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New annual statewide school testing system on hold

By [Amy Hetzner](#) of the Journal Sentinel

Posted: Feb. 20, 2010 | [\(13\) Comments](#)

Nearly six months after the state announced it was scrapping its annual test for public school students, efforts to replace it with a [new assessment](#) are on hold and state officials now estimate it will take at least three years to make the switch.

The reason for the delay is tied to what is happening in the national education scene.

Wisconsin is among the 48 states that have signed onto the [Common Core State Standards Initiative](#), which expects to complete work on grade-by-grade expectations for students in English and math by early spring. Once that is done, the anticipation is that the state will adopt the new standards, using them to help craft the new statewide test.

Wisconsin officials also are planning to compete for part of [\\$350 million](#) that the U.S. Education Department plans to award in the fall to state consortiums for test development.

"We are hoping by late spring we will have a direction and a plan for moving forward, whether that will be with other states or by ourselves," said Jennifer Thayer, assistant superintendent of reading and student achievement at the state Department of Public Instruction. But "that continues to change on a daily basis."

When the DPI [announced in August the phaseout](#) of the [Wisconsin Knowledge and Concepts Examinations](#), the tests given to every public school student in grades 3 through 8 and 10, Thayer said the expectation was that it would take two to three years to complete and that the state could still meet that three-year target.

"But, again, a lot is depending on the national picture at the moment," she said.

In the meantime, the state has signed non-binding memorandums of understanding with three national groups that are seeking to pool resources - and gain federal funding - to overhaul their statewide standardized testing programs.

One consortium seeks to replicate Oregon's computerized testing program, which shortens the length of testing time by changing the questions based on student responses, on top of delivering near-immediate results. Another is working on a system that involved more open-ended questions, instead of the

predominantly multiple-choice questions of most statewide assessment systems.

A third consortium is trying to launch a national test to be used in all states.

"It's a pretty complicated landscape in this area right now," said Chris Minnich, director of standards and assessment for the Council of Chief State School Officers. "The biggest thing we're hearing from Wisconsin is they do want to move forward with a new assessment system aligned with the common standards, but they want to get it right."

The delay might try schools' patience, however. The most common complaint about the current testing system is the months-long wait between when the WKCE is administered and when schools and parents receive students' results.

Asking schools to wait three years to rectify that issue is disappointing, said John Ashley, executive director of the Wisconsin Association of School Boards.

"I hope that the timeline is more aggressive than that, because if we're looking to convince the Department of Education that Wisconsin is doing innovative things, which would make our application more competitive, I don't think other states are planning a three-year implementation," he said.

In addition, school districts might need time to get used to the idea of administering a completely computerized test.

Online testing of students will pose a logistical challenge for Milwaukee Public Schools, said Deb Lindsey, the district's director of research and assessment. Not only will schools have to figure out how to free up enough computer time to administer the test, they will have to ensure they have adequate bandwidth and software capabilities, she said.

"But I think that, given sufficient time to progressively move into an online assessment, we'll be well-prepared," Lindsey said. "Our kids are certainly more ready than the systems they're currently schooled in."

Any testing changes the state makes could be for naught, however, if teachers and school administrators don't get training on how to better interpret and use the data, said Gary Cook, an associate scientist at the Wisconsin Center for Education Research.

Standardized test results should be used to help school administrators understand what is happening in their buildings and make decisions about instruction, he said. But many school officials and teachers don't have enough knowledge about using data to do that, he said.

"I am more interested in expanding teachers' ability in evaluating their own kids in their own classrooms all the time than I am about creating a neat, computerized and snazzy assessment," said Cook, the state's former testing chief who was tapped recently to serve as an expert on the federal government's assessment panels. "In my view, that's an area where we are falling short."

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1. [HeavyPetter - Feb 21, 2010 11:02 AM](#)[» Report abuse](#)[00](#)
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Welcome to national education standards...school boards in California and Texas(the largest text book markets) will be deciding what our kids should know and when they should know it.

2. [gcr3903 - Feb 21, 2010 1:47 PM](#)[» Report abuse](#)[10](#)
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Should our children really have to wait? They can't afford to wait! This is the DUMBING DOWN OF AMERICA at it's finest. These school officials should be ashamed of the incredibly poor job their doing. Parents must get in faces of the school board about the dwindling grades of the school system. Let's take the money from a rail system that no-one will ride and put it towards schools.

3. [timmyj3 - Feb 21, 2010 3:04 PM](#)[» Report abuse](#)[00](#)
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Wow! What a clusterfudge. There is almost too much material here. Money wasted, bureaucrats on parade, teacher establishment running wild, favpred states getting preferred treatment, government inability to decide or actually solve a problem. Good stuff.

