

# State Eliminates Test Scores From Teacher Evaluations

State Board of Education heard testimony for and against the controversial proposal to eliminate state standardized test scores from the calculation of teachers performance ratings.



By **Kathleen Megan**

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**A**fter years of intense opposition from teachers unions, the State Board of Education reversed course and voted Wednesday to eliminate a requirement that state standardized test scores be used in teacher evaluations.

Several board members expressed confusion about why the change was desirable after years of state support for including the scores in teacher ratings.

Joseph Vrabely, an education board member, said he didn't understand why years after Gov. Dannel P. Malloy made linking test scores to teacher evaluations a centerpiece of his education reform plans, the board was now considering a "total divorce" from the policy.

He asked why the weight of the test scores couldn't simply be reduced rather than entirely eliminated.

The decision follows a recommendation made last week by an advisory council led by education Commissioner Dianna Wentzell and including leaders of the teachers unions, superintendents and school boards.

The Performance Evaluation Advisory Council, as the group is called, recommended eliminating the scores in the calculation of teachers' performance ratings, but continuing to use the standardized tests to help set goals for teachers and to shape professional development plans.

Wentzell, who only a year ago told legislators of the importance of including the test results in evaluations, emphasized Wednesday that the state's standardized test results — the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium tests — will continue to be used in setting goals and in professional development.

"Today's action by the State Board of Education affirms the consensus among Connecticut education stakeholders that state mastery tests provide a valid and reliable estimate of student achievement, and that they should play an important role in goal-setting for educators," Wentzell said.

At one point in the discussion Wednesday, board Chairman Allan Taylor asked, "Why is it that [the state's standardized tests] can be used to inform goals but not to measure their accomplishment?"

Fellow board member William Davenport, a teacher, said that 70 percent of teachers do not teach subjects covered by the standardized test, so perhaps it doesn't make sense to make the test a part of the final rating calculations.

Wentzell and other state education officials also said that other classroom tests — some standardized — are incorporated into evaluations along with other factors.

Teachers and union leaders have balked at including the Smarter Balanced test scores in teacher evaluations partly because they say questions remain about the fairness and appropriateness of the computerized test.

During a public comment session before the board considered the issue, David Cicarella president of the New Haven Federation of Teachers, said a high stakes test that counts in teacher ratings creates "an unhealthy obsession" with test scores and turns schools into "test prep factories."

The requirement that test scores be reflected in evaluations has been part of the review system for several years, but has never been implemented as a requirement because the state started using the Smarter Balanced test three years ago.

The state was to start using this spring's exams in teacher ratings.

Almost exactly a year ago, the State Board of Education agreed to the last year of postponement, but at that time Taylor said he was "drawing a line in the sand" on further delays.

In the end Wednesday, Taylor and five other board members voted in favor of dropping test scores from teacher ratings. Two board members voted against and one abstained.

Of those voting in favor, several said they did so partly because of reports that disagreement hindered considering other issues that are key to evaluations and professional development.

"It's held us back," said Sarah Barzee, chief talent officer for the state Department of Education and a member of the Performance Evaluation Advisory Council, told education board members. "I feel like we've been treading on a treadmill, not moving anywhere."

If the proposal was passed, Barzee said, she hoped the council would be able to move forward and address other issues.

Taylor explained his vote, saying he thought students and teachers would be better able to keep the focus on "student outcomes," rather than letting the conflict over standardized tests "become a pure contest of political power."

"Let's just say I think we're better off in the education system and our kids are better off with this being moved forward in this forum," Taylor said.

Stephen Wright, one of the board members who voted against it, said, "I don't understand why we use the test if we're not going to use it as a measure of student performance [in teacher evaluation ratings]. We spent a lot of money on it, a lot of resources."

Mark Waxenberg, executive director of the Connecticut Education Association, the state's largest teachers union, said of the board's action: "I think they acted properly and basically defined the role and purpose of the state mastery test relative to how we use them to advance the learning goals of our students.

"So I think it was a very, very good decision on their part to do so," he said.

Among those who were opponents of the PEAC recommendation, Jennifer Alexander, chief executive officer of the Connecticut Coalition for Achievement Now, said, "We're deeply disappointed by today's vote. I think this is a piecemeal approach to teacher evaluation and a watered down system that takes us backward."

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