

Kathleen Oropeza: Youngsters are victims of bad law

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Who in their right mind would subject kindergartners to seven or more high-stakes end-of-course exams? The Florida Legislature, that's who.

There's no way to sugar-coat this. It's been covered with disbelief in the national press, by liberals and conservatives alike. Everyone is shaking their heads and asking: "What the heck, Florida?"

Come November, it's a question every voter in this state should be asking, too. Back in 2011, state senators and representatives decided to bring teacher evaluations to the boiling point by passing Florida Statute 1008.22(6), effective this year. It imposes an unconscionable multimillion-dollar unfunded mandate on districts, requiring them to pay for the development and administration of thousands of new assessments for every K-12 "course" not currently addressed by state exams.

This law ignores the fact that young children learn material as subjects, not courses, within the context of a single class. In fact, numerous effective diagnostic methods already exist to assist teachers and help young students achieve. Florida's youngest public school students will now sit for assessments similar to those taken by older students in these subjects: language arts, math, music, P.E. art, science and social studies. They may also be tested on additional courses such as: introduction to computers, dance, health, French, Spanish, theatre, band and orchestra. To make matters worse, the process lacks uniformity, since individual districts are allowed to determine the value of these tests. For example, one district may choose to weight the K-2 exams as 30 percent of overall student performance in that subject area, while another may choose a weight of zero.

In a nutshell, this is about using our children to play hardball with teacher evaluations while forcing districts to spend millions of dollars they don't have to develop thousands of new high-stakes tests. As always, Florida's children are the ultimate victims. At the very least, parents should resent the instructional time that will be lost to this nonsense.

In a recent television interview, state Sen. David Simmons expressed alarm over the hyper-testing of 6-year-olds. Reformer Neil McCluskey from the CATO Institute went on "Fox and Friends" decrying Florida's heavy-handed, top-down, one-size-fits-all testing of little children.

Unfortunately, the Legislature is famous for passing bad laws and vowing to fix them later. When it passes bad laws, good people get hurt.

The Florida Department of Education has failed to produce written guidelines for districts regarding multiple end-of-course assessments for small children. The department has known for three years that this day was coming, yet it remains strangely silent. Where's the careful explanation justifying the importance of stressing out 6-year-olds with seven end-of-course exams?

This is a political punt on the part of the state. Parents will not happily subject their small children to this insanity. When parents complain, as they surely will, the state will simply blame the districts. So, who in their right mind would subject kindergartners to seven or more high-stakes end-of-course exams? Clever politicians with an agenda to dismantle Florida public education, that's who.