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New testing regime at public schools is a recipe for disaster

By Darrel Galera and Roberta Mayor

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Testing obviously plays an important role in educating children — particularly tests designed to help teachers identify the needs of individual students.

The state's new testing regime, called the Smarter Balanced Assessment (SBA), is quite different. It is not just unhelpful, but counterproductive.

>> First, SBA test results are not available until long after the test-takers have moved on from their current teachers' classrooms and, in many instances, from their current school.

>> Second, SBA tests and the entire battery of tests administered cost more money to buy and consume more time to prepare for and administer than most members of the public would ever imagine possible.

These resources should instead be spent educating the children.

>> Third, test-takers perceive these tests as inconsequential and have little incentive to take them seriously, yet teaching careers are on the line, including those of teachers in subject areas not even covered by these tests.

>> Fourth, subject areas not covered by the SBA tests, such as art, music, history and science, tend to be de-emphasized by school communities seeking higher test scores, and individual teachers have a strong incentive to “teach to the test” in the areas that are tested.

The superintendent has long contended that the SBA test results would be helpful in evaluating teachers.

Ironically, the combination of these flawed tests and their role in an equally flawed teacher-evaluation system has already adversely affected a principal's ability to deal effectively with teachers who require their attention and support.

Such unintended consequences can be expected when non-educators like the superintendent take it upon themselves to dramatically alter the way schools work without first seeking the meaningful involvement of school-level personnel.

Businessmen Terrence George and Harry Saunders recently expressed enthusiastic support for the new testing regime in Hawaii's public schools ("Students did well on challenging exams," *Island Voices*, Sept. 27).

They described recently released test scores as "encouraging," not because the scores were high — they were not — but because the scores had been expected to be even lower.

After acknowledging that making sense of all this is "admittedly confusing," they concluded that senior members of Hawaii's Department of Education should be commended.

With all due respect, we strongly disagree.

And Hawaii's public school principals overwhelmingly disagree.

According to our 2015 survey of public school principals, approximately nine out of 10 believe that the DOE has performed poorly in this area of implementing the SBA.

There is an inherent risk in harmful unintended consequences as a result of top-down decisions such as these decisions about the recent testing.

Such risks can be minimized or eliminated by seeking involvement and using the meaningful feedback of students, parents, teachers, and principals.

Such consequences can be avoided if DOE leadership has a deep understanding of what works and what does not.

We can't help but wonder if the superintendent has ever asked herself why no private schools in Hawaii have adopted anything remotely close to the new SBA testing regime currently being forced on every public school in Hawaii.

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