

KNOWING THE SCORE: THE WHO, WHAT, AND WHY OF TESTING

TEST TALK 2015

Concerns have intensified about the amount and type of testing in K-12 schools. Two-thirds of public school parents agree there is too much emphasis on standardized testing in their community's public schools, according to the national PDK/Gallup poll.¹ Increasing numbers of students are "opting out" of state or locally mandated testing by refusing to sit for exams.²

This *TestTalk* brief provides objective information about testing in K-12 schools. Our intent is to help parents, educators, policymakers, and others reach their own decisions about testing policies in their community and state. Here you will find background information about tests and answers to common questions about K-12 testing.

1. What basic facts about tests are important to understand?
2. Is standardized testing a new development?
3. What are some common reasons for testing?
4. What is high-stakes testing?
5. How much testing goes on in K-12 schools?
6. Who's responsible for the amount of testing?
7. How do federal requirements from the Congress and U.S. Department of Education contribute to the amount of testing?
8. How do states contribute to the amount of testing?

9. How do districts and schools contribute to the amount of testing?
10. How has the Common Core affected testing?
11. What about college admissions tests and other tests?
12. How can individuals decide how much testing is too much, whether to opt out, and which tests could be eliminated?

1. WHAT BASIC FACTS ABOUT TESTS ARE IMPORTANT TO UNDERSTAND?

A *test* is a tool, usually composed of questions with right answers or best answers, that is used to measure an individual's aptitude or level of achievement in an area of knowledge.³ Most of the tests taken by students are *achievement tests*, which are intended to estimate what a student knows and can do in a specific subject as a result of schooling.⁴ Although this brief looks at a range of tests, including those developed or selected by teachers for classroom use, much of the debate about testing centers on *standardized tests*—those that are administered, scored, and interpreted in a standard, predetermined manner.⁵ Much recent debate centers on "*high-stakes*" standardized tests that are used to help make important decisions about students or educators (see the section on high-stakes testing).

Testing policies and requirements vary by location, grade level, and course of study. General data should be considered in light of the specific situation in your own state or district.

The specific tests administered, the amount of time devoted to testing, the subjects tested, the consequences attached to test results, and many other policies differ across states, districts, and schools. Testing requirements also vary from grade to grade. In middle or high school, the number and types of tests a student takes may further depend on the course of study, such as whether the student is taking Advanced Placement (AP) or International Baccalaureate (IB) courses or pursuing a career and technical education curriculum.

Tests can provide useful information about student learning.

Testing provides information that is difficult to obtain in other ways. Since we don't have a direct window into students' understanding, we rely on various tools to gather evidence of what students know and can do. Classroom work and discussions offer one type of evidence. Testing can elicit additional evidence about how well students are progressing and what they have and have not learned after a certain amount of instruction.

Standardized tests have advantages for assessing larger numbers of students.

"In many situations, standardized tests provide the most objective way to compare the performance of a large group of examinees across places and times," a National Research Council board concluded based on a decade of research.⁶ Standardized tests produce results that are **comparable** across classrooms, schools, districts, or states, and in some cases across international borders. They are an **efficient and relatively inexpensive** way to collect and report large amounts of achievement data. Although standardized tests have limitations (see below), they yield information that is likely to be more consistent across large numbers of students than alternatives such as teacher grades.

Research is mixed about the effectiveness of tests as motivational tools.⁷

Tests are often thought to motivate students to study, but the degree of motivation depends on the type of test, the stakes attached to results, and other factors. Even the same student may be motivated to different degrees by different tests. Some evidence suggests that teacher-designed classroom tests that are used to determine grades may provide greater motivation than standardized tests. Although high-stakes tests are generally considered more motivating for students, this is not clear-cut. While some students may work harder when stakes are high, other students may be negatively affected by intensified pressure. In addition, some teaching practices, such as excessive test preparation, can dampen some students' motivation by heightening anxiety, frustration, or fear of failure.

Tests have limitations.

