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Petri seeks to upgrade testing

Rep. Tom Petri, R-Fond du Lac, took on the status quo at the U.S. Department of Education with the introduction of the Assessment Accuracy and Improvement Act, a proposal to provide more accurate tests for elementary and middle school students.

The bill, introduced with Rep. David Wu, D-Ore., as a co-sponsor, would allow states to use "adaptive" tests to fulfill their No Child Left Behind (NCLB) testing requirements.

Currently, under NCLB, each state is required to test students in grades three through eight. Each state has its own tests, which must be approved by the Education Department. The tests are often done on paper and are identical for every student within the same grade in any given state.

Petri wants the Education Department to allow states to fulfill their federal testing requirement by using "adaptive" testing.

"An adaptive test is a test that changes in response to previously

asked questions," Petri explained in a press release announcing the bill. "It's done on a computer. If a student answers a question correctly, the test presents a question of increased difficulty. If a student answers incorrectly, the test presents a question of decreased difficulty. The test customizes itself to the student's actual level of performance with a great deal of accuracy.

"The result is that the teachers, and the people using the test, are able to identify kids who really are a couple of grades behind, or alternatively, others who are doing much better than their class level," he said.

Even though adaptive tests do not satisfy NCLB requirements, school districts nationally, and nearly a third of schools in Petri's congressional district, are already "speaking with their wallets" by spending scarce resources to use the tests because they provide valuable information that the federally mandated assessment does not.