

## CREATE SYSTEM WITH LESS TESTING TO MEASURE PERFORMANCE

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In January, the state Education Department announced it was reducing the length of its third- through eighth-grade standardized tests -- not that students will see much difference.

The department cut one reading passage and corresponding questions from one of the English Language Arts assessments, and one short essay and corresponding questions from another. Also eliminated were two math questions on two of the math assessments. The six-day testing regimen remains intact -- three for ELA and three for math -- with the overall time spent on testing barely changed.

It's unlikely this incremental and palliative bureaucratic response will do much to quiet the widespread protests over the impact and use of standardized tests in schools. Nor should it, for these revisions cannot be understood as anything but cosmetic.

The fact that state exams will still be administered over six days is important. In our report, "Time on Test: The Fixed Costs of 3-8 Standardized Testing in New York," we showed that an average of 96 minutes is spent on test administration -- in addition to the 90 minutes, on average, that students spend taking the actual exam. This amounts to a total 186 minutes consumed by the testing process on each of the six days of ELA and math testing, a rough equivalent of 3.5 days or 18.6 hours. The bottom line: Even with the state's changes, six days of testing means that far too much instructional time will still be sacrificed.

The state Education Department also announced that students who are "working productively" on a test may take more than the allotted time if needed. This is, apparently, a response to parental worry about the stress children feel when they are unable to complete tests.

We contend that the inability of many students to finish within the time constraints is an indicator of a poorly constructed test.

Moreover, this attempt at reducing testing pressures will add time to testing; as some students wait for their "productively working" peers to finish, the marginal effect of reducing the number of test questions will be negated.

Perhaps the reason for the superficial tinkering is because the purpose of standardized testing remains broadly characterized as serving both administrative and instructional goals. On the administrative side, we are looking for school and school district accountability. On the instructional side, we want to know how each individual child is doing in school.

The fact is, however, that these standardized tests are not needed to provide critical information about individual students. New York school districts regularly assess children throughout the school year on Common Core-aligned curriculum. This allows each child's strengths and weaknesses to be identified -- and acted upon -- in a timely fashion during that school year.

Recognizing this, we can create a system to measure school and district performance that requires less testing of students and less loss of instructional time.

One idea is to randomly assign the three different ELA tests to three subgroups of students within a grade and then administer those tests on a single day; the same could be done for the math tests. Each student would take one of the ELA assessments and one of the math assessments, providing enough data to assess schools and districts overall, while reducing testing to two days. Except for very small places, where some modification of this approach may be needed, performance of the schools and districts can be assessed by examining the outcomes of the three ELA exams and the three math exams.

We agree that there is value in school- and district-level accountability, and that some assessment is necessary toward that end.

We also believe that measurement of outcomes should be goal-oriented, purposeful, efficient and minimally disruptive of the mission of our schools.

Once we recognize that we do not need the state's grades 3-8 standardized tests to measure individual student achievement, we can conceptualize ways to evaluate school and district progress without making students bear such a great burden in its service.

Standardized testing reform? The state Education Department has to go back to the drawing board.

BOX:

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