- ✦ The content on a particular test represents just a **sample** of the broader knowledge and skills students are expected to learn in a particular subject. If a different sample of test questions were selected, a student might score differently.
- ✦ Test scores are **estimates** of a student's understanding. A student's score could vary for reasons unrelated to actual learning if the student took the test several times with no additional instruction in between. A test is most useful when it assesses what students have actually been taught—in other words, when the content of the curriculum and test are aligned.⁸
- ✦ Adhering to **standards of professional practice** can improve the quality of tests. Professional associations with testing expertise have developed a set of standards to promote the sound and ethical use of tests and provide a basis for evaluating tests, testing practices, and the effects of test use.⁹ These standards address technical and policy issues, such as the appropriate use and reporting of results, the need for evidence to support specific high- and low-stakes uses, and the importance of ensuring tests are fair and accessible to all test-takers.

2. IS STANDARDIZED TESTING A NEW DEVELOPMENT?

Standardized tests, and controversies about their use, have been part of education since the early days of mass public schooling.

In the mid-19th century, tests began to be used for purposes that are recognizable today, including measuring student learning; making decisions about selection, placement, and credentialing of students; and monitoring the performance of school systems. Even then, tests were seen as instruments to encourage school reform and motivate students to learn.

The 20th century saw the growth of various types of nationally standardized tests. The SAT college admissions test was first administered in 1926 and became widely used after World War II; the ACT was first given in 1960. The Stanford Achievement Tests, first published in 1923, and the Iowa Test of Basic Skills, first administered in 1935, were used by many schools to track student achievement and compare the performance of their own students against national norms. These types of nationally standardized tests were not developed or required by the federal government, but were administered at the option of states, districts, or schools.

During the past 40 years, testing requirements have expanded greatly as concerns have escalated about the quality of schooling, U.S. competitiveness in a global economy, and the readiness of high school graduates for college or careers. A key development occurred in the 1990s when many states, with encouragement from state governors, began to set standards for the content students should learn in core academic subjects and to administer their own tests to measure progress toward these standards. The Common Core State Standards and accompanying tests, discussed in more detail in another section, are the most recent effort to ensure students graduate from high school well prepared to enter college or careers.

Another major development in the history of testing was the passage in 2002 of the **No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB)**, which expanded federal testing requirements to encompass *all* students (not just those served by federal programs) and additional grade levels. NCLB is discussed in more detail later.

3. WHAT ARE SOME COMMON REASONS FOR TESTING IN K-12 SCHOOLS?

The vast majority of tests administered in K-12 schools are intended to assess how well students have learned academic knowledge and skills in a particular area.

The results of these achievement tests can help determine whether students are on track to master the academic standards for their grade and, eventually, to graduate from high school with adequate preparation for higher education or careers.

Achievement tests are often used for other reasons as well.

- ✦ Holding states, districts, and schools accountable for using tax dollars effectively to improve achievement for students in general and for groups that are the target of special programs (often called **"accountability testing"**)
- ✦ Making **high-stakes decisions** about students and teachers (see the next section)
- ✦ Tracking and analyzing **"gaps" in achievement** among student groups in order to encourage attention to the needs of historically underserved groups, such students who are economically disadvantaged, come from racial/ethnic minority backgrounds, have disabilities, or are English language learners
- ✦ **Evaluating the impact of a specific program**, curriculum, or instructional strategy on participating students (such as a dropout prevention program or new approach to teaching math)

- ✦ Informing decisions about **admitting students to colleges** or universities
- ✦ **Diagnosing the learning strengths and weaknesses** of individual students; identifying which students need extra help to succeed; or identifying which students are eligible for special services (remedial, gifted, language proficiency, or special education programs)

One of the most important and beneficial reasons for testing is embedded in good teaching practice—to help teachers adjust their instruction and help students reflect on and adjust their learning strategies.

Assessments designed to provide immediate feedback to teachers and students during the instructional process are known as **formative assessments**, or **assessments for learning**. They may include quizzes, self-testing, practice tests, and many other low-stakes or no-stakes assessments. Although this type of assessment is often overlooked in testing debates, numerous studies have documented positive effects of frequent, well-designed formative assessments on student achievement.¹⁰ Related research suggests that students learn better and retain more when they engage in “**retrieval practice**,” such as self-testing, practice tests, or classroom quizzes that call on them to retrieve information they have read and studied.¹¹

4. WHAT IS HIGH-STAKES TESTING?

Much of the controversy around testing deals less with the tests themselves than with the consequences, or stakes, attached to their results.

