

Database



Testing the Tests

School boards are assessing district testing policies

AMERICANS LOVE TO MEASURE

things: buildings, babies, public opinion, pass completions. You name it, we'll find a way to quantify it. Some of the appeal, to be sure, is the bragging rights that come with being the best of the bunch. But we also find utility in knowing how one thing stands in relation to where it should or could be as part of our continual striving to be better.

Public schools are no exception. Measuring student achievement has been a classroom fixture since standardized tests were first administered in the last half of the 19th century.

Indeed, even those of us who have been out of school for decades can still recite our SAT scores. As students and later as teachers and parents, we accepted testing as an inevitable part of schooling. Until recently, that is.

The drive to hold schools accountable in the last several years led to the proliferation of standardized tests in elementary and secondary classrooms. First there were yearly state assessments to see if students are on track to advance to the next grade, which were then supplemented with interim assessments to gauge if they are on track to do well on the state assessment,

which were in turn supported by practice tests to make sure the kids knew how to be strategic when answering the questions on the interim and state assessments. Add a layer of high stakes on top of normal test anxiety, and we have come to a place where more and more parents, teachers, and students are saying “Enough with the testing already!”

Two years ago, parents began to express their frustration by “opting out” —refusing permission for their children to take the required state exams. In New York, about 20 percent of students did not participate in the assessments in 2015.

While the number of opt-outs were considerably less elsewhere in the country, it was still enough to get the attention of state policymakers—who scrambled to respond with new testing policies. The U.S. Department of Education also weighed in by issuing guidelines that recommended spending no more than 2 percent of classroom time taking required standardized tests.

MODEST RELIEF

The ESEA reauthorization provided more, if modest, relief for test-weary educators and parents. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) keeps NCLB's requirement to annually test students in grades three through eight and once in high school in reading and math, and at each school level in science. ESSA also maintains the 95 percent testing participation requirement.

However, the law does allow some wiggle room by granting states the



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authority to determine how to factor the 95 percent participation into the accountability system. Also under ESSA, states are able to use richer forms of assessment, such as portfolios and performance tasks, that are more appealing to educators and parents than large-scale multiple-choice tests.

More significantly, the law promises support for more rational testing systems by allowing states and districts to use Title I dollars to conduct “audits” of state and local assessments for the dual purpose of eliminating unnecessary tests and improving quality. The inclusion of local assessments in the process is key. According to the Center for American Progress (CAP), most of the standardized tests taken by students are those required at the district level, not the state.

TESTING POLICY ANALYSIS

CAP analysts examined state and district testing policies and calendars for 14 districts across seven states. They found that students are tested an average of once per month, and as often as twice per month. Most of these are district tests.

Moreover, urban districts experience more testing than suburban districts. Urban high school students, for example, spend over twice the amount of time taking tests as their suburban peers. Across the board, analysts found that districts “may be administering tests that are duplicative or unnecessary” and may also be spending “significant” classroom time on test preparation.

For school boards—especially those who are hearing from unhappy constituents—this actually could be good news. District testing policies, unlike state-mandated tests, are something boards can change. Earlier this year,

NSBA entered into a partnership with Achieve, Inc., in order to provide school boards with tools to do just that—lead efforts in their districts to develop a more coherent and streamlined assessment system that puts student learning at its center.

Achieve developed and piloted its Student Assessment Inventory for School Districts in 2014. We are now working with them, alongside school boards associations in Illinois, New York, and Washington state, to engage school board leadership in the inventory process in eight school districts. The goal is to make sure districts are administering the minimum number of tests to produce the maximum amount of useful information for diagnostic, instructional, and accountability purposes.

This is not a one-time analysis. The process includes many steps and may take up to several months to complete. It works best when it involves key stakeholders from parents and classroom teachers to administrative staff. While the tools offer guidelines for structuring an effective process, exactly who takes part and how is determined locally to best serve individual district needs.

Through an iterative process, inventory participants examine every standardized assessment that students in the district take. Collaborative teams then analyze each test guided by questions such as:

- **Basic information:** What is the grade level and subject? Which students take it? What type of test is it (e.g., end-of-year summative, interim, etc.)? What standards is it aligned to?
- **Use and purpose:** What is the intended purpose? How is the infor-

mation intended to be used? Who are the intended users? Do they use it, and if so, do they find it helpful?

- **Operational:** What kind of items are on the test (e.g., multiple-choice, constructed response)? How much time does it take to administer? How often is it given? What is the cost?

Once the analysis is complete, the teams develop recommendations for the board about which tests to keep, modify or eliminate altogether.

Standardized tests are not going away, nor should they. And parents agree. According to a recent Gallop poll, two-thirds of parents say there is “too much emphasis” on standardized testing, but at the same time, more than half believe scores are an important indicator of public schools.

A well-designed testing system—developed with the participation of all interested parties and authorized by the board—will assure that assessments are useful, accurate, and few in number. In doing so, districts will be able to temper the outsized influence testing has wielded over too many classrooms, and refocus teachers and students on the business of learning.



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