

Center for American Progress



# Testing Overload in America's Schools

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# Introduction and summary

In August, when the Lee County School Board in Southwest Florida voted 3-2 to opt out of the state's mandated tests tied to the Common Core State Standards due to concerns about the overtesting of students,<sup>1</sup> a packed room of opt-out supporters and parents erupted in cheers.

As unpopular as Florida's mandated tests are in many quarters, the state's tests are not the sole culprit. A local newspaper's analysis of the tests given by the Lee County schools found that 52 percent of the assessments that students take are district mandated, while less than half are state required.<sup>2</sup> In other words, overtesting in Lee County might not be only a state and federal problem but a local problem as well.

The Lee County vote, which was later rescinded due to concerns that the decision could place the district in violation of state law and risk losing funding,<sup>3</sup> highlights how the issues of overtesting and the way in which tests results will be used have become more and more controversial in recent months.

New, more rigorous tests that are aligned with the Common Core State Standards—which serve as guideposts for what students in grades K-12 should know in reading and math—will be administered broadly this school year. The prospect of this expanded rollout has spawned growing concern among teachers over how the results will be used to evaluate teacher and school performance. At the same time, the new tests have generated hope among advocates that the low-quality, fill-in-the-bubble tests that states currently use, and the added assessments that districts require to compensate for them, will finally become a thing of the past.

This spring saw a wave of so-called opt-out efforts from Colorado to Illinois where parents sought to keep their children from taking standardized assessments.<sup>4</sup> In New York, more than 550 principals signed a letter protesting the state's tests.<sup>5</sup> Some states have decided to stop administering the new Common Core tests, while others have chosen to walk away from using the Common Core standards altogether.<sup>6</sup>

But the bigger question still looms: Are schools overtesting students?

A recent Purple Strategies poll<sup>7</sup> commissioned by the Center for American Progress found that 49 percent of parents think there is too much standardized testing in schools. But in an apparent contradiction, three out of four parents think that it is important to regularly assess whether their children are on track to meet state academic goals, according to a poll conducted by the Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research.<sup>8</sup> Support for regular assessment is even higher among Latino and black parents.<sup>9</sup>

It appears that schools and families are at a crossroads when it comes to testing.

High-quality assessments generate rich data and can provide valuable information about student progress to teachers and parents, support accountability, promote high expectations, and encourage equity for students of color and low-income students. But it is important to acknowledge that for some children, testing exacts an emotional toll in the form of anxiety and stress. Therefore, the number of tests and/or the amount of time devoted to tests should be limited to the minimum amount needed to acquire critical information to improve student learning.

Moreover, it must be remembered that tests simply collect information and that they are only as valuable as the quality of the information collected and the way that information is utilized. Tests should not take center stage in the classroom, particularly at the expense of meaningful learning time. Schools should design assessment schedules, as well as overall schooling, in ways that maximize the learning experience and foster the positive development of students.

In undertaking this study, we had two goals: to obtain a better understanding of how much time students spend taking tests and to identify the degree to which the tests are mandated by districts or states. To that end, we focused on 14 districts—urban and suburban—in seven states during the 2013-14 school year. We examined district and state assessment calendars and supplemented that information with correspondence with school district and state central-office staff, along with other publicly available information. We used this information to identify the number and frequency of district and state-required standardized assessments for students by grade spans K-2, 3-5, 6-8, and 9-12 and to determine the time it took for students to take the assessments. We sought to capture the average standardized testing experience of most K-12 students and therefore only included tests

that either the state or district required of all students. This analysis did not include teacher-developed tests or test-preparation activities; as a consequence, it understates the amount of time and energy devoted to testing in these districts. Because our analysis included only a relatively small sample of districts, it may not reflect the testing experience of students or districts in other communities.

In addition, we interviewed several district and state education officials to better understand why they require certain assessments and the efforts underway to reduce the amount of testing in schools. A number of these efforts are highlighted in this report.

