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NATIONAL NEWS

- 1) [Lack of Clarity in Budget Bill Leaves Ed. Dept. Some Flexibility](#); Klein – Education Week
- 2) [Failing Grades on Civics Exam Called a 'Crisis'](#); Dillon – New York Times
- 3) [Elementary Teachers Critical to Advancing STEM Education, Report Says](#); Robelen – Education Week

FLORIDA NEWS

- 4) [FCAT writing scores for 2011 hit historic highs](#); Postal – Orlando Sentinel
- 5) [Florida Students: Far Better Writers Than Readers?](#); Ward – Sunshine State News
- 6) [Huge expansion of charter schools and virtual schools approved by Legislature](#); MacQueen – Florida Tribune

STATE NEWS

- 7) [LAUSD shortens school day for teacher protest](#); Song – Los Angeles Times
- 8) [Mitch Daniels: Pro-National Standards, Anti-More Money](#); McNeil – Education Week
- 9) [Experts Urge California to Join Both Assessment Groups](#); Gewertz – Education Week

NATIONAL NEWS

Lack of Clarity in Budget Bill Leaves Ed. Dept. Some Flexibility

Education Week

By: Alyson Klein

May 5, 2011

<http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2011/05/05/30fedbudget.h30.html?tkn=VNUFNoxf7JUUnu%2BhgHz4UHvuRAN7UOtFwWDDL&cmp=clp-edweek>

The tumultuous budget process that finally produced a federal spending deal for the rest of fiscal year 2011 also left a lack of clarity in final funding levels for U.S. Department of Education programs.

Typically, lawmakers set new fiscal year spending levels for every federal program. But this year, lawmakers just extended funding for a number of programs at fiscal 2010 levels. At the same time, the Obama administration also made a number of cuts, including to programs in the Education Department.

The final budget agreement, reached April 8 just hours before the federal government was slated to shut down, resulted in a department budget of \$68.5 billion for fiscal 2011, which ends Sept. 30. That's down from \$69.8 billion in the previous fiscal year after adjusting for the Pell Grant program.

But in a number of cases—such as the nearly \$3 billion Improving Teacher Quality State Grants program—spending levels aren't in the formal bill. Instead, they are outlined in charts accompanying the legislation.

For instance, according to the charts prepared by congressional aides, the teacher-quality grants are slated to be cut by \$475 million. But that cut isn't actually written into the bill.

The Education department has 30 days from April 15, when the package was signed into law, to set final spending levels, and in some instances could become the target of advocates looking for a way to have funding restored.

But the department is not planning to make major changes to the spending plan outlined by congressional aides, said Justin Hamilton, a spokesman for the agency.

"We believe that Congress was clear about where they wanted cuts to be made," Mr. Hamilton said. "We have a very limited amount of flexibility in how to carry out a small number of those cuts, not wide latitude."

Budget experts say that's a smart move. Making major changes, they say, could prove politically perilous.

"It would be unwise for the department to manipulate the unspecific language in the bill. That would jeopardize their relationship with Congress," said Jennifer Cohen, a senior policy analyst with the Federal Education Budget Project at the New America Foundation, a think tank in Washington.

Under Pressure

Still, even lawmakers acknowledge that the budget process opens the door to more flexibility this year.

"The Senate and House Appropriations committees expect that when the Education Department writes its spending plan for fiscal year 2011, it should strongly consider the funding-level assumptions that the committees used to write the final spending bill," said Kate Cyrul, a spokeswoman for Sen. Tom Harkin, D-Iowa, the chairman of the Senate subcommittee that sets the funding for the department. "However, the committees also understand that only the bill language is legally binding, so the department has some discretion."

At least one lawmaker is hoping to persuade the department to use some of its flexibility to help a program that is slated to be defunded in the charts that accompanied the bill—but was not specifically zeroed out in the law.

Sen. Jack Reed, D-R.I., a longtime supporter of school libraries, has spoken to both Secretary of Education Arne Duncan and officials at the White House Office of Management and Budget about whether the department can restore some money for the Literacy Through School Libraries program, which was financed at \$19 million in fiscal 2011. He'd also like to get dedicated funding for school libraries down the line, said his spokesman, Chip Unruh.

