

Our View: Don't abandon linking tests to teacher pay

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It's no surprise that the state Department of Education might delay linking teachers' pay raises to students' test scores. Criticism from the teachers' union has been building for years, centered on whether it is fair at all to judge an instructor's worth on the basis of her students, much less on the results of a brand-new standardized test aligned with curricular standards known as the Common Core.

This debate has raged nationally, even more so than in Hawaii, to the point that last June one of the Common Core's biggest backers -- the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation -- called for a two-year moratorium on states or school districts making any high-stakes decisions based on students' scores on new standardized tests aligned with the rigorous new standards. The reasoning was sound: "A rushed effort to apply the assessments could be seen as flaws in the new standards."

Putting too much emphasis on test scores is the central issue here, not the standards themselves. It's important to remember that. The Race to the Top was not perfect, nor is the Common Core, but both initiatives do strive to put children first, ahead of the interests of adults who continue to have jobs whether or not students in their schools receive a decent education.

One obvious risk in a two-year delay on linking evaluations to scores is that the Hawaii State Teachers Association would exploit the lull and push the DOE to give up altogether its bid to hold teachers at least partly accountable for the performance of their students. That would be unacceptable.

The long-planned and previously agreed-to performance-based evaluations must move forward eventually, for both principals and teachers, who besides their powerful unions also have the K-12 tenure system providing mighty job security. A fair evaluation system that takes students' scores into account is attainable and should remain the goal.

There's little argument against raising the bar in America's schools, instilling more rigorous and relevant coursework to benefit students for whom problem-solving and entrepreneurship are prerequisites for 21st-century success, as technology, outsourcing and other factors obliterate conventional paths of the past. Many people who want higher standards, however, are leery about holding teachers accountable when so many factors that affect how well students do in school and on standardized tests are out of the teachers' control.

The powerful HSTA hates the idea of linking its members' salary increases and future job prospects to students' test scores, even though union members did sign off on the plan in exchange for healthy pay raises.

The fact that Hawaii's unionized principals eluded similar accountability in their own contract negotiations further rankled teachers, and poses continuing challenges for the DOE.

Amid this local and national landscape, the DOE is considering waiting until 2016-17 before using students' results on the new Smarter Balanced Assessment as a factor in teacher evaluations, rather than fully implementing the plan this school year as part of its Educator Effectiveness System.

A deferral is defensible, to allow students and teachers to become more familiar with the Common Core standards and the curricula and standardized tests aligned with them, and to buy the DOE time to work with the principals' union on this issue; students would still take the Smarter Balanced Assessment in March as scheduled, but scores would not be a factor in teacher evaluations.

The surprise will be if the DOE ever succeeds in using student test scores as a factor in teacher evaluations, given the inequity between the teachers' and principals' evaluation systems and the HSTA's past success in averting contractual agreements once the ink was dry and the pay raise budgeted. Remember those random drug tests that never happened?

The Race to the Top era in Hawaii has been stressful at times, for the students and no doubt for the teachers and principals. But it has wrought measurable gains in student achievement, including as gauged by reliable tests in the elementary grades, and, more importantly, in the number of students taking college-prep classes in high school. A child who has great teachers does better than one who doesn't, that's common sense confirmed by research. So while delaying performance-based teacher evaluations is warranted, derailing them is not. Hawaii's students deserve the best teachers they can get.