4. [Laker - Feb 21, 2010 3:12 PM](#)[» Report abuse](#)[00](#)
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What amazes me is that few parents seem to be pushing their kids to learn, but are only concerned about high marks in school ... thus, the dumbing down of America.

Then when junior or missy fails to live up to the standards established by colleges and universities, they blame to schools, but never their kids for not taking advantage of the opportunities presented.

Why is the demand for private school educational opportunities increasing and why do the private school students do so much better than public school students? Because they want to learn.

Parents and students expect and demand success.

On the public level, having the student feel good seems to be more important than demanding hard work. Why don't we just preprint the final grades on the report cards before the school year begins and hand those cards out at the semester. Partents and students will be happy because their kids are getting good marks, albeit learning nothing in the process.

Want success ... let's start eliminating frivolous classes and rebuild our education system from the bottom up.

Let's start with installing new reading, math, history and science classes that teach the kids to read; to acquire math skills which can get them through trig and calculus; teach history as it actually happened, not the way some do-goods would like to have had it happen (yes, we had slavery, a bloody civil war, the halocaust, among other things); and finally teach sciences like physics and chemistry the way they should be taught.

But it boils down to having students who want to learn ... like they do in the private schools where teachers may sacrifice some monetary rewards to work with students who want to learn.

For those who don't want to learn ... waupun and other places are waiting ... please take out the

TVs, Radios, and recreation equipment and install classrooms. I will be your last chance to learn. Want an incent. No diploma, no parole.

5. [Tinidril - Feb 21, 2010 6:15 PM](#)

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I am glad that we are replacing the WKCE. It is widely known in the national testing arena to have laughably low proficiency standards. <http://www.jsonline.com/news/education/29257294.html>

It seems to me that there are already a plethora of standardized tests available ... do we really need three different national groups with three distinctly different approaches studying this?

Open-ended answer testing is a joke. "Making the grades : my misadventures in the standardized testing industry" by Todd S. Farley is a real eye-opener into that field.

MPS has been failing for years and years and years what's a few more years wasted on committee meetings, panels, and studies? {/sarcasm off}

6. [Tinidril - Feb 21, 2010 6:16 PM](#)

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7. [Tinidril - Feb 21, 2010 6:17 PM](#)

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8. [Tinidril - Feb 21, 2010 6:18 PM](#)

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Eek. Sorry about the triple post.

9. [History Teacher - Feb 21, 2010 9:24 PM](#)

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All this talk about private schools being better than public schools will disappear after August 1, when choice schools have to publish their test scores. We'll finally compete on an even level.

For the record, the WKCE is terrible, and the state standards are vague. Personally, I would like to see the ACT required in high schools, with possibly a social studies test, since that is the only one of the core four subjects not on the ACT.

10. [DBONIN - Feb 21, 2010 10:35 PM](#)

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Yes, I know this is a fake quote attributed to Petronius Arbiter, 210 BC. That said, there is a nugget of truth here...

We trained hard . . . but it seemed that every time we were beginning to form up into teams we would be reorganized. I was to learn later in life that we tend to meet any new situation by reorganizing; and a wonderful method it can be for creating the illusion of progress while producing confusion, inefficiency, and demoralization.

It's no wonder our kids haven't learned anything. After all these years we still don't know what to teach them, nor will we for several more years!

11. [Free Bird - Feb 22, 2010 8:20 AM](#)

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WKCE is pointless, it tests kids in October (MPS starts after Labor Day) for what they are supposed to learn by the end of the year, and then the results aren't even available until midway through the school year (if that).

12. [unionman - Feb 22, 2010 8:50 AM](#)

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If you want an elephant to grow, you don't measure it. You feed it.

We're simply replacing one misguided test with another. Until teachers are actually allowed to teach, things won't improve in our nation's public schools.

13. [WorkKeys - Feb 22, 2010 12:26 PM](#)

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As an ex-Wisconsinite and out of state business owner, I continue to be amazed at the lack of linkage between education and the real world, nationwide. Blaming education for its faults is fruitless. There is enough blame to go around for all involved. Tests for the sake of defining what you know without a relative comparison of that knowledge to the real world will continue to bring

less than acceptable outcomes. Another message mentioned ACT's offerings and I agree. Might I suggest that you check out WorkKeys? We have implemented it within our companies. We work with education to involve students in what new technologies are being required by American industries of the future, and seek implementation in our state, as it appears you are attempting in yours. By combining efforts of education, government, business and industry in defining needs, education will gain a new sense of direction for all. Good luck Wisconsin.

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