics,” he said. “And if you loved Sal Khan’s algebra you’ll probably love his geometry.

Connexions is open to anybody who wants to submit material” — a strategy Mr. Baraniuk calls “in-reach.”

“We’re enlisting professional societies,” he said.

Mr. Khan has recently broadened his curriculum to include art history, civics, history, and “micro- and macroeconomics, drawing on my hedge-fund experience.” And he has taken a different approach, allowing users to post comments. Urging students to bring “a healthy dose of skepticism — this is just one point of view,” Mr. Khan seems content to rely on the wisdom of crowds. “Our material isn’t just reviewed by Americans, or a few professors. It’s been reviewed by the world,” he said.

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: December 12, 2011

A previous version of this article incorrectly rendered a portion of a quotation. “We have schools in rural Africa where they don’t have an Internet connection, where teachers use our material,” said Katherine Perkins, the director of PhET, Physics Education Technology. She did not say, “schools in rural Africa where they don’t have an Internet connection, or even electricity.”

Iowa literacy plan would have many repeating 3rd grade
Des Moines Register
By: Mary Stegmeir
December 9, 2011

http://www.desmoinesregister.com/article/20111210/NEWS02/312100030/0/SPORTS0804/?odyssey=nav%7Chead

Nearly 1 in 3 Iowa fourth-graders last year lacked basic literacy skills and, if a proposal Iowa lawmakers will consider next year had been in place, most may have had to stay in third grade.

The provision is part of a reform package Gov. Terry Branstad will introduce in January, and is based on a Florida initiative that has boosted scores.

Critics in Iowa say ending social promotion for third-graders could erode students’ self-esteem, and they question the wisdom of retaining children based solely on their performance in one subject area.

But the policy’s architects argue that literacy skills are so fundamental they trump everything else that occurs in the early grades.

“If they can’t read by fourth grade, they’re going to fall behind in other subjects, too,” said Linda Fandel, special assistant on education in the governor’s office.

The literacy push is part of a wide range of school improvement tactics proposed by Branstad in October. Other proposals include more rigorous teacher evaluations, end-of-course exams in some high school subjects, and the creation of a grant fund to reward schools for innovation.

State officials won’t release the retention policy’s price tag until next month. But the Florida policy requires hundreds of millions of dollars annually for mandated student support services, documents show.

Fandel said Iowa leaders would reallocate existing education money to cover as much of the program’s costs as possible.
Thirty-one percent of Iowa’s fourth-graders scored below basic in 2011 on the reading portion of the National Assessment of Education Progress, a test given biannually to a sample of the state’s students in mostly fourth and eighth grades.

The performance of third-graders on last year’s Iowa Tests of Basic Skills, a battery of exams given to all children in third, fourth and other grades, showed nearly 23 percent of students scoring below proficient in reading.

Depending on which test results are considered, somewhere between 7,800 and 10,000 Iowa children were considered illiterate in third grade last year.

Yet fewer than one-tenth of 1 percent of the struggling students were not promoted.

Similar statistics have prompted state lawmakers in Utah, Arizona, Oklahoma, Indiana and Tennessee to pass legislation based on Florida’s law banning social promotion. New York has a comparable policy for third-, fifth-, seventh- and eighth-grade students.

“Reading is always pretty much a top agenda item, but in the past few years, there have been more and more states that have turned that into a conversation about (ending) social promotion,” said Kathy Christie, chief of staff at the Education Commission of the States based in Denver.

Florida implemented its retention policy in 2002-03. Since then, the percentage of Florida third-graders scoring at the lowest level of the state’s reading exam has fallen from 27 percent to 16 percent, state data show.

Not all students who fail the exam are held back. Six types of exemptions are granted to students including for disabilities and language skills.

That said, the percentage of students retained under the initiative has also decreased from 13 percent during the first year to 5.9 percent in 2010-11. And statistics show that Florida’s low-performing youngsters who have been held back do better on subsequent reading exams than their peers who were promoted because of an exemption.

The state’s school system has also recorded higher scores among the middle school and high school students who were subject to the policy, with the greatest achievement increases among minority students.

“We drew a hard line in the sand, and principals reorganized their schools around reading,” said Mary Laura Bragg, a former Florida Department of Education official who now works for the Tallahassee-based Foundation for Excellence in Education. “What gets measured gets done.”

Also key to Florida’s success was a support system to foster early literacy skills and help identify struggling students before they reached third grade, a structure Iowa hopes to copy.

Florida provided professional development for every K-3 teacher in reading instruction the same year it adopted the retention policy. Literacy coaches were placed in each school district and a state reading center was opened to provide further support to school administrators, teachers and parents.

Students who are retained in Florida participate in summer school, and are offered intensive, individualized reading instruction during their second year of third grade.

