

Proposal would revamp standardized tests in California

By Theresa Harrington, Contra Costa Times

SACRAMENTO – California’s schools chief on Tuesday called for sweeping changes in the standardized tests that measure student achievement, dispensing for the most part with multiple choice questions in favor of more rigorous, thought-provoking exams.

As part of an overhaul of the state’s curriculum standards, the STAR tests familiar to every parent and student would be transformed in two years with requirements for in-depth essays and projects that students will complete on computers. The changes proposed by state Superintendent Tom Torlakson go far beyond the tests themselves, impacting how teachers teach and how students learn.

While Torlakson’s proposal must be approved by the governor and Legislature, it is almost certain to be adopted in some form. It aligns the state’s instruction and testing with a recently-adopted set of Common Core State Standards for curriculum that are being phased in now by some school districts, with required implementation by 2014-15. Those standards seek to deepen learning by, for example, requiring students to read informational texts as well as fiction and dig deeper into mathematical concepts as well as memorizing tables.

“Multiple-choice, fill-in-the-bubble tests alone simply cannot do the job anymore, and it’s time for California to move forward with assessments that measure the real-world skills our students need to be ready for a career and for college,” said Torlakson, a former teacher in East Bay schools. “As a

teacher, what's most exciting is that these new tests will serve as models for the kind of high-quality teaching and learning we want in every classroom every day."

California's Standardized Testing and Reporting, or STAR, tests are administered to every public school student beginning in the second grade. The test results are used to rank the state's schools, determining which ones need to bolster their instruction and, in some cases, which ones will get extra money or need different leadership to perform better. But the multiple-choice-only tests have long been criticized for forcing teachers to focus on dull lesson plans heavy on rote memorization.

Torlakson's other recommendations include:

Assess college readiness using English language arts and math tests taken by all high school juniors.

Develop science tests based on new curriculum standards to be adopted next fall.

Create or use other new tests for students with severe cognitive disabilities.

Determine whether it will still be necessary to administer tests in alternate languages, since new assessments are expected to include language supports and accommodations.

Discontinue required tests for second grade and create a state-approved list of tests in math and English language arts for second-graders to be used voluntarily by schools.

Consider alternatives to the California High School Exit Exam.