In general, however, education advocates expect little to change from the spending parameters outlined in the final budget deal. "There could be minor differences for smaller programs," said Joel Packer, the executive director of the Committee for Education Funding, a lobbying coalition. "But I'd be surprised if there are any surprises."

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

Failing Grades on Civics Exam Called a 'Crisis'

New York Times

By: Sam Dillon

May 4, 2011

http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/05/education/05civics.html?_r=1&ref=education

Fewer than half of American eighth graders knew the purpose of the Bill of Rights on the most recent national civics examination, and only one in 10 demonstrated acceptable knowledge of the checks and balances among the legislative, executive and judicial branches, according to test results released on Wednesday.

At the same time, three-quarters of high school seniors who took the test, the [National Assessment of Educational Progress](#), were unable to demonstrate skills like identifying the effect of United States foreign policy on other nations or naming a power granted to Congress by the Constitution.

"Today's NAEP results confirm that we have a crisis on our hands when it comes to civics education," said [Sandra Day O'Connor](#), the former [Supreme Court](#) justice, who last year founded [icivics.org](#), a nonprofit group that teaches students civics through Web-based games and other tools.

The [Department of Education](#) administered the test, known as the nation's report card, to 27,000 4th-, 8th- and 12th-grade students last year. [Questions](#) covered themes like how government is financed, what rights are protected by the Constitution and how laws are passed.

Average fourth-grade scores on the test's 300-point scale rose slightly since the exam was last administered, in 2006, to 157 from 154. Average eighth-grade scores were virtually unchanged at 151. The scores of high school seniors — students who are either eligible to vote or about to be — dropped to 148 from 151. Those scores mean that about a quarter of 4th- and 12th-grade students, and about one-fifth of 8th graders, ranked at the proficient or advanced levels.

"The results confirm an alarming and continuing trend that civics in America is in decline," said Charles N. Quigley, executive director of the [Center for Civic Education](#), a nonprofit group in California. "During the past decade or so, educational policy and practice appear to have focused more and more upon developing the worker at the expense of developing the citizen."

One bright spot was that Hispanic students, who make up a growing proportion of the country's population and student body, narrowed the gap between their scores and those of non-Hispanic white students. On average, Hispanic eighth-graders scored 137 and non-Hispanic whites 160. That 23-point gap was down from 29 points in 2006. Among high school seniors, the gap narrowed to 19 points from 24 points.

The achievement gap between blacks and whites in civics, about 25 points at the fourth- and eighth-grade levels and 29 points among high school seniors, did not change significantly.

The results showed that a smaller proportion of fourth and eighth graders demonstrated proficiency in civics than in any other subject the federal government has tested since 2005, except history, American students' worst subject.

"We face difficult challenges at home and abroad," Justice O'Connor said in a statement. "Meanwhile, divisive rhetoric and a culture of sound bites threaten to drown out rational dialogue and debate. We cannot afford to continue to neglect the preparation of future generations for active and informed citizenship."

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

Elementary Teachers Critical to Advancing STEM Education, Report Says

Education Week

By: Erik Robelen

May 5, 2011

http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/curriculum/2011/05/us_system_fails_to_ensure_stem.html

A new [report](#) argues that an often neglected but vital avenue to improving STEM learning in U.S. schools is a concerted focus on

strengthening the selection, preparation, and licensure of elementary school teachers to adequately tackle math and science material.

"We cannot wait any longer to get serious about STEM policy," declares the report from the Center for American Progress, a Washington think tank. "Strengthening our elementary school teachers in math and science is the first critical step in the right direction."

The report says, for example, that prospective teachers can typically get a license to teach at an elementary school without taking a rigorous college-level STEM class, such as calculus, statistics, or chemistry, and without demonstrating a solid grasp of math or science knowledge, or the nature of scientific inquiry.

"This is not a recipe for ensuring that students have successful early experiences with math and science, or for generating the curiosity and confidence in these topics that students need to pursue careers in the STEM fields," write authors Diana Epstein and Raegan Miller, two education experts at the Center for American Progress.

The report serves up five specific recommendations:

- Increase the selectivity of programs that prepare teachers for elementary grades;
- Implement teacher compensation policies that make elementary teaching more attractive to college graduates and career changers with strong STEM backgrounds;
- Include more math and science content and pedagogy in schools of education;
- Require teacher candidates to pass math and science subsections of licensure exams; and
- Explore innovative staffing models that extend the reach of elementary level teachers with an affinity for math and science and demonstrated effectiveness in teaching them.