The report finds the following:

- **Despite the perception that federally mandated state testing is the root of the issue, districts require more tests than states.** Students across all grade spans take more district tests than state assessments. Students in K-2 are tested three times as much on district exams as state exams, and high school students are tested twice as much on district exams.
- **Students are tested as frequently as twice per month and an average of once per month.** Our analysis found that students take as many as 20 standardized assessments per year and an average of 10 tests in grades 3-8. The regularity with which testing occurs, especially in these grades, may be causing students, families, and educators to feel burdened by testing.
- **Actual test administration takes up a small fraction of learning time.** Although testing occurs frequently, students across all grade spans—even in grades 3-8, where state standardized tests are mandated by federal law—do not spend a great deal of school time actually taking tests. Students spend, on average, 1.6 percent of instructional time or less taking tests.
- **There is a culture of testing and test preparation in schools that does not put students first.** While the actual time spent taking tests might be low, a culture has arisen in some states and districts that places a premium on testing over learning. It is difficult to systematically document the prevalence of these activities. However, our research indicates that some districts and states may be administering tests that are duplicative or unnecessary; they may also be requiring or encouraging significant amounts of test preparation, such as taking practice tests.

- **District-level testing occurs more frequently and takes up more learning time in urban districts than in suburban districts.** In grades K-2, urban students spend about 52 percent more time on district tests than state tests. In grades 3-5 and 6-8, students in urban districts spend approximately 80 percent and 73 percent more time, respectively, taking district-mandated standardized tests than their suburban peers. But the difference is most profound among high school students. Urban high school students spend 266 percent more time taking district-level exams than their suburban counterparts.
- **Districts are not transparent about testing practices or purposes.** While parents may know when their children are being tested, the purposes of the tests students are taking, whether the state or district is requiring the test, and how much time tests take may not always be clear from the information that districts provide. Chicago Public Schools stood out among all the districts for its transparency regarding district assessments. Most districts examined post some information regarding their district-level assessments on their websites, but the information is often limited in its usefulness for parents and other stakeholders.

Based on our findings and analysis, we make the following recommendations:

- **States should implement the new Common Core-aligned assessments.** Because they are of higher quality, include more open-ended questions, and are more useful for instruction, the new Common Core-aligned state assessments are less likely to lead to teaching to the test. These assessments also offer the promise of reducing the need for districts to layer on additional tests to compensate for low-quality state tests. States should move forward with the implementation of Common Core-aligned assessments.
- **States should issue guidance and provide technical assistance to districts to support fairer and more efficient testing practices that put students first.** States should provide stronger guidance to districts about when and how to use standardized assessments so that they are not requiring duplicative or unnecessary assessments. States should help districts identify ways to streamline their testing schedules so districts do not impose an unfair testing burden on students. States may want to look to New York as an example, where state education officials provided targeted grants and issued individualized guidance and recommendations to each district on how they may reduce the number of tests they employ.

- **Districts should critically examine their approaches to standardized testing and listen to teachers in the process.** Many district-driven assessments are used to gauge student progress and help teachers improve instruction. Districts should therefore consult with teachers about the assessments that they find useful to their instructional practice when critically evaluating their portfolio of assessments and determining which tests to keep or eliminate.
- **District and school leaders should refrain from test preparation and other practices and activities that may increase test anxiety.** As part of this report, we were not able to objectively measure how much time schools are spending on test-preparation practices. But media reports and common anecdotes of activities—such as administering practice versions of tests, holding school pep rallies that elevate the importance of tests, and inviting all students to wear the same color shirt during test week—have surfaced in recent years.<sup>10</sup> These types of activities can unnecessarily escalate the significance of tests and spur test-related performance anxiety among students. Test preparation should consist of nothing more than high-quality instruction aligned to rigorous academic standards.
- **Districts should improve the transparency of district-level assessments.** Parents and the community should be informed of all district and state tests, including when they are scheduled to occur, their purpose, their administration time, and whether they are required by the state or district. At a minimum, this information should be posted on school districts’ websites.

Used properly, high-quality assessments can be a valuable tool for teachers to determine where students are struggling, for parents to understand their children’s progress and knowledge gaps, and for policymakers and advocates who need assurance that all students are receiving a high-quality education. We simply need to get smarter about when, where and how we use them.

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