

**Alaska's New Contract
For Statewide Student Assessment**

**Questions
&
Answers**

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Questions & Answers

About the New Contract for the Alaska Statewide Student Assessment

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Q: Who is Alaska's new contractor to administer the Alaska Statewide Student Assessment system?

A: The testing firm is Data Recognition Corporation of Maple Grove, Minnesota. Data Recognition Corporation has experience with statewide assessment programs since 1987 and has been specializing in test and survey processing since 1979. The company currently conducts large-scale student assessment programs for the states of Louisiana, South Carolina, Minnesota, Alabama and Ohio, and now adds Alaska to its list.

Q: What does the Alaska Statewide Student Assessment System consist of?

A: The assessments covered will be for grades 3 through 9 in addition to the High School Graduation Qualifying Examination.

Q: Is Alaska saving money by going to a new contract?

A: Yes, Alaska is saving a lot of money. By asking for bids, Alaska discovered a new, more competitive assessment, and a better product at lower cost. The new contract will cost \$5 million a year. This represents a \$12.3 million savings over the next five years.

Q: What are the other benefits?

A: A key benefit of the new contract is that the State of Alaska for the first time will own all of the test questions on all of its tests. This ownership is important should Alaska need to call for new assessment proposals in the future. By owning our own questions, switching contractors will be seamless and can be accomplished with few, if any, development costs. The former contractor owned either part or all of most test questions, which made it very difficult to change contractors. Listed below are some other benefits of the new contract.

- Assessments in grades 3 through 9 in addition to the HSGQE that are criterion-referenced tests based on Alaska student standards in English, writing and math, and specifically designed for Alaska.
- Two versions of each assessment for grades 3 through 9, and five forms of the HSGQE will be developed.
- Testing window in April, maximizing instructional time within the school year to teach skills outlined in the grade level expectations.

- Priority placed on scoring and returning test results, assuring that the results of 12th grade HSGQE are returned by April 25. Results from all other assessments will be provided to school districts by May 13 through a secure, password protected web connection to the company.
- Alaska will own all test questions, making future changes in testing contractor a seamless process.
- Training in test administration and in using data from the assessments.
- Data warehouse for tracking student pass/fail results of the HSGQE.
- Pre-coding all district test booklets from data the district provides through a web based technology solution for collecting data, and making late changes in student information.
- Contractor will study methods to move assessments to electronic formats, allowing remote testing and faster return of assessments for scoring.
- Valid methods for equating assessments between tests produced by new contractor and former contractor, and equating between potential electronic versions and hard copy tests.
- Growth scale will be developed to more easily track the growth of individual students and groups of students, because each grade level test will be fully aligned to Alaska standards.
- Contractor will establish a No Child Left Behind Council to provide consultative feedback on amendments to NCLB and how those amendments impact Alaska statutes and regulations.
- Periodic external studies to validate exams remain aligned to state standards.

Q: Who has been involved in the decisions to seek a change in the assessment system?

A: Commissioner of Education & Early Development, Roger Sampson, discussed concerns about Alaska’s current assessment system with the State Board of Education & Early Development, principals, teachers, superintendents, and others from the education community. He heard that the test window is too early and inflexible. Staff members in the Department of Education told him the assessment system was not compliant with federal requirements due to changes in federal law resulting from No Child Left Behind Act. He also heard that the costs of the assessment system under the former contractor were escalating.

Q: Who was consulted outside of the Department in the development of the RFP for an assessment change?

A: The department worked with consultants the state has worked with in the past, who provided advice on developing the RFP and input on a quality test for each grade level. The Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) reviewed and provided feedback on an outline of the RFP. Two members of the TAC and two members of the superintendent's association read the RFP document and provided feedback.

Q: When did the Department of Education go to bid?

A: The department let a bid out on December 2, 2003 and set a deadline of January 9, 2004 for firms to submit proposals. Five firms submitted responsive bids. In addition to Data Recognition Corporation, bidders included Measured Progress of Dover, New Hampshire; Vantage Learning of Newtown, Pennsylvania; Renaissance Learning, Inc., of Wisconsin Rapids, Wisconsin; CTB/McGraw-Hill of Monterey, California; and Northwest Evaluation Association of Portland, Oregon.

Q: Who selected the new contractor?

A: A committee of seven people examined five bids January 12, 13 and 14, 2004 in Juneau. The committee reached unanimous agreement to award the contract to Data Recognition Corporation. Committee members included: Mark Lewis, contract officer for the Department of Education & Early Development (EED); Erik McCormick, EED Data Manager; Les Morse, EED Director of Assessment and Accountability; Nick Stayrook, Executive Director of Program Planning and Evaluation, Fairbanks North Star Borough School District; Richard Smiley, EED Education Administrator; Jack Walsh, Director of Personnel and Student Services, Kodiak Borough School District; Gary Whiteley, Assistant Superintendent, Kenai Peninsula Borough School District.

Q: Will there be opportunities for involvement of other Alaskans to participate in the development of the assessments?

A: Yes. In the coming months, the new contractor, in concert with the department, will convene committees of Alaskans to assist in development of the new tests. The committees include test question writing committees for each exam in reading, writing and math; content review committees; test question bias and review committees; an assessment policy committee; and a technical review committee.

Q: Do all these committees duplicate work that was previously completed, and prove to be a waste of time working on something we had already developed?

A: No. It would have been necessary to do extensive work on the current assessments adding questions to the benchmark, augmenting or nearly adding a completely new test to

the Terra Nova, and working on some issues around having an advanced level on the High School Graduation Qualifying Examination (HSGQE).

Q: Can we be prepared to have assessments for next year, including the HSGQE retake in October and the full assessments for grades 3-9 by spring?

