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Evers moves to transform state assessment system

MADISON — Wisconsin will transform its statewide testing program to a new system that combines state, district, and classroom assessments and is more responsive to students, teachers, and parents needs while also offering public accountability for education.

“We will be phasing out the Wisconsin Knowledge and Concepts Examinations (WKCE),” said State Superintendent Tony Evers. “We must begin now to make needed changes to our state’s assessment system.” He also explained that the WKCE will still be an important part of the educational landscape for two to three years during test development. “At minimum, students will be taking the WKCEs this fall and again during the 2010-11 school year. Results from these tests will be used for federal accountability purposes,” he said.

“A common sense approach to assessment combines a variety of assessments to give a fuller picture of educational progress for our students and schools,” Evers explained. “Using a balanced approach to assessment, recommended by the Next Generation Assessment Task Force, will be the guiding principle for our work.”

The Next Generation Assessment Task Force, convened in fall 2008, was made up of 42 individuals representing a wide range of backgrounds in education and business. Tom Still, president of the Wisconsin Technology Council, and Joan Wade, administrator for Cooperative Educational Service Agency 6 in Oshkosh, were co-chairs. The task force reviewed the history of assessment in Wisconsin; explored the value, limitations, and costs of a range of assessment approaches; and heard presentations on assessment systems from a number of other states. It recommended that Wisconsin move to a balanced assessment system that would go beyond annual, large-scale testing like the WKCE.

Based on those recommendations, the Department of Public Instruction has ceased development of new test items for the WKCE. Additionally, the agency will request proposals on a wide range of assessment system components, seeking maximum flexibility to meet Wisconsin’s educational and statutory needs as well as cost and implementation constraints. New assessments at the elementary and middle school level will likely be computer-based with multiple opportunities to benchmark student progress during the school year. This type of assessment tool allows for immediate and detailed information about student understanding and facilitates the teachers’ ability

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to re-teach or accelerate classroom instruction. At the high school level, the WKCE will be replaced by assessments that provide more information on college and workforce readiness.

As part of state legislation enacted in 1992, statewide assessments of student knowledge in five subjects were required. Early versions of the WKCE were commercial shelf tests from CTB/McGraw-Hill for grades four, eight, and 10. With enactment of No Child Left Behind in 2002, the WKCE and Wisconsin Alternate Assessment for Students with Disabilities (WAA-SwD) became high stakes, summative assessments used for federal accountability purposes. Last fall, 430,000 students in grades three through eight and grade 10 took paper and pencil assessments in reading and mathematics. Additionally, to meet state accountability requirements, students in grades four, eight, and 10 took assessments in language arts, science, and social studies. Costs for the assessments last year were about \$10 million. A comprehensive and improved assessment system is expected to cost significantly more, especially during the development years.

“Our next statewide assessments must balance the needs of students, teachers, and parents as well as providing public accountability for student learning,” Evers said. “We will be actively pursuing possible funding strategies for test development, including competitive federal assessment funds. Funding must meet demands from the state and federal government, interest groups, and the public for accountability in education.”

The state is well poised to develop a comprehensive assessment system. Wisconsin is part of the national Common Core Standards Initiative, which is aligning academic standards to expectations for postsecondary and career readiness. Additionally, draft revisions to Wisconsin’s Model Academic Standards for English language arts and mathematics were commended for aligning well with American Diploma Project benchmarks. The American Diploma Project, part of the nonprofit education reform organization Achieve Inc., is working to raise the rigor of high school standards, assessments, and curriculum to better align these expectations with the demands of postsecondary education and work.

“Standards, curriculum, instruction, and assessment are four pillars of the learning process,” Evers said. “Wisconsin needs an assessment system that supports our advances in these other areas. New assessments must be based on state standards and provide timely information that can inform instruction, improve student achievement, and support our efforts to ensure every child is a graduate ready for the workforce or further education.”

Types of Assessment

Formative – Daily evaluation strategies that provide immediate feedback. May include in-class questions, class discussion, or teacher observation.

Benchmark – Administered periodically to gauge student progress or evaluate how well a program is working. May include graded class work, midterm and end-of-unit assessments, or commercial products developed for this purpose.

Summative – Monitors national, state, district, school, or classroom progress. May include end-of-course exams; ACT, SAT, and Advanced Placement exams; or other large-scale assessments such as the WKCE and WAA-SwD.

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