

Legislator files bill to do away with FCAT

By KATHERINE ALBERS, LESLIE WILLIAMS HALE

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A Florida representative from Miami who proposed a failed 1 percent sales tax for education last year is suggesting another big change: to do away with the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test, or FCAT.

Rep. Dwight Bullard, D-Miami, announced Tuesday the filing of HB 473, which would replace FCAT with comprehensive end-of-course tests.

“The bill expands the way school accountability is determined by focusing on the entirety of students’ work throughout the year in addition to their end-of-course exam scores,” according to a press release from Bullard’s office. “The ability for schools to prepare students for promotion and their successful use of innovation and technology in teaching would be taken into account in the new accountability formula.”

Starting in third grade, students are tested on math, reading and writing, as well as science in fourth, eighth and tenth grades. Students who do not score well enough can be held back a grade.

According to the materials provided by Bullard’s office, FCAT neglects “important subjects,” such as civics, geography, world history, humanities and the arts.

Officials in Lee County welcomed the news with guarded enthusiasm Tuesday. As Lee schools Superintendent James Browder said, testing in the state seems to be trending in that direction but will cause growing pains just like any other change.

“I think it’s the way that we are headed anyway,” said Browder. “I think the FCAT will become a test that allows us to look at how we’re doing in some of the lower grades, but when you get to secondary schools, an end of course test would give you a better look at student achievement.”

In high school, ninth grade is the last grade in which students are tested for math, science and reading. Tenth-graders take math and reading and 11th-graders take science, but the science test is not a graduation requirement.

“I think the end-of-course exams would have more relevance for every teacher,” said

Donna Mutzenard, director of the Island Coast Service Unit of the Florida Education Foundation, which represents the teachers and support staff in Lee County.

But, she added, feelings on the switch would likely be mixed among teachers.

“Most will be concerned about who is going to put the end-of-course (exams) together,” said Mutzenard. “The question would be, how is it going to be funded to develop the end-of-course testing, and who is going to pay for it?”

Collier County also welcomed the news with enthusiasm Tuesday. Jonathan Tuttle, executive director of the Collier County Education Association — which represents the district’s teachers — said he was “not sad” to see someone suggest a replacement for the FCAT.

“It makes more sense,” he said. “If a student is taking algebra II, the state has minimum standards and the students should meet those standards by the time the semester is over.”

But Tuttle also had concerns. He said he hoped that if the tests came to fruition, they would truly replace the FCAT and not be another test heaped on Collier County students and teachers.

The bill calls for the reforms to be developed over three years, by a panel of education professionals, parents, teachers, community leaders and research experts. Reforms would take effect in the 2014-15 school year, when the FCAT would also be phased out. Students would be required to pass geometry, algebra II, biology I and one high-level physical science to graduate.

“Our bill puts children first by giving parents, school professionals and the education community the power to work out a plan that everyone can buy into,” said Bullard, the House Democratic Ranking Member on kindergarden through twelfth-grade education policy matters and a former teacher, in a press release. “The problem with education reforms of the past decade is that ideas were dreamed up in Tallahassee then hammered into the schools, teachers and children whether or not those ideas made sense. This plan will help bring Florida’s public school system into the 21st Century.”

The reform plan outlined by Bullard would also use diagnostic tests to determine if kids are meeting standards, and direct them toward intervention programs if they are not keeping pace. Intervention services would be paid for “by redirecting money now used to reward high performing schools toward programs to help all struggling students,” according to Bullard’s office. Those high-performing schools, in turn, would still be rewarded by “being liberated from certain state mandates and would get more flexibility to develop and fund innovative education programs.”

Collier County School District administrators could not be reached for comment Tuesday.



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