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Alaska's education assessment system fully approved

The U.S. Department of Education has fully approved Alaska's assessment system under the federal No Child Left Behind Act, Alaska Education Commissioner Roger Sampson announced today.

"This significant determination assures Alaskans that we are accurately testing our students in the academic standards set by Alaskans themselves," Commissioner Sampson said. "Most importantly, we know we can track the progress of individual students from year to year so teachers can meet the needs of each student."

To date, Alaska is one of only five states to receive full approval. States that are not fully approved face the possible diversion of some federal education funds from the states to school districts. The U.S. Department of Education also is more likely to favorably view initiatives proposed by fully-approved states.

The state recently applied to the U.S. Department of Education for permission to assess schools' progress with a growth model, which measures the progress of each student from year to year and gives schools credit for students who are significantly improving.

"Parents and teachers want to know how each child performs year to year. A growth model is fairer because it recognizes academic growth in individual students," said Commissioner Sampson. "Some schools now are listed as not making adequate yearly progress although many students are improving."

Alaska assesses more than 97 percent of its students in grades three to 10 in standards-based assessments in reading, writing and math.

The assessment results -- which break down the subjects into their components -- help parents and teachers understand the strengths and weakness of students in detail. Educators can use the results to address students' individual needs.

On a broader scale, school and district administrators can use the results to look for schoolwide and districtwide patterns of what is being learned and not learned, and then place resources where they are needed.

The results also are used to monitor the progress of schools and districts under No Child Left Behind, whose goal is that all students be proficient in reading, writing and math by the end of the 2013-2014 school year.

“I’m proud that Alaska is one of the first states to demonstrate that it has a reliable and fair way to measure whether students are learning what they need to know and be able to do,” said Governor Frank H. Murkowski. “Alaskans can have confidence that we are well-positioned to take the next steps toward fulfilling our belief that all Alaska students can meet the standards.”

To be fully approved, Alaska’s assessment system went through a rigorous review by the U.S. Department of Education. Reviewers were looking for alignment of valid, reliable and fair tests to challenging content and performance standards; the involvement of a wide variety of Alaskans in developing the tests and standards; and an effective, understandable method of presenting results to the public.

The overarching goal of the state standards movement is to align standards, assessment and instruction. Alaska began its current school reform in the early 1990s and has been refining it with the participation of hundreds of Alaska educators and members of the public.

“Long before Congress passed No Child Left Behind in 2001, Alaska had embraced standards and accountability,” Commissioner Sampson said. “This recent federal accolade is the result of years of work by Alaska’s educators, parents, legislators, and state boards of education. Their work positioned us to meet the requirements of No Child Left Behind and to pursue initiatives that Alaskans believe are best for students.”

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