

Too Many Tests, Too Much Time

A New Opportunity to Create a More Streamlined Approach

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Standardized assessments long have played a role in public education. For much of that time, they have been faulted as too time-consuming, too restrictive and too removed from real teaching and learning.

The shift to new standards and assessments turns the page on this.

Illinois put in place the new Illinois Learning Standards to make clear what students must know and be able to do at every step from kindergarten through high school. When we have new standards, we need new ways to understand how our students progress on them. That's why Illinois created a new assessment system rooted in the standards to ensure what's tested reflects what's taught. This opens the door for districts – the driver of most testing – to reduce the number of assessments that students take.

Students Take One Test a Month

On average, students take at least one standardized test a month that is required by either the district or state¹. This amounts to 1.6 percent of instructional time over the course of the school year², studies show.

Over the course of a student's academic journey, students take an average of 113 standardized tests between preschool and their senior year of high school. The bulk of testing comes in grades three through eight – where federal law requires annual assessment in math and reading – and is driven by testing at the district level.

District Added Tests to Answer Questions Old State Tests Could Not

The youngest students in kindergarten through second grade are assessed three times as much on district exams as state exams, and high school students are assessed twice as much on district exams, a recent study found³.

What's more, the academic purpose of each assessment – the why and what for? – is not often clear to students, families or teachers, fueling concerns that this is an era of testing run amok.

Districts for years layered on assessments to answer questions that old state tests could not, questions like where do my students stand and how can I tailor instruction to help them improve? Old state tests could not provide this insight because they occurred once late in the year and tended to focus on skills that were easily measured, but not the most meaningful for student success. That the results of state assessments arrived months later, when they served little academic purpose, further diminished their value.

If we can get state assessments right – that is, if we can create a state assessment system that truly supports instruction – then it enables districts to reduce local testing.

New Standards, Assessments Offer Opportunity to Streamline

The new state assessment system called PARCC more fully measures students' higher-order thinking, and includes mid-year resources for educators to provide an early check on what is needed to help students progress. In time, PARCC also will provide results within weeks so teachers might tailor their instruction.

That's why the shift to new standards and assessments is a chance for districts to take stock of their assessments and create a more streamlined approach. Across Illinois, school districts are beginning to do just that.

Illinois committed to create a more transparent assessment system and help districts build an aligned, streamlined local assessment system⁴. The Illinois State Board of Education offers an assessment inventory tool to support such streamlining⁵.

With Fewer Assessments, Less Concern About Testing Time

The new state assessments have high-quality questions that challenge students to think deeply and problem solve⁶. But it takes longer for a student to solve a math equation and write an explanation of their work than to fill in a bubble.

PARCC ends the race against the clock that occurs with many tests. It provides extra time for students to complete the test – 150 percent of the expected time needed. This ensures students can show what they can do, not how fast they can do it. Nine of every 10 students completed the assessment within the allotted time⁸.

Even so, Illinois students likely will take about three-to-four hours longer to complete PARCC than old state tests, depending upon their grade level⁹. This represents less than one-tenth of 1 percent of the average instructional time this school year¹⁰.

1 Lazarin, Melissa, Center for American Progress, "Testing Overload in America's Schools," 2014.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

Council of Chief State School Officers and Council of Great City Schools, "Commitments from CCSSO and CGCS on High-Quality Assessments," 2014.

Illinois State Board of Education, "Student Assessment Inventory for School Districts," 2014.

6 Illinois State Board of Education, "Top 10 Things Teachers Need to Know About the New Illinois Assessments," 2015.

7 Illinois State Board of Education, "PARCC Unit Times," 2014. NOTE: ISBE provides unit times, which are the blocks of time recommended to schedule the assessment, and estimated time on task, which is the time that students likely will need to complete the assessments.

8 PARCC, "PARCC Field Tests: Lessons Learned," 2014.

9 Illinois State Board of Education, "PARCC Testing Times Fact Sheet," 2015.

10 Ibid.