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NATIONAL NEWS

- 1) [Common Assessments: More Details Emerge](#); Gewertz – Education Week

STATE NEWS

- 2) [Teachers Resist High-Tech Push in Idaho Schools](#); Richtel – New York Times
- 3) [New Jersey: Fast-Tracked and Rewritten Bill Could Put Some Public Schools Under Private Management](#); Mooney – New Jersey Spotlight
- 4) [New York Governor Expected to Set Up Panel on Education Reform](#); Hu – New York Times
- 5) [Opinion: Could New Orleans and California schools offer peek at Michigan's future?](#); Murray – Grand Rapids Press
- 6) [Tennessee: Principals' teacher ratings vary widely by district](#); Hubbard – The Tennessean
- 7) [Florida high schools likely to see dip in school grades](#); Tammen – Northwest Florida Daily News

NATIONAL NEWS

Common Assessments: More Details Emerge

Education Week

By: Catherine Gewertz

January 3, 2012

http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/curriculum/2012/01/parcc_invitation_to_negotiate.html

Happy New Year, and welcome to the Year of the Common Assessments. Or at least the year of common-assessment procurements.

I know; what a nerdy way to usher in a new year, right? Sorry; we can't help it. It's part of our job here at *EdWeek*. One of our ongoing resolutions is to keep you informed about the activities of the two big groups of states that are designing tests for the common standards. And we have some updates for you.

The two consortia—which, you probably recall, are working with federal Race to the Top money—have released documents that shed a bit more light on what the tests might look like when they're fully operational in 2014-15. We say "might" because there is a very long road to travel between these documents and the final tests—lots of tweaking, field-testing, revising, reviewing. But the accumulating stack of documents offers interesting glimpses.

So what do we have here? First of all, the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers, or [PARCC](#), issued an "invitation to negotiate" for development of its test items. (That's what most folks call an RFP, or request for proposals. But in Florida, which is PARCC's fiscal agent, they call it an invitation to negotiate, or ITN.)

You can find PARCC's announcement [here](#), and the ITN itself [here](#). The ITN goes hand-in-hand with PARCC's model content frameworks, which were released in November and can be found [here](#), along with webinars walking you through them.

A cluster of earlier PARCC invitations-to-negotiate, including one for systems architecture and another for information on artificial intelligence used in assessments, are [here](#), along with the consortium's procurement timeline and descriptions of all its anticipated procurements.

What's in PARCC's newest ITN?

It covers development of the group's summative, end-of-year test, as well as its midyear formative assessments. It doesn't include the consortium's planned early-year diagnostic assessment or its assessment for speaking and listening skills.

PARCC discusses the "innovations" it seeks in the tests. On the English/language arts assessment, for instance, it seeks "enhanced comprehension" reading items that can measure deeper, more nuanced types of understanding and require students to read complex passages and cite evidence to support their answers. There will also be a focus on measuring students' "academic vocabulary."

It gives some hints of what test items might look like as it describes the "task generation models" that winning vendors will use to design items. In a section of the English/language arts test probing students' research skills, for instance, they could be asked to draw on a speech from a historical figure and several related informational texts about the speech. Another task could ask them to do something similar in science, since the standards' literacy skills reach across disciplines.

The ITN previews things like how long the tests might take. The group's performance-based assessment in English/language arts, for instance, one of the two components of its summative test, is envisioned as three sessions over two days, one focusing on a research simulation and another on a literary analysis. The end-of-year, computer-based test will ask students to read about six passages and respond to machine-scorable items, including pairs of readings that enable comparison and synthesis, and "innovative" items that are designed to deepen students text analysis as they move through the test. Reading passages for grades 3-5 will be 200-800 words long, and those for students in grades 6-8 will be 400-1,000 words long. Passages for high school students will be 500-1,500 words long.

The math test will include items with single or multiple prompts. Some will be machine-scorable, and some will require hand scoring. The performance-based assessment in math will include tasks that demand written arguments or justifications of students' answers, or critiques of reasoning. They will also include problems that involve real-world scenarios. The number of tasks is, at least at this point, pretty broad: between 11 and 66 in grades 3-8 on the end-of-year assessment and the first section of the performance-based assessment, for instance, with an additional 2-4 tasks in each of the second and third sections of the performance-based assessment.

The ITN also says that PARCC will develop two series of end-of-course tests in math at the high school level: one for the traditional course sequence—Algebra 1, geometry, and Algebra 2—and another for a course sequence that would integrate those topics.

