

By Paul Grimaldi
Journal Staff Writer

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Panelists voice concerns about PARCC as graduation requirement

CRANSTON, R.I. — Standardized educational tests remain a target for grassroots organizers who question the scope, utility and expense of the newest assessment program pushed on local school districts by federal agencies and educational policy makers.

Rhode Islanders have been at odds for nearly a decade in the debate over linking graduation to a standardized test.

About 25 people gathered Monday night at a Cranston library to discuss the concerns they have about Rhode Island's moves on assessment tests, the latest one being the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers, or PARCC. Introduced in 2014, the PARCC will become a high school graduation requirement in Rhode Island beginning with the class of 2020.

The event was organized by Parents Across Rhode Island, which acts as an information resource for parents on public education issues.

Six panelists raised a number of problems they see with the new test, as well as efforts to impose such testing nationwide. Their concerns include: the elimination of certain subject topics and teaching strategies, the inappropriate testing approach for students of limited English proficiency or with learning disabilities, the inordinate time now devoted to test preparation, the cost of the computerized test, the threat to student-data privacy and a loss of teacher control of student assessments.

Patricia Hincks decided not to stand by and watch her young grandchildren fail to be taught basics such as how to make change. She advocates for changes to the math standards of the Common Core, a set of academic standards with which the PARCC is aligned.

The retired East Greenwich schoolteacher even brought homemade poster boards to illustrate some of the math concepts she saw missing from her grandchildren's math classes.

"I never thought I would be back in my retirement talking about education," Hincks said. "[But] I saw a lot of red flags.

"There are so many missing skills."

Another retired educator, former art professor Wendy Holmes, described the assessment trend as "testing mania."

Holmes said she fails to see how "high-stakes" tests accurately measure an art major's "readiness" for college. The intent of the PARCC is to deploy standards only for math and English.

"This surely isn't all that education should be," Holmes said.

Barbara Walton-Faria, a Newport teacher and chairwoman of the Rhode Island Teacher Advisory Council, said technology issues hinder students and the districts. The PARCC is administered by computer, but many students are uncomfortable with basic computer skills such as navigating drop-down menus.

In Newport, testing commandeers a school computer lab for more than three weeks, preventing actual instruction, Walton-Faria said. The consequences reverberate for months.

"This disrupts your entire school year," she said.

Walton-Faria said she thinks teachers are the ones to best assess student progress. "Parents need to start speaking out."

This might be the time to do that, she said, as the state has a new education commissioner and education board chairman.

"Things have been changing," she said. "They have been stumbling over themselves to meet with us."

The other panelists were: Jean Lehane, administrator of Stop Common Core RI, and Tracy Ramons, director of Parents Across RI.

pgrimald@providencejournal.com

(401) 277-7356

On Twitter: @PaulEGrimaldi



Retired math teacher Patricia Hincks holds up a board at Monday's forum to illustrate what she said are some of the basic math concepts not being taught in the fourth grade. At left is former art professor Wendy Holmes. The Providence Journal / Kris Craig