

From the desk for  
Senator Rod Monroe



## Stop the testing opt-out hysteria (OPINION)

optout.JPG

Reynolds teacher Emily Crum, center, talks during an opt out committee meeting in April. About 5 percent of Portland Public Schools students have opted out of taking new Smarter Balanced assessments. (Laura Frazier/Staff)

**Guest Columnist By Guest Columnist**

**Follow on Twitter**

on June 04, 2015 at 10:35 AM, updated June 04, 2015 at 10:36 AM

**By Bill Porter**

Lackluster leadership and little information have hijacked the roll-out of the Smarter Balanced test in Oregon's public schools this spring. As the legislative session begins wrapping up and school leaders start planning for next year, let's set aside the hysteria and stop the unproductive calls to "opt out."

Most Oregonians say tests have a role to play in gauging how well schools are doing from one year to the next, so let's focus instead on more substantial problems: ensuring schools have the best tests that take the least time and yield the most helpful information for different stakeholders. Wonky changes like these don't lend themselves to sound bites, but they'll go further in helping schools focus on what's important.

Oregon has a new test this year because it has new standards to guide what students should be learning. Before adopting the Common Core standards, Oregon's standards in math and English hadn't been updated since 2003 — before the iPhone, Wikipedia, social media and Wi-Fi Internet access. Unlike the old standards, the Common Core tests focus on skills students need to succeed in the 21st century. They emphasize how students solve problems instead of what they've memorized.

For years, parents and teachers have complained that OAKS — the state's old test — didn't tell much about whether students were learning important skills. It encouraged meaningless "test prep" skills like choosing the right multiple choice answer. Its replacement, Smarter Balanced, emphasizes open-ended questions, short essays and multi-step problems that look more like actual classroom assignments. Teachers who have compared Smarter Balanced to the old tests say it's a big improvement and more reflective of what they want to be teaching. That's not surprising; hundreds of Oregon educators collaborated across 20 other states to create Smarter Balanced, according to the Oregon Department of Education.

None of this means Smarter Balanced is perfect. The first-time roll-out this spring flagged areas that need adjusting, including making the test shorter and returning results more quickly. These are all things Oregon, as a co-creator of the test, is in a position to change. But let's not kid ourselves that having no standardized test at all or starting over from scratch are viable options.

Making the process even easier for students to skip out on taking the test, as Oregon legislators seemed poised to do, is no solution either. All that does is rob parents and policymakers of information about how schools in our communities are doing and undermines efforts to improve. Based on the PTA sessions I've attended, what parents want is more information, not more opt-out forms.

Let's also be careful not to trade fewer tests for lower quality tests. Better tests — like Smarter Balanced — ask students to explain their thinking, construct equations and write. If all we care about is testing time, we end up back where we started — with easy-to-complete multiple choice tests no one thinks do a good job.

School districts need help shrinking the battery of local standardized tests put in place over the years, as Delaware, New York and other states are doing. For example, teachers in one New York district identified 63 different tests used on top of the state test, many measuring the same material but with varying quality. Now, teachers and district leaders there are pruning significantly, cutting testing time and choosing tests that provide the best data.

In addition to trimming testing time, we can do more to trim how test results are used. No single test can capture everything students are accomplishing, so let's figure out what else would help us track how well schools are doing. California is crafting a new approach that uses Smarter Balanced scores along with indicators such as college success, school climate and teacher engagement; it also will encourage districts to add metrics that are important to their communities. What could Oregon create?

Taking tests and showing what you can do should — and always will — have a role in education, just as they do throughout life. Instead of fighting over the tests, let's focus on right-sizing how they are used and getting the resources and supports so that more students are succeeding at the skills the tests measure.

*Bill Porter, a partner with the organization Education First, is an education policy adviser for state leaders, advocates and educators around the country. He has two children in Portland Public Schools.*

© 2015 OregonLive.com. All rights reserved.