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NATIONAL NEWS

New Details Surface About Common Assessments

Education Week

By: Catherine Gewertz

January 9, 2012

<http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2012/01/11/15assess.h31.html?tkn=PVMX%2Fq2JvavZE3v40CNhGhD00DfoK3J7S0sg&cmp=clp-edweek>

With one set of academic standards now serving as the educational guideposts in nearly every state, questions are hovering about what the tests for those standards will look like. But gradually, details are emerging that show plans that could fundamentally change the U.S. testing landscape.

Documents issued by the two groups of states that are designing the tests show that they seek to harness the power of computers in new ways and assess skills that multiple-choice tests cannot. Those plans are very fluid, however, since several years of design, dialogue, revision, piloting, and reworking lie ahead before the assessments are ready in 2014-15. But early documents offer glimpses of the groups' thinking.

"This stuff is a very big deal, and it's a huge departure from the kinds of tests most kids currently take," said Chuck Pack, a national-board-certified math teacher at Tahlequah High School, in Tahlequah, Okla., a small town outside Tulsa.

"As classroom teachers, we're sitting here waiting to know what our kids are going to be expected to do. We have the standards—what they're supposed to know—but now how are they supposed to be able to demonstrate that? Documents like this help us get our heads around that," said Mr. Pack, who serves on an advisory board that is guiding CTB/McGraw-Hill as it designs "next generation" assessments.

The information is trickling out in solicitations issued in the past two months by the [SMARTER Balanced Assessment Consortium](#) and the [Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers](#), or PARCC, for vendors to work on the tests. Those two consortia of states are using \$360 million in federal Race to the Top money to create new assessments for the Common Core State Standards, which all but four states have adopted.

"Every major publisher that has been a state assessment contractor in the past, and many others with an educational reform orientation, are paying attention" to those solicitations, said Alan J. Theimann, the legislative counsel for the Association of Test Publishers.

A [Dec. 30 solicitation](#) by PARCC, seeking vendors to write test items, describes the consortium's vision of its testing system in more detail than did previous documents. It expects to award that contract in April to "multiple" vendors to design half the test items, and renew the contract to some of those vendors to craft the rest.

The solicitation covers the development of the two pieces of the test that will yield students' summative scores in mathematics

and English/language arts and be used for accountability purposes: a computer-based end-of-year test and a performance-based assessment given toward the end of the year. The scope of work also includes developing midyear formative assessments that are part of PARCC's system but are optional for states.

Digging Into Text

A preliminary blueprint of PARCC's English/language arts exam shows that the performance-based assessment, spread over two days, would involve a "research simulation" that asks students to read a suite of texts, including an "anchor" text such as a speech by a prominent historical figure. They would have to answer questions that require them to cite evidence from the text for their answers and write an essay. Another aspect of the performance-based test would require students to "engage" with literature (grades 3-5) or conduct literary analysis (grades 6-11) using a combination of shorter and longer texts.

The end-of-year exam would employ six literary and informational texts and ask students to respond to machine-scorable questions, including ones that demand comparison and synthesis of the readings.

The end-of-year test in English/language arts would yield at least half of a student's points in that topic. One-third to one-half would come from the performance-based test, according to the preliminary blueprint.

PARCC's math test will include three types of questions: "innovative," machine-scorable, computer-based items; items that call for written arguments or justifications; critiques of mathematical reasoning, or proof that students "attended to precision" in math; and items involving real-world scenarios. The performance-based assessment in math will count for 40 percent to 50 percent of a student's points in that subject, and the end-of-course exam will yield 50 percent to 60 percent of the points.

The math exams will focus on solving problems in the "major content areas" at each grade level, as well as demonstrating conceptual understanding, fluency and mathematical reasoning, and applying knowledge to real-world problems.

At the high school level, PARCC will develop two series of end-of-course math tests: a traditional one—Algebra 1, geometry, and Algebra 2—and one that integrates those topics. Those parallel pathways reflect choices educators can make about how to design math courses from the common standards.