Of particular concern are the results of high-stakes tests, which are used to inform decisions with meaningful consequences for students or educators. Examples of high-stakes uses include the following:

- ✦ **Student graduation and promotion**—determining whether students have the knowledge and skills necessary to be awarded a high school diploma or promoted to the next grade level. Tests that students must pass in

order to graduate from high school are called **exit exams**.

- ✦ **Student course completion and report card grades**—determining whether a student will pass a course or what grade a student will receive. Many states have instituted “**end-of-course**” exams to assess how well students have mastered the content of a specific course.
- ✦ **Teacher and principal evaluation**—determining the effectiveness of individual teachers or principals in part by examining the scores of students in their classrooms or school. The results may be used to make decisions about whether to hire, reassign, or dismiss teachers or principals or refer them for support or interventions, as well as to reward educators whose students show high performance or achievement growth.
- ✦ **Sanctions and rewards for schools and their staff**—determining which schools are low-performing and must undergo interventions or close; determining which schools must replace principals or teachers; or identifying high-performing schools for rewards.

Testing experts caution that decisions affecting students’ life chances or educational opportunities should not be made on the basis of a single test, or on test scores alone.¹² There is also evidence that the more a test is used to make high-stakes decisions affecting individuals, the more subject it will be to pressures—ranging from teaching to the test to outright cheating—that could distort or corrupt the results.¹³

High-stakes testing may also have unintended negative effects on the teaching and learning process. For example, in an effort to prepare students to pass important tests, principals and teachers may spend more time teaching students the content that is likely to appear on the test while reducing time for other important knowledge and skills, or they may focus on questions similar to those on the test, such as short reading passages, while decreasing attention to more complex tasks, such as reading a novel or solving problems.¹⁴

5. HOW MUCH TESTING GOES ON IN K-12 SCHOOLS?

There is limited hard national data on the number of standardized tests taken by K-12 students or the amount of time devoted to testing. The most extensive recent data pertains to the nation's large urban districts and comes from a survey and analysis by the Council of the Great City Schools.¹⁵ This study found that the average student in big-city districts takes roughly 112 mandated standardized tests between prekindergarten and high school graduation, or an average of about eight standardized tests per year. This mandated testing (meaning tests required for every child in a designated grade) consumes between 20 and 25 hours each school year the study concluded. The average amount of time devoted to mandated tests in school year 2014-15 was highest in grade 8—approximately 4.22 days or a little more than 2% of school time—but this does not include time spent on preparing students for tests. Although the testing burden is particularly high in high school, much of this testing is optional or applies only to students enrolled in special courses or programs.

At all grade levels, this mandated testing “frequently produce overlapping results,” the Council concluded, and the study found “no evidence that adding testing time improves academic performance.”¹⁶

An earlier study of 14 urban and suburban districts by the Center for American Progress¹⁷ found that students take as many as 20 standardized assessments per year, with an average of 10 tests in grades 3-8. This study estimated that the time involved in administering elementary and secondary tests amounted to a small fraction of instructional time per year, about 1.6%.

Frustration about testing escalates when parents and students feel that certain tests are duplicative or unnecessary. However, concerns about over-testing stem not only from the time required to administer tests, but also the amount of time teachers devote to test preparation, such as taking practice tests. A grade-by-grade analysis of testing in two districts by the American Federation of Teachers found that testing *and* test prep took up 19 school days in one district and a month and a half in the other district in heavily tested grades.¹⁸

In response to complaints about over-testing, many states and districts are taking steps to evaluate the coherence of their assessment systems, reduce testing time, and eliminate duplicative or unnecessary tests.¹⁹ The U.S. Department of Education recently released a set of general suggestions to help states and districts determine how to cut back on assessments and ensure the ones that remain provide meaningful information for student learning.²⁰

6. WHO'S RESPONSIBLE FOR THE AMOUNT OF TESTING IN K-12 SCHOOLS?

The totality of testing today cannot be attributed to one level of government or one set of policies. Rather, it is the product of—

- ... numerous decisions
- ... made at all levels of government
- ... across several decades
- ... for reasons that probably seemed justified.

Some tests are administered to fulfill federal requirements, while others are attributable to state, district, or school requirements. Some tests like the SAT or ACT are not technically required in most states, but they are still taken by millions of students because many higher education institutions require these tests or because parents, teachers, and students recognize their importance.

