

ISTEPing in the Right Direction? An Analysis of Fall Versus Spring Testing

2005 UPDATE

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INTRODUCTION

In 2003, the Center for Evaluation and Education Policy (CEEP) issued the Education Policy Brief, "ISTEPing in the Right Direction? An Analysis of Fall Versus Spring Testing," that examined the rationale behind the scheduling of statewide standardized testing. In the months following the publication of that Policy Brief, many changes have occurred around the country to the testing programs of states. Due to these significant changes, CEEP presents this update to our 2003 report.

CEEP research indicates that, in an effort to comply with the testing provisions of the *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB), a number of states have added components to their assessment programs. These components include assessing additional grade levels, alternate assessments for certain special education students, and English proficiency exams for language minority students. *NCLB* has not only prompted modifications to the components of state testing programs, but it has also forced states to carefully examine program administration issues to ensure timely compliance with the accountability and reporting elements of the federal law. As a result, states continue to grapple with the question, "When during the school year is the best time to test students for mastery of standards and to provide a performance measure for state and federal accountability?"

Indiana has not been immune to the discussion of this particular testing issue. Indeed, during the time of preparation of this brief, legislation was once again being considered by the Indiana General Assembly to move ISTEP+ (Indiana Statewide Testing for Educational Progress-Plus) administration from

the fall to the spring (House Bill 1134 and Senate Bill 256). As in 2003, this Policy Brief will reveal the testing timelines of the other states, acknowledge the supporting rationale for both fall and spring testing, and look more closely at a few states that have recently made a change concerning the timing of their tests.

OUR PROCESS

To compile information concerning state assessment programs, a number of national organizations were contacted, including the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), the Education Commission of the States (ECS), and the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL). Only CCSSO reported having this type of information available. However, their data were neither current for the 2004-05 school year nor available for subsequent school years. CCSSO indicated having staff in the process of collecting this information and did share some preliminary information with CEEP. However, due to the limited information available, CEEP staff searched the web sites of every State Education Agency (SEA), and contacted several states directly (via phone calls and e-mail) to clarify and confirm information.

CEEP staff collected information on testing timelines, subjects, grade configurations, names, and SEA testing contacts. As with the 2003 report, discussion in this report is limited to the testing components of state assessment programs, such as Indiana's ISTEP+ program, used for compliance purposes with state and federal accountability laws. These tests are generally criterion-referenced tests spanning Grades 3-8, coinciding with grade-level testing required under *NCLB*, and a high school graduation qualifying or exit exam. A

criterion-referenced test measures student achievement relative to academic standards established by a state entity, usually the SEA or State Board of Education. Criterion-referenced tests used by states to gauge students' subject matter competence typically include a basic skills assessment with multiple-choice questions and an applied skills assessment containing short-answer or essay questions along with the solving of mathematical problems.

KEY FINDINGS (FOR 2005-06 SCHOOL YEAR):

- Seven states will administer their assessment tests in the fall (**Indiana, Michigan, New Hampshire, North Dakota, Rhode Island, Vermont, and Wisconsin**).
- The states of **Michigan, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont** are moving their tests from the spring to the fall commencing in the 2005-06 school year.
- **Thirty-nine states** will administer their criterion-referenced assessments in the spring.
- **Connecticut** is moving its tests from the fall to the spring commencing with the 2005-06 school year.
- **Idaho** and the **District of Columbia** report testing occurs in the fall and spring semesters to gauge how much students learn during the course of the school year. **Utah** administers the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (a norm-referenced test) in the fall and their criterion-referenced test in the spring. **Delaware** administers its science and social studies tests for Grades 4 and 6 in the fall and the balance of its tests in the spring. **Ohio** administers a Grade 8 English test in the fall.

- The states of **Iowa** and **Nebraska** do not mandate testing periods, but allow the testing windows to be locally determined.
- **Oregon** reports that its multiple choice assessments for Grades 3-4, 6-8, and 10 are available online and can be utilized from late September through late May. A paper and pencil version of the test can be taken in March and April.
- Multiple states have scheduled components of their assessment programs, other than their criterion-referenced tests, during the fall semester. These components include English proficiency tests for language minority students, reading tests for primary grade students, end-of-course tests, and graduation qualifying and exit exams for high school students.

WHY ARE STATES SWITCHING?

Michigan. On June 8, 2004, the Michigan State Board of Education voted to move its state assessment testing period from a late January/early February period to early October. The transition will take effect in the 2005-06 school year, and the new assessment will test students on materials learned in the previous school year. The change was based

on a recommendation developed after months of in-depth review and discussion by the State Board, with input from parents, educators, and business leaders from across the state and an advisory committee consisting of 24 educational experts and representatives from statewide organizations and stakeholder groups.