"The math and science competency of elementary school teachers is clearly a blind spot in our country's STEM policy," the authors write.

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

FLORIDA NEWS

FCAT writing scores for 2011 hit historic highs

Orlando Sentinel

By: Leslie Postal

May 4, 2011

<http://www.orlandosentinel.com/features/education/os-fcat-writing-scores-20110504.0.3391930.story>

Students make "impressive" gains on essay test

Florida students made "impressive" gains on the FCAT writing exam, putting their scores for 2011 at historic highs, the Florida Department of Education announced Wednesday morning.

Students in grades four, eight and 10 — the ones who take the writing test — penned better essays than ever before, the department said.

The FCAT writing scores are the first results released from the 2011 Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test.

Scores from the FCAT, which also includes math, reading and science exams, are used to grade public schools; help determine whether students are promoted or earn diplomas; and now, under a new merit-pay law, gauge teacher quality.

About 1.8 million students took the statewide exams in March and April.

FCAT writing tests the ability of students to write an essay on an assigned topic in 45 minutes. This year, 10th-graders had to explain how being famous would affect someone's life. State educators don't expect polished essays but look for organization and a command of language.

The essays are graded 1 to 6, and, this year, the state wanted students to earn at least a 4. The standard used for school grades had been the percentage of students earning at least a 3.5, but that is expected to be bumped up to a 4 this year. The State Board of Education is to vote on that change May 17.

This year, 81 percent of fourth-graders, 82 percent of eighth-graders and 75 percent of 10th-graders statewide scored at least a 4 on FCAT writing, besting previous highs posted in 2009 and 2010, the state said.

In Orange County, the percentage of fourth-graders scoring at least a 4 equaled the state average of 81 and represented an 18-percentage-point increase from last year. Other districts saw similar jumps.

At Rock Lake Elementary in Orlando, every fourth-grader tested met the challenge. It was the only school in Orange in which all

students scored at least a 4 on their essays.

"Wahoo!" Principal Lynn Wassatt said. "We're just so proud of them. ...We're on cloud nine."

Rock Lake's fourth-graders were on their St. Augustine field trip Wednesday, but Wassatt managed to reach the teachers on their cellphones and share the good news. She said the teachers and students erupted in cheers.

The school focused on writing skills all year, offering extra help after school to students who needed it. And it seemed to pay off when the fourth-graders sat down to write their FCAT essays about the kind of weather they liked best.

"I am very proud of our teachers and students," Education Commissioner Eric Smith said in an emailed statement. "Every time the state raises its expectations for student achievement, the talent and skill of our teachers, combined with the ability of our children, leads to success."

Scores for Central Florida school districts largely followed the state improvement trend. Seminole County led the local pack, with scores well above the state average. Osceola County, which historically had struggled on FCAT, made some of the biggest gains, with its fourth- and eighth-graders beating the state average this year.

"These impressive results show the progress being made in the classroom as we work every day to teach effective writing skills," said Terry Andrews, Osceola's interim superintendent, in a prepared statement.

Individual students' writing-score reports are due to arrive in school district warehouses by May 12. They then will be delivered to schools and then sent home to parents, a process that typically takes several more days at least.

The on-time release of the writing scores is likely a relief for many educators, who were frustrated by long delays in getting out 2010 FCAT scores. Those problems were blamed on Pearson, the state's testing contractor, which was fined nearly \$15 million for failing to meet its deadlines last year.

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

Florida Students: Far Better Writers Than Readers?

Sunshine State News

By: Kenric Ward

May 5, 2011

<http://www.sunshinestatenews.com/story/florida-students-far-better-writers-readers>

Defining anomaly, scores on FCAT essays hit 'historic highs' while other results languish

Oddly, Florida students score lower on reading than on writing

While their reading scores have been nothing to write home about, Florida students continue to post top numbers with the FCAT essays.

The state Department of Education announced Wednesday that pupils in grades 4, 8 and 10 scored "historic highs" on the writing test this year.

"Our educators continue to rise to the occasion, answering the call of increased expectations for our students to ensure they are leaving school ready for the next step," said Florida Education Commissioner Eric J. Smith.

But, as in previous years, there's a gigantic chasm between reading and writing performance.

