



Draper Notes

April 9, 2015

Legislature Approves Scaling Back of School Testing

By [Leslie Postal](#) Orlando Sentinel

Bill to curb testing in Florida public schools headed to Gov. Rick Scott

Faced with an outcry from parents and educators, the Florida Legislature on Thursday sent to Gov. Rick Scott a bill that would scale back high-stakes testing in public schools.

The sweeping measure eliminates some exams, reduces how much weight test scores carry in teacher evaluations and limits to 45 hours the time students can spend on testing each school year. It also allows school districts to start a new school year as early as Aug. 10.

Sen. John Legg, R-Lutz, the sponsor of the Senate version, said the bill would end the state's "overly scripted, top-down approach" to public education.

Critics, however, said the legislation did not go far enough, as it leaves intact plenty of state-mandated testing and requirements that key decisions such as student promotion be based partly on test scores. It also continues the state's

push to more online testing, despite problems with computer-based exams last month.

"This bill is a start. We need to go much further to reduce high-stakes testing in our schools," said Rep. Joseph Geller, D-Aventura.

Still, the bill's passage out of the Legislature seems a sign that some complaints about Florida's testing system, which ratcheted up significantly this school year, have been heard in Tallahassee. Many parents and educators said testing dominated too much of the school year, to the detriment of students.

The frustration over testing has been highlighted by one South Florida school board's decision, quickly reversed, to skip state tests this year and a growing "opt out" movement of parents refusing to have their children take the state's new Florida Standards Assessments. The FSA is a series of exams in math, reading and writing taken by students in grades three to 10, and it would remain in place, even if the bill comes law.

The bill (HB 7069) passed on the same day the Seminole County school district reported that 72 students at Teague Middle School in Altamonte Springs planned to opt out of upcoming FSA exams, the most ever at a single school.

The House voted 105-6 to pass the legislation the Senate approved last week and then to send it immediately to Scott.

In February, Scott said, "we have too much testing" and urged lawmakers to make changes to state testing laws during the spring session. Scott's office did not respond immediately when asked if he would sign the bill.

The testing provisions of the bill also:

- Require that an independent panel review results from this year's FSA exams before the results are used to grade schools A-to-F or to help evaluate teachers. Some critics had questioned whether the new FSA, which replaced most of the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test this year, was a valid measure of student achievement.
- Limit testing to 45 hours — out of 900 — a school year, with some exceptions.
- Scrap an 11th-grade language arts exam that Scott canceled this year by executive order.
- Cancel a requirement for final exams in all courses, ending a demand introduced by the state's 2011 teacher merit-pay law. That requirement could have meant up to 1,000 new final exams given in Orange County schools this spring.
- Reduce from 50 percent to one third the percentage of a teacher's evaluation based on student test-score data.
- Delete rules that said all middle and high school students who did poorly on state reading and math tests had to take remedial courses in those subjects.

Andy Ford, president of the Florida Education Association, said the bill takes "some steps to easing some of the many negative consequences" that resulted from Florida's "drastic increase in testing" in recent years.

But it left in place many tests and many fears about technology problems as more exams are delivered by computer in coming years, Ford said. So more changes to state law likely are needed.

"We'll be looking at how the rest of the testing season goes," he said.

The part of the bill that allows an earlier start to the school year is backed by some Central Florida educators because it would allow the first semester to be wrapped up before Christmas.

Current law prevents most schools from opening until two weeks before Labor Day, or Aug. 24 this year, and that start date means the first semester would end in January.

Seminole Superintendent Walt Griffin said if the bill becomes law, he would suggest moving the first day of classes to Aug. 17 this year. That would allow the first semester to be finished before the winter break.

But Griffin said he wouldn't make the suggestion to the Seminole County School Board if the bill isn't signed soon, for fear a later change to the 2015-16 calendar would interfere with summer plans.

"We want to be sensitive to our teachers and our families," he added.

Officials in other Central Florida school districts say a change to the calendar for the upcoming year is probably unlikely, though some have discussed it.

lpostal@tribune.com or 407-420-5273

Copyright © 2015, Orlando Sentinel