



News Release

For Immediate Release:

September 25, 2014

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Governor Hassan, Department of Education Announce Federal Approval of New Hampshire's Pilot Competency-Based Assessment Program

First-In-The-Nation Accountability Strategy Offers Reduced Level of Standardized Testing with Locally Managed Assessments

Continuing efforts to help students develop the skills and innovative thinking needed for success in the innovation economy of the 21st century, Governor Maggie Hassan and New Hampshire Department of Education (NHDOE) Commissioner Virginia Barry today announced that the U.S. Department of Education (USED) approved New Hampshire's Performance Assessment for Competency Education (PACE) pilot in four school districts.

A first-in-the-nation accountability strategy, the PACE pilot will allow districts to reduce the level of standardized testing in favor of more locally managed assessments that will be more integrated into a student's day-to-day work. The four PACE-implementing districts – Sanborn Regional, Rochester, Epping and Souhegan – have worked closely with NHDOE over the past five years to develop the strategy, and as a result, the U.S. Department of Education has agreed to allow them to be the only districts in the country to pilot a new locally managed assessment process for accountability purposes.

"It is exciting to add another 'First-In-The-Nation' distinction here in the Granite State with this innovative program to provide more meaningful, locally managed assessments that empower our students and our teachers," Governor Hassan said. "New Hampshire is nationally recognized as a leader in competency-based education, and the approval of this pilot project further demonstrates our status as an innovator in public education. I applaud our four pilot school districts and the New Hampshire Department of Education for their hard work to develop this pilot program, and I look forward to it paving the way for other school districts to implement it in the future."

The PACE project has been widely followed in education circles as demonstrating a strategy for reducing the nation's reliance on standardized testing while providing assessments that give meaningful feedback for students, parents and teachers. Beginning this year, the four PACE-implementing districts will give the Smarter Balanced statewide assessment once in elementary school, once in middle school and once in high school – in three grades instead of seven. In the offsetting years that students don't take the statewide assessment, the PACE districts will administer carefully designed common and local "performance assessments" developed by the districts themselves and validated at the state level.

State of New Hampshire Department of Education

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Performance assessments are complex, multi-part tasks that ask students to apply what they have learned in sophisticated ways. For example, in English, middle school students might submit research papers showing that they know how to analyze and present information from many sources. In math, fourth-graders might design and cost out a new park and write a letter to their board of selectmen arguing their perspective based on their calculations and other evidence.

Dr. Brian Blake, Superintendent of the Sanborn Regional School District said, “As the leading PACE district, Sanborn Regional believes this is the right work at the right time. PACE allows us to build rigorous assessments into everyday student learning rather than making the assessments an isolated, special event with no immediate results. We believe our own assessments, as a part of the PACE Pilot, will meet State and Federal accountability requirements. The confidence that the State of New Hampshire has in our teachers has made us stronger and allowed us to prepare for this work.”

“The New Hampshire Department of Education has been working with the four PACE districts intensively for two years to build educators’ capacity to help manage the local assessment process,” NHDOE Commissioner Virginia Barry said. “We believe in the strength of our educators and know that they are working hard to create a clear and effective accountability system to support teaching and learning.”

“We hear about over-testing because we really have two accountability systems,” NHDOE Deputy Commissioner Paul Leather added. “The state system is required by federal law but may not help us improve teaching and learning. Schools administer their own tests for that. The PACE pilot brings those together and reduces the testing needed.”

The department has also worked to ensure that disadvantaged students are not allowed to fall through the cracks. Scott Marion, Associate Director of the Dover, New Hampshire-based Center for Assessment and who has worked with New Hampshire on this pilot, noted that, “the PACE competency-based education system provides closer monitoring of each individual student than standardized-tests do and provides the results quickly enough to actually help to improve teaching.”

Beginning in 2012, all New Hampshire school districts were invited to participate in the pilot. The pilot required extensive training and local commitment to managing their testing locally. Although the work was partly funded with generous grants from the Nellie Mae Education Foundation and the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the PACE pilot project requires a large-scale commitment by administrators and teachers of participating districts. However, USED and NHDOE anticipate that school districts throughout the state and the nation will benefit from the experience gained from PACE.

Today’s USED approval is for the four-district PACE pilot only. The department considers this pilot a study that will provide valuable research data into how testing will work in the future. It is not a waiver and does not change the requirement that all other districts in New Hampshire participate in the Smarter Balanced statewide assessment that New Hampshire schools will soon begin to administer. The PACE pilot will pave the way for other school districts to participate in the future if they are able to meet qualifications.

The PACE pilot is one NHDOE’s strategies to reduce over-testing. The department is also in the final stages of making it possible for New Hampshire high schools to administer the College Board’s SAT as the high school assessment in future years.

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