Some tests are administered to nearly all students, while others are focused on particular groups of students, such as students with disabilities or English language learners, or students taking AP or IB courses or specialized career development programs.

Key decision-makers

- ✦ **Local** superintendents, boards of education, principals (and teachers for classroom tests)
- ✦ **State** governors, chief state school officers, boards of education, legislators
- ✦ **Federal** policymakers (Members of Congress, the President, administration officials)

Other influences

- ✦ **Private testing companies** and commercial vendors that market tests
- ✦ **Multi-state consortia** that develop tests for use by member states (most notably, the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium and the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers, or PARCC)
- ✦ **Colleges and universities** that require, recommend, or recognize certain tests for admissions or college credit
- ✦ **Families and students** who choose to take non-mandated tests of importance to their future
- ✦ The **business community**, which often advocates for standards and tests to ensure students are prepared for careers and which plays a role in developing career-related assessments and certifications

And there's a cumulative effect.

When new testing requirements are added, old requirements are not always revised or eliminated. Some tests that have outlived their usefulness may remain in place. In other cases, both a new test and the old test are administered to some students during a transition period. In addition, requirements are not always well coordinated across the local, state, and federal levels or even within the same state or district. Tests that may seem reasonable in isolation are not judged in terms of their collective impact.

Both political parties have contributed to growth in testing.

At the state level, new testing requirements have been endorsed over the years by state leaders of both political parties. At the federal level, the last four presidents have supported the idea of using academic standards and aligned assessments to gauge student progress and encourage reform. No Child Left Behind was an initiative of President George W. Bush and was enacted with bipartisan support.

7. HOW DO FEDERAL REQUIREMENTS SET BY CONGRESS AND THE U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION CONTRIBUTE TO THE AMOUNT OF TESTING?

The No Child Left Behind Act requires states to administer tests in math, English language arts (ELA), and science to virtually all students during their elementary and secondary years.

The main federal testing requirements are contained in Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965, as amended by NCLB. As the largest source of federal funding for K-12 schools, Title I provides grants to districts and schools with high numbers or percentages of children from low-income families to help ensure that all children meet challenging academic standards.

Under NCLB, states receiving Title I funds must comply with the following testing requirements (which continue to apply even in states that have received NCLB waivers, as explained below):

- ✦ **Develop or adopt state standards** in ELA, math, and science for what students should know and be able to do at various grade levels
- ✦ **Annually test** all students in grades 3-8 and *once* during high school **in ELA and math** (14 tests)
- ✦ Test students in **science at least once during each grade span**—elementary, middle, and high school (3 tests)
- ✦ Use state-developed or state-adopted tests that are **aligned with the state's academic standards** in ELA, math, and science
- ✦ **Publicly report state test results** at the state, district, and school level not only for students overall but also for **specific "subgroups"** including economically disadvantaged students, major ethnic/racial groups, English language learners, and students with disabilities. This information is intended to help parents and the general public see how well their schools and districts are doing and where they need to improve.

- ✦ Ensure that **95% of the students** in each subgroup take the required assessments
- ✦ Annually assess **the English language proficiency** of students who are learning English

Other federal programs include testing requirements affecting specific groups of students, such as assessments for children with disabilities under the Individuals with Disabilities Act and language proficiency assessments for English language learners under Title III of ESEA.

The NCLB provisions expanded on the testing requirements in prior federal law.

For most of the program's history, Title I testing requirements affected only those schools and students served with Title I funds—typically, children in the poorest schools who needed extra academic support. The 1994 ESEA amendments required states to adopt academic standards and tests *for Title I schools*, but by 2001, several states had still not complied. NCLB extended the requirements for standards and tests to *all* students and schools in states that received Title I funds (which all states currently do) and required annual testing in more grades. NCLB also added new requirements for tracking and reporting test data by subgroup.

A major rationale for these new requirements was to enable parents and policymakers to compare the performance of disadvantaged students with that of other students in the same state, district, and school.

This could only be done if all students took the same tests. By highlighting data on achievement gaps, federal policymakers hoped to encourage schools and districts to do a better job of meeting the needs of underachieving groups.