The solicitation document answers a question that had been circulating among some educators of young children. PARCC said that its tests will be given by computer to students in grades 6-11, but those in grades 3-5 will answer questions with pencil and paper because of concerns about younger children's keyboarding skills.

Teacher Participation

Documents issued recently by the SMARTER Balanced consortium offer a less-descriptive preview of its tests, largely because work on an earlier solicitation, to design item specifications, isn't yet complete, and informs other parts of the test design. That [request for proposals](#), issued in July, and its content specifications, released in August, represent the most detailed version of the consortium's ideas. ("[Consortia Flesh Out Concepts for Common Assessments.](#)" Aug. 24, 2011.)

In a [request for proposals](#) issued last month, 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 by machine, the document 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 request for proposals also 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. PARCC documents say that teachers will help shape the tests by serving on local committees reviewing test items. They will also be involved in developing model instructional units, diagnostic assessments, professional-development modules, and other PARCC resources.

In September, SMARTER Balanced issued a solicitation for development of guidelines for accessibility and accommodations for English learners and students with disabilities. PARCC plans such a solicitation this year, as well as requests for work on other parts of its testing system, such as its early-year diagnostic assessments and tests of speaking and listening skills.

PARCC [has contracted](#) with the Dana Center at the University of Texas at Austin to build prototype assessment tasks in math, and with the University of Pittsburgh's Institute for Learning to generate such items in literacy. Those items are slated for release this summer.

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STATE NEWS

Florida Governor Asks Lawmakers to Boost School Spending

Education Week

By: Sean Cavanagh

January 10, 2012

http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/state_edwatch/2012/01/post_15.html

Florida Gov. Rick Scott, who oversaw major cuts to school funding last year, is now asking state lawmakers to boost spending on education, though Democrats say his proposal doesn't stand up to scrutiny.

The first-term Republican, in his annual State of the State address, reiterated his call for increasing state spending on schools by \$1 billion annually, a plan that would [boost per-student funding](#) by about 2 percent, to \$6,372.

In a speech that was otherwise heavy on anti-tax and anti-government themes, Scott said he was proposing increased funding for schools in response to calls from state residents.

"I heard one thing very clearly, over and over," said Scott, according to his [prepared remarks](#). "Floridians truly believe that support for education is the most significant thing we can do to ensure both short-term job growth and long-term economic prosperity for our state. And you know what? They are right."

Last year, the governor and the state's Republican majority in the legislature approved sweeping changes to the state's school systems, many of which angered teachers and other education groups. Those steps included new laws [phasing out tenure and implementing merit pay](#) for teachers and requiring them to pay more for pensions. The state's largest teachers' union has [argued that those changes](#) will make their jobs more difficult and less attractive to aspiring educators and take too much power from districts.

Scott praised the state's teachers in his speech, singling out a first-year teacher in the rural town of Immokalee, who was sitting in the legislative gallery, as an example of educators' commitment to their craft.

Florida Democrats greeted Scott's call for new education funding skeptically, saying he was proposing to raise funding for schools by gutting other government programs, particularly in [health care](#). Those gains would not fill the hole left by earlier cuts, they argued.

Nan Rich, the Democratic minority leader in the state Senate, said Scott's budget created a "false choice, pitting our hospitals against our teachers." She said that Republican policies have had a severe toll on the government's—and schools'—ability to function because of so many public workers "on the front lines getting pink slips."

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Florida Governor Rick Scott: 'I've seen firsthand how education puts the American dream within reach'

Tampa Bay Times

By: Staff

January 10, 2011

<http://www.tampabay.com/blogs/gradebook/content/live-seen-firsthand-how-education-puts-american-dream-within-reach>

From Gov. Rick Scott's State of the State address this morning before the Florida Legislature (full remarks [here](#)): *WHILE LOWERING TAXES AND ELIMINATING UNNECESSARY REGULATIONS ARE CRITICAL, THE BEDROCK OF ANY SOUND, SUSTAINABLE ECONOMY IS AN EDUCATED WORKFORCE WELL EQUIPPED TO MEET THE CHALLENGES OF AN ADVANCED GLOBAL MARKETPLACE.*