There is a lot more detail in the ITN, as well as in its appendices. We're still wading through it all.

But a notable feature of the PARCC ITN is that this big chunk of work isn't going to just one vendor. The document outlines two phases: the first phase, in which "multiple" vendors will develop half the test items, and a second phase, in which contractors from Phase I who have "shown the ability to work collaboratively and deliver high quality, innovative assessment items and tasks on deadline" will have their contracts renewed to finish the job. The contracts for this work are slated to be awarded in April or May.

A few new tidbits are trickling out of the other consortium, too. The [SMARTER Balanced Assessment Consortium](#) has issued a cluster of requests for proposals, or RFPs, recently.

You can see its master work plan [here](#), and its procurement schedule—listing each anticipated RFP and what it's for—[here](#). You can see each released RFP and its status [here](#), but you'll see that they are mixed in with all of the RFPs for Washington state, which is SMARTER Balanced's fiscal agent. You can pick out which ones are the consortium RFPs by looking for "SBAC" in the title.

Back in August, we told you about two documents from SMARTER Balanced: its [content-mapping-and-specifications document](#), and [RFP #4](#), which was for item specifications. In a more recent flurry, there are RFPs for developing accessibility and accommodation policies (RFP #6), building the software to support the item bank (RFP #7) and developing style guidelines that will be used to review test items for content alignment, bias and sensitivity, and creating training materials for item writers (RFP #8).

RFP #14, for item writing (among other things), offers a few new tidbits, but doesn't provide the kinds of test details that are included in PARCC's ITN. The August documents get closer to providing those kinds of things. But we do learn in RFP #14 that SMARTER Balanced seeks development of 10,000 selected-response or constructed-response items and 420 performance tasks in math and English/language arts, to facilitate pilot-testing in the 2012-13 school year. Most will be scored with automated scoring, the RFP says.

Part of the work will be conducting research to find out which types of items are best suited to automated scoring and which must be scored by hand. The winning vendor(s) will conduct "cognitive labs" and small-scale trials to test innovative approaches to test items.

An interesting aspect to this RFP is that it asks the prospective vendor to hire and train teachers from SMARTER Balanced states to write items and tasks, and review items for content alignment, accessibility, and bias.

[\(Back to top\)](#)

STATE NEWS

Teachers Resist High-Tech Push in Idaho Schools

New York Times

By: Matt Richtel

January 3, 2012

http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/04/technology/idaho-teachers-fight-a-reliance-on-computers.html?_r=2&ref=education

POST FALLS, Idaho — Ann Rosenbaum, a former military police officer in the Marines, does not shrink from a fight, having even survived a close encounter with a car bomb in Iraq. Her latest conflict is quite different: she is now a high school teacher, and she and many of her peers in Idaho are resisting a statewide plan that dictates how computers should be used in classrooms.

Last year, the state legislature overwhelmingly passed a law that requires all high school students to take some online classes to graduate, and that the students and their teachers be given laptops or tablets. The idea was to establish Idaho's schools as a high-tech vanguard.

To help pay for these programs, the state may have to shift tens of millions of dollars away from salaries for teachers and administrators. And the plan envisions a fundamental change in the role of teachers, making them less a lecturer at the front of the room and more of a guide helping students through lessons delivered on computers.

This change is part of a broader shift that is creating tension — a tension that is especially visible in Idaho but is playing out across the country. Some teachers, even though they may embrace classroom technology, feel policy makers are thrusting computers into classrooms without their input or proper training. And some say they are opposed to shifting money to online classes and other teaching methods whose benefits remain unproved.

“Teachers don't object to the use of technology,” said Sabrina Laine, vice president of the American Institutes for Research, which has studied the views of the nation's teachers using grants from organizations like the Gates and Ford Foundations. “They object to being given a resource with strings attached, and without the needed support to use it effectively to improve student learning.”

In Idaho, teachers have been in open revolt. They marched on the capital last spring, when the legislation was under consideration. They complain that lawmakers listened less to them than to heavy lobbying by technology companies, including Intel and Apple. Teacher and parent groups gathered 75,000 verified signatures, more than was needed, to put a referendum on the ballot next November that could overturn the law.

“This technology is being thrown on us. It's being thrown on parents and thrown on kids,” said Ms. Rosenbaum, 32, who has written letters to the governor and schools superintendent. In her letters she tells them she is a Republican and a Marine, because, she says, it has become fashionable around the country to dismiss complaining teachers as union-happy liberals.

