

Push to fix CSAP begins

A group of lawmakers hopes to shift statewide exams to focus more on college preparation.

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Sen. Josh Penry is part of the fight for a new age in testing.

While kids across Colorado pencil in bubbles on statewide exams this month, lawmakers are calling for the next evolution in standardized testing — an extensive overhaul to make exams more relevant to life after high school.

A bipartisan coalition of legislators is ready to dump the once-a-year CSAP in favor of end-of-course tests more closely tied to curriculum and college-entrance requirements.

"We're in a new century, and it's time for our thinking to evolve," said Rep. Rob Witwer, R-Genesee. "This could be the end of CSAP and the beginning of something much better. It really is an evolution."

Lawmakers have debated the relevance of the Colorado Student Assessment Program for a decade. But momentum to change it is mounting this year as Gov. Bill Ritter pushes a revamping of course-content standards and testing from preschool to college.

It's typically Republicans — demanding accountability of the education system — who stick up for CSAP. Yet Witwer and Sen. Josh Penry, R-Grand Junction, are leading the fight for a new age in exams.

"This emphatically isn't a step backward on assessments," said Penry, who is sponsoring legislation on Ritter's education initiative. "What we're talking about is the living, breathing evolution and modernization of CSAP."

Despite a growing block of bipartisan supporters, there is some dissension about what should replace the annual statewide tests.

Some lawmakers are eyeing the ACT, typically taken in 11th and 12th grades and used by college admissions offices. The company also makes tests for eighth, ninth and 10th grades, showing students if they're on track to get into college.

Colleges — even those in Colorado — couldn't care less about CSAP scores, and, taking their lead, neither could students, said Rep. Christine Scanlan, D-Dillon.

"Kids don't really care about the 10th-grade CSAP, but they step it up for the ACT," said Scanlan, a Summit County school-board member.

Others would rather let school districts choose what exams to give students.

"I don't think we should move from one mandated, one-size-fits-all testing system to another one," said Rep. Michael Merrifield, a Colorado Springs Democrat who chairs the House Education Committee.

The former music teacher is pushing for flexibility in the initiative — what he calls "a smorgasbord of options" from which districts could choose.

He prefers evaluations, like a panel of teachers rating a musical performance, writing samples or even the way a student solved math problems.

No matter what route Colorado chooses, the state would have to get approval from the federal government to stay compliant with No Child Left Behind requirements. Other states already have waivers to try new testing techniques.

Several schools in Colorado already use the ACT in addition to CSAP.

ACT scores in Adams 12 Five Star Schools, which includes Northglenn, Thornton and other north-of-Denver suburbs, have crept half a point higher since the district began testing eighth-, ninth- and 10th-graders three years ago.

"College readiness equates to work readiness or military-service readiness or start-your-own-business readiness — not 'I just barely skimmed through at the minimum requirement, and I'm glad that's over,'" said Stan Hesting, an assistant superintendent.

Another testing reform up for debate this legislative session would give the highest-scoring students up to six college credits. And the students who score lowest on statewide tests would have to take an 11th-grade "diagnostic exam" so educators and parents could map out course work to get them on track.

Under the current system, there is no follow-up for 10th-graders who bomb the test, said Sen. Mike Kopp, a Littleton Republican introducing the proposal.

"They just walk off a plank, and we just shrug our shoulders," he said.

Ritter's three-year reform plan calls for a panel of curriculum and testing experts to specify by grade which skills a student must master. The state's curriculum standards, developed more than a decade ago, do not include grades below third or above 10th.

Ritter's initiative would then focus on modernizing exams to test for those standards and create a tiered-diploma system for high school graduates, the top diploma coming with guaranteed college admission.

The state's \$16 million annual contract for CSAP expires in 2011. The education department and the governor's office said they are discussing testing options but likely will not decide how to revamp tests until the new requirements are in place.

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