



# Opinion Editorial

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## A Test of Strength Tossing PARCC Bad for Students

By: Sarah McKenzie and Gary Ritter

Imagine you are sitting in a classroom, and have been working hard to learn the material throughout the semester. Suddenly, right before finals week, the teacher announces that there will be *NO TEST!* High-fiving students gather up their books as they leave. The teacher is smiling and looks pretty relieved as well.

You feel like you should be excited too, but after the initial feeling of relief you wonder about the implications of “No Test” and approach the teacher-

You: Will we still get a grade for the class?  
Teacher: Yes, of course, I have to give you a grade.

You: What will it be based on? The test was 90% of our grade.  
Teacher: I’ll figure something out. How about if you take this test from a couple years ago? It will cost you extra though.

You: Was it the same class?  
Teacher: Sort of, except we learned different things.

You: I don’t think that will work. How will I know if I learned what I need to know for my next class?  
Teacher: I don’t know, but it doesn’t really matter, at least we aren’t taking a test!

But it *does* matter ... to Arkansas students, parents, teachers, and policymakers. We all need to know if Arkansas students are learning.

In less than a month, Arkansas students will begin taking the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) tests in English and math. PARCC replaces the exams that have been administered annually to Arkansas students since 1999.

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Guest writer

Because Arkansas educators are a part of PARCC development, Arkansas teachers have helped develop the PARCC items. From writing the questions to reviewing the final items and standard-setting, Arkansas teachers are at the table, having their voice heard.

An 180-hour change eliminating the PARCC testing this spring would likely leave school leaders and parents with no unbiased feedback about student learning this year. Incurring additional expense by inserting in old exams, especially those that take longer to administer and aren't aligned with what students have been doing, is foolish. Whether a good choice for Arkansas, and the PARCC exams should be given as scheduled.

The political controversy surrounding PARCC (overseer unannounced) may mean state leaders eventually reconsider the choice of exams. If and when we do end up choosing a new assessment for Arkansas, we should seek one that generates and disseminates meaningful information about student achievement and growth for students, parents, teachers and policy makers. There are a few testing virtues that should guide this search.

A good statewide exam should certainly allow for comparison across states, should allow for measures of student growth over time, and should be conducted in a manner that ensures the highest quality of learning outcomes that matter to students. There are several exams being used across the country that boast one or more of these characteristics.

Thus, regardless of the outcome of the PARCC debate, there is one thing that should not be up for debate: the usefulness of annual assessments for Arkansas students. Annual assessments provide important general information to the public, provide essential schoolwide information to school leaders, and can provide helpful data about individual students to parents and teachers. Moreover, such student-level assessments allow policymakers and school leaders to draw conclusions about the effectiveness of various educational programs or curricular strategies.

The success of Arkansas students is important to all of us. For all the reasons highlighted above, it is vital that we continue to administer annual assessments of student learning. Repealing the PARCC test today—with the possibility of moving to another high-quality assessment in the future—is the right answer for Arkansas students.

Sarah McKenzie and Gary Ritter direct the Office for Education Policy of the University of Arkansas.



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If passed, House Bill 1241, filed last week by Rep. Mark Lowery, R-Maumelle, would essentially mean “No Test” this year for the majority of Arkansas students. While this last minute change might placate some of the Common Core opposition in the short term, retreating from annual testing would be very problematic in the long term and leave Arkansans as confused as the fictitious student in the conversation above.

Here at the UA Office for Education Policy, we are not at all confused on this issue – eliminating the tests would be bad for Arkansas students. Arkansas educators have been making gains with our students and we need annual assessments to measure this progress. In our view, Arkansas should definitely administer a statewide assessment this year, and we recommend PARCC for a handful of reasons:

- **Because we said we would.** Teachers and school leaders have been working for years to prepare their students for these assessments. Districts across the state have invested time and money to prepare facilities and staff to administer the assessment.
- **Because it measures the standards Arkansas students have been taught.** Arkansas students have been being taught the standards measured by PARCC since 2011, going back to tests that measure old content is unfair to students and their teachers.
- **Because Arkansas educators are a part of PARCC development.** Arkansas teachers have helped develop the PARCC items. From writing the questions, to reviewing the final items and standard-setting, Arkansas teachers are at the table, having their voice heard.
- **Because we care about Arkansas students.** PARCC will help us understand if we are preparing students for college and careers; and it will allow for comparisons with 10 other states!

An eleventh-hour change eliminating the PARCC testing this Spring would likely leave school leaders and parents with no unbiased feedback about student learning this year. Incurring additional expense by reverting to old exams, especially those that take longer to administer and



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aren't aligned with what students have been doing, is foolish. Neither is a good choice for Arkansas, and the PARCC exams should be given as scheduled.

The political controversy surrounding PARCC (however unwarranted) may mean state leaders eventually re-consider the choice of exam for future Arkansas students. If and when we do end up choosing a new assessment for Arkansas, we should seek one that generates and disseminates meaningful information about student achievement and growth for students, parents, teachers, and policy makers. There are a few testing virtues that should guide this search.

A good statewide exam should certainly allow for comparisons across states, should allow for measures of student growth over time, and should be connected to important learning outcomes that matter to students. There are several exams being used across the country that boast one or more of these characteristics.

Thus, regardless of the outcome of the PARCC debate, there is one thing that should not be up for debate: the usefulness of annual assessments of learning for Arkansas students. Annual assessments provide important general information to the public, provide essential school-wide information to school leaders, and can provide helpful data about individual students to parents and teachers. Moreover, such standardized assessments allow policymakers and school leaders to draw conclusions about the effectiveness of various educational programs or curricular strategies.

The success of Arkansas students is important to all of us. For all the reasons highlighted above, it is vital that we continue to administer annual assessments of student learning. Retaining the PARCC test today – with the possibility of moving to another high-quality assessment in the future – is the right answer for Arkansas students.

*Sarah McKenzie and Gary Ritter direct the Office for Education Policy (OEP) at the University of Arkansas.*