

## The Front Burner: States that bail on state standards risk mediocrity

By Marc Tucker Guest columnist  
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Gov. Rick Scott's recent order to withdraw Florida from one of two multistate groups developing new student tests tied to the Common Core State Standards is not just a casual result of Sunshine State politics.

Spearheaded by the nation's governors and chief state school officers, the Common Core State Standards outline what students should know and be able to do in reading and math at all grade levels, and the tests these groups are designing will measure whether students are meeting these more rigorous standards.

Initially, critics of the Common Core tried to prevent their adoption in states known for their long-standing commitment to strong standards such as Massachusetts and California, arguing they were actually weaker, hoping that other states would follow. When this failed, opponents shifted to pushing for their rollback in more conservative states with less of a commitment to high standards, labeling them an unprecedented federal intrusion into local control of education.

Now, they have found another, even more disingenuous strategy. Instead of taking on the standards on their merits, the critics are urging governors and legislators in select states to oppose the use of the new tests on the grounds that they are too expensive and too time-intensive and require technology the states don't have and can't afford. The idea is that teachers teach what the tests measure; so if the tests are not measuring the Common Core, then the standards are dead — at least in those states.

Scott's announcement shows this crafty strategy is paying off. Georgia, Alabama and Utah have also withdrawn from the two multistate groups, while Oklahoma and Pennsylvania technically remain members but opted to use other tests.

Let's be clear about why this matters: The annual tests being offered by these groups will be at least twice as expensive as the conventional multiple-choice, computer-scored tests long used by U.S. schools. At the same time, the tests and examinations used by most of the world's top-performing education systems are more than twice as expensive as these new tests, though affordable because they are given to students only two or three times in their school career, not every year.

Why use such expensive tests? Because, in testing, as in other things, you get what you pay for. Multiple-choice, computer-scored tests are good at measuring the acquisition of basic skills and facts. Yet they cannot measure whether you can write well, build a robot, or synthesize knowledge and skills across a variety of fields of study to solve a complex problem — the very kinds of tasks now required in jobs that pay well in the modern economy. Those things can be measured, but it costs a lot more to measure them.

Any state that abandons the tests being produced by the consortia is essentially saying that it is not prepared to pay for tests to accurately measure the skills and knowledge its children will need to be competitive in the global labor market.

Whatever states are currently spending on testing, it's a fraction of what they are spending on K-12 education overall. But that fraction will largely determine what their teachers choose to teach. If a state's tests measure only basic skills and basic knowledge, its teachers will naturally teach to that level, and not much more, because all the consequences for success and failure will be tied to the tests.

We are headed for a two-tier education system. States that choose to go their own way now and forgo the tests offered by either of the consortia will find they have de facto chosen to be second-class education systems. They will lag the states that choose quality now — much like students who make the choice to drop out of high school and may never catch up.

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