IN MY OWN LIFE I'VE SEEN FIRSTHAND HOW EDUCATION PUTS THE AMERICAN DREAM WITHIN REACH. I GREW UP POOR. AS A KID I DELIVERED NEWSPAPERS FOR \$5 A WEEK. WHEN I WASN'T DELIVERING PAPERS, I WAS SELLING TV GUIDES FOR 4 CENTS PROFIT A COPY AND FLIPPING HAMBURGERS FOR 85 CENTS AN HOUR.

TODAY I STAND BEFORE YOU PRIVILEGED TO BE THE GOVERNOR OF THE GREATEST STATE IN THE GREATEST NATION. THIS IS THE AMERICAN DREAM; IT'S A STORY RE-TOLD A THOUSAND TIMES WITH EACH SUCCESSIVE GENERATION; AND THE MEANS BY WHICH IT IS ACCOMPLISHED IS AN EFFECTIVE AND ACCOUNTABLE SYSTEM OF EDUCATION.

WE CAN HAVE GREAT WEATHER, BEAUTIFUL BEACHES, AND A WONDERFULLY STRATEGIC LOCATION, BUT IF FLORIDA DOESN'T PROVIDE THE INTELLECTUAL TALENT TO MAKE OUR BUSINESSES COMPETITIVE, WE WILL BECOME A FOOTNOTE WHEN THIS CENTURY'S HISTORY IS WRITTEN. BUT, IF WE CAN CONTINUE TO CREATE A CULTURE OF EXCELLENCE IN OUR SCHOOLS, FLORIDA WILL MERIT A FULL CHAPTER IN THAT HISTORY THAT DESCRIBES THE REAWAKENING OF A MIGHTY, PROSPEROUS NATION. WE CAN DO THIS.

AND WE BEGIN TO DO THIS BY BUILDING ON THE SUCCESSES OF LAST SESSION WHEN WE INCREASED SCHOOL CHOICES FOR FLORIDA'S PARENTS. WE ALSO REFOCUSSED AN OUTDATED TENURE SYSTEM INTO A SYSTEM THAT CAN REWARD ITS BEST PERFORMERS FOR EXCELLING IN EDUCATING OUR STUDENTS.

AS YOU KNOW, NONE OF THIS WAS PARTICULARLY EASY, BUT ALL OF IT WAS OBVIOUSLY NECESSARY IF WE'RE TO GIVE OUR CHILDREN THEIR CHANCE TO GRASP THE FUTURE. THANK YOU FOR YOUR WILLINGNESS TO CONFRONT THESE ISSUES.

I HAVE SPENT THE PAST TWO YEARS TRAVELING THE STATE AND LISTENING TO FLORIDIANS ABOUT THEIR VISIONS FOR THE FUTURE. I WOULD LIKE TO TAKE A MOMENT TO RECOGNIZE ONE OF FLORIDA'S TALENTED, HARDWORKING EDUCATORS WHO HAS TAUGHT ME A GREAT DEAL ABOUT THE BRIGHT FUTURES OF OUR STUDENTS AND OUR STATE.

HEATHER VINIAR IS HERE WITH US TODAY IN THE GALLERY. HEATHER IS A FIRST YEAR TEACHER IN THE RURAL FARMING COMMUNITY OF IMMOKALEE. I HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO MEET HER WHEN I TAUGHT SCHOOL FOR A DAY THIS FALL. HEATHER IS VERY COMMITTED TO HER STUDENTS. SHE TEACHES AMERICAN GOVERNMENT AT IMMOKALEE HIGH SCHOOL. HER CLASSES REACH ALL KINDS OF OUR STUDENTS INCLUDING HONORS, ADVANCED PLACEMENT AND ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS EVERY DAY.

