

COMMENTARY

Student Test Systems Need Careful Analysis

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On the football field, a talented quarterback often calls the option play, holding off on the decision to run or pass to the last possible moment. This gives him time to survey the field and choose the best option for moving the ball forward.

Policymakers have options, too. Given the chance, they can wait and watch before making a key decision. When it comes to testing in California's education system, this is a great time to call the option play.

Last summer California along with 40 other states adopted the [Common Core Standards](#), academic goals for what students should learn and when they should learn it. These new standards are different but also better than what we have.

But putting them into practice will take a lot of work. We will have to redesign curricula, develop new instructional materials, and retrain teachers.

Most important, however, is developing new assessments to measure whether California students are mastering the skills they need to be successful in the 21st century.

This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to build an assessment system that provides information that teachers, parents, students and employers can use. The choices that we make about what gets measured, when and how will have a huge impact on how far down the field the new standards can take us.

Some key parts of this new assessment system will be built for us. The federal government has awarded funding for two multistate consortia to develop assessment systems aligned to the Common Core standards. The two groups the [Partnership for the Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers \(PARCC\)](#) and the [Smarter, Balanced Assessment Consortium \(SBAC\)](#) have adopted very different approaches to their task.

California made an initial decision to join PARCC, but with a new governor and new leadership over education policy there is an opportunity to revisit that decision.

Right now, we can't be sure which consortium to choose. Both are just beginning their work, and their proposed strategies will evolve as they bump up against the realities of assessment design and development.

Thus, it's time for Gov.-elect Jerry Brown and newly elected state schools chief [Tom Torlakson](#) to call the option play: California should participate in both groups until it becomes clear which one promises the greatest gains for our state's students.

Calling the option buys some time, in policy as in football, but the quarterback still has to decide whether to run or pass. How will California's leaders know which consortium will move us farthest toward our goals? Here are a few key features that California

should insist upon in a new assessment system.

Make assessments computer-adaptive. Computer-adaptive assessments, which use sophisticated software to adapt questions to a student's ability level, can provide a much sharper picture of what students have learned and where they're having problems than one-size-fits-all tests with arbitrary cut-scores. The development of computer-adaptive assessments is especially important for English-language learners and children with special needs, who together make up more than 40 percent of all students in California schools.

Provide early warning for students. The multiple segments of California's education system have come together to endorse the use of a common measure of readiness for college coursework. What's missing is a testing system that measures both where a student has been and where the student is going. That is, a vertically integrated assessment system that provides information to younger students about whether they're on track toward readiness.

Be honest about the high school exit exam. While 94 percent of California's high school seniors pass the existing exit exam, most also end up in remedial classes when they enroll in college. A test measuring minimal competency helps no one.

Measure college and career readiness. Assessing whether students have mastered the critical thinking, problem solving and cooperative learning skills needed in the 21st century workplace requires assessments that include performance and open-ended response items including extended writing assessments, not just multiple choice questions.

Get teachers involved. Involving teachers in the development, administration, and scoring of assessments can enhance the value they derive from student testing. To be successful, teachers need timely and detailed feedback about how they and their students are performing, rather than a summary judgment as to whether they have succeeded or failed.

It's quite possible that both PARCC and SBAC will include these features in the assessment systems that they develop, and it's also possible that one system will turn out to be vastly better than the other. Right now we don't know which is the better choice, and for the moment there's no need to choose. We have options.

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