**Task force recommends reducing Colorado testing burden**

By Eric Gorski  
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Despite agreeing that Colorado tests its students too much, a state task force was unable to find many places to cut tests other than in high school, a reflection of both stringent federal requirements and divergent views over the value of assessments.

The 15-member advisory panel, created in the last legislative session, met for the final time Monday after six months of talks.

Although it still must finalize a report to present to the legislature before month's end, the task force agreed to urge elimination of all testing for high school seniors and a reduction for juniors.

But the group split on continuing to test ninth-graders in math and English, and on whether social studies tests should be scrapped altogether.

Beyond that, Colorado has little choice but to follow federal law mandating third- through eighth-grade math and reading tests, and that high schoolers be tested at least once. Students also must be tested in science once each in elementary, middle and high school.

The fate of those decade-old rules, however, is uncertain as Congress considers overhauling the No Child Left Behind law.

Amid Republican talk of scaling back or eliminating the tests, U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan on Monday defended the federal requirements as critical to measuring students' educational progress.

The Colorado task force is seeking a difficult balance — recognizing the value of assessments in holding schools and districts accountable for serving all students while acknowledging public belief that kids are overtested and classroom instruction is suffering.

"I know there are folks on our team who would have liked to have seen greater agreement around reduction," said task force chairman Dan Snowberger, superintendent of the Durango School District. "But I feel we made some huge movement. That will be in the eye of the beholder."

Snowberger is meeting Wednesday with legislators to provide an update on the task force. He said it is "a little concerning" that legislation to reform state tests has been drafted before the group suggests fixes.

The group — including parent, teacher, district, charter school and business representatives — will make recommendations including:

- Cutting all tests for high school seniors. Seniors now take social studies and science tests. Thousands of seniors refused to take the social studies tests last fall, calling them unnecessary.
• Requiring high school juniors to take only the ACT — already mandated — or a similar college entrance exam. This spring, 11th-graders also will be tested in English and math as part of the Colorado's participation in a multistate testing consortium called PARCC, the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers.

• If possible, fulfill federal science testing requirements in high school though an augmented ACT or similar exam.

• A paper-and-pencil option for all state tests starting in 2015-16, acknowledging complaints that computer labs are being turned over to testing.

Telling divisions arose over state-required English and math ninth-grade tests. Some task force members wanted them eliminated, but others argued the tests are critical to measuring student growth.

The group also could not agree on what to do with social studies tests for fourth- and seventh-graders, the first round of which found students woefully unprepared. Advocates for social studies say the subjects are relegated to second-class status without tests.

On another contentious issue, the panel said a statement is needed on the practice of parents who refuse to allow their children to be tested, and the implications for districts and schools. Schools and districts should be "held harmless" through 2016 if they fall short of a requirement that 95 percent of students take state tests, the group said.

"It's not about parents asking for permission," said task force member Ilana Spiegel, a parent representative from the Cherry Creek School District. "The right already exists. Parents need clear, factual information about it."

Any changes adopted by state legislators would likely come in the 2015-16 school year at the earliest.

The task force also discussed longer-term fixes, including testing students just once each in elementary, middle and high school. But the group chose not to make any detailed recommendations.

Syna Morgan, chief academic officer for Jefferson County Public Schools, said she initially was concerned the group working toward compromise would result in a "lose-lose."

"I feel like we've done as much as we can ... and we are probably much closer than we think we are on the long-term vision," she said.