AND, JUST AS ALL OF US HAVE HOPES AND DREAMS FOR THE FUTURE, SO DO HER STUDENTS. THE STUDENTS I SPOKE TO WANTED TO DO EVERYTHING FROM BEING A CHEF, TO A TEACHER, TO A VET, A HAIR DRESSER, A DOCTOR, A LAWYER, OR TO OWN A SMALL SHOP OR STORE. EDUCATORS LIKE HEATHER, THESE STUDENTS AND THEIR DREAMS ARE WHAT WILL DRIVE THE FUTURE PROSPERITY OF OUR STATE.

THANK YOU, HEATHER. OUR FUTURE CERTAINLY IS BRIGHT.

AFTER TRAVELING THE STATE AND LISTENING TO PARENTS, TEACHERS LIKE HEATHER, AND OUR STUDENTS, I HEARD ONE THING VERY CLEARLY, OVER AND OVER. FLORIDIANS TRULY BELIEVE THAT SUPPORT FOR EDUCATION IS THE MOST SIGNIFICANT THING WE CAN DO TO ENSURE BOTH SHORT-TERM JOB GROWTH AND LONG-TERM ECONOMIC PROSPERITY FOR OUR STATE. AND YOU KNOW WHAT? THEY ARE RIGHT!

THAT'S WHY THIS SESSION I ASK YOU TO CONTINUE YOUR COMMITMENT TO EDUCATION—TO ENSURE THAT THE DIFFICULT DECISIONS WE MUST MAKE ON THE BUDGET ARE FOCUSED ON PRIORITIZING THE THINGS WE ALL KNOW ARE ESSENTIAL TO THE FUTURE OF OUR GREAT STATE.

MY RECOMMENDED BUDGET INCLUDES \$1 BILLION IN NEW STATE FUNDING FOR EDUCATION.

AND I ASK YOU TO PLEASE CONSIDER THAT RECOMMENDATION VERY CAREFULLY. ON THIS POINT, I JUST CANNOT BUDGE. I ASK YOU AGAIN TODAY TO SEND ME A BUDGET THAT SIGNIFICANTLY INCREASES STATE FUNDING FOR EDUCATION. THIS IS THE SINGLE MOST IMPORTANT DECISION WE CAN MAKE TODAY FOR FLORIDA'S FUTURE.

BUT, OUR EFFORTS ON EDUCATION CANNOT END HERE. FLORIDA HAS A RICH CULTURAL HISTORY SURROUNDING ITS COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES. DON'T TAKE MY WORD FOR IT. ASK ANY ANTHROPOLOGIST.

BUT WE NEED TO BE REALISTS ABOUT THIS. SOMEWHERE OUT THERE TODAY, THERE ARE GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS MEETING IN BRAZIL, OR INDIA, OR CHINA, AND THEY'RE NOT DEBATING ABOUT WHETHER THEY SHOULD PROVIDE STUDENTS WITH THE PRAGMATIC KNOWLEDGE TO SEIZE A LARGER PIECE OF THE GLOBAL ECONOMY. NO, THE ONLY DEBATE THEY ARE HAVING IS ABOUT HOW QUICKLY THEY CAN BECOME THE DOMINANT GLOBAL PLAYERS.

I LOOK FORWARD TO WORKING WITH YOU TO CLOSELY LOOK AT OUR HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM; TO UNDERSTAND HOW WE CAN ENSURE THAT IN THE FUTURE, JOB CREATORS FROM AROUND THE WORLD WILL HAVE TO LOOK TO FLORIDA TO FIND THE TALENTED AND EDUCATED WORKFORCE THEY WILL NEED TO COMPETE IN THE 21ST CENTURY.

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Education bills to watch in 2012 in the Florida Legislature

The Palm Beach Post

By: Allison Ross

January 11, 2012

<http://blogs.palmbeachpost.com/extracredit/2012/01/11/education-bills-to-watch-in-2012-in-the-florida-legislature/>

With the beginning of the Florida 2012 legislative session yesterday, I thought it might be a good time to do a roundup of the education bills to watch this season.

Any particular issues or legislation that you're watching this session? Post a comment below or send us an email at EducationNews@PBPost.com.

