

What Do Teachers and District Leaders Think about State Standards and Assessments?

A Summary of Three Reports

During 2017, state leaders will face important decisions as they carry out the enhanced state roles under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) and continue to implement rigorous standards for student learning. To fulfill these responsibilities, state leaders will need to work with district leaders, principals, and teachers to strengthen classroom practice, assessment, professional development, and parent and community engagement.

Three recent reports by the Center on Education Policy (CEP) at the George Washington University can help state leaders and others better understand the views of frontline educators on issues related to state standards, assessments, and other areas. These reports are based on surveys of teachers and district leaders conducted in 2015 and 2016 and on teacher focus groups:

Listen to Us: Teacher Views and Voices describes findings from a national teacher survey on the current and future state of the teaching profession and explores the impact of new standards (including the Common Core) and aligned assessments on classroom instruction, curriculum, professional development, and testing.

Listening to and Learning from Teachers: A Summary of Focus Groups on the Common Core and Assessments shares feedback about the Common Core and aligned assessments from teacher focus groups in Delaware, Illinois, Utah, and Wisconsin.

District Leadership in the New Era of Assessment depicts the views of district leaders in states implementing the Common Core about the impact of CCSS-aligned assessments in their districts and other topics.

While each report has its own focus, they all echo a common theme: the move to more rigorous standards has been, for the most part, a positive step toward college and career readiness for all students, but challenges remain for the teachers and local leaders responsible for ensuring that all students achieve higher standards.

This summary highlights the overarching findings and recommendations from CEP's surveys and focus group research. The three full reports can be accessed at www.cep-dc.org.

Major Findings Across Three Reports

Views on State Standards

- Teachers indicated that the new college and career-ready standards have changed instruction in positive ways, including greater uniformity across states, increased rigor, and a greater focus on the most important skills and knowledge.
- Across the focus groups, most teachers expressed positive views of the Common Core State Standards but were less supportive of the aligned assessments.
- Many of the district leaders surveyed saw support for the standards and assessments among a majority of local administrators, but found less support among teachers, parents, school board members, and other key stakeholders.

Curricula Aligned to State Standards

- Teachers reported that they did much of the initial work to develop and revise curriculum for the state standards on their own. This was mostly because CCSS-aligned curricular materials were not readily available in the early years of implementation. While teachers said the availability of materials has improved in recent years, their concerns about quality and access persist.

State Assessments

- Many district leaders agreed that the new CCSS tests do a better job than their previous state tests of measuring higher-order analytical and performance skills, are an improvement over the previous tests, and will inform and drive instruction in positive ways.
- Many district leaders, however, appear to be withholding judgment about various features of the new state math and ELA exams. Between 40% and 55% of district officials surveyed said that it was “too soon to tell” or that they were “not sure” about how the new exams compared to the state’s previous exams, their impact on instruction, and the usefulness of the student achievement information provided.
- Although a primary goal of new state assessments is to improve classroom practice and student learning, focus group teachers and district leaders indicated the student data they received from the 2015 state math and ELA assessments was not very helpful. Focus group teachers also indicated that they find other tests more informative for guiding instruction.
- Still, most math and ELA teachers reported using student data from new assessments to modify their teaching at least somewhat. And a majority of district leaders said their districts are using aligned assessment results to guide revisions to instruction, remediation, and curriculum.

Student Testing

- The majority of teachers and district leaders said that students spend too much time taking all types of school tests. A majority of both groups also indicated that state-mandated tests should be reduced in frequency or length, rather than eliminated altogether. Students choosing to opt-out of tests were not an issue for most district leaders.

Challenges Faced by Teachers

- Major challenges for teachers include state or district policies that get in the way of teaching and constantly changing demands placed on teachers and students. Some teachers also said that uncertainty about whether their state plans to continue using current standards and assessments presented a significant challenge.

Lack of Voice in Decision-making

- A large majority of teachers and district leaders feel their opinions are not factored into decision-making at the district level (teachers) and the state or national levels (both).

Policy Recommendations

State education leaders are working to assist districts, schools, and teachers in their efforts to teach state standards and assess student knowledge. The following recommendations, which are based on CEP's year-long study of standards and assessments, are intended to reinforce these efforts and provide some new insights into steps that could be taken to provide further assistance.