“I fought for my country,” she said. “Now I'm fighting for my kids.”

Gov. C. L. Otter, known as Butch, and Tom Luna, the schools superintendent, who have championed the plan, said teachers had been misled by their union into believing the changes were a step toward replacing them with computers. Mr. Luna said the teachers' anger was intensified by other legislation, also passed last spring, that eliminated protections for teachers with seniority and replaced it with a pay-for-performance system.

Some teachers have also expressed concern that teaching positions could be eliminated and their raises reduced to help offset the cost of the technology.

Mr. Luna acknowledged that many teachers in the state were conservative Republicans like him — making Idaho's politics less black and white than in states like Wisconsin and New Jersey, where union-backed teachers have been at odds with politicians.

Mr. Luna said he understood that technological change could be scary, particularly because teachers would need to adapt to new ways of working.

“The role of the teacher definitely does change in the 21st century. There's no doubt,” Mr. Luna said. “The teacher does become the guide and the coach and the educator in the room helping students to move at their own pace.”

Many details about how students would use their laptop or tablet are still being debated. But under the state's plan, that teacher will not always be in the room. The plan requires high school students to take online courses for two of their 47 graduation credits.

Mr. Luna said this would allow students to take subjects that were not otherwise available at their schools and familiarize them with learning online, something he said was increasingly common in college.

The computer, he added, “becomes the textbook for every class, the research device, the advanced math calculator, the word processor and the portal to a world of information.”

Idaho is going beyond what other states have done in decreeing what hardware students and teachers should use and how they should use it. But such requirements are increasingly common at the district level, where most decisions about buying technology for schools are made.

Teachers are resisting, saying that they prefer to employ technology as it suits their own teaching methods and styles. Some feel they are judged on how much they make use of technology, regardless of whether it improves learning. Some teachers in

the Los Angeles public schools, for example, complain that the form that supervisors use to evaluate teachers has a check box on whether they use technology, suggesting that they must use it for its own sake.

That is a concern shared by Ms. Rosenbaum, who teaches at Post Falls High School in this town in northern Idaho, near Coeur d'Alene. Rather than relying on technology, she seeks to engage students with questions — the Socratic method — as she did recently as she was taking her sophomore English class through “The Book Thief,” a novel about a family in Germany that hides a Jewish girl during [World War II](#).

Ms. Rosenbaum, tall with an easy smile but also a commanding presence, stood in the center of the room with rows of desks on each side, pacing, peppering the students with questions and using each answer to prompt the next. What is an example of foreshadowing in this chapter? Why did the character say that? How would you feel in that situation?

Her room mostly lacks high-tech amenities. Homework assignments are handwritten on whiteboards. Students write journal entries in spiral notebooks. On the walls are two American flags and posters paying tribute to the Marines, and on the ceiling a panel painted by a student thanks Ms. Rosenbaum for her service. Ms. Rosenbaum did use a computer and projector to show a YouTube video of the devastation caused by bombing in World War II. She said that while technology had a role to play, her method of teaching was timeless. “I’m teaching them to think deeply, to *think*. A computer can’t do that.”

She said she was mystified by the requirement that students take online courses. She is taking some classes online as she works toward her master’s degree, and said they left her uninspired and less informed than in-person classes. Ms. Rosenbaum said she could not fathom how students would have the discipline to sit in front of their computers and follow along when she had to work each minute to keep them engaged in person.

Some of her views are echoed by other teachers, like Doug StanWiens, 44, a popular teacher of advanced history and economics at Boise High School. He is a heavy technology user, relying on an interactive whiteboard and working with his students to build a Web site that documents local architecture, a project he says will create a resource for the community.

“I firmly believe that technology is a tool for teachers to use,” he said. “It’s time for teachers to get moving on it.” But he also spoke last year on the capital steps in opposition to the state’s program, which he said he saw as a poorly thought-out, one-size-fits-all approach.

Half of teachers, he suspects, will not use the new computers. And the online learning requirement seems to him to be a step toward cutting back on in-person teaching and, perhaps eventually, on not having students congregate in schools at all.

“We can just get rid of sports and band and just give everyone a laptop and call it good,” he said.

Stefani Cook, who teaches accounting and business at Rigby High School in southeast Idaho and was the state’s 2011 Teacher of the Year, also teaches a modernized typing course to 32 online students after-hours. A contractor for the state pays her to teach the course and also to help other teachers shape and present their online lessons.

