

Brown ed adviser questions CA's national assessment choice

By Tom Chorneau

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A key adviser to incoming governor Jerry Brown said Wednesday that state officials should reconsider a decision made last spring to join one of two national groups developing assessments based on the common core.

Michael Kirst, a professor emeritus of education at Stanford who served Brown as president of the California State Board of Education during the late 1970s, said California's needs might be best served by taking another look at the two consortia that are building new common core testing systems before committing to one of them.

"This certainly ought to be examined again with a new cast of players," said Kirst in an interview. "It ought to be done quickly too because the work of both assessment groups is ramping up – whatever we do should be fairly soon."

Kirst, who remains close to Brown and played a role during the campaign, offered the suggestions as focus over implementing the common core standards has begun to move up the priority list for the incoming Legislature.

Officials at the California Department of Education have been saying for months that they are unable to take the next steps in bringing the new math and English Language Arts goals into the classroom without removal of a state statute prohibiting work on new academic frameworks.

Removal of that barrier, however, would theoretically also trigger a new question over how and when California would be able to pay for new instructional materials and added professional development of teachers will also be needed.

But first, some would argue, questions surrounding assessments need to be answered that would in turn guide decisions on new textbooks and teacher training.

Last spring, as part of the state's unsuccessful effort to garner points in the federal Race to the Top competition, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger and state schools chief Jack O'Connell signed a non-binding agreement to join the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers, or PARCC, which is led by Florida and Massachusetts among others. Washington D.C.-based Achieve is assisting the PARCC group.

The alternative group, called the Smarter, Balanced Assessment Consortium is being led by Washington and Utah among others. WestEd, based in San Francisco, is helping the SBAC.

Currently, the differences between the two groups are not significant, but insiders say important distinctions are already beginning to emerge over such issues as computer-adaptive testing and vertically integrated measurements.

Kirst, who was careful to stress that these were his observations – not Brown’s, said there are several options that might make sense for California.

One is to be a member of both groups for now, which is allowable under rules set up by the U.S. Department of Education. A number of states are, in fact, participating in both including Pennsylvania, Colorado and Georgia.

The advantage here is that California could follow developments in both camps, free to choose which one would be better closer to the end of the process.

Another might be for California to become a ‘governing’ state of one of the organizations. Federal rules require that states that serve in a leadership capacity are committed to that group’s product and cannot move to the other team.

In addition to being able to influence the outcome, service as a governing state also comes with a share of the \$350 million that the federal education department has set aside for this process – money that could help California no matter what team they choose.

“I think there are strengths and weaknesses to both of these approaches as well as the decision to play a leadership role,” he explained. “But I do wonder if we are not going to be a governing state, why not learn from both sides? I don’t see the downside.”

Kirst did note, however, that this is a key decision that shouldn’t be left to people who will soon be out of office. “I don’t have a position on what to do, but it is not something that should be decided by outgoing state officials in my view.”