For now, here are a few that we find interesting and will definitely be watching:

Parent-trigger bill: Bills filed in the legislature this month — [Senate bill 1718](#) and House bill 1191 — would give parents of children at low-performing schools the power to choose several different options in hopes of turning the school around. If more than 50 percent of parents agree, they could turn the underperforming school into a “district-managed turnaround school,” convert it to a charter school, close the school or bring in an outside firm to manage the school. These Florida bills, labeled “parent empowerment in education,” are similar to other parent-trigger laws in other states, notably California. But the laws are controversial, as The New York Times notes [in this story](#). A parent advocacy group, [Parents Across America](#), which counts Boca Raton mother **Rita Solnet** as one of its founding members, has come out against these bills, saying in a statement that it believes “the underlying goal of this law was to turn public schools over to charter operators.”

School bus ads: This week, the Senate Education Committee approved a bill that would allow school districts to sell advertisements on school buses. The committee voted 4-2, with Ellyn Bogdanoff, R-Palm Beach, opposing the bill. Proponents say the bill, [SB 344](#), would allow school districts to generate more revenue. Others worry about some of the consequences, saying it pushes consumerism into schools and could exacerbate inequities between students who can afford things on the advertisements and those who can't. Some have also expressed concerns about safety, saying drivers may focus more on the ads than on driving safely around the buses. The bill bans advertisements for products deemed inappropriate for children, such as alcohol, but that ban could be challenged in court if the bill passes into law. Similarly, there's [another bill](#), filed by Irv Slosberg, D-Boca Raton, that would [allow school districts to sell the naming rights to school cafeterias](#).

Charter school funding: A new charter advocacy industry group, the [Florida Charter School Alliance](#), is pushing for equal funding of charter schools and traditional public schools. It is pushing for the passage of [HB 903](#), which would allow for school districts to share revenue generated by capital outlay millage levy with charter schools. In the bill, if school districts choose not to share that revenue, “the Florida Education Finance Program allocation for that school district shall be recalculated so that each charter school in the school district receives, on a per-student basis, the same amount of funds that it would have received if the district school board shared the millage levy revenue.”

On a different note with charter school funding, [SB 1338](#) would [require](#) each charter school in the state to maintain a website with information about the school, its personnel, and its programs — as well as any fees paid to a school's management company, if it has one.

More on charter schools: one last bill with charter schools that we're watching right now: [SB 1162](#) would create a new category of charter schools, called “family charter academies.” To read more about it, click [here](#) for the Tampa Bay Times' education blog.

School vouchers: This week, the Senate PreK-12 Education Committee passed [SB 962](#), which would allow 6,500 more low-income students use state-backed vouchers to go to private schools. The bill would raise the program's cap for the next school year by \$31 million to a total of \$250 million. For more on this bill, click [here](#) for a story by the News Service of Florida.

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Idaho moves to adopt new school grading system

Associated Press

By: Jessie L. Bonner

January 10, 2012

http://hosted2.ap.org/IDIDF/5848642fab654a008ee1e48cdd184f82/Article_2012-01-10-No%20Child%20Left%20Behind-Idaho/id-e9544e068f9641b290866b20d8789fc6

Idaho education officials plan to adopt their own grading system for schools while rejecting the latest benchmarks under the federal No Child Left Behind law.

Under a new accountability system developed by the state Department of Education, Idaho would use a new five-star scale to evaluate and recognize schools.

The new measuring system would use standardized test scores to measure student academic growth and proficiency in grades 3-10, while things like graduation rates and student enrollment in advanced courses would come into play in later grades, according to early drafts of the plan obtained by The Associated Press Tuesday.

The department chose a five-star scale because it's a rating system the general public can relate to, said public schools chief Tom Luna.

"When we look for hotels, when we look for restaurants, when we look for book reviews or movie reviews, or product reviews, we're very familiar with the five-star rating," Luna said. "We want something that is very customer friendly, and customer recognizable, and whether you're inside education or outside education, we're all very familiar with the five-star approach to rating things."