States set their own academic standards and decide which specific tests to administer to meet NCLB requirements.

While the tests used to comply with NCLB must be aligned with state standards, federal law does not stipulate a specific set of standards or a particular test. Many states that have adopted the Common Core State Standards (see the section on this topic) have chosen to administer Common Core-aligned

tests developed by the PARCC or Smarter Balanced state consortium. Some adopting states, like Kentucky, are using their own tests aligned to the Common Core. Other states that have not adopted the Common Core, like Virginia, are using tests aligned to their own standards.

While waivers of key NCLB requirements have given states more flexibility about how they use test results to judge the performance of schools and districts, the basic NCLB/ESEA testing requirements have remained intact (for now).

Much of the backlash against NCLB testing from both political parties focused on the original law's "accountability" requirements, which attached consequences to test results. States were required to use test results in ELA and math to determine whether all schools and districts were making "adequate yearly progress" (AYP) in raising achievement for students overall and for specific subgroups. Title I schools that fell short of their state's student achievement targets for two or more consecutive years had to undergo a series of interventions intended to improve their performance. These requirements became increasingly unpopular because they were inflexible and unrealistic, labeled large numbers of schools as low-performing for failing to meet achievement targets for one subgroup, and had unintended negative impacts on instruction.

In 2012, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan began to grant waivers of NCLB accountability requirements to states that agreed to adopt state-developed standards to prepare students for college and careers and adopt tests to measure progress toward those standards, among other requirements. All but seven states have active waivers or applications to extend their waivers,²¹ but the waivers have not changed the basic ESEA testing requirements.

After years of political gridlock, the House and Senate passed bills in 2015 to amend ESEA. Both the House and Senate bills would maintain the requirements for testing students in grades 3-8 and

high school in ELA and math, and testing at three grade spans in science, but would give individual states more control over how to use the required tests for accountability purposes. As of October 2015, the future of this legislation remained uncertain.

The federally sponsored National Assessment of Educational Progress provides an ongoing national “report card” of what U.S. students know and can do in core subjects. However, it is administered only to a nationally representative sample of schools and students rather than to all schools and students.

First administered in 1969, NAEP was created to provide a common yardstick for measuring the achievement of U.S. students over time—information that was previously not available because different states used different standardized tests. NAEP is administered every two years in reading and mathematics, and less often in other subjects, to students at grades 4, 8, and 12—three critical junctures in the educational system. The knowledge and skills assessed by NAEP are not aligned to any particular state’s curriculum or to the Common Core or any other set of standards. Rather, NAEP content is determined by the National Assessment Governing Board.

Although NAEP is an important gauge of educational progress for the nation, its assessments do not directly affect the majority of students or schools. While all states participate in the reading and math tests (and a large majority participate in the other subject tests), the assessments are administered only to a sample of schools and students within each state. The samples are selected to be nationally representative. Furthermore, NAEP does *not* provide scores for individual students or participating schools; scores are reported only for states and for selected large urban districts. For this reason, NAEP is generally considered to have low stakes or no stakes for students.

8. HOW DO STATES CONTRIBUTE TO THE OVERALL AMOUNT OF TESTING?

States sometimes use results from the same state tests to meet federal requirements and additional state goals.

There is tremendous variation among states about which tests they administer and how they use these tests. At the high school level, for example, states may use the same test to fulfill ESEA requirements *and* to determine whether students graduate, are promoted, or pass a course. At the elementary grades, a state test used to determine whether schools are accredited by the state may also be used for ESEA. When this type of overlap occurs, states sometimes set different “passing scores” to define students’ proficiency for federal purposes than for purposes such as graduation. Many states also evaluate the effectiveness of teachers or principals based in part on their students’ scores on the state tests used for ESEA.

These kinds of multiple uses of one test do not necessarily lead to more testing, but they often raise the stakes attached to testing for students and educators. And in certain situations, these additional state requirements could increase the overall amount of testing for some students; for example, students who fail a graduation test the first time may have multiple opportunities to retake the test.

States often administer additional tests to most students, beyond what is required by the federal government through ESEA.