In a longitudinal analysis of FCAT data, Sunshine State News compared reading scores of third-, seventh- and ninth-graders in 2010 with the writing results of fourth-, eighth and 10th-graders in 2011.

In every case, writing-proficiency scores were two or three times higher than reading scores, as shown here in a representative sampling:

2011 FCAT WRITING -- percentage of students scoring 4 or above (listed for grades 4, 8, 10):

State: 81, 82, 75

Broward: 86, 86, 80

Hillsborough: 90, 86, 75

Martin: 85, 93, 81

Miami-Dade: 80, 79, 73

Orange: 81, 80, 74

St. Lucie: 84, 82, 74

2010 FCAT READING -- percentage of students scoring 4 or above (listed for grades 3, 7, 9):

State: 39, 34, 20
Broward: 39, 37, 20
Hillsborough: 40, 34, 21
Martin: 44, 43, 29
Miami-Dade: 36, 30, 17
Orange: 38, 34, 18
St. Lucie: 33, 30, 15

Even if every student who scored a "3" or above in reading were included, those percentages would not rise to the level of the writing scores. At several schools, not a single student essay landed in the "1" or "2" range, while the majority of pupils were clustered at the "4" threshold.

All of which begs the question: Why does the same cohort of students who performed so marginally in reading in 2010 excel in writing the next year?

DOE officials caution that reading and writing comparisons are a bit like "apples and oranges," but they acknowledge that budget constraints have changed how the writing test has been graded in the past two years. Instead of two readers, the state is paying the NCS Pearson Inc. testing service for only one reader per exam.

Education researchers say that change can produce higher overall scores because single readers are generally less likely to downgrade an essay if they know they are the sole grader.

"Having one reader reduces objectivity even more and exacerbates grade inflation. (Readers) are aware it's all on them, so they're reluctant to fail people," Jay P. Greene, head of the Department of Education Reform at the University of Arkansas, told Sunshine State News last year.

The Buros Center for Testing, of Lincoln, Neb., said no "authoritative source" considered using just one scorer to be good enough.

Other education think tanks, including the New York-based Thomas B. Fordham Institute, dinged the FCAT writing test for a lack of rigor, suggesting that the state's qualitative standards were set arbitrarily low.

Pearson, which has a \$254 million state contract to administer FCAT exams, did not respond to requests for comment.

The issue of inflated scores is not merely academic. Because the state uses FCAT results to financially reward or punish schools and school districts, money is on the line.

In light of the cavernous gap between lagging FCAT reading scores and soaring writing scores, the state Board of Education plans to raise the so-called "cut" score for the writing battery from 3.5 to 4.

That, presumably, raises the bar for performance-based rewards next year. But the DOE, anticipating that increase, already reported this year's results on a "4 and above" scale -- and still the sizable performance gap remains.

If nothing else, the writing exam appears to be a leveler among districts with varied demographic backgrounds. For example, the St. Lucie County schools, which tend to score toward the lower end in reading, reported a fifth consecutive year of improved scores in writing and drew closer to higher-performing systems around the state.

The percentage of St. Lucie fourth-grade students scoring a 4 or above increased by 16 points compared to the statewide gain of 13. St. Lucie's eighth-graders raised their scores by an average of 12 percentage points in eighth grade compared to 6 for the state, and the district's 10th graders upped their scores by 2 percentage points, matching the statewide improvement.

FCAT reading and math results for 2011 are due out later this year. These scores on these exams, along with the writing test, are factored by the state to determine school grades.

Meantime, state education officials pointed to what they termed "continuous increases" in eighth-grade writing on the National Assessment of Educational Progress.

Between 1998 and 2007, the most recent year for which NAEP writing results were available, Florida's eighth-grade performance increased 17 percentage points for students scoring at or above the proficient level, with only four states scoring better than the Sunshine State.

A "proficient" score on NAEP is comparable to a score of 5 on the FCAT writing assessment. Selected Florida students in eighth- and 12th-grade also participated in the first computer-based NAEP writing assessment earlier this year.

See district-by-district and school-by-school FCAT writing results [here](#).

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

Huge expansion of charter schools and virtual schools approved by Legislature

Florida Tribune

By: Kim MacQueen

May 4, 2011

<http://fltrib.com/huge-expansion-charter-schools-and-virtual-schools-approved-legislature>

While on the campaign trail, Gov. Rick Scott talked about expanding options -- especially virtual and charter school options -- for parents of children attending Florida's K-12 schools. He'll get that chance this week, as bills that vastly expand both are headed his way.

