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Schools fret over subject tests

Officials must come up with quizzes for music, art, and PE.

TOM MARSHALL

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BROOKSVILLE - How would Vincent van Gogh have fared on a standardized test of art knowledge?

While the Dutch master might have rebelled and covered his multiple-choice sheet with oil paint, Florida art students - as well as those in physical education, music, and other subjects not yet tested by the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test - will have no such option this spring.

Their teachers' shot at a statewide pot of merit pay depends on it.

Under Florida's new Special Teachers Are Rewarded plan, every teacher must be evaluated on the basis of student performance.

That mandate has prompted a rush by school districts to create or acquire tests in every subject by year's end.

"We haven't been given anything from the arts yet," said Laurie Pellito, a human resources coordinator who developed the Hernando plan and submitted it this week. "But the music association in the state is working on providing something. Visual arts we're still working on; we haven't heard from them yet."

This year, Hernando will use the FCAT as a "pre-test" in foreign language, PE, career technical education, the arts, and some core courses in the upper grades of high school. Then it will use a subject-area test, if one can be found or developed, as a "post-test."

That's an unfortunate consequence of being forced to implement the program in midyear, before subject-area tests could be given to establish a baseline of knowledge, Pellito said.

"For this year, yes, students might be somewhat out of their comfort zone with what they're asked to do," said Pellito, referring to the new tests. "But the STAR plan tests are only for teacher evaluation."

Hillsborough County, which already requires semester exams in many subjects, will earn \$400,000 from the state to run a "test bank" for districts that need tests, and quickly, to comply with STAR. The **Florida Virtual School** will also contribute some tests for use by other districts, according to the Department of Education.

Commissioner of Education John L. Winn said the new system would provide incentives for the best teachers to stay in Florida.

"If we can move past the one-size-fits-all teacher salary schedule to a more dynamic system of compensation, our students and teachers will be the beneficiaries," he said in October. "We will go a long way to attracting and keeping top teachers."

Forcing changes

But the new mandate might also change the way some teachers teach, or force schools to alter their curriculums to make subjects more testable, said Elaine Wooten, a curriculum specialist for the School Board.

"It's going to cause us to pull back from allowing schools to be so different (from each other), especially in PE and the arts, because they're going to have to take a standardized test," she predicted.

For example, PE teachers might have to teach more physical education concepts. If they spend all of their class time working on boosting students' fitness, she said, "then you're going to do an assessment and test the fitness of 1,500 kids?"

Few teachers like the idea of competing for a slightly higher salary, said Joe Harrin, band director and fine arts chairman at Hernando High School.

He said the STAR program would likely cut into rehearsal time and force teachers to spend more time teaching theory and concepts, but might also produce more well-rounded musicians.

"They don't care how good our students are at performing, they're looking for general knowledge," Harrin said, referring to state policymakers. "Whether a student is an excellent trumpet player is neither here nor there."

But he said there are reasons why arts teachers - whose programs are often the first to be eliminated when budgets get tight - should be happy about the arrival of state-mandated tests.

"It forces the county to develop (curriculums), which makes it harder for them to eliminate programs," Harrin said. "Anything like that helps legitimize what we do as fine arts teachers."

Sunday deadline

Under the STAR legislation, districts must submit plans to test students by Sunday and implement those plans during the current school year, or lose a chance at \$147.5-million in startup funds.

If they miss that deadline, they'll still have to pay those bonuses - up to 5 percent of base pay to 25 percent of all teachers - from their own budgets.

School boards across the state have objected, and the Florida Education Association union has filed a lawsuit, claiming the state violated laws by not crafting sufficient administrative rules for districts to meet the deadline.