“I’m a big supporter of the policy because it forces the adults to do what’s right for kids,” said Gary Norris, who led the Sarasota County school system in Florida from 2004 to 2008 before becoming school superintendent in Waterloo, Ia.

Since 2009, elementary and middle school students in Waterloo have spent 90 minutes a day on reading, said Norris. It’s a practice in place in Florida, and one he thinks other Iowa districts may adopt if the retention policy is approved here.

“If we’re passing kids along that can’t read, we’re not doing them any favors,” Norris said.

The intense focus on reading, however, has raised eyebrows among some parents and educators.

Many teachers view retention as a decision that should be made on an individual basis, said Chris Bern, Iowa State Education Association president.

Currently, teachers base promotion on a student’s overall academic and social skills, he noted.

“Reading’s important, but it’s not the only subject,” agreed Karen Tegeler, a Des Moines parent. “Holding a kid back because they struggle in one area, but maybe excel in others … that doesn’t seem right.”
The issue hits home for Tegeler, who has four children. Her youngest child, a fourth-grader, has a visual impairment. He struggles with reading, but is advanced in math.

“Under this he would have been held back, which I don’t think would have been good for him socially or academically,” said Tegeler. “I don’t want them passing kids on who truly aren’t ready, but shouldn’t we really be retaining them in kindergarten or first grade rather than waiting until third grade?”

The provision to end social promotion for third-graders was added to Iowa’s reform blueprint at the behest of state Rep. Dave Heaton.

The Republican from Mount Pleasant is most interested in emulating the intervention services offered to Florida’s struggling readers, but said the threat of retention also played an important role in the success of that state, whose students now do better than Iowa fourth-graders on national tests.

“What happened in Florida is that when parents all of a sudden realized that there wasn’t going to be any social promotion for those that did not attain reading skills, parents became engaged,” Heaton said. “The results have been astounding.”

But other legislators aren’t so sure. Rep. Mary Mascher, a Democrat from Iowa City, said she’d rather put money toward providing summer tutoring or year-round school for struggling students.

Florida allocated $104.6 million in fiscal year 2011 for its Just Read program, which was formed a year before the retention policy was approved and provides some support services mandated by the law.

Up to an additional year of state-funded per-pupil allocations is also spent for each child who is retained. A 2010 review by the Politifact, a fact-checking project operated by the St. Petersburg Times, shows that close to $271 million is spent annually in Florida on remedial education for students retained in the lower elementary grades.

“What (Florida has) put in place does not have a long-term impact on a student’s learning,” said Mascher, a retired teacher. “There’s no (national) evidence out there — none — that shows that retaining a student in third grade results in overall academic achievement in their careers after that.”

A steady stream of new research has emphasized the importance of early literacy. A report released earlier this year by the Annie E. Casey Foundation found that students who don’t read proficiently by third grade are four times more likely to drop out, a reality disproportionately affecting minority and low-income children.

Iowa’s plan would require all districts to adopt a system-wide, research-based reading program. It also calls for the state to create a literacy center to act as a clearing house for curriculum, lesson plans and proven teaching strategies.

Students who fail to read by the end of third grade would have the opportunity to attend a summer reading camp with the possibility of testing into fourth grade at the end of the program.

“It’s crucial that we get as many kids as possible reading by the end of third grade so they can have success in school,” Fandel said. “That will do a lot to, if not close, at least significantly narrow the achievement gap for children.”

STATE NEWS

California: New teacher contract could shut down school choice program

Los Angeles Times
By: Howard Blume
December 11, 2011
http://www.latimes.com/news/local/la-me-school-choice-20111211,0,5238251.story

If teachers approve a tentative three-year pact, the district would no longer hand over campuses to charters or other outside nonprofits.

As schools across California bemoan increasing class sizes, the Alliance Technology and Math Science High School has boosted class size — on purpose — to an astonishing 48. The students work at computers most of the school day.

Next door in an identical building containing a different school, digital imaging — in the form of animation, short films and graphics — is used for class projects in English, math and science.

At a third school on the same Glassell Park campus, long known as Taylor Yards, high-schoolers get hands-on experience with a working solar panel.
These schools and two others coexist at the Sotomayor Learning Academies, which opened this fall under a Los Angeles school district policy called Public School Choice. The 2009 initiative, the first of its kind in the nation, has allowed groups from inside and outside the Los Angeles Unified School District to compete for the right to run dozens of new or low-performing schools.

For two years, the school board has selected the winners after painstaking reviews and intense politicking. The process has led to acrimony, litigation and layoffs, but at Sotomayor, there's been an almost startling degree of cooperation.

The competition for schools could end immediately, however, if teachers approve a tentative three-year pact with L.A. Unified this week. The district would no longer hand over campuses to outside nonprofits, including charter schools.

That would be a step backward, said former school board member Yolie Flores, who wrote the Public School Choice policy two years ago.

