Group wants 'hold harmless' year on Common Core test

Joey Garrison, The Tennessean, March 26, 2014

Movement in the Tennessee legislature to halt the state's shift to a new test aligned with Common Core education standards has Jesse Register worried.

Nashville's superintendent is a big backer of the standards and their computerized test, and says he doesn't want Metro students to fall behind.

And yet he and other superintendents who support Tennessee's transition to the Common Core-aligned Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers test have a message for the state: Don't use it for "high-stakes" accountability decisions just yet.

Register plans to soon formally deliver that position to the Tennessee Department of Education. His idea is a one-year "hold harmless" period for the new PARCC test, which is set to replace the Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program in 2014-15. Doing so would prevent its results from affecting the evaluation of teachers and the accountability of schools and students themselves.

Though MNPS has taken part in the PARCC practice field test this year, he called the test "an unknown" for teachers. He pointed to potential challenges, including a move away from a purely multiple-choice format with PARCC, its alignment with tougher standards and a new online format in which he said "glitches" are expected.

His hope: Establish a "new baseline" of test results next year and go from there.

"Let's make it something that is not directly tied to teacher accountability, which I think is important because I think teachers are feeling stressed from so much change so quickly," Register said. "Let's lower the stakes, if you will, for students because there will be differences and there will be an impact on implementation.

"We take the position that you can't draw a linear comparison from TCAP to PARCC."

The Tennessee House of Representatives voted this month to delay the transition to the new PARCC test for two years, though that same proposal could face an uphill climb in the Senate.

A hold on tying PARCC to accountability decisions also could be a long shot because it lacks support from Tennessee Education Commissioner Kevin Huffman.

"Pausing accountability is not a new concept," Huffman said. "From the second I arrived, people have wanted to pause accountability. Our belief is that it's important that we who are spending taxpayer dollars and working in the system need to have accountability for the results of our kids.

"We think it's really important that we continue with accountability under any system," he said. "The U.S. Department of Education, I think, has taken a pretty hard stand on that
as well."

Concerns over PARCC's first year, though, are widespread among superintendents, according to Wayne Miller, executive director of the Tennessee Organization of School Superintendents. He said his group had engaged in discussions with the state on a hold-harmless period before the ongoing legislative session, but talks have quieted.

Miller said he hopes that between now and next year — when PARCC data start surfacing — the state will ensure some "latitude" on the test.

"We really just don't know what it's going to look like," Miller said of PARCC. "We hope we do. We think we do. But until it's there, you really don't know what it looks like."

Among those in that corner is Williamson County Schools superintendent Mike Looney, who noted that PARCC will mark Tennessee students' first experience in computerized testing.

"I strongly believe the right thing, the fair thing, the equitable thing to do is to hold students and teachers harmless that first year until we have baseline data and we can determine growth and appropriate achievement levels thereafter," Looney said.

"Anybody who will listen to me, I'm advocating and articulating that message."