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May 21, 2013

Joint Committee on Finance

Paper #535

Smarter Balanced and ACT Pupil Assessments (DPI -- Administrative and Other Funding)

[LFB 2013-15 Budget Summary: Page 390, #4]

CURRENT LAW

State law requires that standardized pupil assessments be administered in the 4th, 8th, and 10th grades in all public, charter, and private parental choice schools in the state, to evaluate the level of proficiency attained by pupils in the subjects of mathematics, science, social studies, reading, and language arts/writing. State law also requires a 3rd grade reading assessment. These assessments are collectively administered as the Wisconsin knowledge and concepts examinations (WKCE).

Beginning in 2005-06, federal law under the reauthorized Elementary and Secondary Education Act ("No Child Left Behind") requires states to administer exams in reading and mathematics annually in 3rd through 8th grades, and once in high school. Beginning in 2007-08, federal law requires state to assess science proficiency once each in the elementary, middle, and high school grades. These requirements are also met by the administration of the WKCE.

GOVERNOR

Provide \$1,872,800 in 2013-14 and \$9,619,700 in 2014-15 and 2.0 GPR positions for the state's standardized pupil assessments program. Base level funding for pupil assessments is \$4,578,300 annually.

Of the total, \$1,550,600 in 2013-14 and \$2,782,500 in 2014-15 would be used to: (a) fund the final year of the Wisconsin knowledge and concepts examinations (WKCE) in 2013-14; (b) administer the new Smarter Balanced and Dynamic Learning assessment systems in 2014-15; and (c) replace the science and social studies portions of the WKCE in 2014-15.

Of the total, \$322,200 in 2013-14 and \$6,837,200 in 2014-15 and 2.0 GPR positions would be used to implement the full ACT suite for high school pupils statewide, including Explore, Plan, ACT college entrance exam, and WorkKeys in 2014-15. The total ACT funding would be used for the following purposes: (a) \$140,700 in 2013-14 and \$183,500 in 2014-15 for 2.0 GPR positions; (b) \$181,500 in 2013-14 and \$362,900 in 2014-15 for costs related to certifying all high schools as ACT administration sites; (c) \$571,600 in 2014-15 for data integration with state systems, training materials, and WorkKeys certificates; and (d) \$5,719,200 in 2014-15 to administer the ACT assessment suite to pupils enrolled in grades 9, 10, and 11 statewide.

Require the State Superintendent to adopt or approve examinations to measure pupil attainment of knowledge and concepts in grades 9 and 11, in addition to grades 4, 8, and 10 under current law. Also, beginning in 2014-15, require school districts, independent charter schools, and private schools participating in the Milwaukee and Racine parental choice programs to administer the exams in grades 9 and 11. As is the case under current law for grades 4, 8, and 10, upon the request of a pupil's parent or guardian, a school must excuse the pupil from taking the exams in grades 9 and 11.

DISCUSSION POINTS

1. Under No Child Left Behind, states were required to ensure that 100% of pupils became academically proficient in reading and mathematics by 2013-14. Assessments to measure proficiency were designed by each state, aligned to that state's academic standards, and the "cut scores" that determine whether a pupil's score is considered "proficient" were also set by each state. Penalties for missing annual proficiency objectives included providing tutoring for students, allowing students to transfer schools, major school restructuring, reopening as a public charter school, or turning operation of a school district over to the state.

2. In June, 2010, the State Superintendent issued a proclamation adopting the Common Core State Standards for curriculum, instruction, and assessment in English language arts and mathematics in Wisconsin. The common core standards were jointly developed through Council of Chief State School Officers and the National Governor's Association, with the help of the educational policy organization Achieve. Achieve, founded as a nonprofit organization in 1996 and funded by a variety of corporate interests and foundations, advocates education reforms and funds technical assistance for states in the areas of standards, assessments, and college and career readiness. The common core replaced the state's prior model academic standards, with a more rigorous, cohesive, and specific set of standards for K-12 education.

3. While adoption was voluntary for all states, 45 states and the District of Columbia have chosen to adopt the common core. Some have suggested that the common core was rapidly adopted due to the assumption that states that did not adopt the new standards would not be eligible for Race to the Top grants under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA). On the other hand, education experts have long advocated for voluntary national standards in the U.S., in order to help states and school districts have general guidelines about what students should know and be able to do at each level of elementary and secondary school.

4. In September, 2010, the federal Education Department awarded a four-year \$160 million grant, and later a second \$16 million grant, from funds provided under ARRA to the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium to fund the development costs of a new, comprehensive assessment system. Wisconsin is a governing state of the 30-state consortium that is collaborating to develop the new student assessment system to be aligned with the common core, and has participated in constructing the new system and developing test items. The consortium was given four years to develop a valid assessment, with full implementation required by 2014-15 under the grant.

