

Portland teachers union resolution objects to new Smarter Balanced test

Carrie Young

This month students in Ohio were the first to take Common Core related test. Portland teachers are objecting to plans to administer the Smarter Balanced test to Oregon students. (AP Photo/Ty Wright) *(Ty Wright)*

Laura Frazier | The Oregonian/OregonLive By **Laura Frazier | The Oregonian/OregonLive**

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The union representing teachers in **Portland Public Schools** approved a resolution this week opposing plans to conduct what promises to be a tough battery of tests this spring associated with the new Common Core standards.

The Smarter Balanced test replaces the Oregon Assessment of Knowledge and Skills and will cover the Common Core reading, writing and math standards Oregon adopted in 2010. Students in grades three to eight and 11 will be tested in math and language arts.

About 70 **Portland Association of Teachers** representatives from schools across the district voted to approve the resolution Wednesday night, said PAT President Gwen Sullivan. The resolution was crafted by a union committee and references the Oregon Education Association's vote last spring **for a moratorium on administering the test.**

"It's not just going against something, it's about what we're for," she said. "It was even more of a symbol of (what) people honestly feel about this particular issue. Teachers do not support this test."

The resolution references multiple concerns with the test, such as predictions that approximately **65 percent of students will fail this year** and that Smarter Balanced test scores have not yet been determined to be valid or reliable. The resolution also points out the millions of federal and state dollars that have been allocated for test design and implementation.

The resolution calls for PAT members to speak and petition about the amount of time students will spend preparing and taking the test. Members are also encouraged to hold parent informational sessions about Smarter Balanced and opting out and practice sessions for parents and teachers to take the test.

The PAT also asks for Portland Public Schools Superintendent Carole Smith, school board members and principals take the Smarter Balanced test and publicly release their scores. The school board is encouraged to quit using standardized test scores to make decisions, the resolution states.

How hard can it be?

Students are preparing for a daunting task: the Smarter Balanced test. See if you can answer these sample questions.

10 multiple choice questions

The resolution will be sent to legislators, the Oregon State Board of Education, the PPS board of education and other city and state leaders.

The resolution follows a protest and lengthy discussion about Smarter Balanced at **this week's Portland Public Schools Board meeting**.

A group organized by teachers, parents and activist group Don't Shoot Portland **gathered before the school board meeting Tuesday night** to encourage parents to consider opting their children out of taking the test. Demonstrators held signs, some reading "Hands Up, Don't Test," and stood outside the district's Blanchard Education Service offices.

During the board's regular meeting Sullivan asked the board to consider the issues surrounding the test and the position members had already taken.

The board **voted in July** to request that the state not use Smarter Balanced test results to evaluate schools and teachers. The board also objected to setting mandated achievement goals **linked to Common Core tests**, instead voting in November to set aspirational targets. Oregon Chief Education Officer Nancy Golden has proposed **holding off from rating schools** based on test scores for a year.

Sullivan expressed frustration with the district's plan to implement the test regardless, saying that Smarter Balanced has not been shown to be reliable, valid or culturally relevant.

What the district does know about the test is concerning, she said, namely that the test requires extensive technology resources and hours of prep time and testing that could go to other instruction. The Smarter Balanced math and reading tests are on average expected to take 3.5 hours each to complete.

Sullivan also objected to administering a test that head education officials predict most students will fail, which can harm a student's confidence and enthusiasm for learning.

"I understand more and more why PAT members feel like they are being asked to violate their ethical responsibility as educators when they are forced to administer these tests," she said. "We need to do what we do best, which is teach students in an individual and culturally relevant manner."

Sullivan said she's not directing parents to opt their child out of taking the test, but wants parents to know the facts so they can make informed decisions. She said she has been asked to talk about Smarter Balanced at parent meetings at multiple schools, and is concerned that parents don't know enough about the test or their right to opt out of it.

The district allows parents to opt their child out of standardized testing for either disability or religious reasons, in accordance with Oregon law. Parents are required to speak with school administrators, fill out a form, and offer an alternative activity for their child to complete in lieu of the test. The district's form advises parents that state tests scores and participation levels are used in school ratings.

Several parents then spoke during the public comment period about why they had already decided to have their child be exempted from taking the test.

At the meeting board member Steve Buel objected to the information the district had made available to parents and families about Smarter Balanced. He also said he worries that principals will encourage parents to have their child take the test when they submit opt out forms.

Buel said certain statements in district material, such as that the test will measure how much students are learning, are inaccurate given that the district doesn't have any results. He said the overall message was not fair or honest about the concerns surrounding the tests.

"We need to have a balanced response," he said.

Buel then proposed a motion to direct Smith to create documents for parents that explain both the positive and negative points about the test. Board members Bobbie Regan and Tom Koehler agreed with him.

The vote was split 3-3 and the motion failed, though Smith said the district would review the documents regardless.

This week Ohio became **the first state to administer Common Core related tests**. In Portland Public Schools, Smarter Balanced testing will begin in March and April and will wrap-up by June 5, according to the district.

The district is currently working through a readiness plan to get schools prepared to administer the test. The plan outlines holding test administration training, creating testing schedules, giving students practice tests, distributing necessary technology and communicating with families and reports varying levels of readiness for each category.

In an interview Thursday Sullivan said she hopes that objection to Smarter Balanced will lead to changes in district assessments. She's a member of the district's **Assessment Advisory Council**, and would like to see a more meaningful test that allows a student to demonstrate their knowledge and still encourage problem solving, teamwork and creative thinking.

"It's the first time in a long time that I feel hopeful," she said. " Maybe we could start to honestly make things better. We don't want to be forced to teach to a test."

--Laura Frazier

lfrazier@oregonian.com

503-294-4035

@frazier_laura