Under the system, four- and five-star schools will be publicly recognized and rewarded financially while being held up as an example, Luna said.

Schools that fall on the bottom end of the scale, earning one or two stars based on the academic measures, will fall under intense scrutiny and be required to develop improvement plans. They will also need to post two years of progress before advancing on the five-star scale.

Schools that fall in the middle, with three stars, will also have to draft improvement plans but will have more flexibility and only have to post one year of progress before advancing on the grading scale.

Idaho is embarking on its own course after opting to ignore latest requirements for determining school progress under No Child Left Behind, which is known primarily for its emphasis on standardized tests and the labeling of thousands of schools as "failures."

Idaho and a handful of other states spearheaded a rebellion against No Child Left Behind last year, saying the 10-year-old law sets unrealistic benchmarks and fails to accurately measure student growth.

Luna is focusing instead on education changes that were signed into law last year as part of his Students Come First plan, which emphasizes the academic growth for students and less on whether they can pass a specific test, he said.

Luna has led the charge to disconnect the state from No Child Left Behind, arguing Idaho schools can no longer wait for Congress to reauthorize the education law and rewrite it to better gauge student performance.

President Barack Obama announced in September that since Congress had failed to rewrite No Child Left Behind, he would allow states that meet certain requirements to apply for a waiver to get around it.

Eleven states have already formally requested the waivers, while Idaho plans to meet a second deadline to apply on Feb. 21. The state started accepting public comment on Idaho's application, which details the new grading system for schools, on Tuesday.

The 21-day public comment period ends Feb. 1.

With the waiver, Idaho would start using the new five-star system to rate schools during the 2012-2013 school year.

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Virginia governor highlights education initiatives

The Washington Times

By: David Sherfinski

January 9, 2012

<http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2012/jan/9/virginia-governor-highlights-education-initiatives/?page=all#pagebreak>

Virginia [Gov. Bob McDonnell](#)'s education initiatives for kindergarten through 12th grade are likely to draw some bipartisan support in the coming [General Assembly](#) session — but they also have given out-of-power Democrats a toehold for their new role as the effective minority party.

[Mr. McDonnell](#) laid out his legislative priorities Monday at a news conference in Richmond, stressing that in order for [Virginia](#) to compete with other states in job creation and the economy, the state must provide adequate funding for education. [Mr. McDonnell](#) has proposed adding \$438 million in new K-12 funding to his two-year budget, although \$342 million of that will go toward teacher pensions. He also wants to add more than \$200 million in the next two years for higher education.

"I remember the old saying when I was growing up — my dad kind of beat it into my head — 'If you want a good job, you've got to have a good education,'" he said, surrounded by students and legislators.

Perhaps the most prominent item [Mr. McDonnell](#) unveiled is a measure that would repeal the so-called "King's Dominion" law that bans school systems from starting their school year before [Labor Day](#) and allows local school boards to decide when to open their classrooms. The tourism and hospitality industry has long opposed repealing the law, in line with the stance [Mr. McDonnell](#) took during his days as a state delegate representing Virginia Beach.

[Mr. McDonnell](#), though, said that the way to solve the problem is to look at what's in the best interests of the students and that local autonomy is a fundamentally good idea.

"I think the days of unfunded mandates, rigorous, inflexible policies foisted on the states by the federal government and on the localities by the states has got to end," he said. "It disrespects the sovereign authority that each level of government has."

The "King's Dominion" measure is one that is likely to receive bipartisan support. Lawmakers of both parties already have introduced bills that would grant that authority to local school boards on when to start the school year. Seventy-seven of 132 school systems in the state already have waivers releasing them from the mandate.

But [Mr. McDonnell](#), a fierce advocate of charter schools and school choice, is also pushing a proposal that would provide tax credits to companies that contribute to scholarships for low-income students to help them attend the school of their choice. The measure was defeated last year and is one that Democrats deride as a voucher-type program, though actual school vouchers

are prohibited by the state Constitution.