5. The new Smarter Balanced assessment is a "next-generation" assessment that will fulfill both state and federal accountability requirements using computer-adaptive testing. This type of test adjusts the difficulty level of questions based on prior answers, in order to produce a more accurate measurement of pupils' knowledge and skills. The test will also include benchmark assessments for use throughout the school year, to help guide classroom instruction. Smarter Balanced will be field tested in 2013-14, and the exam will be ready to replace the mathematics, reading, and language arts portions of the current WKCE in 3rd through 8th grades beginning in 2014-15.

6. As part of its 2013-15 biennial agency budget request, DPI requested that, rather than implement the Smarter Balanced test in high school, the state implement mandatory ACT testing for all high school juniors, as well as the remainder of the ACT suite of tests in 9th and 10th grades. Explore is the first test of the suite, which would be administered to 9th grade pupils, and Plan is the second test, which would be administered to 10th grade pupils. All three exams test pupils in English, mathematics, reading, and science. Families who previously would have paid for their student to take the ACT, will be able to take the exam free of charge. (In 2012-13, the fee for the ACT including the writing exam is \$50.) The ACT is primarily known as a college entrance exam, and it has been shown to be a reliable predictor of college success. However, it is also aligned with the common core standards, and because the material tested grows more difficult with each test, the suite can be used to assess pupil performance throughout high school, identify areas for intervention or remediation, and track pupil growth over time.

7. The final component of the ACT suite is WorkKeys, a job skills assessment intended to help high school pupils identify necessary coursework and provide another indicator for career readiness. ACT offers a "National Career Readiness Certificate" that can be earned by passing three WorkKeys exams: applied mathematics, reading for information, and locating information.

8. Some have criticized the common core, citing challenging content in the early grades that might be developmentally inappropriate, as well as overly prescriptive curriculum and instruction guidelines. Others express concern that, if cut scores on the new exams are not set at an appropriate level, failure rates could be inflated, especially among English language learners, students with disabilities, students of color, and economically disadvantaged students--groups who historically have shown achievement gaps on standardized assessments when compared to their counterparts. However, others argue that, not only were cut scores on the WKCE set too low, but the state model academic standards used to design the exam were often too vague and not rigorous enough.

9. Overall proficiency rates are expected to decline with implementation of Smarter Balanced. The State Superintendent raised the cut scores for the WKCE in 2012-13, in order to better align with the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). The adjusted scores were framed as a transition to the new Smarter Balanced assessments, which would test the new, more rigorous standards. Whereas 81.9% of pupils in 2011-12 scored proficient and advanced in reading using the old cut scores, the 2012-13 scores showed just 36.2% of pupils were proficient or advanced in reading. For mathematics, using the old cut scores 78.0% of pupils were proficient or advanced, while 48.1% were proficient and advanced in 2012-13, using the higher cut scores. It is anticipated that, when the Smarter Balanced assessment is implemented, proficiency rates will be closer to the lower, NAEP-aligned scores.

10. Critics argue that the relatively fast implementation, for both the common core standards and the Smarter Balanced assessment consistent with those standards, has limited the time available for field testing, so that little is known about how effective the standards will be, and whether and to what degree the assessment will appropriately measure student performance. Educators in some school districts have complained that they have not been provided the professional development necessary to successfully integrate the new standards into their instructional practice. On the other hand, school districts were made aware that the state adopted the common core and received the Smarter Balanced grant in 2010, and have had since that time to adapt their curriculum and instructional practice, in order to be prepared for the assessment by 2014-15.

11. Proponents argue that by transitioning to the common core and Smarter Balanced assessment, the curriculum in public schools will be more focused on a deeper understanding of essential knowledge and skills, rather than covering a broad array of topics with little depth, as was the case under the state's old model academic standards. However, the common core has developed standards for, and the Smarter Balanced assessment will test, only reading and mathematics. (Other consortiums are working to develop online adaptive assessments in science and social studies for future years.) Critics suggest this leads to a more narrow curriculum, a trend that was often criticized under No Child Left Behind as other academic subjects such as science, history, foreign languages, music, art, and career and technical education may be de-emphasized.

12. On the other hand, remedial education for the lowest-performing students, some argue, is rightly at the forefront of education policy, because improving the performance of those students is crucial to ensuring that all students, regardless of socio-economic background, graduate from high school with the basic skills necessary to succeed in college or the workforce. Still, some have argued that the overall approach is more properly applied in failing urban school systems with poor results. By contrast, most Wisconsin school districts are relatively small and produce relatively high-performing graduates: (a) the state's four-year cohort graduation rate is 87.5%; (b) the statewide average ACT composite score is one point above the national average (22.1 compared to 21.1 nationally); (c) statewide average SAT scores are above the national averages (by 98 points in critical reading, 89 points in writing, and 91 points in mathematics); and (d) the percentage of Wisconsin students passing their Advanced Placement exams is 9.1 percentage points above the national average (68.1% passing rate, compared to 59% nationally).