Ms. Cook is a believer in classroom technology and generally supports the state’s plan. She is on a 38-member task force that is working out the logistics of deploying computers to teachers next fall and, eventually, to 80,000 high schoolers. The group will also organize training for teachers. Ms. Cook said she did worry about how teachers would be trained when some already work long hours and take second jobs to make ends meet.

“I’m excited about it,” she said. But some teachers, she said, “think it’s just another thing that they’ve got to do.”

Mr. Luna, the superintendent, said training was the most essential part of the plan. He said millions of dollars would be set aside for this but that the details were still being worked out. Teachers will need to learn how to use the new devices and how to incorporate them into their lesson plans, which could involve rethinking longstanding routines.

For his part, Governor Otter said that putting technology into students’ hands was the only way to prepare them for the work force. Giving them easy access to a wealth of facts and resources online allows them to develop critical thinking skills, he said, which is what employers want the most.

When asked about the quantity of unreliable information on the Internet, he said this also worked in favor of better learning. “There may be a lot of misinformation,” he said, “but that information, whether right or wrong, will generate critical thinking for them as they find the truth.”

Mr. Otter said of a teacher like Ms. Rosenbaum, “If she only has an abacus in her classroom, she’s missing the boat.”

Some of the state’s politicians disagree with that message. State Senator Dean L. Cameron, a Republican who is a co-chairman of the senate budget committee, said there was no proof that the technology improved learning. He said he felt the legislature was “dazzled” by presentations given by lobbyists for high-tech companies — who also gave generously to Mr. Luna’s re-election campaign.

(Mr. Luna said that \$44,000 of his \$300,000 in donations to his last campaign came directly or indirectly from technology

companies, but he said that was because they supported his agenda, not because they shaped it.)

Mr. Cameron said of the law: "It's almost as if it was written by the top technology providers in the nation." He added: "And you'd think students would be excited about getting a mobile device, but they're saying: not at the expense of teachers."

Last year at Post Falls High School, 600 students — about half of the school — staged a lunchtime walkout to protest the new rules. Some carried signs that read: "We need teachers, not computers."

Having a new laptop "is not my favorite idea," said Sam Hunts, a sophomore in Ms. Rosenbaum's English class who has a blond mohawk. "I'd rather learn from a teacher."

[\(Back to top\)](#)

New Jersey: Fast-Tracked and Rewritten Bill Could Put Some Public Schools Under Private Management

New Jersey Spotlight

By: John Mooney

January 4, 2012

<http://www.njspotlight.com/stories/12/0104/0022/>

The Urban Hope Act could bring new public schools -- with some for-profit management -- to some of Jersey's poorest districts
First proposed by Gov. Chris Christie and since taken up by South Jersey Democrats, a plan that would open up select public schools to nonprofit or even for-profit management appears poised for passage in the final days of the legislature's lame duck session.

The proposed Urban Hope Act, at least in its current incarnation, is in part an attempt to speed the glacial pace of getting new schools built in some of New Jersey's poorest districts. The initiative may enlist the aid of the Schools Development Authority, which is often criticized for dragging its feet on projects.

The measure has seen a host of changes since the idea was first announced by Christie at a Camden public school last summer, and then filed as bills by state Sen. Donald Norcross (D-Camden) and state Assemblyman Angel Fuentes (D-Camden).

Initially envisioned as an effort by Christie to convert low-performing public schools to private management, the latest version is focused on building a few new public schools in three districts: Camden, Newark, and Jersey City. Up to four schools could be launched in each district.

And the private part has been downgraded, with enough protections for public school teachers that the measure even has the support of the New Jersey Education Association. Local districts would also have to approve the new arrangements.

But the initiative still would create a new class of so-called renaissance schools in the state -- albeit on a pilot basis -- that would be separate from district management. And it proposes a new array of financing for schools to be built in these districts, including the possible participation of the beleaguered Schools Development Authority.

Still, potentially involving the SDA is sure to bring a series of operational and legal questions, if not challenges, especially since the authority was launched under court orders to build new district schools.

Norcross has taken the lead on the proposal on the Senate side, and said he made significant changes in the bill after meetings with a range of stakeholders, critics, and supporters.

"This is a reflection of those conversations, and just as important, it is something that can get passed and signed into law," Norcross said.