These may include tests states developed themselves or commercially available tests. For example:

- ✦ **Interim or benchmark tests** to gauge students’ progress at various points before the end of the school year

- ★ Exams in **subjects other than ELA, math, or science**, such as history, geography, government, foreign languages, or technological literacy
- ★ Tests in **grades K-2**
- ★ Assessments of **more advanced content in math, science, or ELA**—such as trigonometry, physics, or advanced English
- ★ **End-of-course** exams (which may be different from the high school exam used for ESEA)
- ★ **SAT or ACT** tests (some states require all high school students to take these tests)
- ★ Assessments of general **career or workplace readiness** skills

- ★ Tests of **non-academic skills**, such as social or emotional learning

States, districts, or schools may also require a subset of students to take tests for particular purposes.

- ★ Tests to **diagnose students' needs or place them in special programs**, such as remedial, gifted, special education or ELL programs
- ★ Exams for students in **vocational and technical programs**, such as industry-based certification and licensing exams

The tests that often matter most to students are the classroom tests that affect their grades.

9. HOW DO DISTRICTS AND SCHOOLS CONTRIBUTE TO THE OVERALL AMOUNT OF TESTING?

Districts and schools often require additional tests beyond those used to comply with federal or state mandates.

By some estimates, the majority of testing requirements are determined at the local level. For example, the districts studied by the Center on American Progress on average required two or three times as many tests as states did, depending on the grade level.²²

Examples of locally required tests:

- ★ **Interim or benchmark tests** administered at key points in the school year to see how students are progressing in learning the content in state standards for their grade (districts may do this even if their state does not require interim tests)
- ★ **Other standardized achievement tests**, such as the Iowa Test of Basic Skills or Stanford Achievement Tests
- ★ **Locally designed** tests
- ★ **Diagnostic tests** required of all students, such as Lexile reading exams
- ★ **Career readiness** or career aptitude tests, such as WorkKeys, Kuder career assessments

Most of the concerns about over-testing, including criticisms from teachers themselves, have focused on federal and state test requirements. But it's important to remember that classroom tests developed or chosen by teachers--midterms, finals, quizzes, and other assessments—not only contribute to the overall amount of testing but often have the most direct impact on students. Most of these classroom tests count toward students' course grades and may engender more anxiety among students than state tests.

10. HOW HAS THE COMMON CORE AFFECTED TESTING?

Tests to measure how well students have mastered the Common Core State Standards often replace a state's previous ELA and math tests.

The Common Core State Standards are the product of a broad state effort, led by the Council of Chief State School Officers and the National Governors Association, to develop a set of standards in ELA and math that would be shared by a number of states. These standards outline the knowledge and skills that students should learn in each of the grades K through 12 so they will graduate from high school prepared to enter a two- or four-year college or the workforce. Recognizing that many families move across state lines, the Common Core was intended to

address disparities in state expectations for student learning, with some states having less challenging standards than others. The standards were designed to be sufficiently challenging to enable U.S. students to compete with their international peers.

Whether to adopt the Common Core standards is a state decision. As the Common Core became more controversial and as concerns (and misinformation) circulated about their origin, intent, and impact, some states dropped the standards and replaced them with their own standards, which may not differ that much from the Common Core. As of October 2015, 42 states and the District of Columbia have adopted the Common Core standards in ELA and math.²³ The Common Core continues to be a contentious issue, and the landscape of adopting states is by no means settled.

States that have adopted the Common Core are replacing their key tests in ELA and math with tests aligned to the knowledge and skills in the new standards. Adopting states have taken different approaches to this task. Many are using or phasing in the Common Core-aligned tests in ELA and math developed by either the Smarter Balanced or PARCC state consortium, while the rest are using their own tests aligned to the Common Core. Some states that originally planned to use consortia tests have dropped them in response to public opposition.

States that have not adopted the Common Core are using their own tests aligned to their own ELA and math standards.

It is difficult to estimate how Common Core-aligned assessments are affecting the total number of tests or amount of testing time in adopting states.

