

Schools To Be Rated On More Than Just Tests

by Kathleen Megan

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With the state on the verge of releasing the scores of its new standardized tests, it would be easy for test-weary parents to miss what many consider good back-to-school news.

While the first Smarter Balanced test scores will be accorded plenty of importance — and education officials keep warning that the scores will be low because the test is new and more rigorous — the state is also embarking on a new rating system for schools that de-emphasizes testing.

The new accountability index is designed to provide parents with a broader picture of their child's school based on a variety of factors, and will allow comparisons to other schools and districts.

[House Supports Bill That Eases Testing For High School Juniors](#)

For high school students, less than half the accountability rating will be based on test scores. Other factors to be weighed include a school's chronic absenteeism rate, the number of students who go on to higher education, the graduation rate, physical fitness and access to the arts.

For elementary and middle school students, greater emphasis will be placed on year-to-year improvement on test scores rather than on any particular score. Attendance and physical fitness also will be considered.

The new accountability system will be a major shift from the state's School Performance Index, which depended on test scores alone.

"It's a huge change for the state and a huge change for our culture in how we understand student performance and student growth," said Ajit Gopalakrishnan, the state Department of Education's chief performance officer. Gopalakrishnan said that just the move toward more of a focus on academic growth than on scores is "a huge shift. We need the whole state to start thinking and talking about growth because it's not about who you have, it's about how much you have helped your student improve."

"We need to start thinking and understanding more about that," he said. "You've got to look at how you are helping your kids to improve. That's got to be the key."

Casey Cobb, a professor at the Neag School of Education at the University of Connecticut, said he thinks the new accountability system "may lead to a lessening of some of the unintended consequences of high stakes testing."

Those consequences have included a tendency of educators to focus mainly on the subjects that will be tested — English, reading, math — to the detriment of other subjects.

"There has been a narrowing of the curriculum, particularly in high-need areas," Cobb said. "It's predictable behavior when you place so many consequences on a narrow definition of performance."

"If we start measuring other indicators that we think are important to kids' lives, then that will get paid attention to."

A More 'Holistic' System

[Senate OKs Plan To Drop Test For High School Juniors](#)

State officials said the new rating criteria and the emphasis on growth in student achievement has been in development for the past 18 months and is based on producing well-rounded students ultimately.

The legislature approved plans for the new system during this year's session, and the U.S. Department of Education gave its go-ahead with a federal waiver that was approved earlier this month.

"A successful student is physically, mentally, socially and, of course, academically ready" for college and career, said Kelly Donnelly, chief of staff for the state education department.

Eventually, the criteria may be further broadened to reflect a school's civics program and even hard-to-measure characteristics like students' perseverance.

Rep. Andy Fleischmann, D-West Hartford and co-chairman of the education committee, said, "The latest studies show that if you're not looking at chronic absenteeism, access to the arts, the latest graduation rates, then you probably are not really getting a good clear picture of how a school or a district is actually performing. "Under this new approach, we're still keeping our eyes on each child's academic growth while also acknowledging a host of other important factors."

The move has been well-received by superintendents, who say the new system will provide a fairer, more useful profile of schools and districts.

"I really appreciate a more holistic accountability system," said Hartford Superintendent Beth Schiavino-Narvaez. "It helps us to understand what a good education looks like, that it's more than test scores. It gives you more information and it honors great progress. It recognizes that people are starting at different points."

Mark Benigni, Meriden's superintendent, said the new model is "definitely much more effective, more reflective of what students should know and be able to do."

"I think it's a huge step in the right direction," Benigni said. "It validates what many feel: that students should not be judged on one test score and that education is far greater than one test. When you look at students successful in college and life, it's not necessarily the highest test-takers." He said his only concern is about the time and effort it will take to collect, analyze and use the newly tracked data.

Welcome Development

Some parents say the broadening of measurements of school performance is a welcome development. "Parents have always complained about too many tests, teaching to the test," said Pamela Bahre, a Meriden parent and member of the city's school board. "To look at everything as a whole is going to be good." Bahre said one possible concern is whether school systems with fewer resources might suffer. One of the measures looked at is preparation for college and career readiness, which includes factors such as how many students are enrolled in Advanced Placement courses and are succeeding on the AP tests. She said some districts may not be able to afford to offer a large array of such advanced courses. Another parent, Don Romoser of Ridgefield, said: "I look at it and think of it as looking at the whole child — what a wonderful way to rate the community of a school. Not just on academic performance. There is so much more to education, to learning to be a responsible citizen and person, than just the academic. I think it's a very positive thing."

Scott Minnick, an East Hampton school board member and a parent, teacher and fierce critic of the Smarter Balanced test, said there are some good aspects to the new system. But she fears it will "hammer" lower socio-economic school districts that may not be able to offer as many AP tests or strong arts programs. Teacher union representatives had mixed reviews of the new system.

Mark Waxenberg, executive director of the Connecticut Education Association, which has fought hard to get rid of the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium test, said the state is "recognizing that testing is not the only piece of the puzzle that needs to be looked at when it comes to the success of a child or a school or a district. The inclusion of all these other factors is a step in the right direction."

But Waxenberg said he still sees the inclusion of the Smarter Balanced test scores as a problem. Union leaders have said the test produces too much stress for children, asks questions that are not age-appropriate, and favors wealthier students who have grown up with computers.

"If the test scores are in any way, shape or form part of the rating, that's a part that is flawed," Waxenberg said. "It's like a cake with a rotten egg."

Jan Hochadel, president of the AFT Connecticut union, said in a statement that "broadening the criteria for assessing student and school performance beyond test scores and graduation rates is an important first step toward taking a more appropriate view of the 'whole child.'"

Still, she said, "it's important to recognize that there is cost in learning time for students and instruction time for educators with any assessment. The data they provide may prove to be of little value when weighed against

the additional burden they create."
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