The bill is clearly on the fast track, with both the Assembly's and the Senate's budget committees hearing the measure on Thursday and the full chamber ready for vote on Monday, the final day of the session.

The hearings are likely to be crowded, with advocates on both sides expected to testify. The NJEA, a notable supporter, hasn't typically lined up behind proposals first championed by Christie.

But Ginger Gold Schnitzer, the chief lobbyist for the NJEA, said yesterday that Norcross had addressed the most significant of the union's worries in writing into the bill that the schools would fall under the same accountability and standards as traditional public schools. Further, teachers would be fully certified and protected by the same rights as in public schools, including the right to organize.

"Back in July, we thought this had a mess a problems, and he [Norcross] was willing to listen to us," Schnitzer said yesterday. "When he then takes a lion's share of our suggestions, how can we not support it? This is still about public schools and using

public money for public education."

Numerous questions remain, since the bill does allow for private management of at least some non-instructional school functions. It also waives public bidding laws for these schools and brings in the potential that some of the projects would be built on SDA land that had been designated by the Supreme Court for district schools.

David Sciarra, the lawyer that has led the Abbott v. Burke court fight said there are a "host of practical and legal questions."

Much of the attention is focused on a project being promoted by Norcross's brother, Democratic leader George Norcross, that would use land next to the Cooper Health Systems in Camden, of which he is chairman. The property in Lanning Square had been earmarked for a district public school that has been perennially stalled by the SDA.

"This is essentially opening up SDA to use of their sites for projects for either non- or for-profit use," said David Sciarra, director of the Education Law Center in Newark. "That raises a whole host of concerns that we have not seen addressed in any serious manner."

Norcross, the senator, didn't deny that the Lanning Square site would be a prime candidate for the project, and he said one of the impetuses of the bill as now written is to get long-stalled projects moving in some form. Norcross has been a frequent critic of the SDA's slow action under Christie.

"There are a number of sites in Camden, and they will all get looked at," he said. "There has been nothing more disappointing than seeing [the Lanning Square site] sit there year after year."

Other critics have said there are also questions around the financing of such projects, with private companies potentially reaping the benefits at the taxpayers' expense. One provision of the bill would have local districts responsible for any bonding for the new schools' construction.

"While the revised Urban Hope legislation is an improvement on the original, a number of serious concerns remain that make it very vulnerable to corruption and abuse, at the taxpayers' expense," said Julia Sass Rubin, spokesperson for Save Our Schools NJ, a grassroots group that has grown active in school reform debates.

"We hope that the legislature will address these problems so that the good intentions of this program are not subsumed by unintended corruption and abuse."

[\(Back to top\)](#)

New York Governor Expected to Set Up Panel on Education Reform

New York Times

By: Winnie Hu

January 3, 2012

<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/04/education/cuomo-expected-to-announce-new-education-commission.html?ref=education>

Gov. [Andrew M. Cuomo](#) is expected to announce Wednesday in his State of the State address that he will convene a statewide commission to address a wide range of education issues, including improving student performance and school accountability, according to people familiar with the plan.

The commission is likely to address Mr. Cuomo's oft-repeated concern that the state finances schools with taxpayer money regardless of their performance, according to these people. In recent weeks, the governor has emphasized the need to provide financial incentives to districts to improve achievement. Plans to establish the commission were [reported Monday by The Daily News](#).

Mr. Cuomo's aides declined to discuss the commission, but education advocates and others said the governor had talked informally about gathering a group of education experts to study and recommend reforms.

Merryl H. Tisch, chancellor of the New York Board of Regents, said she would urge Mr. Cuomo and his commission to help advance a statewide teacher evaluation system, which has stalled over opposition from teachers and district officials. Dr. Tisch said they should also look at consolidating school districts to reduce costs, and review unfunded state mandates, including pension and health care costs, imposed on districts.

Billy Easton, executive director of the Alliance for Quality Education, an advocacy group, said that he welcomed the commission as a way to bring more attention to education, but cautioned that its focus should not be just to raise test scores.

"The question is: what do we mean by performance? Often it is a code word for test scores," Mr. Easton said. "What we found is the emphasis on test scores under [No Child Left Behind](#) has narrowed the curriculum, increased teaching to the test, and has not been successful in preparing students for college and careers."

Robert N. Lowry Jr., deputy director of the New York State Council of School Superintendents, said that as governor, Mario M.

Cuomo appointed a commission in the early 1990s to address questions about school financing and performance. “It produced a valuable analysis among other things, and made some recommendations that became the governor’s education agenda in the next session,” Mr. Lowry said.

