

State DOE considers deferral of rating system

Hawaii's teachers might have a two-year wait before their job assessments will be tied to student achievement results

[By Nanea Kalani](#)

<mailto:nkalani@staradvertiser.com>

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Concern over the reliability and fairness of using a brand-new standardized test to evaluate teacher performance is prompting the state Department of Education to consider delaying the use of test scores for high-stakes personnel decisions.

Officials say it could be two more years before public school teachers see their pay tied to student achievement — an initiative the state originally planned to implement this school year under its so-called Educator Effectiveness System.

The controversial evaluations — which were rolled out statewide last school year but had no negative effects — base half of a teacher's annual rating on student learning and growth, measured in part by academic growth on standardized assessments.

In a memo to teachers last week, schools Superintendent Kathryn Matayoshi said the department is "exploring the feasibility" of delaying until 2016-17 the use of Smarter Balance scores to formally evaluate teachers.

Students for the first time will be taking the Smarter Balanced Assessment, which is aligned to the more rigorous Common Core standards, in March. It replaces the Hawaii State Assessment in language arts and math for grades 3 to 8 and grade 11.

Some educators anticipate test scores will drop dramatically because of the higher expectations. The assessments have been designed "to go beyond multiple-choice questions to include extended response items, as well as performance tasks that allow students to demonstrate critical-thinking and problem-solving skills," according to the Smarter Balanced website.

Under current plans tied to Hawaii's federal accountability waiver, the spring test scores are supposed to be used to help determine whether teachers are eligible for pay raises, granted tenure or fired.

"This request is meant to allow for more support for our educators," Matayoshi said in a statement. "We need more time to transition to the new student assessments."

Nearly 40 states have adopted policies that tie teacher evaluations in part to the performance of their students on standardized tests. And more than three dozen states have agreed to administer Common Core-aligned standardized tests by this school year.

But teachers locally and across the country have been arguing that it's unfair to tie their performance to scores on the untested exams. Other critics contend the federal government is forcing the Common Core standards on states and promoting an over-reliance on testing.

"For us this is a huge win in that it's a recognition that tying test scores to teacher evaluations is a tricky business to begin with, and this particular test is untested," said Kapo-lei High School

English teacher Joan Lewis, who serves as vice president of the Hawaii State Teachers Association. "This says to us that our employer is listening and they're paying attention to our concerns."

The Obama administration has given states incentives to adopt the Common Core and high-stakes teacher evaluations through its Race to the Top grant program and waivers from the No Child Left Behind law. Hawaii won a grant and waiver.

Amid growing criticism over high-stakes testing, U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan in August announced that states would be able to delay tying teacher evaluations to test scores.

"We encouraged states to move a whole lot of changes simultaneously, because of the enormous urgency to raise standards and improve systems of teacher support — not for another generation of students, but for today's students," Duncan wrote in an August blog post. "But in how this change happens, we need to listen carefully to the teachers, principals and other educators who are living it on a daily basis — and we need to be true to our promise to be tight on outcomes, but loose on how we get there."

He added that "testing issues today are sucking the oxygen out of the room in a lot of schools" and that "too much testing can rob school buildings of joy, and cause unnecessary stress." (Based on Smarter Balanced field testing, it takes students up to 4 1/2 hours for the language arts portion of the test and up to four hours for the math.)

States will be able to apply for the delay when seeking NCLB waiver renewals this spring, according to a U.S. Department of Education spokes-woman.

Matayoshi said if the state does seek a waiver to delay the linking of test scores and evaluations, the department would still be required to continue calculating student growth data for all teachers of tested grades and subjects and provide that information to teachers and principals to support improvement efforts.

If a waiver is approved, it would mean Smarter Balanced results wouldn't be applied to teacher evaluations until the 2016-17 school year, after the second administration of the test, DOE spokes-woman Dona-lyn Dela Cruz said.

Lewis, with the HSTA, said teachers are still committed to helping craft an evaluation system that better measures a teacher's effectiveness.

"Any test that you give a student is supposed to be snapshot that gives you a indication of where they are on their academic journey. And like any snapshot, sometimes it's out of focus, sometimes someone blinks," she said. "So then to say that a teacher's employment and compensation should be tied to where the students are at any point in time, that's a difficult proposition."

Under teachers' 2013-2017 labor contract, the state and teachers union agreed to annual performance-based evaluations. Lewis said the union isn't backing down from that commitment.

"I get that people like to use test scores — it's simple and easy but if we're talking about really measuring student learning, we have to have a more comprehensive way of looking at it. It's not as simple as a number," she said. "If all we care about is test scores, we're never going to get the kind of education system everyone is craving."