



From the desk of  
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## Don't kneecap Smarter Balanced exams before they even begin: Editorial Agenda 2015

aliceott.JPG

Some teachers display definitions or tips about Common Core State Standards in their classrooms. Alice Ott Middle School was among the first in Oregon to administer Smarter Balanced tests when the assessment window opens March 10. Most other schools will start testing students after spring break. (Laura Frazier/Staff)

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In recent hearings before the House Education Committee, **Reps. Chris Gorsek** and **Lew Frederick** decried the **expected 60-65 percent failure rate** of Oregon students taking the **new Smarter Balanced exam** this spring.

No teacher, they contended, would knowingly give such a challenging test that would flunk most students in the class. It's one reason the two legislators, both former teachers, are sponsoring a bill that would help parents across the state easily opt their children out of taking Smarter Balanced or other such statewide assessments.

Ironically, their criticism is a compelling reason that legislators should reject the bill and instead encourage families to embrace the exam and the **Common Core State Standards** that the test measures. The projected failure rate reflects that Oregon's Department of Education is raising the bar for students -- both in the material being taught and the manner in which they are tested. This is good news for those who believe that public schools should be a place for children to explore their passions, but still master the fundamentals, develop critical thinking skills and graduate ready to pursue their potential at the next level.

We're not there right now. For too long, Oregon schools have been mired in mediocrity, as shown time and again with its **lowest-in-the-nation graduation rate** and **other measures**. Worse, even some of those who graduate from high school are learning belatedly that they are **unprepared for their chosen career path**. Less than a third of students enrolled at **Oregon's four-year public colleges graduated** in four years, according to 2013 data compiled by the Chronicle of Higher Education. Only 16 percent of those in **Oregon's community colleges received a certificate or degree** in the expected two-year frame, (although many transfer to a four-year institution.)



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One significant reason? Students are having to take remedial math classes, for instance, before they can even enroll in college credit courses necessary for their majors, said Patrick Burk, an associate professor in Portland State University's Graduate School of Education and former chief policy officer for the state education department from 2002 to 2009.

That delay represents a loss of time and an extra year or two in tuition for students - many of whom will ultimately just give up, their patience or pocketbooks emptied, he said.

Unfortunately, those downriver effects aren't getting the attention in all the furor over the Smarter Balanced test and, by proxy, the Common Core standards. Oregon is one of about 40 states that have adopted the standards, which establish benchmarks for what students should know in order to be ready for college or careers after high school. Although Oregon adopted the standards in 2010, this is the first year that students in third through eighth grades and high school juniors will take the Smarter Balanced exam.

Gorsek and Frederick's proposal, **House Bill 2655**, is just one of several initiatives aimed at curbing the educational test and standards. Some efforts, such as a bill carried by **Rep. Susan McLain**, D-Forest Grove that **delays use of the scores in school report cards and teacher evaluations**, is a reasonable interim measure during this transitional year. But others could kneecap the system before it even has a chance to take hold.

House Bill 2655, sponsored by Gorsek, D-Troutdale, and Frederick, D-Portland, is one of the latter. While motivated by some valid concerns, the bill would practically encourage widespread opting out by families. Schools would be required to alert parents that they can opt out their students for any reason, provide the form and describe what activity students will do while others are taking the test.

Some of the issues identified by the legislators - schools and teachers devoting days to test preparation as opposed to class plans - reflect errors of execution, not flaws in the test. With additional resources and training, teachers will grow more comfortable teaching material that meets Common Core standards and extra test preparation won't be necessary. Other criticisms challenging Smarter Balanced's validity ignore the extensive research and pilot testing already done - not to mention the fact that the exams have yet to be given in most of the state.

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Mass exemptions will only keep Oregon schools from figuring out a path to a success. Test results provide a way for the education department to compare the 197 school districts and identify what is working and what is not. The results can show which schools are getting higher percentages of their students to meet benchmarks, such as reading proficiency, which can lead to replicating programs and techniques elsewhere. Take **Alice Ott Middle School in the David Douglas School District** for instance. Three-quarters of the school's student population qualify for free or reduced lunches and it includes a high number of non-native English speakers. Yet **Alice Ott ranks in the top 10 percent of schools** in the state and easily surpasses state averages for percentages of students who meet reading and math benchmarks.

Figuring out what is working for Alice Ott students could help students in similarly low-income schools, but it's difficult to pinpoint those successes without having these statewide tests.

These tests aren't "high-stakes," no matter how many times opponents attempt to label them as such. The real high stakes live in whether Oregon raises the bar -- or teaches its students to keep aiming low.

-- The Oregonian/OregonLive editorial board

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