State Sen. Mark Obenshain, Harrisonburg Republican, who is working on a tax-credits measure, said that the typical progression of the legislation in other states has been "skepticism, passage, success, and then broad bipartisan support," noting that Pennsylvania's program was championed by former Gov. Edward G. Rendell, a Democrat.

That prospect is unlikely in [Virginia](#), Sen. Janet D. Howell said.

"We don't have any money to give [for] private schools," the Fairfax Democrat said. "We've proposed massive cuts to public schools already, so I'm quite positive the Democrats will resist this with everything we've got."

[Mr. McDonnell](#) also wants to increase the percentage of the state sales tax that goes toward transportation from 0.5 percent to 0.75 percent for the next eight years, generating \$110 million in revenue for road maintenance. The money would be diverted from the general fund, which goes toward paying for items like education.

"I think that's really a fundamental fight," said Sen. J. Chapman Petersen, Fairfax Democrat, noting that the sales tax was created in the 1960s for the express purpose of funding education — in that case, a state community college system. "When you fund transportation through the general fund, you're basically giving all the out-of-state users of our highways a free ride."

[Mr. McDonnell](#) also will meet resistance from the Virginia Education Association on a measure to establish an annual contract and evaluation process that would make it easier to oust ineffective teachers from the classroom — a proposal he readily acknowledged would not sit well with everyone. Teachers in [Virginia](#) now work under a three-year probationary period where they can be dismissed without reason, after which they can reach a continuing contract where they cannot be dismissed arbitrarily and have the opportunity to defend themselves, VEA President [Kitty Boitnott](#) said.

[Mr. McDonnell](#) said routine evaluation and analysis is an idea from the private sector that would serve the school system well.

"I don't think any professional, excellent school teacher in [Virginia](#) wants to tolerate the presence of another very mediocre or underperforming teacher ... who is compensated and treated in the same way," he said.

But [Ms. Boitnott](#) did not approve.

"At first blush, he's right," she said. "We don't like the sound of it."

She said it appeared to be an unnecessarily severe way to dismiss teachers and that she would look more closely at another teacher-related proposal that would streamline the grievance process.

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Washington lawmakers to propose charter schools

Associated Press

By: Donna Gordon Blankinship

January 10, 2012

<http://www.seattlepi.com/news/article/Wash-lawmakers-to-propose-charter-schools-bill-2455415.php>

A group of Washington Democrats plans to introduce a bill this week that would allow for public charter schools in the state, an idea rejected three times before by voters.

Sen. [Rodney Tom](#), D-Medina, said Tuesday that charter schools have proven to be effective and popular in nearly every other state. "Why would you want to prevent schools that people are clamoring in other states to get into?" Tom asked.

Charters are public schools that run independently from district controls, but are instead governed by a multi-year performance contract that requires proof that a school is improving student achievement.

Teachers' unions tend to oppose charters, in part, because many hire non-union staff.

Washington is one of eight states without such schools, according to the [Center for Education Reform](#), an advocacy group that supports charters. The other states are Alabama, Kentucky, Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota and West Virginia.

Most recently, Maine passed a charter school law in 2011 and the issue has been back on the agenda in many of these other states, including bills introduced but not passed in four, while some of the 42 states with charter school laws have voted to expand their use, according to the education policy group.

Robin Lake, a researcher at the [University of Washington's Center on Reinventing Public Education](#), said they have been especially effective in urban settings.

Some charters are unique schools created by local groups and others are part of small chains of a few dozen schools set up by charter management organizations. Seattle's Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation has given much financial aid to these groups and has paid for research to track their effectiveness.

The successful ones can "move mountains" in student achievement, pushing kids up several grade levels in one year, Lake said.

Others get mixed results and are no better, and sometimes worse, than traditional public schools, she said.

Washington voters rejected initiatives calling for charter schools in 1996, 2000 and 2004. The Legislature rejected charter bills on several other occasions before they reached the ballot.

Now that most other states are successfully using these alternative public schools to raise student achievement, Tom says it should be a safe topic for Washington again. He said he expected a bill to be introduced Thursday.

