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Nationwide assessment pool to get \$350M

Partnership supports new testing method for students

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SALISBURY -- Maryland K-12 students may soon be measured by a nationwide assessment.

Through the federal Race to the Top grant competition, the U.S. Department of Education intends to allot \$350 million to a partnership between Maryland and 25 other states for the development of an assessment in line with the new nationwide standards for what students should learn at each grade level.

Florida filed the grant application on behalf of the partnering states, a group accounting for more than 60 percent of U.S. K-12 students.

Along with 11 other states, Maryland will lead the partnership to begin using a computer-based testing system in which students will take parts of the assessment at key times during the school year, closer to when they learn the material, rather than waiting for one big test at the end of the year.

"Maryland has been consistently involved with reform programs that we believe will move our students forward," said state Superintendent of Schools Nancy Grasmick. "The (partnership) is committed to designing assessments that will ensure our graduates are prepared for success after high school. There is no more important goal facing public education at this time."

Maryland Comptroller Peter Franchot echoed these sentiments during a visit to Fruitland Intermediate, saying a college degree will soon become as important as a high school diploma.

Developing assessments and standards at a national level is passing the buck, according to Neal McCluskey, the associate director of the Center for Educational Freedom at the Cato Institute.

He says states struggling to get students over higher bars are hoping federal involvement will fix their problems. He likened the move to the passing of power from local districts to the state level following the passage of No Child Left Behind. Shifting control over curriculum to broader and broader groups, he says, lessens competition between local districts, competition the libertarian Cato Institute believes drives improvement.

"There is no meaningful research basis indicating this will improve academic outcomes," McCluskey said. "And adopting the standards is not at all voluntary -- adoption is being coerced by money from the federal Race to the Top contest."

Local and state education officials say the new assessments and standards will be adopted regardless of whether Maryland receives Race to the Top money and have cited the success of countries such as Singapore and Finland in using national standards and assessments.

McCluskey says it's a standard line to point to countries that beat the U.S. in academic performance, but most countries behind the U.S. also have national standards. He says research on common

standards that controls for countries' socioeconomic and cultural factors doesn't exist.

Wicomico Superintendent John Fredericksen said he's optimistic the partnership will work well, calling the current system "woefully inadequate" as it only marks a snapshot in time and doesn't account for the wide variety of aptitudes and talents present in the student population.

The only reason to connect better assessments to national standards is so states can pool resources to afford them, McClusky said.

If each state had its own assessment, the price of the testing system would go way up, Fredericksen said.

The cost of the new system is still unknown.

For a summary of the assessment proposal visit www.achieve.org/PARCCsummary.

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