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Putting education to the test

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RALEIGH — Do you believe that the word “test” is figuratively a four-letter word? Politicians on the left and right surely do.

Republican Gov. Pat McCrory and Democratic gubernatorial candidate Roy Cooper are both opponents of excessive and duplicative standardized testing. Surveys suggest that parents, teachers, and administrators believe that “overtesting” is a problem. Even members of the N.C. State Board of Education, particularly Lt. Gov. Dan Forest, want to hold the line on

state testing requirements.

In one of the many overlooked achievements of his first term, McCrory led an effort to examine North Carolina's end-of-grade and end-of-course assessments. In 2013, McCrory called on the State Board of Education to examine state testing requirements, and, months later, the board appointed members to the newly created (and unfortunately named) Task Force on Summative Assessment. As a result of the task force's work, for example, the N.C. Department of Public Instruction initiated an innovative pilot program for through-course/interim assessments in elementary and middle schools.

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While the amount of time used for standardized testing informed the task force's work, there is still much we do not know. For example, how much time do North Carolina public school students spend on testing and tasks related to testing? Is it truly excessive? Who imposes testing requirements? Can policymakers find a way to balance the need for testing with the concerns of those who question its use?

The Council of the Great City Schools published "Student Testing in America's Great City Schools: An Inventory and Preliminary Analysis" in October. Researchers found that federal, state, and locally mandated assessments in 66 urban school districts consumed about 25 hours, or around 2.3 percent of a typical 180-day school year.

But this is somewhat misleading. The report did not account for optional tests, diagnostic tests for students with disabilities or English learners, school-developed or required tests, or teacher-designed or -developed tests. In addition, it did not evaluate time used for test preparation.

On the other hand, "Testing Overload in America's Schools," a 2014 paper published by Melissa Lazarín of the Center for American Progress, concluded that schools spend only an average of 1.6 percent of total classroom time for testing. Interestingly, Lazarín observed that school districts required more testing than states. In fact, she found that students in grades K-2 were tested three times as much on district exams as state exams. High school students are tested twice as much on district exams as those mandated by the state.

Finally, researchers at the The Benjamin Center for Public Policy Initiatives at SUNY New Paltz analyzed testing time used for New York state standardized English language arts and math exams in grades 3-8. Benjamin Center researchers Robin Jacobowitz and KT Tobin found that state testing alone required 2 percent of the total school year.

Similar to the Council of the Great City Schools report, their analysis did not include field tests, practice tests, makeup tests, test preparation, or additional testing for English language learners or students with special needs.

By spending around 2 percent of their time on administering state tests, New York public schools appeared to have broken state law. In 2014, the New York state legislature approved a 1 percent limit on testing. The authors correctly point out that time limits on testing are arbitrary and "grounded less in science and more in rhetoric." In an attempt to appease the anti-testing crowd, legislators approved a law that was politically expedient but empirically dubious.

The lessons from these studies are clear. First, legislators should avoid placing arbitrary caps on testing time. There is simply no research that supports it. And schools and districts will find a way to feign their compliance anyway.

Second, they should be mindful that school and school district testing mandates likely consume more time than tests required by the state or federal government. Even then, locally administered testing often varies by school and student.

It would be a mistake for state legislators or federal bureaucrats to impose one-size-fits-all rules that govern decisions

made at the school and district levels. After all, we have enough of those already.

Terry Stoops is director of research and education studies for the John Locke Foundation.

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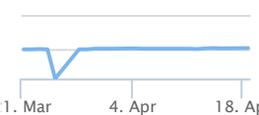
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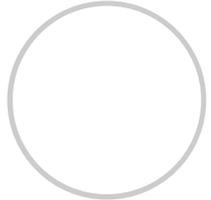
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