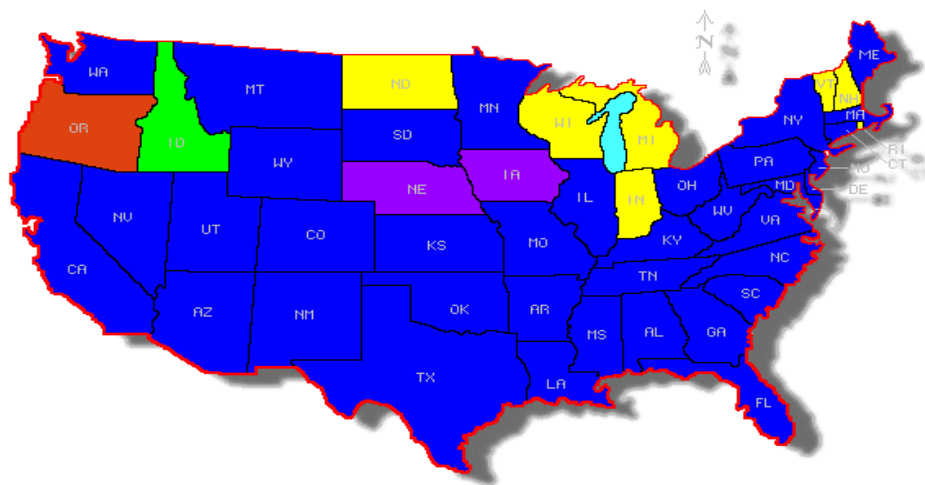
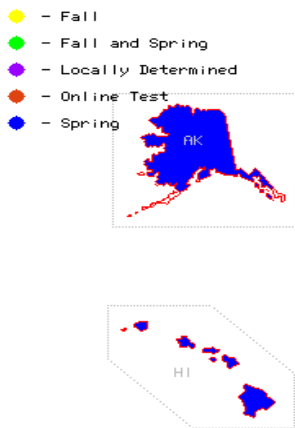
In reaching this decision, the State Board cited the following advantages to fall testing which led to the change:

- Testing early in the school year will permit local school districts to receive their results in the fall, when there are still several months left in the school year and would enable educators to use the results to improve instructional opportunities for students.
- The fall results can be returned to teachers by classroom so that there is no need to re-run the results for the students' current teachers (as is the case with spring test results).
- There is limited time to "prep" students for the tests; hence, there will be less inappropriate test preparation activities taking place before the test.

- The results can be used to calculate the *NCLB Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP)* status of schools and the state accountability categories during the winter and spring, so that school officials can review the results and corrections can be made to annual performance reports before they are issued in the spring or summer.
- The tests in Grades 3-8 can be aligned to state standards that establish what students are expected to know and be able to do by the end of the previous grade.

New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont. Beginning in fall 2005, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont will introduce a new state testing program for students in Grades 3 through 8. The New England Common Assessment Program (NECAP), a series of custom-designed tests developed by the three states, will measure students' proficiency in reading, math, and writing grade level expectations (GLEs). Reading and math will be assessed at every grade level 3 through 8 and writing will be assessed in Grades 5 and 8. In explaining the move, Tim Kurtz, New Hampshire Director of Assessment, stated "late spring testing works well for *NCLB* if you use only multiple

State Testing Schedules (2005-06 School Year)



2005-06 Scorecard for Fall v. Spring Testing				
Fall	Spring	Fall & Spring	Locally Determined	Online
7	39 States	2 (Includes D.C.)	2	1

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choice items. Early spring can work well, but what standards do you use? The end-of-grade standards don't work well if testing occurs with 2-3 months left in the school year. We like the idea of fall testing and have used Indiana's enlightened assessment schedule as proof that it can work."

Connecticut. Staff from the Connecticut Department of Education report that the Connecticut Mastery Test (CMT) and the Connecticut Academic Performance Test (CAPT) will be administered to students in the spring of the 2005-06 school year. The administration of the new CMT will move from the fall to the first two weeks in April and will comply with the *NCLB* requirement to include Grades 3-8 in state testing. To transition to the new spring tests, pilot testing began in the spring of 2003. A spokesperson for the Connecticut Department of Education provided the following rationale for the change in their testing window:

- Students would be tested based on what they had learned in the current year and there would be less loss of learning.
- The first month of school would not be spent on prepping for the test.
- Some administrative groups wanted the change from fall to spring.
- The high school assessment is given in the spring.