As of Wednesday, House and Senate have both okayed SB 1546, dealing with charter schools and HB 7197, expanding virtual education options.

Sponsored by Sen. John Thrasher, R-Jacksonville in the Senate and Rep. Kelli Stargel, R-Lakeland in the House, SB 1546 paves the way for charter schools designated "high-performing" to create their own districts and gives them 15-year charters. The schools would be allowed to grow by 25 percent as long as they maintained A or B averages, would formalize an appeals process for schools whose charters are appealed or revoked, and would allow three or more charters to create high-performing charter school systems.

Last year, similar legislation proposed by the Senate was shot down in the House. This year, the House mounted its own unstoppable charter schools expansion effort, led by the K-20 Innovation Subcommittee and spearheaded by Stargel.

"We all know that parents have their children's best interests at heart when making important choices about their children's academic future," Stargel said. "This legislation is a signal of our commitment to providing parents with a multitude of school choice options in order to fully empower them to make decisions that will significantly impact their children's academic future."

Foundation for Florida's Future Executive Director Patricia Levesque gave the bill high marks, saying it would help the 37,000 students currently on waiting lists for charter school spaces in Florida. But opponents were concerned that the legislation will create a league of schools incentivized to turn away high-risk, low-income students who can't live up to their rigorous academic standards.

HB 7197, sponsored by Sen. Anitere Flores, R-Miami -- and identical legislation developed by the K-20 Innovation subcommittee -- mandates that every student take at least one online course prior to graduation and that statewide assessments be administered online by the 2014-2015 school year.

But the bill also has a massive expansion of the use of online education. The bill creates virtual charter schools and blended-learning charter schools, and authorizes the Florida Virtual School to provide full-time virtual education to students in grades K-12 and part-time to students in grades 4-12.

"In order for our students to compete on a global playing field, we must ensure they are exposed to digital-age technology," said Flores. "Our education system is supposed to prepare students for the world ahead of them, and exposure to online learning will help students adapt earlier and open doors to more opportunities."

Sen. Dwight Bullard, D-Miami, was a vocal opponent of the measure, calling it a "massive digital learning overhaul that fails to fund the purchase of a single computer."

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

STATE NEWS

LAUSD shortens school day for teacher protest

Los Angeles Times

By: Jason Song

May 4, 2011

<http://www.latimes.com/news/local/la-me-lausd-protest-20110504,0,5542985.story>

An afternoon union protest on May 13 will not interrupt standardized testing, but schools will be required to make up the lost time later in the year, according to the district.

The Los Angeles school district will hold a shortened day of classes on May 13 to accommodate a planned teachers union protest without interrupting standardized testing on most campuses.

Dismissal time will vary from school to school but could be up to several hours earlier than normal. Schools will be required to make up the lost time from the shortened day later in the year, according to Los Angeles Unified School District officials.

The teachers' demonstration is aimed at encouraging state legislators to place tax extensions on the fall ballot to provide continued funding to school districts. L.A. Unified faces a nearly \$408-million deficit.

Earlier this spring, the Board of Education voted to issue preliminary layoff notices to nearly 7,000 employees as a cost-saving measure.

The teachers union initially had planned to hold protests in the morning on May 13 and ask their members to report to classrooms an hour late.

But district officials were concerned that mandatory state standardized tests would be disrupted and that students could go unsupervised. As a result, new schools Supt. John Deasy offered the shortened day alternative after meeting with union leaders Thursday night.

In an email to staff, Deasy wrote: "UTLA agreed that they would adjust the focus of their day of activity to concerns about the failure of the State of California, to the public funded schools. I made it perfectly clear that the day's activities and flyer notification about this day could not focus on any concerns about LAUSD."

After classes are dismissed, teachers will pass out leaflets in front of their campuses and then go to Pershing Square to participate in the protest, organized by the California Teachers Assn., at 4 p.m.

The protest comes as district officials negotiate with unions to cut costs. Groups that represent district police officers, police sergeants and lieutenants, academic administrators and construction workers have tentatively agreed to 12 furlough days, which will save the district millions of dollars.