"What we created, by way of a competition, helped people behave differently," said Flores, who now heads an education advocacy group. The policy created "a sense of urgency" that compelled schools to change for the better, she said.

At Sotomayor, two of the five schools are run by charters, which are independently managed and exempt from some rules that govern traditional schools. Most charters are nonunion.

Damon Siah, a ninth-grader, said he likes the format because he can work ahead in math, his favorite subject, something he couldn't do at his traditional school.

Freshman Juan Ortiz said his math grades have surged through his use of computer programs that isolate the areas he needs to work on. He said he's now tutoring other students.

The school using digital art on the Sotomayor campus, called ArtLAB, also includes special education students in rigorous academic courses and adds another teacher to such classes.

ArtLAB is one of the three Sotomayor schools founded by teams of L.A. Unified teachers. These schools are directly overseen by L.A. Unified and abide by district union contracts.

At another of the three on that campus, the L.A. River School, instructors are teaching students to use solar cells, a soil lab and a water lab, which are outfitted with industrial equipment. So far, this school has attracted more students than the others at Sotomayor. The River School groups its classes by interest and aptitude rather than by grade level.

The third non-charter there is the School of History and Dramatic Arts. The other charter, Early College Academy for Leaders and Scholars, is managed by Partnerships to Uplift Communities, which has 13 schools.

Competing while having to share a campus "has demanded that all of us be on our 'A game,'" said Paul Payne, a math teacher who helped start the River School. "We have five really amazing schools on this campus." The schools work together to divide cafeteria hours and organize campuswide sports teams and clubs.

From the start, however, Public School Choice has been criticized.

School board member Steve Zimmer said charter operators campaigned almost exclusively for the new campuses rather than trying to take on existing schools, which he regards as the heart of the mission.

Teachers complained that plan development was onerous on top of their regular duties.

Charter bids frequently attracted fierce opposition. At Clay Middle School in the Athens neighborhood of unincorporated South Los Angeles, for example, local district officials — including school board member Marguerite Poindexter LaMotte — insisted that the school was making progress.

Alliance College-Ready Public Schools dropped plans to compete for Clay. "This work is hard enough when people want to work together," said Judy Burton, chief executive of Alliance, which runs 20 schools, including one school at Sotomayor.

Another charter organization, Green Dot Public Schools, pressed on, however, and ultimately won control of Clay through its lobbying and track record. The teachers union has sued to reverse the takeover.

Political pull worked in various ways. The district initially set up nonbinding elections by which parents and others could vote on competing plans. Grass-roots organizing by the teachers union helped teacher groups dominate these elections. Union opponents, with the support of L.A. Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, subsequently used their clout to end this voting.
Last year, five charters opened in new campuses. This fall, six opened in new schools and two opened at Clay. Other nonprofits have claimed four schools. The new charters this year eliminated about 150 jobs formerly held by district teachers.

It's difficult to assess the effects of Public School Choice on student achievement after only one full academic year.

Some defenders of the effort say L.A. schools Supt. John Deasy tossed aside a promising program and gained nothing meaningful.

The superintendent "gave away a crown jewel of education reform that put L.A. on the national map," said former state Sen. Gloria Romero.

But Deasy said the agreement with the teachers union could give all district schools the advantages of charters. Any school could opt out of provisions of the union contract as well as district policy, gaining new freedoms.

The principal of one of the Sotomayor charter schools said Deasy's deal could be good for students overall.

"I love the idea that the district schools are receiving more autonomy," said Mara Simmons, a former L.A. Unified teacher who heads the Partnerships to Uplift Communities charter. "That was one of our original wishes and intentions when we put in a bid for this school."

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**Louisiana: LEAP tests era to end**

Baton Rouge Advocate  
By: Will Sentell  
December 12, 2011  

A test for fourth- and eighth-graders that became one of the symbols of Louisiana's latest bid to improve public schools will be phased out, state officials said.

The exam, which is called LEAP, and others will be scrubbed in three years because new tests will be launched in connection with a national drive to make public school courses more rigorous.

Under current rules, fourth- and eighth-graders have to pass LEAP, and meet other standards, to move to the fifth and ninth grades.

Whether a similar rule will be in effect for passage when the new exams begin for the 2014-15 school year is up to the state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, which sets policies for public school students statewide.

"They will have to make that decision," Scott Norton, assistant superintendent for standards, assessments and accountability for the state Department of Education, said of BESE members.

“All that has to be revisited,” he said.

LEAP stands for Louisiana Educational Assessment Program.

The changes will also spell the end of iLEAP, an annual skills test for third-, fifth-, sixth-, seventh- and ninth-graders, as well as end-of-course exams that high school students have to pass to earn a standard high school diploma.

Those students also will take new tests starting with the 2014-15 school year linked to the state's revamped curriculum.

The issue surfaced on Thursday during a meeting of the House and Senate education committees.