Conduct ongoing stakeholder outreach around their state standards and aligned assessments.

Past research conducted by CEP indicated that many states conducted outreach around the standards during the early years of adoption. However, engaging stakeholders in discussions about the standards and the new assessments is an ongoing process. State education officials and district leaders should continue to educate all stakeholders about the need for rigorous standards and aligned assessments.

Where not prohibited by state law, provide district leaders and teachers with lists of curricular resources that are high-quality and aligned to current state math and ELA standards.

State leadership and support is key to providing all teachers with access to the high-quality curricular resources they need to teach the standards with fidelity. While some states and national organizations have created and disseminated vetted, high-quality resource lists for educators seeking curricular materials, other states have not taken such an active role. These resource lists are especially useful for teachers in school districts that have not yet adopted textbooks, curricular materials, and training tools that are aligned to current state math and ELA standards. Where such lists exist, state leaders should ensure that they are widely disseminated to teachers.

Provide teachers with timely, actionable assessment data.

Although teachers in focus groups indicated they do want to use test data to improve instruction, the nature of the state summative assessments does not allow for feedback throughout the school year, thus limiting their impact on classroom practice.

State leaders could consider changing their assessments to be a series of interim tests that can be aggregated to a single summative score, as allowed under ESSA Title I, part A, section 1111(b). If that is not an option, states should put in place systems that give teachers access to timely, useful data from interim assessments that are aligned with state standards. A simple, low-cost remedy might be for state leaders to review the information they are sending to parents and consider sharing that same data with classroom teachers.

Ensure that teachers have access to relevant professional development opportunities so they can confidently access and understand assessment results.

The first step involved in helping teachers effectively use assessment data is making sure they are comfortable and confident in navigating the various online portals that are being used to share information. Next, teachers need appropriate training so they can understand and use the student reports they receive. Once teachers master the online portals and are comfortable with how student achievement is being reported, state and district leaders can focus on the more sophisticated professional development needed to effectively use the data to improve classroom instruction.

Address technology issues associated with computer-based assessments.

State officials, working with district leaders, should make it a priority to minimize technology-related problems associated with administering state math and ELA assessments on computers. Although only small proportions of district leaders reported frequent technological problems with administering the 2015 state assessments on computers, even small technology problems with testing can have a very negative public impact. States should make it a priority to address any technology issues that arise even occasionally. Failure to address these problems, especially when the goal is to test nearly all students by computer, may result in diminished support for the assessments.

Listen to district leaders about how state math and ELA assessments could be made more useful to educators, parents, and students.

State leaders should be concerned about the ambivalence of district leaders on the impact of new assessments, and should seek to learn more about district leaders' concerns, particularly how the results from the state exams can be better understood and used by teachers, parents, and students.

Review current testing schedules to see if some mandated tests can be eliminated or reduced.

State leaders should review their mandated tests to determine which should be kept, reduced, or eliminated. To support these efforts, state leaders could seek ESSA funding under Title I, part B, which authorizes the Secretary to award grants to states to audit their assessment systems and carry out plans that emerge from the audit. States receiving these funds must make subgrants to school districts for the purpose of auditing local assessment systems. In addition, ESSA allows state leaders to establish limits on the aggregate amount of time devoted to testing at each grade level.

Taking steps to reduce the amount of time students spend sitting for tests may also lead to fewer students opting out of exams, and thereby enable states to more easily meet ESSA's requirement that 95% of students participate in state math and ELA exams.

Consider the opinions and ideas of teachers and district leaders in planning and evaluating education policies and programs.

State and federal policymakers and education leaders need to meaningfully involve both teachers and district leaders in policy decisions. As frontline educators, teachers have a unique perspective on classroom practice, student learning and achievement, and parental engagement. Their insights about standards, curriculum, and assessment can support decision making at every level.

District officials have deep expertise and can make valuable contributions to debates on K-12 policies and programs. State leaders, including state legislators and state school board members, should regularly host meetings with district leaders to discuss strategy and solicit feedback on current or pending policies and programs.

Finally, state leaders should make sure their own voices are heard. By meeting with their state's senators and congressional representatives, state leaders can offer feedback on current federal programs and policies as well as pending legislation.

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