

Local educators continue to ponder content of state tests

Posted by Ken Grabowski on September 26th, 2014



School officials from around the state and in Manistee County are wondering what is next for the state testing as the legislature has yet to create a new MEAP test to measure student achievement.

MANISTEE — Most school officials will agree that the future state mandated school testing situation has improved over the course of the past several weeks.

What was once a muddy, zero visibility situation has been upgraded to at best a murky one. School officials still await a finished product that students will be tested on in the spring for assessment and to measure growth.

For the past several years the state legislature was moving toward using the Smarter Balanced Testing Assessment. However, in the spring of 2014 the legislature balked at the cost and elected to go back to a new version of the MEAP this year.

What has been frustrating to school administrators and teachers is a portion of their evaluation is supposed to be based on the achievement levels of their students on these tests. However, the many unknowns about the new test make it difficult for educators to prepare for.

Manistee Intermediate School District General Education director Kay Salyer said the information is coming in from the state, but at a slow pace.

"The Michigan Department of Education is required to create a test tied to the Michigan standards," said Salyer. "So they are in the process of creating an electronic test for in the spring."

Salyer said from the information she has received, school officials anticipate starting the testing process in March and ending in May. It is set up in a way that there is a window of opportunity for the science test and one for the math and all these other different windows.

"We know it is going to be electronic and based on the Michigan Standards, the dates it is going to be administered, but what the questions will look like is still up in the air," she said.

Manistee High School Principal Julia Raddatz handles a great deal of the data and testing details for the Manistee Area Public Schools. She also expressed her frustration about what has transpired over the past several months in Lansing.

"The process in Lansing can be pretty much described as building an airplane in the air," she said. "It normally takes 18 months to develop and the state had one ready to go and our teachers had one ready to go and they said wait, we want this instead. So now we are all playing catch-up instead."

Salyer said they are still having teachers align their curriculum to the Michigan standards at this point in time.

"We haven't changed much in our preparation from what we have been doing," she said. "We have been doing that now for a couple of years. I think we are good shape, as it takes a while for teachers to align their curriculum to new standards."

What has frustrated educators locally and throughout the state is when the mandated changes in testing come from the legislature, but the funding to change the curriculum doesn't follow with it.

"We don't have the money to go out and buy all new resources," said Salyer. "So we take the list of standards and say 'do we cover this and is it covered enough?' The thing is we really don't know because we don't know what the items will look like at this time and the depth of knowledge standards. If we had used the Smarter Balanced Assessment, we would have had lots of samples to use."

Salyer said they are making the best out of a difficult situation.

"It's kind of nerve wracking for the teachers, but we are used to a lot of change and just say 'It's going to be what it's going to be and let's just try our best,'" she said.

They are hoping to get the results from the test within a month.

"That is the whole idea for having an electronic assessment as you want to get them as soon as possible," said Salyer. "Another thing about the new teacher evaluations is to use the the testing results as part of it. If you don't have the results back by the end of they year, they are not going to be able to use those results in the evaluation as required by law."

Salyer said the bottom line is they need a set of standards and transparent information about how those standards will be measured.

"Without that we can't fully prepare our students to be proficient on the assessment, and we haven't had that ever," she said.

Raddatz pointed to the confusion the junior class is going through this year.

"This year our juniors will take the ACT test in March and the very next day they will take the ACT Work Days, and then in late April and May they take another set of math and social studies tests," she said. "They basically double up that class this year, but we basically don't have anything for ninth or tenth grade. It is frustrating as an educator because this year's junior gets both assessments, but they don't feel that lucky because they have twice as many tests as the year before's juniors."

She said the changes in the tests are the most frustrating part about the situation.

"There is nothing there to support it, as ACT used to have Explorer and Plan, but they don't have that anymore," she said. "I don't think it is setting our students up for success, I think what we are doing by default is testing them in isolation."

Raddatz said the data it produces this year will not be that helpful.

"We want apples to apples, so that we can talk to students about their growth, but what we are getting instead is bananas," she said.