[\(Back to top\)](#)

Opinion: Could New Orleans and California schools offer peek at Michigan's future?

By: Dave Murray

Grand Rapids Press MLive.com

January 3, 2012

http://www.mlive.com/education/index.ssf/2012/01/could_new_orleans_and_californ.html

New Orleans and Los Altos, Calif. couldn’t be more different than Michigan. But my travels to those places this year gave me a glimpse at where I believe education in our state is headed.

We’ve just turned the last page on the calendar on a year where we witnessed the first steps of dramatic education reforms, from special districts for failing schools to new teacher evaluations and lifting the cap on charter schools.

But I constantly found myself thinking back to my new friends Reginald and Jade and their completely re-imagined school and teacher Kelly Rafferty, who, with a swipe of her finger, could tell how each of her students were performing on math problems and instantly make adjustments in her lessons.

I visited the Mahalia Jackson Elementary and Early Childhood Center with other writers in April to see how educators are working to address not just academic needs, but problems linked to poverty.

The school, recast just over a year ago, is located in the heart of New Orleans’ Central City, and the blocks of shotgun homes surrounding the school were filled with damaged, dilapidated and boarded up houses.

Hurricane Katrina offered the chance to start from scratch. The district works with foundations and organizations to provide all-day services starting at birth. A clinic offers basic health and mental health services, and parents have access to food stamps and other state or local assistance programs. A public access computer lab allows residents to use the Internet, and classrooms and community meeting rooms are used in a variety of ways.

The idea is to provide the family services in a central hub, surrounding the students with all the programs to get them on the right track from birth, and help their parents as well.

Pat Cooper, CEO of the city’s Early Childhood and Learning Foundation, said the group aims to see what can happen if issues arising from poverty can be taken out of the equation.

“We need a generation of children where we don’t have excuses,” he told me. “Let’s see if we can transform not just a group of children, but their families and even the community.”

We’ve seen elements of such a program in the Grand Rapids area. The Kent School Services Network brings some social and medical programs to 18 buildings in six districts — Grand Rapids, Wyoming, Kentwood, Cedar Springs, Godfrey-Lee and Godwin Heights.

Gov. Rick Snyder has spoken of the need to work with children in the years before kindergarten, and has consolidated a variety of state programs under one umbrella. The state Board of Education has called for universal preschool.

The neighborhood surrounding Rafferty’s school in California’s Silicon Valley was more upscale than storm-ravaged New Orleans, and looks to maintain performance amid a funding crisis and changing population. Her school is approaching educational challenges through blended learning, where teachers guide students through Internet-based lessons.

Rafferty moved through her fifth-grade classroom at Santa Rita Elementary carrying an iPad as students worked on math problems on laptops.

She was able to look at each student’s progress in real time, seeing which programs they were getting wrong, which ones they spent the most time figuring out and on which problems they sought extra help through an online video.

That allowed her to sit down alongside the struggling students to assist them, while other students could move ahead to more challenging problems.

Superintendent Jeff Baier said the immediate feedback excites him as he looks at how a proper blended instruction plan works in the classroom.

Previously, teachers would present a lesson, issue a test to see how much students learned, grade them at home to see where the problems are, then start reviewing the next day.

“This changes the way teachers are teaching — in a good way,” he told me during a September visit. “This is a tool, one of many. But it’s a tool we use to a positive effect.”

The school has a partnership with the Khan Academy, a nonprofit website that provides free lessons and tests that are used by a growing number of schools and homeschooling parents.

Khan said it’s important to realize that the computer is not replacing the teacher. “Learning is the end, and technology is a tool,” he said. “It allows a student to get intervention when he or she needs it, liberating the teacher to do other things.”

We’ve seen mixed results with blended learning in Kentwood and Holland —and a countywide school created by the Kent Intermediate School District — have tried different technology-based approaches that administrators believe to be successful.

But a year-old program in Grand Rapids had a bumpier start, with 44 percent of the students receiving failing grades. Students have complained the curriculum is rushed, so they don’t learn as much, and teachers have resisted the program.

Snyder’s April education message looked to an “Any time, any place, any way, any pace” approach and state Superintendent Mike Flanagan has offered “seat time” waivers to districts, such as Wyoming, that create programs for students to learn inside a classroom, but away from it as well.

