

## No more March Madness for Kansas Educators



This is typically the time of year when Kansas schools are busily preparing for and participating in state assessments. It's a considerable amount of activity given that all students in grades three through eight and one grade in high school participate in state reading and math assessments each year, and students in grades four, seven and once in high school take state science assessments each year. I've referred to it in the past as our own version of March madness.

While the activity continues this year, I'm hopeful that the element of “madness” has been removed from the process. That's because we're embarking on a new accountability system this school year that removes some of the high stakes nature of state assessments that was present for the past decade under the Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) accountability system dictated by the federal No Child Left Behind legislation.

Under the AYP accountability system, an increasing percentage of students were required to meet a set achievement level on the reading and math assessments each year in order to meet AYP measures. Under that system, all students were required to be proficient in reading and math by 2014.

Last July, Kansas received an Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) Flexibility Waiver, which allows us to implement a new accountability system, among other things. Our new accountability system still relies on student performance on state reading and math assessments, but in the new system the results are viewed in multiple ways to determine whether a school is making progress. In addition to looking at overall achievement on assessments, the new system also gauges whether the gap is narrowing between the state's high-performing students and the lowest performing students in a given school. It also looks at overall student growth to determine if student performance is improving as it should over time. And finally, it looks at a school's success in reducing the number of students who perform below the proficient level on state assessments. This reliance on multiple measures provides a more meaningful assessment of student and school success.

The other important difference in the new accountability system is that the targets for performance are unique to each school because they're based on where the school is already at in terms of achievement, performance gap, growth and the percentage of students below proficient. Previously, a single target was arbitrarily established for all schools.

I am hopeful that these changes help Kansas educators to view our state assessments less as accountability tools and more as learning tools that can help us make sound instructional decisions for all of our students. If we can focus on what the assessments tell us about what our students need from us to help them learn, and if we can use that information to make the changes needed to help our students become better learners, we will have nothing to fear from our annual state assessment results.

Students, teachers, administrators, schools - and our entire state - will be better served if we confine March Madness to the basketball court.



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Diane". The signature is fluid and cursive, written on a white background.

Dr. Diane DeBacker  
Kansas Commissioner of Education