

EDUCATION: The quest for a smoother testing path

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- Mar 5, 2016



- MICHAEL CATERINA | THE GOSHEN NEWS

MICHAEL CATERINA | THE GOSHEN NEWS The Jean Team, from left, John Moyer, Jamie Rose, Suzanne Mahaja and Jessica Guetig, get excited as presenter Matt Brown introduces them for a Family Feud style game during an ISTEP+ rally to get kids prepared to take the test Monday at Parkside Elementary.

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GOSHEN — With the help of two bills under consideration in the state legislature, lawmakers hope to strike the acronym “ISTEP” from the vocabulary lists of Hoosier students, parents and educators as soon as next year.

But local superintendents who’ve watched as ISTEP+ woes wreaked havoc on students’ scores and corporation grades said they may already have the answer lawmakers are seeking in an assessment tool provided by the Northwest Evaluation Association, or NWEA.

In recent years, the ISTEP+ assessment has been riddled with technology glitches, scoring delays and questions about the validity of the test’s results, leaving many education leaders — and the public — frustrated.

Hoosier lawmakers' plans call for an end to the ISTEP+ test in 2017 and for the creation of a panel to recommend a test to take its place.

Westview School Corporation Superintendent Randy Zimmerly said “I believe that the end of ISTEP certainly is here.”

But the bigger battle, he added, will be to determine how summative or formative the new test will be.

A new type of test

Summative tests, like ISTEP+, are designed to show how much a student has learned over the course of one school year and how proficient students are in a particular subject.

Formative tests, however, provide a snapshot of what a student knows at a particular point in time.

Testing students multiple times in a school year — and providing the results in near real-time to their teachers — is ideal for educators who want to show how students’ knowledge has grown, school officials explained.

“Educators prefer growth,” Goshen Community Schools Superintendent Diane Woodworth said. “If we can give this same test in the fall, in the winter and again in the spring we can use it as a benchmark along the way to see where a student needs help instead of waiting on a big summative test that doesn’t give us the information we need in time.”

Measures of Academic Progress, the assessment created by the Northwest Evaluation Association, does just that, according to NWEA’s Chief Executive Officer Matt Chapman.

NWEA’s client list includes 144 public schools in Indiana, as well as 25 charter schools and 121 non-public schools, according to data provided by the organization.

Nationwide, the organization serves approximately 7,800 schools across the country and administers more than 9 million student assessments each year.

Eight of the nine area school corporations including Goshen, Concord, Fairfield, Lakeland, Middlebury, Wa-Nee, Wawasee and Westview currently use the NWEA assessment in multiple grade levels.

West Noble School Corporation does not currently use the test, but has in the past, Superintendent Dennis VanDuyne said.

Middlebury Community Schools recently began using NWEA for student assessment again after a several year hiatus due to budget cuts, Superintendent Jane Allen said.

The school corporation used the test for many years before cutting it in 2002.

“We knew the value of it and we knew we wanted to bring it back,” Allen said. “We find it a lot more valuable than the ISTEP+ for informing instruction. That’s the whole key for us.”

Unlike ISTEP+ that assesses only students’ skills for the current grade level, the NWEA test can more accurately pinpoint which level students are capable of testing in.

For example, a sixth-grade student who takes the test and fails to answer a sixth-grade level math question correctly might be bumped down to fourth-grade level question until he or she can determine the correct responses, Allen explained. Likewise, a classmate who easily responds to sixth-grade language arts questions correctly could be bumped up to a higher level test.

“And that’s why for us it’s so valuable because we know who’s where and what skills we need to work on with individual students. It actually gives us the data we need to inform instruction,” Allen said.

Fairfield Community Schools Superintendent Steve Thalheimer said he has not had a direct conversation with lawmakers to voice his support of NWEA, but has been part of general conversations about the test including at a superintendent’s study council meeting.

“Almost all of the superintendents are saying they would favor a move to something like NWEA,” Thalheimer said.

Local lawmaker support

Sen. Carlin Yoder, R-Middlebury, said he’s a big fan of the NWEA test but both Yoder and Rep. Wes Culver, R-Goshen, said they’ll wait for information from other testing companies before throwing their support behind one brand.

“We have had some very preliminary discussions at this point and that decision will probably be at the hand of the committee that is being formed,” Yoder said during a phone interview Wednesday night. “We don’t have anything ironed out at this point.”

Culver said he’s “leaning toward” NWEA based on the support local superintendents have given the test, but added that “it’s too early to say right now” whether NWEA will receive the support of lawmakers across the state.

Multiple school corporations in Indiana and neighboring states are already using NWEA’s program and Culver said an “off the shelf” test like NWEA could save the state up to \$80 million a year in money that is currently spent on creating a customized test.

“It has a better track record than ISTEP in terms of grading and getting the test scores back,” he said, adding that NWEA might have been selected sooner if not for lawmaker’s quest for a more summative test that would make it easier to determine whether students passed or failed.

“My understanding is that the only hold up was that there wasn’t a summative way of gauging a child’s improvement year over year,” he said. “... Otherwise we would have switched to it a year ago. Most of the lawmakers supported it over ISTEP anyway.”

Chapman said NWEA has spoken with state leaders about their needs and said the organization would be able to meet the requirement of a summative test if need be.

“The proficiency requirement is the easier to measure of the two,” Chapman said. “It’s really hard to measure academic growth above and below grade level, but we have about 40 years of experience doing it.”

Chapman added that NWEA leaders are “really excited” about the opportunity to measure the academic progress of Hoosier students should lawmakers decide to include both growth and proficiency data.

While there are other testing companies available and much to consider, Middlebury’s Allen said she hopes lawmakers will take a close look at NWEA.

“I’m sitting here saying I know this is good for us,” she said. “It’s good for our kids. It’s good for our teachers. It’s good for our administrators. It’s good for helping us know how to get better at what we do.”

We're really good, but we can always do better and we need the path to get us there that makes the most sense. That's what's NWEA does for us."

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