Michigan leaders are convinced that technology, used properly, can transform the state schools. But it is part of a plan that includes helping teachers perform better, getting students get help earlier, confronting issues from poverty and offering parents

choices.

[\(Back to top\)](#)

Tennessee: Principals' teacher ratings vary widely by district

The Tennessean

By: Julie Hubbard

January 4, 2011

<http://www.tennessean.com/article/20120104/NEWS04/301040090/Principals-teacher-ratings-vary-widely-by-district>

In Murfreesboro City Schools, principals rated nearly half the teachers a five — the best score possible on the state's new evaluation.

But in Fayette County Schools in far West Tennessee, only 1 percent garnered that rating.

The first glimpse of how educators fared under the system, which ultimately will affect whether they earn and keep tenure, demonstrated how subjective the process can be. The [Tennessee Department of Education](#) released principal observation data in December after *The Tennessean* and Williamson County Schools Director Mike Looney filed separate open records requests for it.

Looney said he wanted the data for comparison after Williamson principals rated 97 percent of teachers a three or higher, and state education officials questioned those ratings. He said his county has a high level of teacher talent plus motivated students, and state officials shouldn't pressure districts to align scores with projections.

"To come to some conclusion that our scores are too high ... is preposterous," Looney said. "We are not going to feel compelled or pushed into making our teachers fit some bell curve."

State officials say it's premature to draw conclusions on midyear data, but they want principals and district directors to review it and ensure they are holding teachers to a high bar.

But some teachers say it shows what they've said all along — schools with stricter principals won't fare as well under the evaluation, where those observations count for 50 percent of the final score.

"I question how evaluators are evaluating if the scores vary greatly across the state," said Marshall Winkler, wellness teacher at Franklin High School. "I feel like the (state) jumped into this new plan too soon."

The broad range in scoring was apparent at the bottom of the scale, too. Only one Williamson County teacher received the lowest score. Humbolt City Schools, 140 miles west of Nashville, gave 7.6 percent of teachers a one, while no teachers in at least 16 other school districts received the bottom score.

The data is based on 47,000 teacher observations that districts uploaded onto a state portal from August through Dec. 13. Principals perform a minimum of four observations per teacher per year, so teachers had more than one observation score reflected in the data. Some districts didn't have enough observations uploaded to be included in the data, and districts using their own evaluation models, such as Memphis and Hamilton County, aren't reflected in it, either.

Predictions falter

Tennessee and 16 other states redesigned teacher evaluation models in the past two years, tying ratings to student test scores, according to the National Council on Teacher Quality. Tennessee, further along than most, both designed and piloted its new system in the 2010-11 school year and put it into effect for all districts this school year.

Under the new system, 35 percent of the final score is on student learning gains and 15 percent on data the school chooses, such as ACT scores. Principals use a long list of measures for success to do their observations, which count for the other half.

The state predicted that districts would rate 3-5 percent of teachers as ones; 10-25 percent as twos; 40-50 percent as threes; 10-25 percent as fours and 5-10 percent as fives. No district that submitted data hit all those ranges.

The projections were based on value-added scores — which measure how much students learned in a year — how other districts using the same observation form distributed scores, and research from the National Institute for Effective Teaching, said Emily Barton, the state's assistant commissioner for curriculum and instruction.

Murfreesboro City Schools also got a visit from state officials after issuing more fives on teacher observations than any other district in the state but one — Clinton City Schools.

"When first seeing the score distributions, I questioned why they were different than the predicted distribution," Murfreesboro City Schools Director Linda Gilbert wrote in an email. "I have made the principals aware of the state average and expected

distribution ... but I have not asked them to change what they are doing.”

She said the higher evaluation scores are justified, since the district is among 18 statewide that showed the most student growth on 2011 test scores.

After Metro Nashville Schools Director Jesse Register reviewed the data, he said his principals may have graded teachers more strictly than other districts.

Metro gave 15 percent of teachers observed a top score, compared to the state average of 20 percent.

“The only conclusion you can draw at this time is that our principals and evaluators are taking the process very seriously and there is not grade inflation here,” Register said.

Tennessee Organization of School Superintendents board member Dan Lawson, director of Tullahoma City Schools, said districts are more concerned about observation score variances within their own schools more than differences by districts.

“That’s going to be a much more real issue than the concern about what happens between here and Memphis,” he said.

Barton said the projections aren’t a quota, rather a tool for districts to evaluate whether they are being fair, and that scores will change moving into next semester.

