

As PARCC test is ended for high schools, North Shore grade schools target it



After millions of dollars spent for online and paper exams, technology improvements and teacher training, it's not clear how long the two-year-old state PARCC exams will last and in what format.

The Illinois State Board of Education's contract to administer PARCC ends June 30, 2018, state records show, and ISBE officials say there's no renewal option, meaning the agency would have to enter into a new contract to keep PARCC going.

The state board has already eliminated high school PARCC testing for some 140,000 students for the upcoming school year, a decision announced last week after the federal government pressured the state to fix the way it tests high school kids. And a group of grade school districts on the North Shore asked the state Wednesday to get rid of PARCC in elementary and junior high schools.

Nearly 1 million kids take the reading and math exams in the third to eighth grade, and the length of the tests and other issues have spurred some families to ditch the exams.

Last week, state school Superintendent Tony Smith wrote in a letter to superintendents, principals and regional education officials that "students in Grades 3-8 will continue to take the PARCC assessment."

But he didn't say for how long.

One thing is clear: Elementary and junior high students are scheduled to take the controversial PARCC exams in the 2016-17 school year. What happens after that is anyone's guess, even though a testing contract is in place.

The original \$160.5 million contract with NCS Pearson Inc. includes both high school and grade school PARCC testing over four school years, from 2014-15 to 2017-18. But as of last week, the State Board of Education wiped out PARCC high school testing in favor of giving the SAT college entrance exam to 11th graders beginning in April.

"The contract with Pearson has not yet been amended to date. We are currently in discussions with Pearson regarding this contract and the services Pearson will provide under the contract during the remainder of the term," ISBE spokeswoman Megan Griffin said in an email to the Tribune.

Pearson declined to comment about the contract.

The company has so far been paid about \$37 million to administer both high school and grade school testing, according to state comptroller records.

Federal law requires that states give reading and math exams in the third through eighth grades and at least once in high school.

In 2014-15, Illinois launched PARCC, short for the Partnership for Assessment in Readiness for College and Careers, an exam based on Common Core learning standards that focus on critical thinking and problem-solving and help prepare students for college and work.

The exams were designed to be taken online — though districts could opt to use paper and pencil — and hundreds of schools reported needing technology upgrades so kids could take the computer-based tests.

A fall 2014 state survey estimated that close to \$150 million in improvements were needed,

ranging from internal wiring to high-speed internet connections and network security systems, and at least \$50 million in upgrades were already in progress.

Meanwhile, test scores have been dismal and the state tests have drawn opposition from families who questioned the amount of testing at school — part of a national movement that has prompted some states to stop using the PARCC exams.

Elementary districts that send students to top-performing New Trier Township High School District say their schools and hundreds of others already use tests that gauge student progress, and "PARCC is merely an ineffective and costly redundancy," according to the letter to Smith.

The superintendents in Wilmette, Winnetka, Northfield, Glencoe and Kenilworth shared continued concerns about how much time is spent on PARCC exams. "In reality, PARCC takes significantly more time away from core instruction than any other assessment in the state's history," the letter said.

The group asked that Smith "discontinue use of PARCC for elementary school districts as well, just as ISBE has done for high schools."

A state assessment review committee, under ISBE, is now collecting feedback from educators, parents and students about the second year of PARCC testing, which could lead to changes. For example, the 2015-16 testing was streamlined and shortened, but whether the exams are still considered too long remains at issue.

Steve Cordogan is chairman of the committee and the former director of research and evaluation in Arlington Heights-based Township High School District 214. He has long been an advocate of less testing, but he said assessing higher-level standards does take time. "The longer the test, the more accurate the test," he said.

"Nobody wants to take time out of class to give a long test and yet they want accurate results. Where do you find the balance?" Cordogan asked. While PARCC was shortened this past school year, "How much of a burden does it remain?"

While some districts spent money on technology upgrades for the online testing, Cordogan said it didn't go to waste. "The fact of the matter is that tests are going to be computerized in

the future."

Some lawmakers also will be reaching out to their communities to get feedback about PARCC.

State Rep. Robert Pritchard, R-Hinckley, said he plans to hold a meeting with constituents. In the past, he said he spoke to students who "really unloaded on me. They were appalled at the time that PARCC took and ... they lost out on instruction time," Pritchard said. He is a member of key House education committees.

Pritchard said he doesn't know if there's a better test out there, so the state may have to stick with PARCC and try to improve it.

Cordogan said the state is "thinking in terms of simply staying with PARCC, but the question will be what happens to PARCC at the national level. We have all seen PARCC's membership (of states) shrink. And we know PARCC is trying to change the way it positions itself to become a supplier of test items" in addition to full tests.

States are beginning to take advantage of the more flexible PARCC products that don't necessarily involve a full test, according to PARCC spokeswoman Heather Reams. Six states, including Illinois, and Washington, D.C., will give the full tests in 2016-17, she said.

Unclear is whether Illinois would be open to an exam that would include PARCC test questions as well as new test items. When the Tribune asked if the state will move to a new grade school test, spokeswoman Griffin said, "At this time, we are committed to continuing to use PARCC at Grades 3-8." Students are also required by federal law to take science exams in certain grades, but those tests are not connected to PARCC.

In the previous two years, Illinois high school students took a hodgepodge of reading and math exams, depending on the courses they were in rather than their grade level. Because kids didn't take the same state exams in reading and math, the U.S. Department of Education determined that Illinois was not complying with federal testing requirements and threatened to withhold federal education funds.

ISBE then announced the change to the high school testing schedule, ditching PARCC in favor of the SAT. While many administrators praised the move to give an exam that kids can use for college admissions, some educators had reservations.

Carol Baker, a former high school administrator who is now superintendent in Lyons School District 103, said she would have liked to have seen PARCC continued in high school, so schools could chart the academic growth of students as they moved from eighth grade into high school. At one point, the state was contemplating PARCC tests in ninth, 10th and 11th grades, but given the state's budget crisis, the money wasn't available.

"I don't think we put in enough money and effort to implement PARCC," Baker said.

Even at the grade-school level, "the challenge continues to be training, resources and funding," Baker said.

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