

The Salt Lake Tribune

Utah parents say new end-of-year tests largely agenda free

Education • Even those who oppose Common Core find little objectionable.

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THE SALT LAKE TRIBUNE
PUBLISHED: NOVEMBER 11, 2013 04:03PM
UPDATED: NOVEMBER 11, 2013 08:52AM

Parents of Utah schoolchildren who spent the past week reviewing questions for new end-of year tests were generally surprised and happy to find little evidence they were aimed at pushing an agenda. “They were just relieved there was nothing sinister about the test questions,” said Rep. Dana Layton, R-Orem, one of three legislators who met with the 15-member Parent Review Committee and Utah Board of Education members Friday.

The five parents contacted by The Salt Lake Tribune agreed. “The test was not riddled with controversial or indoctrinating material,” parent Christine Ruiz, of West Haven, an opponent of the Common Core, wrote in an email. The Utah Legislature required committee members — two-thirds of whom were appointed by lawmakers — to examine allegations that the new tests based on the Common Core curriculum will be imbued with a social or political agenda. The 15 members spent eight hours a day, Monday through Thursday, and some of them worked Friday as well, poring over questions that could be asked in public school third through 11th grades (and posed to some 12th-graders) next spring on new computer adaptive tests. Each parent was able to get through an estimated 1,300 to 1,600 questions, and each of the nearly 10,000 questions in the pool was reviewed by at least two parents. Parents flagged only 3.7 percent as problematic, many of those because of misspellings, incorrect grammar or other issues, said Judy Park, deputy superintendent of Utah schools.

Ruiz said that while the “overwhelming majority” of questions were appropriate and well-written, she had issues with questions or instructions that were confusing as well as clunky software manipulatives or computer scoring errors. She estimates she flagged less than 1 percent as potentially controversial.

Kimberlie Kehrer, of Mapleton, said she had expected to see questions similar to those on psychological tests, since that’s an expertise of American Institute for Research (AIR), the contractor being paid \$39 million by Utah to develop the tests. “I did not see any such questions,” Kehrer said.

Amy Farnsworth, of Vernal, said she identified perhaps 10 out of 1,300 questions that might bother some Utah parents. “They weren’t so egregious that I automatically said, ‘This is a horrible question.’ I just wanted someone else to take a look.” Sen. Todd Weiler, R-Woods Cross, said he was happy to hear even parents who identified themselves as anti-Common Core express confidence that there was not much social engineering evident in the questions. One parent was offended by a question that seemed to imply that bringing a child into the world is a bad thing, he said. Others didn’t like that the Big Bang was not referred to as a theory, while evolution was. “The parents wanted them both phrased as theories,” he said.

Karen Conder, of Sandy, said parents could click to find the source of each question, whether it came from the contractor, another state or the Utah Office of Education. She was happy to see questions with Utah place names. “This is a Utah test,” Conder said.

Alean Hunt, of Providence, said that while the test questions were “fair and engaging,” she doesn’t like the fact the test results will be used to grade schools. Test results are used in the new School Grades system, created by the Legislature, to assign letter grades to each public school. “I don’t agree a teacher or school or principal should be assessed by how my 9-year-old performs on a high-stakes test,” Hunt said. “There should be more to it.”

Parents on the review committee were asked to commit to serving two-year or four-year terms, so they’ll be back next year. Park said involving parents in Utah Office of Education committees is nothing new, but she hopes to expand the review committee’s work. “This has been such a fabulous process,” she said. “If the statute went away today, we would continue with our plans to expand this even more next year.”