

A Perfect Storm: New standards, new certificated staff evaluation, new state testing and tighter budgets promise a drop in measured student proficiency results before hopeful increases.

By Stewart McDonald

*Red sky at night, sailor's delight
Red sky in the morning, sailor take warning*

The State of Alaska embarked on a new adventure when it adopted new standards for mathematics and language arts in June of 2012. Six months later, the state adopted new staff evaluation regulations requiring increased assessments for every subject taught. As educators, we supported many of these changes as a way to improve K-12 education for Alaska students, but the public needs to be aware that the mandates facing Alaska's schools are going to be costly. As funds for these changes have not been allocated, school districts will have to reallocate already strained budgets to implement these school improvement measures. Results will not be immediate. The morning sky appears to be crimson.

Normally, public schools are engaged in a six-year cycle of curriculum review and annual staff evaluation reviews. Contained in every school district's annual budget are funds dedicated to review two to three content areas and purchase instructional materials, staff training and development. This activity intentionally targets about one sixth of the courses taught and usually directly engages about twenty percent (20%) of staff, leaving eighty percent (80%) to maintain their focus on teaching students and increasing performance results.

Kodiak Island Borough School District offers 241 different courses, from career and technical classes, to enrichment and advanced studies. Under the current review schedule, a school district like KIBSD reviews an average of 40 courses a year. With the new standards adoption and the under recognized infrastructure changes mandated by the new staff evaluation requirements, 100 percent of instructional staff will be focused on unprecedented retooling and retraining to be accomplished in no more than two years. That means 100 percent of students will experience the instructional disruption from physical education to physics.

In addition schools have to develop student performance measures that will allow new employee evaluation systems to assess how well a teacher is doing their job. At first glance this sounds reasonable. A second look reveals this means developing not one but two different performance measures for student instruction provided by a music teacher, physical education teacher, or social studies teacher. Previously this was only expected in the core content areas of reading, writing and mathematics. A task like this is not impossible; it will be time

consuming, require training and materials that do not currently exist. This sort of thing costs money.

These monumental changes will keep educators busy retooling and retraining with precious little time to get ready for what policy makers want-- increased student performance results on state tests. The result will create a turbulent atmospheric pressure system with huge implications.

Kentucky was an early adopter of the new standards. They were also the first to assess their students on these new standards. The results were telling. The Atlanta Journal-Constitution reported that on the previous Kentucky Core Content Tests, 76 percent of elementary students scored proficient or higher in reading in the 2010-11 school year. That percentage plunged to 48 percent for their new test results in the 2011-12 school year, a drop-off in proficiency of more than a third. In 2010-11, 73 percent of elementary students were proficient or better in math, but that fell to 40.4 percent. That drop represents a 45 percent decline in the share of proficient students. Kentucky's assessment results should be a reality call to us all. Kentucky adopted and taught the new standards early. The state spent money to prepare teachers to get ready to test students. In addition the new state assessments are computer-based tests. Alaska will have no more success. To further complicate matters, Alaska is not providing school funding to make these changes. Not all of our students have equal access to daily computer based learning, much less are ready to be exclusively tested by computer. Alaska's latest leg on the school improvement voyage is about to get rough.

I am preparing our local community to brace for the extreme measures that must be taken to prepare our students and staff to face these new challenges. Schools across Alaska are continually being asked to do more with less. From 2009 the KIBSD employed 476 people and in 2013 only 410. Funding is not keeping up with the increased costs that we all are facing in every industry and every home. Schools are going to have to find innovative ways to provide effective staff development, deliver effective instruction, provide computer-based instruction, and do it with fewer people and no more money.

Policy makers and the public must understand that there will be a drop in student test results on the new state assessments. This drop can be expected and does not mean the process is failing. The dip in results will be the short-term cost of pushing sweeping changes at an accelerated rate with little recovery time or investment funding.

School Boards and superintendents can expect there will be critics wrongly claiming that such a drop in student testing reflects some systemic failure of the public school system. These hail storms and harsh winds have become a familiar part of the public school climate. Even still I have confidence that Alaska's

educators can weather the tempest until this perfect storm subsides and a delightful night sky beckons a better day.

(Editor's Note: The author is superintendent of the Kodiak Island Borough School District).