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Board hears summary of new state assessment methods

By RACHEL COLEMAN

• Leader & Times

The Kansas State Board of Education will soon change how it measures the success of individual school districts — but it's not clear exactly how that will affect USD 480. One certainty: it will be quite different from the test-driven assessments that have dominated policy for the past 20 years.

That was the news delivered by deputy superintendent of schools Renae Hickert and director of data and testing Jill Stout at the USD 480 board of education meeting Monday night.

“Over the past 20 years, we’ve had what is called QPA — Quality Performance Accreditation — but in the next few years, we’re going to be moving to a new program,” Hickert said. “It’s the Five Rs.”



Those “Rs” are relationships, relevance, rigor, responsive culture and results. Over a five-year period, districts will be evaluated based on how they address those areas. The previous method of evaluation, AYP (Adequate Yearly Progress), focused mostly on the “results” aspect of education.

“Everything was based on one test,” said. Hickert. “Now, we’re going to a system where a test is only one of five methods of evaluation. Assessment will still be important, but it won’t be the only method.” Stout would discuss tests and the “results” piece of the new method, Hickert said, “but remember, this is just 20 percent, it’s just one of five.”

Stout told the board that her presentation was intended to give them a basic general knowledge of the “assessment” component of the new system. That includes multiple options and requirements for struggling schools and smaller districts, all of which could shift as the state of Kansas implements the new method.

With everything she presented, Stout said, board members should keep in mind the term, “for now. As of now. As of today. Everything is changing so rapidly,” she said.

School districts had counted on moving to an assessment model termed “Smarter Balance,” but in December, the state board of education unexpectedly opted to adopt a testing method developed by the University of Kansas.

Whenever new tests are introduced, Stout said, “they (the state of Kansas) stress to us, over and over, ‘expect your scores to drop.’” The board should keep this in mind, Stout warned, and not panic if scores for USD 480 look low in the next year.

“We have to get past the mindset that we need this score, or this number,” she said. “I firmly believe that if we take care of the instruction, make sure our curriculum is aligned, make sure that we know what every child at every grade level should know — if we meet those goals and provide that quality of instruction, the tests are going to take care of themselves.”

Board member Nick Hatcher said his gut feeling was that “the lower the student-teacher ratio, the better we’re going to do.”

Stout agreed, noting that “we’re asking a lot of teachers,” and any effort to reduce classroom size would be helpful.

Steve Helm agreed with his fellow board member that it might be best to “forget about the assessments and focus on what the students need to be taught ... and then they’ll pass the test.”

One problem to consider, noted Hatcher and board member Matt Friederich, is how to reassure parents who’ve become accustomed to seeing test scores quickly. Because the assessment methods and the tests themselves are in a state of change, results will be delayed for the first year at least; students, teachers, schools and districts will not get scores until sometime in the summer.

“How are we going to alleviate that anxiety?” Hatcher asked.

“Report cards,” said board member Tammy Sutherland Abbott.

“Speaking as a parent, how do we know what the report cards are telling us?” asked Hatcher.

Stout replied that the district’s ongoing project of setting consistent standards for every grade level, including how to grade the work, is designed to make report cards even more reliable across the board.

Superintendent of schools Paul Larkin assured Hatcher that MAP (Measures of Academic Progress) tests, a nationwide method, will continue. Those tests give a picture of how a student is progressing.

For her part, Stout said she feels the changes at the state level, however complicated, are for the best.

“My interpretation is that the state realized there was way too much teaching to the test,” she said. “This is their way to individualize the approach, and get away from the mindset that there is this magical number everyone should aim for.”

Kansas State Board of Education December Meeting Highlights

TOPEKA – The Kansas State Board of Education voted during its December meeting on the future assessment plan for Kansas. The board approved the recommendation of the Kansas College & Career Ready Assessment Advisory Council (KCCRAAC) to require students in grades 3-8 take the approved state assessment, while providing those at the high school level the option to select the assessment most meaningful to the student’s individual plan of study.

Citing budgeting concerns and a desire for greater state control, the board, however, voted against the council’s recommendation to adopt the Smarter Balanced assessment for Kansas, opting instead to contract with the University of Kansas Center for Educational Testing and Evaluation (CETE) to develop the state’s assessment.

The board’s decision removes Kansas from the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC), of which it was a governing member. Kansas students who were scheduled to participate in the SBAC field test this coming spring, will instead take the CETE-developed Transitional Assessment in Math and English language arts along with the rest of Kansas students. The board’s plan calls for CETE to use the transitional assessment as the basis for the development of the final state assessment, which will be enhanced for 2014-2015 and each subsequent year to provide a high quality assessment that is fully aligned to the Kansas College and Career Ready Standards and is meaningful to educators and students.

The CETE-developed assessment will be adaptive and have technology enhanced items, along with constructed response questions. Kansas educators will have greater input into the test design and reporting formats of this assessment.

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