

What We Know (and Don't Know) About Testing Time—and What States Can Do Resources for Legislators

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Legislative- and executive-created commissions in three states—Colorado, New Jersey and Ohio—have recently studied their schools' use of assessments and the time students spend taking tests and offered recommendations for changes. Over the past two years, a handful of national organizations and networks—including American Federation of Teachers, Center for American Progress, Council of Great City Schools and TeachPlus—also have examined these issues. While all these research efforts underscore large differences in states' policies and represent divergent political interests, **there is a surprising degree of agreement across the studies, and many of their recommendations are similar.**

Common Research Findings

- **The federal government requires states to test all students in grades 3-8 and in high school in reading and mathematics.**
- **Total time devoted to testing (including all state and district tests) takes up a fraction of learning time.**

Two of the studies that tried to estimate the total time for standardized tests concluded the average was about 1.7% percent of students' total instructional time—although they also found this percentage varies greatly district to district (for example, urban districts appear to test more).

- **State testing requirements vary dramatically, with some states expecting much more than others.** For example, Ohio mandates several tests in the early grades to gauge reading and a battery of end-of-course tests in high school. Colorado has state tests at several grades in social studies and science. In an effort to improve teacher evaluation and generate more information about teacher quality, many states also require teachers to assess “student learning objectives” and collect evidence about how their students have improved over the year.
- **Locally mandated or administered standardized tests take up more time during the school year than state tests.**
- **Students are tested frequently: They sit for a standardized test as frequently as twice per month and, on average, once per month.** Regardless of the

total amount of instructional time used, the regularity with which standardized testing occurs may cause students, families and educators to feel burdened and that teaching time is compromised.

- **Neither states nor districts are especially transparent about testing practices or purposes.** Although parents may know when their children are taking tests, the purposes of the tests students are taking, how results will be used, whether the state or district is requiring the test, and how much time tests take may not always be clear from the information provided. Schools use tests for 23 different purposes, according to one estimate.
- **New end-of-year state assessments aligned to the Common Core standards (such as Smarter Balanced and PARCC) may help.** Because they are of higher quality and include more open-ended questions, these new tests discourage teaching to the test, according to some studies. They also may offer the promise of reducing the need for districts to layer on additional tests to compensate for previous, low-quality state tests. Aligned to clearer standards, they also should be more helpful at pinpointing specific instructional and teaching learning needs.

District and school standardized tests likely comprise about 80 percent of total student testing time in elementary schools and about 60 percent at the high school grades (where testing also includes college entrance and advanced placement exams).

Implications for States Initiating Their Own Studies

- **Examine the purpose, use and consequences for each assessment—not just at the state level but also at the local level—and streamline those that serve the same purpose.** Tests should be used to improve instruction for students and to help improve schools—not solely (or even primarily) to evaluate schools or educators.
- **Engage teachers.** Constructed-response items, essays and other assessments of higher-order thinking take longer than simple multiple choice test items. Most teachers say they want the data the longer items provide to inform their instruction. Thousands of teachers from 48 states last year rated the value of assessments required by their state or district on a teacher created website, Assessment Advisor (<http://www.assessment-advisor.org/>). Teachers were clear: Not all tests are created equal.
- **Mandating limits to testing time are easier said than done.** Ohio is considering limiting the amount of time students take state and local tests to 2 percent of the school year (and limiting the amount of time spent practicing for tests to 1 percent of the school year). Last April, New York legislators set a 2 percent limit on the amount of classroom time that could be spent on test preparation, or about three and a half days in a school year. However, these percentages are somewhat arbitrary, and it's unclear how states will enforce them. (Recognizing both the challenge of mandating arbitrary testing limits and that interwoven federal, state and local assessment requirements are not easy to untangle, New York is investing significantly to help districts trim their local tests, including through a grant fund for research and innovations. Connecticut also is offering grants to school districts to find ways of reducing local assessment requirements).

What are the Right Questions to Ask?



States should have a clear vision for their assessment systems and how competing assessment purposes, goals and needs for information come together—but they often don't. An effective state testing study—one that actually leads to actionable recommendations—should examine all tests, not just a single state test, and consider how assessment strategies in the state can be most cohesive and most helpful.

Based on work in Ohio helping legislators and policymakers clarify different accountability goals and information needs from tests, Education First has prepared a separate case study and tool suggesting a framework for guiding assessment conversation and decision-making. (See [A Complicated Conversation: A Framework for Guiding Assessment Conversation and Decision-Making](#))

The tests students take throughout a school year are there for a reason: They have a specific use, have been mandated by a specific federal or state law, generate interim performance data that school districts say they want, are used for placement into special programs, or have specific stakeholders (including teachers) who value them. But these reasons often overlap and contradict, resulting in a layering on of more tests than are needed and tests of varying quality.

Based on how assessment review commissions have operated in other states the past few months, policymakers should consider these issues in creating similar reviews in their own states:

- **Assessment review studies take time (and resources) to be done well.** The information and answers about how much testing is taking place and which tests are used throughout the state are not always readily accessible.

- **Review processes should involve key stakeholders**—including educators, parents, employers and higher education leaders—in offering feedback about testing and the value of different tests. In particular, review processes should seek out views from parents and others with diverse racial, ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds.
- **Policymakers should examine requirements and practices at both the state and local levels**—and seek answers to these questions:
 - Who or what (agency, law, etc.) mandates each major assessment?
 - What is the purpose of the assessment?
 - Who designed the assessment?
 - How is the assessment used (e.g., for student achievement progress, graduation, school accountability, educator evaluation)?
 - When and how many times is the assessment administered?
 - Is the assessment diagnostic, formative, interim or summative?
 - What are the consequences for removing the assessment for students, teachers, etc.?

Sources

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