All the test changes stem from the state’s adoption last year of a new curriculum called “common core standards.”

That switch is designed to focus teaching on core topics in math, English and other subjects and making sure that students master those skills before moving to the next grade.

Critics contend that one reason student achievement in the U.S. lags behind many other nations is because schools try to cover too much material.

“We really feel like the common core will provide lots of clarity on what kids need to know to be successful in the workplace or college,” Erin Bendily, assistant deputy superintendent for the Office of Departmental Support, told lawmakers.

Fourth- and eighth-graders have been required to pass LEAP since 2000. About 100,000 students in both grades take the test
annually.

However, the exams have been the source of controversy for years.

Backers said the rule ended decades of social promotions and forced students to gain at least a basic knowledge of math and English skills before they were promoted.

Critics complained that it was unfair to link promotion in part to how students fare on one test. Efforts to repeal LEAP requirements failed in the state Legislature.

Norton said the rule that fourth- and eighth-graders have to pass LEAP is a BESE policy that stems from a state law.

Lawmakers could enact a measure of their own that would spell out whether fourth- and eighth-graders have to earn a certain score on the new tests for promotion starting in 2014-15.

Norton said fourth- and eighth-graders will take LEAP in the spring of 2012 before the test gets springtime tweaks in 2013 and 2014 to account for changes in the curriculum.

The new exams for the 2014-15 school year — presumably to be given in the spring of 2015 — “will be based on a more focused curriculum,” Norton said.

“We have to work to make sure everyone understands the plan,” he told legislators.

Bendily said Louisiana is one of 45 states, two territories and the District of Columbia to adopt the new standards.

Norton said Louisiana is one of 24 states participating in a consortium that shares in a $350 million federal grant paying for the task of hammering out new assessments to see if students are learning the new standards.

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Gerard Robinson: Education challenges growing more rigorous

Gainesville Sun
By: Gerard Robinson
December 12, 2011
http://www.gainesville.com/article/20111212/OPINION03/111209514/-1/opinion?p=1&tc=pg

For the past year, the state of Florida has experienced positive changes in education.

With a common mission of preparing our students to enter into the workforce or start their college journey, we have enhanced teacher evaluations and infused new standards and curriculum into daily instruction.

As a result, our new assessments — the FCAT 2.0 and End-of-Course exams — reflect that increased rigor. These new assessments necessitate establishing appropriate achievement level scores that show parents that their children are on a path to graduating college and career ready.

Over the past two months, Florida followed a process that included various perspectives to help in determining the scores that will define the appropriate levels of achievement students must meet in each grade level. Our standard setting process involved educators, superintendents, college presidents, and business and community leaders. This process has been comprehensive and engaging with the general public giving input through face-to-face meetings and online.

Data from national assessments and testimony from experts have provided additional viewpoints beyond our state's borders.

Preparing our students for a competitive global economy and ensuring that they leave our schools equipped with the necessary resources to achieve success is the single most important factor. With this singular focus in mind, I have provided my recommendations for the achievement level scores for grades three to 10, and, for the first time in Florida's history, our graduation requirements will be aligned with college readiness and our standards are consistent across grade levels.

I am confident that Florida's students and educators will be able to meet the challenge.

Gerard Robinson is Florida's Commissioner of Education.

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The waivers freed districts from the requirement that every student be proficient on state tests by last spring—a goal set by the NCLB law which no state has achieved—and gave them flexibility in spending over $100 million in federal education funding. The waiver came with a “high risk” designation that appears to have no immediate practical consequences. Delisle also said the districts had not made enough progress towards linking teacher and principal evaluations to measures of student academic growth, which includes test scores. The U.S. Department of Education has granted waivers to 43 states and the District of Columbia. At least four of the 43 states that have received NCLB waivers have also been given “high risk” extensions. To be clear, the measures employed by NCLB and NCLB waivers are so painfully simplistic and poorly-designed that they do not accomplish this goal. Growth models, though they have their own weaknesses, have greater potential to do so precisely because they adjust expectations in a manner designed (again, imperfectly) to account for schools’ circumstances. From my perspective, then, if anything deserves criticism here, it is not the fact that NCLB and waiver targets vary by student subgroup, but rather the fact that they are terrible measures of school performance, and we seem to be doubling down on them. States May Get NCLB Waiver Renewals. More. Education Secretary Arne Duncan wants states that circumvent key parts of No Child Left Behind to craft their own guidelines by which to improve. (Alex Wong/Getty Images). The Department of Education announced on Thursday it will allow states to renew waivers allowing them to circumvent key requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act. But in order to extend that flexibility for two more years, the department is expecting states to take their accountability measures up a notch. [READ: No Child Left Behind Waived For 8 California School Districts ]. The future of the sweeping education law is uncertain, as its long-overdue renewal process has stalled in Congress.