National exam to replace LEAP tests

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BATON ROUGE — The controversial high stakes exams that determine whether students are promoted from fourth and eighth grades will be replaced when the state shifts to new national “common core” standards in three years, but that doesn’t mean testing will go away.

Penny Dastugue, president of the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, said Monday that high stakes testing is in state law, not just BESE policy. So, unless the legislature abolishes it, fourth- and eighth-graders will still have to show they have learned enough to be promoted.

“New assessments will be aligned with the new standards,” Dastugue said. “Nothing has been brought to the board” to indicate that high stakes testing will no longer be a part of the state assessment program.

New assessments would replace the Louisiana Educational Assessment Program for fourth and eighth grades that are now used to determine promotion and the Integrated Louisiana Educational Assessment Program in third, fifth, sixth and seventh grades. The iLEAP test is designed to measure student progress but does not determine whether students progress to the next grade.

BESE member Linda Johnson of Plaquemine says the board is just “transitioning from LEAP to a system that 41 states will be using.”

The new program focuses on teaching core subjects — math, English, science and social studies — and assesses how much students have learned.

Shreveport

National common core standards will begin being implemented in the 2014 school year fully implemented for the 2015 school year, she said.

“There will always be a test,” Johnson said. “I think there’s no way we will have something without a high stakes component.”

Dastugue said the results of the new assessments “will be rolled up into school accountability. The board would set the standards” for promotion.

“Most people would love to see high stakes replaced,” Dastugue said. “I’d love to see the day we were confident in our ability and the mechanics were in place to assure that a student has learned enough to succeed.

“Retention is a tough thing,” she said. “I’d love to see us develop some type of alternative to high stakes.”

BESE member Walter Lee of Shreveport said the state already has changed part of its accountability system by eliminating the Graduate Exit Exam and replacing it with individualized end-of-course exams.

Whether the new system will have a high stakes component “hasn’t been determined yet,” he said. “I guess it will not be high stakes as we have known high stakes, with only one test. It might be end-of-year testing. That would have more of an implication of whether you successfully completed the grade or the course.”

Lee said whatever system is used to test students, how they perform on the tests still will be important to teachers since the new “value-added” teacher assessment program bases 50 percent of a teacher’s grade on how well students progress.

“It’s going to be a transition, a period of definition,” he said. “The first concern is being able to define and implement the core subjects and non-core subjects in order to have teacher evaluation.”

So far, the value-added assessment applies only to teachers of core subjects.

Less said he does not favor delaying the teacher assessment program until the new national core curriculum is implemented in three years.

“To delay would be a message to the public that we’re not as serious about education reform as we talk about it. It’s going to come.”