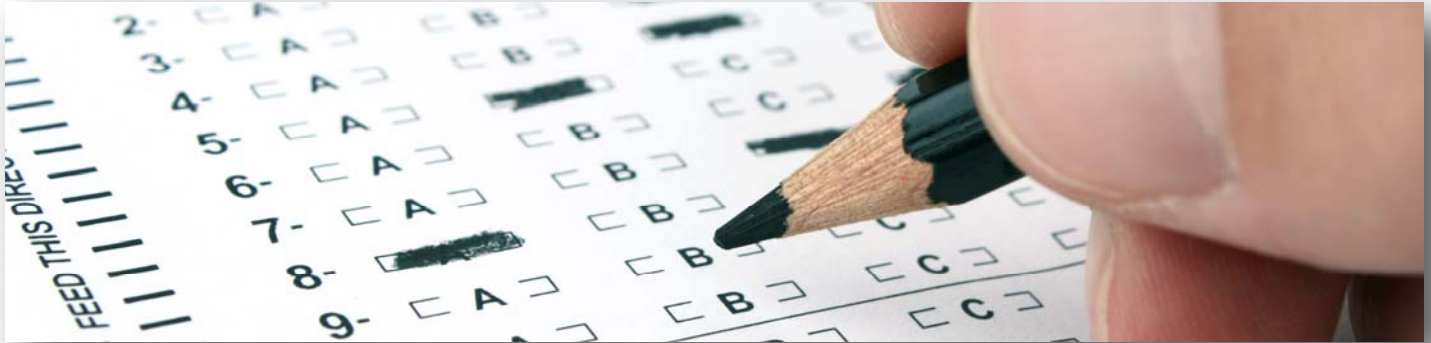


Will There be a Test?

Part 2

California Speaker pro Tempore Calls for Statewide Testing in History-Social Science

By Nancy McTygue, CHSSP Executive Director



Last fall, I wrote a [blog post](#) in response to a repeated question that we were getting from teachers and administrators: “What about testing in history-social science?” As I wrote then (and have excerpted below), I still think statewide testing in history-social science is a way off, and is in no way a sure bet. However, late last week, I heard something surprising – the #2 member in the Assembly is taking up the cause of statewide testing in history-social science, working with the State Superintendent. There are many strong reasons against testing, but let’s also consider the case in favor of it, and what this would mean for our collective disciplines.

The Case against Testing

1. The primacy of local control. [Local Control Funding Formula \(LCFF\)](#) enshrines Governor Jerry Brown’s preference for subsidiarity – a principle of Catholic thought that argues against centralization and for decision-making power at the local level. Applying this principle to California’s educational system has meant sharp reduction in state administered testing ([current plans](#) call for state testing only in E/LA, mathematics, and science). Instead, local schools are encouraged to develop and implement their own evaluation plans to assess student learning in all other subjects.

2. District LCAPs often reflect little interest in history-social science. To receive LCFF funds, districts must document their plans for meeting the eight LCFF priorities that the State Board identified in their [Local Control Accountability Plans \(LCAP\)](#). LCAPs almost never mention history-social science, much less include specific financial alloca-

tions to support instruction in the HSS disciplines. In the LCFF paradigm, the LCAP, more than any other public document, telegraphs a district’s focus, priority, and goals. If the document doesn’t even mention history-social science, the district leaders likely aren’t interested in assessing student learning in it in a substantive or comprehensive way.

3. No one has allocated any money for HSS testing. LCFF established base funding for schools and districts across California, with additional funds allocated to schools with large numbers of English learners, foster youth, and low income students. LCFF doesn’t preclude the development of HSS tests at any level (state or local), but without a mandate to support testing in history and the related social sciences, it’s unlikely that educational leaders will allocate any funds for it.

4. Testing, as an educational activity, isn't popular. It's hard to find any political or educational leaders willing to publicly support more tests for students. In a speech before the Democratic party convention (and [reported in EdSource](#)) in 2014, for example, Governor Brown argued against testing in schools, noting that, "students already have tests coming out of their ears." He went on to say that, "... the genius of each child is not how they bubble in an A, B, C and D." Brown is not alone in his reluctance to support additional testing: the California Teachers Association website links to a National Education Association page with [an online petition](#) calling for the end of standardized testing. Last spring, Superintendent Torlakson did release a [draft plan](#) to potentially administer three summative tests in history-social science, but [it didn't receive a warm reception at the State Board](#). Without support from the Governor, the State Board, and the teachers' union, it's hard to imagine an expansion of the current testing system.

A New Advocate for Testing in History-Social Science

On Valentines' Day, I heard [Assemblyman Kevin Mullin](#) (D-San Mateo), the Speaker pro Tempore, announce his intention to put forward legislation this year to authorize and fund testing in history-social science. The bill, which apparently builds on Superintendent of Public Instruction, [Tom Torlakson's](#) March 2016 [recommendations to the State Board of Education](#), will include, according to Mullin, HSS testing in grades 4, 8, and 11. Mullin spoke at a Civics Summit, hosted by California's Chief Justice [Tani G. Sakil-Cantauye](#). Sakil-Cantauye leads the [Power of Democracy](#) initiative, a bipartisan group working together, "... to improve civic awareness, learning and engagement in California." In his remarks, Mullin agreed with educational leaders and state and local politicians who have called for testing in history-social science to push back against the recent marginalization of the discipline and the importance of the collective disciplines in maintaining a knowledgeable and engaged citizenry.

What This Means for HSS Education Now

As I wrote last fall, I don't believe that statewide testing in history-social science will determine the future of our collective disciplines. The [state ended testing in 2013](#) - and teachers continue to teach and students continue to learn history, economics, government, and geography. In some

schools time dedicated to teaching history-social science has even expanded, due to the literacy demands of the Common Core and the adoption of the [new History-Social Science Framework](#) last summer. (For more information on the new Framework, make sure you join us at [one of our next rollout conferences](#)). Moreover, I am sympathetic to the case made by opponents to excessive standardized testing - the negative impact on classroom instruction, the difficulty in developing and implementing valid tools to measure student learning, and the significant cost associated with administering a statewide test.

That said, I do think there is something to the argument that many of our colleagues have made - that statewide testing in a given content area connotes respect for (and a willingness to devote resources to) that discipline.

So where does that leave us? Can legislative support for testing overwhelm the multiple forces that have aligned to block testing in history-social science? I don't know for sure, but it's unlikely to happen any time soon. Even if Assemblyman Mullin is successful in his bid for testing, he would have to secure support from the Legislature and the Governor for both the creation of a new test and funding to support its pilot and implementation. Getting approval from the legislative and executive branches would just be the first step; the state would then have to write the test, pilot it, and assess its validity - a process that would take years. Moreover this new test will have to align with the many state-adopted documents which emphasize critical thinking as a way to understand content. This sort of test is hard to standardize and is much more costly than previous content tests.

In the meantime, history-social science teachers will continue to teach and students will continue to learn. I'm hopeful that HSS teachers will use the new Framework to organize their instruction around questions of significance, integrating content and disciplinary instruction, with support for student literacy. And maybe if testing becomes a reality at some point in the future aligned with this new Framework, our students will be prepared to take it.

***Note: The opinions expressed in this article are the author's own and do not reflect the official position of either the California Department of Education or the State Board of Education.*