United Teachers Los Angeles President A.J. Duffy said the other deals did not place added pressure on his members to come to an agreement.

"The [other groups] did what they had to do," Duffy said.

Teachers have agreed to furlough days the last two years and "we are interested in working with the district as much as possible," Duffy said.

But before agreeing to any furlough days or other cost-cutting measures, Duffy said, he and other union members need to be convinced the district is not wasting money. They have been going over financial documents the district has provided. Union and district officials also disagree about how much money is in a healthcare fund that L.A. Unified officials have proposed borrowing for other purposes, Duffy said.

"We want to tell our membership that we've seen the books and we've made sure every nickel and dime is accounted for," Duffy said.

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

Mitch Daniels: Pro-National Standards, Anti-More Money

Education Week

By: Michele McNeil

May 4, 2011

http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/campaign-k-12/2011/05/mitch_daniels_text_here_mitch.html

If Mitch Daniels [decides](#) to run for president, his recent [legislative victories on education](#) as the Republican governor of Indiana foreshadow what his national K-12 agenda would be.

Private-school vouchers and public school choice. Limits on collective bargaining for teachers. An emphasis on content over pedagogy for teachers. An expansion of charter schools. Teachers evaluated, in part, on test scores.

In fact, aside from vouchers, this agenda looks very much like the Obama administration's. And in a closely watched speech today at the American Enterprise Institute, where folks were looking for a hint into Gov. Daniels' presidential aspirations, he acknowledged as much.

President Obama and U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, he said, "have had the courage to, in many cases, irritate some of their allies." He went so far as to "salute" and "commend" them on most of their education agenda.

As for what a President Daniels administration would look like, at least on the education side of things, he said he supports a more modest role for the federal government, and a tighter rein on education spending. "There's a lot more of it than we need," he said of the federal education bureaucracy.

However, he said he supports "national standards," and using the Education Department to help share best practices. And this very thrifty governor and former OMB director under President George W. Bush said he even supported the \$4 billion Race to the Top, but only as a one-time endeavor to "try to jar the system into motion." He viewed the idea of Race to the Top as "not bad."

But he also said, "there's been an incredible explosion of spending. We don't need all of that."

Interestingly, Gov. Daniels didn't seem to support that much of a role for the federal government in education research and development, which has been [a priority](#) for the Obama administration. "We think we know enough to make big, big improvements," in Indiana, he said.

Whatever his education agenda, it seems fair to speculate that education wouldn't necessarily be the centerpiece of a Daniels administration. It goes without saying that Daniels—whose gubernatorial campaign and early first term I covered while a reporter in Indiana—is all about getting the country's fiscal house in order, at least at first.

But his speech today offers a glimpse into what's in store for us in the education blogosphere should he decide to run.

And on a side note, consider this the Politics K-12 election 2012 kickoff. Let the campaign blogging begin.

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

Experts Urge California to Join Both Assessment Groups

Education Week

By Catherine Gewertz

May 4, 2011

http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/curriculum/2011/05/california_common_assessment_c.html

It sounds like a page out of a "[Seinfeld](#)" script, but it's not. At a time when states are choosing between the two assessment consortia, two California experts from the world of standards and testing are urging their state to do the opposite: belong to both.

A quick refresher before moving on: You recall that [two big groups of states](#) are designing tests for the new common standards. And you probably recall that about a dozen states joined both, biding time until they could see how each group's plans shaped up. The ranks of those "polygamous" states are [starting to dwindle](#), though, as they decide which group to commit to.

California has been "monogamous" from the start, joining only the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers, or [PARCC](#). It hasn't become a "governing member" of that consortium, so it is free to take up with the other consortium as well, SMARTER Balanced group, or [SBAC](#). The state board of education intends to make a decision soon.

That brings us to the argument being advanced by Doug McRae, a retired assessment designer who helped craft California's testing system, and Ze'ev Wurman, a software engineer who helped shape the state's math standards and tests. In a recent [piece](#) on the Silicon Valley Education Foundation's blog, they argue that California should join the SBAC, and continue dating both consortia for a couple more years while asking tough questions about which group's approach best suits the state.

One of their arguments rests on California's size: It's so big that it wields influence on the groups' test design even without sitting in a "governing member" spot. Other states can't make that argument so easily. Most have made their choice, and it will be interesting to see what California chooses.

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