

## EDUCATION WEEK

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# N.H. Gets Green Light to Pilot Local Assessments

## Leeway a departure from NCLB mandate

By **Alyson Klein**

As it wrestles with a rewrite of the No Child Left Behind Act, Congress is contemplating allowing districts to use local assessments, instead of state tests, to demonstrate student proficiency.

And now, the U.S. Department of Education has signaled its openness to the concept by letting several districts in New Hampshire try out their own set of competency-based tests in lieu of statewide assessments in certain grade spans.

The idea is to test-run a new assessment system that can eventually be taken statewide, if it's successful.

New Hampshire has been experimenting with competency-based learning, which allows students to progress as they demonstrate mastery of academic concepts.

The state will be allowed to use performance-based tests, developed through a collaboration of the state and local school systems, in four of its roughly 85 districts. Those districts would still assess students every year. If all goes well, the state could expand the pilot to eight districts the following year.

In some grades or subjects, the pilot districts would use the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium tests, which are aligned to the Common Core State Standards and being used by the rest of the state. In other grades or subjects, the districts would use their own performance-based exams. Those tests, known as PACE assessments in New Hampshire, were crafted with input from both state and district people.

New Hampshire is hoping the new system will provide educators with "richer, deeper information than we're able to get through large-scale state assessments," Paul Leather, the state's deputy commissioner of education, said in an interview last year.

## Two-Year Tryout

This local testing pilot is a departure from the NCLB law, which calls for states to test students using the same statewide, summative assessment, in grades 3 through 8 and once in high school.

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Instead, the New Hampshire districts participating in the pilot would only take statewide tests once in elementary school, once in middle school, and once in high school.

The local-testing waiver is just for two years, giving New Hampshire essentially until the end of the Obama administration to work on the pilot. If the competency-based tests aren't shown to be comparable to state assessments, or don't end up being workable for the Granite State, New Hampshire has promised to go back to using the Smarter Balanced tests with all of its students.

What's more, New Hampshire has agreed to put its competency-based system through the rigors of the Education Department's peer-review system, in which assessment experts take a hard look at tests to see if they pass muster. However, the peer-review process has been paused; new criteria are being developed and are expected to be released soon.

Kentucky, which also has experience with competency-based learning, is interested in asking for something similar, the state's commissioner of education, Terry Holliday, said last year.

It's too early to say which other states might qualify, said Deborah S. Delisle, the assistant secretary for elementary and secondary education. But she noted that New Hampshire has been working with competency learning for five years, and that designing performance tasks hasn't been easy. They require coordination between teachers and the state and among teachers in different districts, among other challenges.

"New Hampshire has been engaged for quite some time," Ms. Delisle said. "People say, 'Can't any other state do this?' and the answer would be, 'Well, yes, but ... ' " it's not simple, she said.

### **Nebraska Example**

Local testing has been tried under the NCLB law before, in Nebraska. But it was hard to make sure those tests were comparable statewide, something that New Hampshire will be paying close attention to as part of its pilot, Ms. Delisle said.

U.S. Sen. Lamar Alexander, R-Tenn., included language allowing for local assessments in a draft bill to revise the NCLB law, the current version of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.

What's more, when the House considered an NCLB rewrite bill last month, it included language that would allow districts to use their own local testing systems in lieu of the state's, as long as the state gives its approval. The local systems would become part of the state's plan for using Title I dollars, and those plans are submitted to the department.

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