“(The data) is inconsistent with what the research would project, but we are midyear on this,” Barton said. “None of us are jumping to conclusions, because what is really going to matter is not just at the district level, but school level – how it lines up with value added, and until we know that, it’s hard to come to significant conclusions.”

The state is holding three weeks of evaluation training in January to refresh evaluators and train new principals.

At the end of the school year, districts with observation scores that don’t closely align with value-added growth scores could penalize principals by taking 10 percent off their own evaluations, Barton said. For now, the state focus is that educators continue to get used to the new evaluations and that teachers get constructive feedback.

The evaluations won’t affect teacher tenure this year, Barton said, since it takes five years for consideration and teachers can’t lose tenure unless they have two years of low evaluation scores.

Gov. Bill Haslam has asked SCORE, a Tennessee-based education nonprofit, to conduct an independent study on the new teacher evaluation system and report back on June 1. SCORE declined to comment on the observation data report this week.

The Tennessee Education Association, which has criticized the implementation of evaluations, said individual lawmakers are expected to file bills seeking to change the system this session.

“Teachers are going to look at (this report) and ask, ‘How can this be?’ It defies logic,” TEA lobbyist Jerry Winters said. “You can’t take the subjectivity out of the system completely.”

[\(Back to top\)](#)

Florida high schools likely to see dip in school grades

Northwest Florida Daily News

By: Katie Tammen

January 3, 2012

<http://www.nwfdailynews.com/articles/grades-46389-school-high.html#ixzz1iUuHG4B8>

A more difficult FCAT likely will affect alternative schools' performance the most, officials say

High school grades might be a little lower locally and statewide this year.

The anticipated decline comes as the criteria used to calculate school grades intensified with the release of the FCAT 2.0.

The recently redesigned test required students to use more complex thinking than in the past to answer questions on the standardized statewide exam.

“It’s a multilevel reasoning kind of thing,” said Steve McLaughlin, the curriculum specialist for the Okaloosa County School District. “(It’s) less rote memorization and more reasoning.”

For example, the reading passages were not only longer, but required students to infer information from what they’d read, maybe by comparing the tone at the beginning to the tone at the end.

The same was also true for the math section, which required students to take several steps in order to get a correct answer. The science section demanded a wider vocabulary for the students to succeed, said Okaloosa County Superintendent of Schools Alexis Tibbetts.

Students' performance on the test accounts for 50 percent of each school's grade. The other half is made up of five criteria established last year.

The criteria likely will have the biggest impact on alternative high schools because it awards points based on factors such as graduation rates, participation and performance in courses such as AP and dual-enrollment, and post-graduation readiness based on ACT and SAT scores.

For alternative schools that typically house students with issues from truancy to family obligations to behavioral problems, those standards are difficult to meet.

The challenges faced by alternative schools were highlighted in Okaloosa County last year after a now-closed Emerald Coast Career Institute South received an F grade from the state. That caused the school district to lose its high-performing status and change the 2011-12 school year calendar.

The two alternative high schools left in the district — Emerald Coast Career Institute North and Choice High School — are likely facing similar grades this year. But district officials decided it was worth the lower grade to try to ensure more students graduate.

"It's making an investment," Tibbetts said after citing studies that show more than 80 percent of incarcerated people in Florida never graduated from high school. "We're trying to keep them out of prison, off the welfare rolls and get them a high school diploma."

That investment will likely cost the school district at first in terms of high school grades. But Tibbetts and McLaughlin said they hope it will have long-term benefits for students who would have fallen through the cracks at a traditional high school.

But school officials aren't accepting that alternative schools always will get failing grades. Rather, they are revamping the schools in hopes of closing the achievement gap, said Wendy Meserve the district's program director of management information systems.

Emerald Coast Career Institute North is being reorganized to help bolster attendance and student performance through small classes and the use of applicable, hands-on learning. The school has added computers and has strengthened relationships with businesses that could hire the students after they graduate, said Meserve, who worked with educators at the school to make the changes.

"I believe in these programs," Tibbetts said. "If we weren't doing this, we wouldn't be closing the gap."

School grades are due to be released soon, although an exact date hasn't been announced.

Last year, Okaloosa's high schools earned four A grades, two B grades and the F at Emerald Coast Career Institute South. Emerald Coast Career Institute North did not receive a grade because it didn't have enough students enrolled both semesters. Choice High School won't receive a grade this year because it didn't have any 10th graders during the 2010-11 year.

[\(Back to top\)](#)