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New school tests will make Florida harder to compare to others

State to pay \$220 million to replace FCAT, avoid Common Core

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By [Denise Smith Amos](#)

We probably won't know how well Florida's students stack up against peers around the country and the world, some education leaders say, now that Florida has abandoned using a national test in favor of its own.

A year from now, Florida students' math and reading skills will not be measured by the FCAT tests that Florida has used since 1998, nor the Common Core tests that will be used in most states.

DATABASE: [1999-2013 FCAT scores](#) (see details page in returned results for years prior to 2010)

After public resistance to anything resembling nationalized education, Florida will pay the American Institutes for Research \$220 million in taxpayer money to develop and score new statewide tests, Florida Education Commissioner Pam Stewart announced this week.

The decision means Florida won't use the new national tests that it was a leader in developing. It means relying on AIR, the company that developed the complex and controversial value-added method — VAM — of rating teacher quality. It means questions about how to assess the ability of the state's 2.6 million students, particularly when competing with other states to attract business and industry.

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"It's disappointing because, with our work on our own standards over the years and our commitment to accountability in this state, [our students] would have outperformed those other states throughout the country" on national tests, said Nikolai Vitti, superintendent of Duval schools.

"We did not capture the moment."

Others, including a top business leader, say that's not necessarily so. They predict that Florida will again lead the nation in quality education assessments, or find other ways to compare its students to others.

"Our country is losing its competitive edge in the talent pipeline," said Mark Wilson, president of the Florida Chamber of Commerce.

"It's important that our kids can compare themselves to others and our employers can compare one region of the country with another region. ... But at a basic level, each state needs to be able to set their own curriculum and needs to be able to figure out how its kids are going to compete with other kids in the world."

Standardized tests have become the most visible tool for that.

Test scores affect everything from whether a third-grader gets promoted to whether a teen graduates from high school. In Florida, they influence teacher evaluations and whether a school or district is well thought of or shunned.

Nationally, the United States pays attention to several international rankings, which in recent years show that this country has fallen from among the top 20, experts say.

Even so, Wilson said, Florida has a reputation — outside of the state — for high academic standards and achievement. It is unlikely to lose potential employers because of the new tests, he said.

As evidence, he cited an international study that compared Florida's fourth-grade readers with others in 53 countries; Florida ranked second behind Hong Kong. In the only U.S. measure that compares states, called NAEP or the Nation's Report Card, Florida's fourth-graders were above the national average in reading.

Stewart said it is more important to get the right test for Florida's needs than to get a test that compares Florida's students to others.

“While ... comparability to other states was one of the reasons states were signing on to the Common Core ... the bigger reason ... was that these were more rigorous standards that would help our students better prepare for college and career,” she said. “If we’re able to compare ourselves to other states, that’s a bonus.”

The new, as-yet-unnamed tests are supposed to measure higher-order thinking, rather than rote memorization. They will test English, language arts and literacy (formerly reading and writing), math, science and social studies.

And they’ll be cheaper than FCAT, costing \$34.23 per student instead of \$36.17.

Teachers are glad Florida finally picked a new test, but they’re suspicious of AIR, said Mark Pudlow, spokesman for the Florida Education Association, the teachers union.

AIR developed the value-added formulas that rate teacher quality based on students’ predicted and actual performance on state FCATs. Teachers say the value-added method is unfair and the published results are misleading.

“The whole value-added situation is a bit of a mess,” Pudlow said, “and testing has been more than a bit of a mess over the years in Florida, so it’s hard to be optimistic about it. We have a serious over-reliance on testing in Florida, and I don’t think it’s going to change because we have a new testing company in town.”

Ironically, Florida was a founding member of the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers, or PARCC, one of two multi-state groups developing national tests.

The other group is called the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium. Both are creating new tests for 39 states.

At first, nearly all states joined at least one of the two testing groups, hoping to pool costs for new tests that can be national and benchmarked against international standards.

Business groups approved, saying they wanted more measures of students’ readiness for college or career training beyond the ACT and SAT college admissions tests. Colleges also complained that states were producing too many high school graduates who needed remedial classes before they could do college-level work.

The new national Common Core standards and tests were supposed to be a solution.

Federal Race to the Top competitive grants sweetened the pot for states to adopt them. Florida won the largest grant, \$700 million, in 2010.

Since then, political pressure has mounted around the country against Common Core and national tests. Gov. Rick Scott and state legislators were pressured to distance Florida from anything that smacked of a nationalized education.

Scott ordered the state to seek proposals from other testmakers. Stewart picked one that got unanimous votes from a committee.

It’s possible Florida’s new test may include questions or sections similar to those in national tests or other states’ tests, Wilson said, adding that maybe Florida will lead other states to adopt AIR’s tests.

“I think Florida has emerged as a leader, not a follower,” Wilson said. “We’re going to put the best assessment out there.”

Stewart said Florida’s new tests may have some questions in common with other states’ tests, but she had no details about that.

“The new tests will provide a more authentic assessment of the Florida Standards,” Stewart said, “because it will include more than multiple choice questions. Students will be asked to create graphs, interact with test content and write and respond in different ways than on traditional tests.”

Stewart said that she is confident of AIR, which has been delivering online tests for more than seven years and is partnering with Data Recognition Corp., an even older company.

Denise Amos: (904) 359-4083

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