A: Yes. The State has negotiated with the current test contract to use two forms of the HSGQE that already exist. We will field test additional new items for the exam next year during the test administration. We will have to complete item writing work in the next few months with Alaska educators, in order to field test exams for the grade 3-9 assessments in the fall of 2004 for preparation of an operational exam in spring of 2005.

Q: Will the new assessment system lower or raise student standards or the cut scores of each exam?

A: No. The new contractor is being required to make sure there is clear coherence between current scale scores and any new assessment scale scores.

Q: Will our new assessment system meet NCLB requirements?

A: Yes. The RFP specifically required that the assessments meet the NCLB guidance on standards and assessments, and put that obligation on the shoulders of the successful bidder. We will also meet the timeline of having a fully compliant assessment system by 2006. The contractor will complete validation studies on the assessment system they develop to demonstrate it is compliant, and the State will conduct alignment studies to assure the tests are valid measures of our standards. The contractor will be obligated to correct problems with the validity and alignment of the assessments. Finally, the contractor has an NCLB council to provide legal feedback on NCLB statute and regulatory issues, and to make sure Alaska is addressing those issues in our state regulations.

Q: Will we have any way to measure Alaska students to students in other states as a result of these assessments?

A: Yes. We have two measures that compare our students and our system to other students and schools in the nation. We will continue to give a norm-referenced test (NRT) to some grade levels, which will be a separate exam. The state board will determine the frequency of the NRT this spring. We also give the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) to a sample of Alaska students every other year, and this is a good tool to compare how Alaska students compare as a group to groups of students in other states.

Q: What are the Grade Level Expectations (GLEs), and how do they relate to this assessment system.

A: Grade Level Expectations articulate the performance standards at each grade level. Currently Alaska has performance standards for grade spans, however NCLB requires standards or GLEs at each grade level to be used by teacher in developing instruction and by states in designing assessments.

Q: Will the Grade Level Expectations change the standards by lowering or raising expectations?

A: No. The grade level expectations were first developed in an effort to look at the Terra Nova exams, the NRT currently given in grades 4, 5, 7 and 9, and indicate the essential skills necessary for success on that exam, and to determine what would be necessary to augment that exam to meet the NCLB requirements. Approximately 90 teachers began this work in the spring of 2003. In January 2004 Alaska educators, who are experts in their content area, reviewed the GLEs for content rigor, and appropriate alignment to the currently adopted performance standards. In March of 2004 the GLEs will go through a larger community review to make sure they are clear, communicate what must be learned to educators, students, community, and the test contractor. Once the review is complete they will be sent to all districts from the commissioner, and it will be clearly understood the GLEs articulate our adopted standards by grade level.

Q: Does this new assessment system mean our current assessments have flaws?

A: No, however our current assessments do not meet the new mandates of “No Child Left Behind.” We have an opportunity with NCLB to build on the work of many Alaska educators who have contributed to the current assessment system creating an assessment tool that is consistent from grades 3 through 10, based on Alaska standards, and testing information that teachers will be teaching at appropriate grade levels in each classroom.

Q: Will these assessments eliminate constructed response on our assessments?

A: No. The RFP called for bidders to propose various levels of multiple choice and constructed response as a method to determine what the market is like for assessments. We will be able to have an assessment system with approximately 12.5% constructed response on the reading and math tests, and greater than 25% constructed response on the writing test. We may look at differences in the HSGQE which would require greater constructed response on the first HSGQE a student takes that would also indicate if the student is advanced in skills necessary at the 10th grade level, thus meeting the NCLB requirement of including advanced on all assessments. Because the 11th and 12th grade HSGQE re-take is a state rather than federal requirement, we can reduce constructed response, demonstrate if the student has essential skills, and have results returned in a shorter period of time to provide schools and students information in a timely manner before graduation.

Q: How will the Alaska Department of Education & Early Development work to transition from our current assessment system to a new assessment system?

A: The department will work closely with district personal to work with them on how the assessments will be scored, what types of reports will be received by students, schools and districts, new timelines of assessments, and involving district staff members in the development of the assessments. There will be changes, which impact work districts have done in data analysis, and the department will communicate through district test coordinators and superintendents to articulate these changes as quickly as possible so parties are able to respond to changes. It will be best to anticipate some challenges in this transition, however the long term benefits of having an assessment system where schools can demonstrate growth and improve student learning will be worth the challenges.

Q: Will districts experience any benefits with the new contractor over our current system in terms of test administration?

A: Yes. The contractor will provide training for test administration and data analysis after test administration. The contractor will investigate doing trainings in electronic methods, taking into account the difficulty and cost of flying people to central locations for training. The contractor will pre-code booklets for all districts, and maintain a data warehouse for monitoring who has passed and not passed the HSGQE.

Q: How many versions of the exams will be created under this contract.

A: The contractor will develop, with the help of Alaska teachers and members of the community, five versions of the HSGQE and two versions of the 3-9 assessments.

Q: Will the turn around time for the exams be quicker, allowing testing to be later in the year, but still having results arrive in a timely manner?

A: The test window will be in early April, and the results will be returned by May 13 for most exams, and by April 25 for 12th graders taking the HSGQE. This is possible with the current level of multiple choice and constructed response proposed by the contractor. The contractor also has indicated they would investigate and work with the state to evaluate the capacity and capability of conducting electronic testing, which could increase the timeframe for returning results and allow for flexibility in test locations and length of the test window.

Q: Where can I get more information about Alaska's assessment system?

A: You can go to the web site of the Alaska Department of Education & Early Development at www.eed.state.ak.us; or contact Les Morse, the department's Director of Assessment and Accountability, at 465-8691; or email les_morse@eed.state.ak.us.