ONLINE TESTING NEWS

Some states are examining the promise and potential of online student testing. Though online testing appears to be the wave of the future, capacity issues still exist that have limited the scope of online testing around the country.

South Carolina. On Monday, February 14, 2005, the Education Oversight Committee, a

35-member task force of district-level educators, voted unanimously to forward to the legislature recommendations to reduce testing and replace paper tests with computer testing to speed up analysis of student performance.

South Dakota and Idaho have previously attempted the administration of adaptive online testing of students statewide, but have since switched back to paper-and-pencil standardized tests to ensure compliance with *NCLB*.

Officials from South Dakota indicate a desire to return to online testing once all issues with bandwidth, speed, connectivity, and local capacity are resolved.

Kentucky. Gene Wilhoit, State Education Commissioner, has publicly expressed dissatisfaction with not getting the state's spring assessment scores on the Commonwealth Accountability Testing System back until October, close to two months into the next school year. To address this concern, the state is examining the potential of online testing. A pilot online testing program is being developed at the high school level this year.

Oregon has developed an online assessment program, referred to as the Technology Enhanced Student Assessment (TESA). TESA is a web-based computer testing opportunity that is available in participating schools for reading/literature and mathematics knowledge and skills assessments. TESA offers statewide assessments to all students enrolled in participating schools in Grades 3-12. TESA provides students with options not available through the paper/pencil assessment, including a flexible testing schedule, the opportunity to test more than once a year, and the ability to get immediate feedback regarding test results. While the system is not fully implemented, each year the participating number of districts and students is increasing.

TESA presents test items through an Internet connection on either a Macintosh- or Windows-based platform. With TESA, students take statewide assessments whenever they are ready to do so in their own school and they can retest when they are ready. TESA eliminates test booklets, answer sheets, and other test materials. It provides immediate information about performance to teachers for newly enrolled students.

Table 1

Pro-Fall Rationale

- Greater ability to receive and use scores during current school year.
- Sufficient time to modify instructional plans as appropriate according to student test performance.
- Greater flexibility with remediation opportunities (before, during, after school; summer school).
- Complete scope of academic standards included in the tests measuring student proficiency through the previous grade level (a spring test given February or March would narrow grade level standards and the curriculum taught to students before the test).
- Sufficient time for parents to transfer their child to a higher performing school under provisions of *NCLB*.
- Maximum flexibility as to how and when teachers address state standards in the classroom. Standards, not a test, should drive the curriculum.

Pro-Spring Rationale

- More accurate reflection of student's learning for that school year.
- More timely teacher and school accountability data during the school year that the classroom instruction was provided.
- Better student performance in the spring prior to a long summer break.
- Remediation geared toward the gaps in proficiency for current grade level, not prior year grade level.
- Congruency with 39 other states' testing dates.
- Less disturbance of classroom instruction if tests conducted at the end of year.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- The rationales supporting both fall and spring testing remain well-reasoned and compelling. Therefore, education leaders and policymakers should first consider the fundamental question, “What is the purpose of our state assessment program?” If the primary objective is to measure student mastery of academic standards and determine what interventions are needed to help students reach grade-level expectations, arguments tend to favor fall diagnostic testing. On the other hand, if the primary objective is holding teachers and schools accountable for annual results, arguments tend to favor spring testing.
- The debate continues on whether fall or spring testing promotes student achievement by putting testing data in the hands of educators at the optimal time of year. Insufficient research exists on this issue. Conducting this research should be a priority to enable states to make informed policy decisions.
- Without full consideration of the purpose of state testing and valid research to identify the optimal testing period, costs to move a testing program from one semester to another must be considered and questioned.
- Many states continue to struggle with budget deficits, and spending cuts or minimal funding increases for K-12 public education remain likely. Many would argue that the cost of revamping a state testing program could be funds better spent in the classroom on direct instruction or teacher professional development.

- Policymakers would benefit from seeking guidance and information from their own state testing director, testing directors from other states, and national testing experts to understand the complexities of student testing and the ramifications of significant testing program changes.
- States should examine and plan for the increasing use of online assessments. To enable schools to effectively utilize the rapidly advancing online assessment technology, state legislatures should support the replenishment of technology infrastructure locally. The digital divide between poor and wealthy school districts must be eliminated to ensure adequate technological capacity locally to implement large scale online assessments.

50-STATE ASSESSMENT PROGRAM DATABASE AVAILABLE

CEEP staff have compiled a 50-state database which provides information regarding key elements of each state's assessment program. This database is available on the Center's web site (<http://ceep.indiana.edu>).

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