

# Los Angeles Times

## California wants to update its standardized science tests, but the government says no — again



LaTeira Haynes, right, helps sophomore Anthony Rush, 15, left, during biomedical science class at Dymally High School in L.A. last month. (Brian van der Brug / Los Angeles Times)



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California wants to update its standardized tests in science. But for the second time, federal officials have nixed the state's rollout plans.

State officials say that disapproval won't stop them. Students have been taking the same science tests in California since 1998. The new tests are supposed to be more hands-on.

They're in keeping with the [Next Generation Science Standards](#), a set of goals the state recently adopted to focus science learning more on experiments than on listening to teachers give lectures.

California education officials had planned to administer a pilot test this year to students in grades 5, 8, 10, 11 and 12, and then do a field test the following year before fully switching to the new test the year after that. Field tests and pilot tests are different methods for trying out new tests and fixing their flaws before they count.

The officials requested a waiver from federal testing requirements, in part, so students wouldn't have to take both the pilot tests and the old standardized tests in the same year.

But on Tuesday, Ann Whalen, senior advisor to U.S. Secretary of Education John King Jr., wrote that the waiver had been denied. "It just doesn't make sense," said State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Torlakson, a former high school science teacher. "Why force California to spend millions of dollars on an antiquated test that we're not teaching to?"

California planned to spend the two years trying out the new tests to make sure they accurately reflected student

learning and were statistically sound. The plan, Whalen wrote, was not to report those trial scores to schools, parents or taxpayers.

Not seeing such scores was a problem, Whalen wrote. So was that the pilot tests “would not measure the full depth and breadth of the state’s academic content standards.” This is the second time the federal government has denied the state’s requests to transition to the new science tests.

In late September, the government denied a similar request and gave the state 60 days to try again. That first denial letter offered some suggestions for how the pilot tests could be made to work with regulations, including by shrinking the size of the sample or embedding new test questions within the old tests. The state submitted a new request. But in the December letter, Whalen said the plan hadn’t changed enough. The state has until Dec. 29 to state its case at a hearing with federal officials.

Torlakson said his department is deciding whether or not to do so — but expects to move ahead with its plan. After all, he said, Washington is about to have a changing of the guard, and “the current administration is leaving in a few weeks.”