13. With implementation of Smarter Balanced, the state's average proficiency rates will likely be lower as compared to the WKCE. A more rigorous curriculum, among other changes, could help Wisconsin students to continue to improve academically, and to be adequately prepared for postsecondary education or entry to the workforce. Similarly, while ACT results for the state are strong currently, only 71% of the state's graduates in 2012 took the test, and those graduates were likely academically stronger and more college-oriented than non-test takers. Therefore, when the ACT is mandatory, the average composite score is likely to decrease. However, universal ACT testing could also provide a more complete picture of high school students' achievement and preparedness. In addition, some students who might not have considered postsecondary education previously, could be encouraged to consider college if they score well on the test.

14. DPI requested \$209,100 for supplies and services costs related to the Smarter Balanced assessments in 2013-14. These costs are primarily related to training costs for school district and private school personnel related to the new assessment, and costs related to security for the new online testing environment. The cost to administer Smarter Balanced will be approximately \$26 per pupil, including both the end-of-year summative test and the interim assessments throughout the school year. For grades 3 through 8, with an average of 61,000 students per grade, the total cost will be \$9,514,400. However, DPI receives approximately \$6.9 million annually in federal Title VI funding to subsidize those state assessment programs required by federal law. Therefore, in its agency budget request, DPI proposed that the state fund only grades 3, 4, and 8, for a total of \$4,724,800 in 2014-15.

15. An alternative to implementation of the ACT as the accountability assessment in high school would be to adopt the Smarter Balanced assessment for high school juniors. It would be a less expensive exam to administer, and would provide continuity with the 3rd through 8th grade exams. However, the ACT has the advantage of covering reading, mathematics, science, and social studies, versus the reading and mathematics focus of Smarter Balanced. Another disadvantage to administering only one exam during the high school years is that pupil growth over time cannot be demonstrated. This was also a weakness of the 10th grade WKCE exam, which has been criticized in the context of the new school accountability reports ("school report cards") published by DPI. Some have argued that high school performance on the report cards is underestimated, because pupil proficiency is measured only once, and only at the beginning of 10th grade. DPI estimates that administering the Smarter Balance assessment in grade 11 would cost \$1,736,700 GPR, which would represent a reduction to the bill of -\$322,200 GPR in 2013-14 and -\$5,100,500 GPR in 2014-15.

16. DPI is obligated to administer the WKCE in 2013-14, in order to comply with state and federal assessment laws. The cost to administer the WKCE for the final year will be \$4,982,500. State law still requires assessments in social studies and science in grades 4, 8, and 10. DPI has proposed to develop a replacement for the WKCE science and social studies tests, with a one-time development cost of \$145,000 to research and obtain an acceptable off-the-shelf assessment, and ongoing administration costs of \$2,491,000, including \$247,200 that would fund a replacement science assessment for students with disabilities.

17. Dynamic Learning is a new assessment, also being developed by a consortium of

states, that will replace the current Wisconsin Alternate Assessment for Students with Disabilities (WAA-SwD). Similar to Smarter Balanced, Dynamic Learning will replace the mathematics, reading, and language arts portions of the WAA-SwD, but not the science portion. The social studies portion is currently a locally-administered assessment and not currently paid for by the state. The cost to administer the WAA-SwD for the last time in 2013-14 will be \$937,300, and the Dynamic Learning test will be implemented for the first time beginning in 2014-15. However, the federal grant that was awarded to develop the test will also cover the costs of administering the assessment for the first year. Estimated annual costs will be \$1,277,000 beginning in 2015-16.

ALTERNATIVES

1. Approve the Governor's recommendation for funding for pupil assessments totaling \$6,451,100 in 2013-14 and \$14,198,000 in 2014-15.

2. Delete the Governor's recommendation to implement the ACT suite in grades 9 through 11, and instead implement the Smarter Balanced assessment in grade 11. Adjust funding by -\$322,200 in 2013-14 and -\$5,100,500 in 2014-15 and -2.0 positions for an 11th grade Smarter Balanced assessment.

ALT 2	Change to Bill	
	Funding	Positions
GPR	- \$5,422,700	- 2.00

3. Delete provision.

ALT 3	Change to Bill	
	Funding	Positions
GPR	- \$11,492,500	- 2.00

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