

As school tests change, how do we know what works?

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School standardized tests are getting to be like the weather. If you don't like them — or their results — just wait awhile and everything changes.

And that makes it more difficult for educators, students, parents and the public to evaluate the latest school testing results. The numbers from the Measurement of Student Progress tests came out earlier this week, and they painted a mixed picture statewide and in the Yakima Valley.

In the big picture, the story remains much the same. There are local success stories and some encouraging numbers. But by and large, many Yakima Valley school districts, struggling with poverty and language issues, lag behind the state in student assessment. And statewide, a stubborn learning gap continues to separate white and Asian students from their Latino, American Indian and black counterparts.

State Superintendent of Public Instruction Randy Dorn, while noting the similarity of test scores over the past three years, declared victory given the spotty level of recent school funding as the state wrestled with a recession-induced funding crisis. He also stated the scores reflect progress over the past decade.

But that's hard to tell if we're winning over the long term, because the MSP has been around only three years. All public school students in the state took the MSP in the spring; reading tests went to those in grades 3-8, writing tests for students in grades 4-7 and 10, and science tests to students in grades 5 and 8. High school students took a 10th-grade reading test and end-of-course exams in algebra, geometry and biology.

But don't bother memorizing that, because the MSP is about to go the way of the Washington Assessment of Student Learning test, the notorious WASL that held sway for a dozen years until the MSP replaced it. The state is about to phase in a new set of exams tied to Common Core standards, which Washington has adopted along with 44 other states. The effort is aimed at establishing a single set of standards in K-12 for reading and math and start testing in the 2014-15 school year.

All this means assessing student progress over the long haul is like comparing apples to oranges and, soon, to kumquats. Sure, they're all tasty, but they're all fruit of a different color, and the whole point of testing is to provide empirical data about what works and what doesn't. The constant turnover of tests defeats that purpose.

Dorn used the test results to lobby for increased school spending from the Legislature, as mandated by the state Supreme Court in the McCleary decision. He's right — and legislators know — that the state can ill afford complacency in thinking that this year's initial legislative steps will resolve the issue by the 2018 court-imposed deadline. And it's clear that the schools must continue to focus on the learning gap in high-poverty areas and in districts where English is not the dominant language spoken in the household.

The Joint Select Committee on Article IX Litigation, a bipartisan group composed of state Senate and House members, Tuesday approved a draft of its latest progress report to the court. Lawmakers this year bumped up spending by about \$1 billion, but that total may need another \$2.5 billion to \$3.5 billion by 2018.

Educators say this will help our students, but how will we know? At least by 2018, we will have had as many Common Core testing years we did with the MSP; perhaps by then we can start to learn how well our students are learning. We would learn a lot more if we had kept the comparisons to apples and apples.

- Members of the Yakima Herald-Republic editorial board are Sharon J. Prill, Bob Crider, Frank Purdy and Karen Troianello.