While the new ELA and math assessments have replaced the previous tests in these subjects, there may not be a one-for-one correspondence. For example, the Common Core standards for high school math are organized by conceptual areas (algebra, geometry, etc.) rather than grade level. States that previously gave one high school math test that included content through Algebra I may choose to add separate assessments for geometry,

trigonometry, or other higher math content, to be administered in the grade when the student takes the appropriate course. At the same time, some large districts have chosen to eliminate local final exams, and in some cases midterms, as they begin to administer Common Core-aligned tests.²⁴

It is also difficult to estimate the impact of Common Core-aligned assessments on total testing time, in part because of limited data about total testing time before the Common Core. In response to criticisms about test length, both the PARCC and Smarter Balanced consortia have shortened their Common Core-aligned tests. PARCC estimates its tests will take 8¾ hours to 9 hours to administer in 2015-16, depending on grade level (a reduction of about 90 minutes from the previous year), while Smarter Balanced estimates students will need between 7 and 8½ hours to complete its exams.²⁵ How this compares with the administration time of the tests that were *replaced* will vary by state, depending on the complexity and scope of the state's previous exam system. Testing time may vary even more in states that are using their own Common Core-aligned exams instead of consortia exams.

The Common Core could affect total testing time in other ways. Since the standards are relatively new and are often more challenging than those they replaced, districts or schools may decide to do more frequent interim testing to see how well students are progressing before they take the formal state exam at the end of the school year.

11. WHAT ABOUT COLLEGE ADMISSIONS TESTS AND OTHER TESTS?

Millions of students take tests that are not required by any level of government but are recommended or required by colleges and universities for admissions or college credit.

Examples include:

- ★ **College admissions** tests like the SAT, ACT and related subject tests; only a few states require all students to take these tests, but most higher

education institutions require or recommend them

- ★ Tests that enable students to receive **college credit** for high school courses, like the AP and IB subject tests

Students also voluntarily take other tests with value for their future, such as:

- ★ **Certification and licensing** exams for careers
- ★ Exams tied to **national recognition or awards**, such as the National French exam or National Chemistry Olympiad exam

12. HOW CAN INDIVIDUALS DECIDE HOW MUCH TESTING IS TOO MUCH, WHETHER TO OPT OUT, AND WHICH TESTS COULD BE ELIMINATED?

Parents and other citizens are understandably concerned about the amount, impact, and value of mandated testing, regardless of the source of these requirements. In several states, many parents and students have acted on this concern by “opting out” of mandated tests.²⁶ Parents cite various reasons for decisions to opt out, including concerns about negative impacts on testing on their children, concerns about the time and money spent on testing and test preparation, opposition to the Common Core, and other reasons.

While parents and students have the explicit right to opt out in many states, the decision about whether to do so has broader implications beyond the individuals immediately involved. Schoolwide results on state tests are used to identify schools and districts in need of intervention, determine which subgroups of students need extra supports, and to make decisions about teachers’ and principals’ effectiveness. If substantial numbers of students opt out, this could affect the accuracy of achievement results across a student subgroup, school, or district. For example, if the students who opt out are disproportionately high-achieving or come from more affluent families, this could lower the overall achievement results for a school or misrepresent

achievement gaps between various groups of students. If too many students opt out, a district or school may fall short of the federal requirement to test 95% of its students overall and 95% of students in each major subgroup. This requirement was adopted to prevent educators from subtly encouraging or overtly arranging for low-achieving students to be absent on test days so their scores would not bring down a school’s overall performance. If too few students in a specific subgroup are tested, the results may not accurately reflect that group’s achievement.

If you are a parent, student, teacher, policymaker, or other citizen concerned about too much testing, it may be helpful to consider which tests you, your children, and educators in your local school and district find to be most valuable, and which could be eliminated.

Here are some important questions to ask as you consider your views on testing:

- ★ **Which level of government** requires a particular test, and where should concerns about that test be directed (teacher, school, district, state, federal leaders)?
- ★ What is the **reason for this test**, and is it one you agree with?
- ★ What is the **content of the test**, and does it seem appropriate? (Some states and test producers make sample or practice test items available online.)
- ★ Is the test gathering information that **could be obtained from other assessments**?
- ★ How would **opting out of testing affect** you, your child, and other children?
- ★ If a major test were eliminated, **what other sources** could provide objective information about student achievement?

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CREDITS AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This report was written by Nancy Kober, editorial consultant for CEP, with assistance on content and research from Diane Stark Rentner, CEP's deputy director; Jennifer McMurrer, director of research; and Matthew Frizzell, research associate. Maria Ferguson, executive director, provided advice on content and format.

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