The proposal, supported by lawmakers who are expected to introduce identical bills in both the state House and Senate, would allow up to 50 charter schools in Washington, with no more than 10 new schools in any year, according to a document about the proposal.

Both state and local agencies could sign a charter agreement, which would likely last five years but could be revoked at any time.

The proposal focuses on serving educationally disadvantaged children and charter applicants would need to specify how they will fulfill this requirement. Renewal agreements would be based on success rates.

Last fall, the Washington PTA also added charter schools to its legislative agenda, joining other groups in supporting the idea.

But [Mary Lindquist](#), president of the [Washington Education Association](#), the state's largest teachers' union, says now isn't a good time to talk about putting public money into experimental schools when the Legislature is having trouble paying for the schools the state already has.

Lake, an author on a new report this week on charter school effectiveness, says that after 20 years, charter schools aren't really experimental any more.

"In most states, charters are an important piece of the reform strategy, because they bring in new ideas and new energy," she said. "It's part of the mainstream options for public schools now."

Lake speculated that Washington has avoided adopting charter schools because so many of the state's public schools are terrific and a lot of kids are doing really well, that many people didn't see a need.

"But if you look a little closer, we do have an unforgivable achievement gap and a graduation rate that needs to be addressed," Lake said, referring to the gap between tests scores, graduation rates and other measures of student achievement among different ethnic groups and between rich and poor kids.

"It's hard for people to wrap their minds around the idea that we need to change," she said. Research has found that charter schools serving urban areas and kids from minority groups tend to perform best, she added.

Lake said that should Washington decide to allow charter schools, it would benefit from the delay by learning lessons from other state, including the importance of:

- Making sure people are qualified to open a school before they are given a charter.
- Following their progress with good oversight and by setting specific expectations.
- Setting consequences for charter schools that don't perform and closing them down.

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New Mexico issues A-F grades for public schools

Associated Press

By: Barry Massey

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Nearly two-thirds of New Mexico's schools received a grade of C or better under new ratings announced Tuesday by the Public Education Department.

The state plans to use the A to F grades to replace a federally mandated school rating system that many educators consider unfair because it takes a pass-or-fail approach based on student testing in a single year.

"Thanks to our straightforward new A-F grading system, parents, teachers, and community leaders have a much clearer understanding of where our schools are succeeding and where we need to focus our efforts and our resources to improve," Gov. Susana Martinez said in a statement.

The grades are based on standardized tests taken by students and year-to-year growth of student performance in reading and

mathematics. Other factors include the high school graduation rate.

Nearly 90 percent of New Mexico schools failed last year to make "adequate yearly progress" under the federal No Child Left Behind Act.

The Martinez administration has asked the U.S. Education Department to allow New Mexico to use its grading system, which was approved by the Legislature last year, rather than continue with the federal model.

Schools will receive final grades this summer, and those will take into account student testing to be done this spring. The Martinez administration proposes to use the grades to allocate money to help boost school performance and offer bonuses to highly qualified teachers willing to work in struggling schools. The governor also wants to provide financial incentives to the highest-performing schools. According to the preliminary school grades released by the department:

— 73 schools, or 9 percent, received an A.

— 191 schools, or 23 percent, got a B.

— 266 schools, or 32 percent, received a C.

— 208 schools, or 25 percent, got a D.

— 89 schools, or 11 percent, received an F.

Of the schools getting a C or better, 79 percent of those were considered failing under the federal rating system last year.

"Every community in New Mexico now has the opportunity to see what's happening in our schools and how they can help make sure those schools improve by this summer," said Public Education Department Secretary Hanna Skandera. "For the first time, instead of a shallow snapshot from a single test score, we can measure our schools by how much our students are improving in the classroom."

The department released the new ratings on its website, providing a grade card report for individual schools.

Under the federal system, a school will not meet the "adequate yearly progress" goal if any one of several subgroups of students—black, white, Hispanic, American Indian, economically disadvantaged or poor, special education and students with limited English language skills—fail to meet performance or participation targets on tests.

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