

CATS Loses Its Ninth Life

By John Foster

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CATS testing in its current existence won't exist three years from now, but the big changes won't come until that time. This year only the most observant Oldham County students will notice a difference.

For one, Oldham students will still complete a writing portfolio, although the Kentucky Department of Education no longer requires one, Superintendent Paul Upchurch said. The state no longer requires the practical living or arts and humanities portions of the CATS exams, so Oldham County school staff will score the tests themselves.

Sections like reading, math, social studies and on-demand writing will still be tested and scored this spring by the state, but KDE won't calculate an accountability index. Therein lies the biggest difference between last year's tests and this year's — the target accountability score required of all Kentucky schools by 2014 has evaporated.

Upchurch said district staff will independently calculate accountability indexes for schools, helping measure school-wide progress over the next two years, as KDE hammers out the details of a new testing program to commence in the 2011-2012 school year.

The district will still use the data to hold schools accountable and to set goals for progress, but knowing that the state requirement is gone takes some of the teeth out of the scores, he said. It disappoints him that the legislature removed goals people in Oldham County schools were excited about reaching.

"We kind of feel like we've had the rug pulled out from underneath us," he said.

A long time coming

The changes are the result of Senate Bill 1, a piece of legislation that will make dramatic changes to accountability testing in Kentucky in the next few years. It has been a long time coming, Sen. Ernie Harris said.

“The problem with testing has plagued us for years,” he said. “We finally fixed it.” Statewide testing began in 1992 as part of the Kentucky Education Reform Act.

Kentucky was one of the first states to perform statewide accountability testing, long before No Child Left Behind required the same of all states, KDE Communications Director Lisa Gross said. The original test contained open response writing prompts and portfolios of math and writing. In 1998, legislators added multiple-choice questions to the test, and in 2006 tweaked the accountability index calculations. But this year’s changes will do more than tweak the test. In the 2011-2012 school year, Kentucky students will take an entirely new test.

The good and bad of CATS

Harris favors sweeping changes. He isn’t alone — the bill passed unanimously in the house and senate. He said the main flaws with the current testing system were cost, subjectivity and relevance of results.

First the cost — designing, administering and scoring a Kentucky-specific test is tens of millions of dollars more expensive than administering a national standardized multiple-choice test, he said.

To be clear, Oldham County school administrators already use a variety of national standardized tests to measure student achievement and give parents a picture of how their student stacks up nationally, Upchurch said, but it’s not required statewide. East Oldham Middle School math teacher Rusti Morrison said she sees no reason why Kentucky can’t take a national standardized test — then Oldham County schools wouldn’t have to spend their own funds to do it.

Harris also questions the relevancy of the CATS test results. A CATS index measures how one class of, say, fourth-graders at a school measures against the next year’s class. If a “bumper crop” of fourth graders performs really well and the next year an average group of fourth graders performs in an average manner, did students really regress like their accountability index would suggest? Harris says no.

Instead, a test should measure how much one student learns from year to year, he said. That would show the actual level of progress. The new test will do that, he said. Harris’ other main concern is the CATS test’s emphasis on open response writing prompts and writing portfolios. He believes judging those involves more subjectivity than judging a multiple-choice test — which is the direction the new test will take. Upchurch takes issue with that. He said due to the training scorers receive, there is little subjectivity in the scoring process. Students receive scores based on a strict rubric, he said.

He sees value in standardized multiple-choice tests, which is why the school district administers those tests on its own dime. But he also thinks it's important for students to explain their reasoning and organize arguments in writing — more in-depth thinking the CATS test requires that other tests don't.

“Multiple choice doesn't measure deep level thinking,” he said.

Despite his reservations, Upchurch said the changes allow for some positive changes in Oldham County schools.

For one, since the writing portfolio is now optional to districts, Oldham County staff are designing a more relevant writing portfolio. Upchurch said district literacy coaches are working to design a new set of portfolio requirements for next year to fit the needs of Oldham County students.

“It's a tremendous opportunity,” he said.

What do teachers and students think?

Jacob Law has grown up in the age of KERA. Like all Oldham County students, he's assembled portfolios, learned how to answer an open-response question, listened to admonishments to do his best and buckled down for two weeks of testing almost every spring.

The AP student has mixed feelings. “Kids complain about CATS testing all the time, but there's not really a better way to do it,” he said.

Sure several weeks a year are dedicated to reviewing and testing, he said, but necessarily wasted. He said it's good for some students to learn how to write an organized essay and review basic concepts, but the test is a bit of a joke, he said.

The questions are pretty basic for an AP student, he said, and he suspects they're pretty basic for most students. He thinks many students don't try — they have little personal incentive to give an honest effort.

“The test usually turns out measuring who cares and who doesn't,” he said.

He thinks the biggest problems are with the writing portfolio. Requiring a writing piece from woodshop seems a little ridiculous to him. He suspects it seems ridiculous to some teachers in similar classes as well.

Morrison knows her fellow teachers have a wide range of opinions about testing, although no one especially enjoys doing it.

She said part of what makes testing unpleasant is being judged and held accountable. It may not be fun, but it's important and valuable, as long as the results are accurate, she said. Every week a football team takes the field and they're judged by how they perform. The rest of education shouldn't be any different, she said.

She takes results of her students' testing and reflects on her teaching, finding places where she did well or has room for improvement.

As for the future, she welcomes the right changes in math curriculum. She hopes the focus will shift from breadth to depth of content — teaching fewer mathematical processes, but making sure students really understand them. “So they'll actually know what a fraction is before they have to start adding, subtracting and dividing them,” she said.

She said no matter what changes are made, Oldham County teachers will still teach well and Oldham County students will still learn well.

“Oldham County rolls on,” she said.

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