

Answer Sheet

## Report: Time spent on standardized testing in schools is underestimated

By **Valerie Strauss** November 19

A new report finds that the amount of time estimated that students spend on standardized testing in New York State is underestimated.

The report (see below) was done by Robin Jacobowitz and Kt Tobin of The Benjamin Center for Public Policy Initiatives at SUNY New Paltz. Jacobowitz is the director of education projects at The Benjamin Center, and Tobin is the center's associate director. They conclude:

\*In the 2014-15 school year, on average, 1,110 minutes were dedicated to the New York State standardized testing process (in reading and math) for students in Grades 3-6 and 1,134 minutes were dedicated to this process for students in Grades 7-8. This represents 2 percent of "required annual instructional hours" for Grades 3-6 and 1.9 percent for Grades 7-8, and exceeds — essentially doubling — the standard set by the state legislature.

\*This is an underestimation of the time testing really takes. For one thing, science testing, mandated for students in 4th and 8th grades, are not included. In addition, the 180-day school year is used as a basis for establishing instructional hours in a year, even though previous research demonstrates that students in New York State do not receive the assumed 180 required days of instruction.

\*The researchers did not measure all tasks associated with Grades 3-8 standardized testing, such as practice tests or test prep. Thus, the 2 percent is called a floor for the amount of time devoted to Grades 3-8 testing in New York.

\*Instruction on testing days is limited well beyond the actual time students spend taking the tests. Whole schools are impacted by testing, even for non-testing grades.

Here's a post on the report by its authors. While they look at New York State, the issues they raise about time spent on testing affect every state.

By Robin Jacobowitz and Kt Tobin

How much time does testing in schools *really* take?

A survey of New York State teachers who administered standardized assessments this past spring in Grades 3-8, conducted

by the Benjamin Center at SUNY New Paltz, demonstrated that these tests took about 2 percent of the minimum required annual instructional hours. This is double the 1 percent limit placed on these assessments by the New York State legislature in 2014 — and this does not include many of the other tasks associated with New York Grades 3-8 testing, such as field tests, practice tests, makeup tests, test prep and lengthier administrations for English Language Learners or students with special needs.

This fall, Governor Andrew Cuomo charged his newly created Common Core Task Force with examining the quantity and length of exams. The state Education Department announced plans to reduce state-administered 2016 exams by eliminating some questions but not the time allotted to take the tests. And at the national level, the Obama administration called on lawmakers to ensure that tests not exceed 2 percent of classroom time.

But these policy choices about placing limits on testing time in schools are missing a key common-sense point: The proper measurement of time devoted to state-administered standardized assessment must include both the time the actual tests take and the time spent to administer them. We call these the “fixed costs” of standardized testing.

These “fixed costs,” most of which are prescribed and detailed in a 48-page manual disseminated by the New York State Education Department include: the time used to set up the classroom, ensure that certain students get their accommodations, count and distribute the tests, read directions, count and secure tests when students are finished, and then reorient students back to instruction after exams.

#### *[\[Why Obama's plan to cap standardized testing won't work\]](#)*

Using this common-sense standard, it becomes clear that the time (and resources) dedicated to testing are actually much greater than the tests' duration. This is very important because when students are engaged in this testing process, they are not engaged in learning. And when teachers are engaged in this testing process, they are not engaged in teaching.

There are more costs, too. Our recently released study on [“Time on Test: The Fixed Costs of 3-8 Standardized Testing in NYS,”](#) shows that the testing process disrupts instruction for the remainder of testing days and also forces a reallocation of resources for all students, regardless of whether or not they are in a testing grade.

And what is the basis for claiming that “1 or 2 percent for tests” is appropriate? This notion appears to be grounded less in science and more in rhetoric and bureaucratic convenience. Where time on testing is concerned, our students would be better served by a thoughtful testing policy designed with consideration of both the loss of instruction it entails and reasonable expectations of our kids' capacity to sit for lengthy exams.

We are glad that elected leaders and policy makers are seeking to shorten exams. However, reducing the time spent on each exam won't cut the “fixed costs” of testing. Before a student picks up a pencil, and in the time after that pencil is put back down, there is a whole system of procedures that accompanies standardized testing that detracts from teaching and learning. The only way to eliminate these fixed costs is to reduce the number of exam days.

An appropriate level of assessment is important to assure that our schools are doing a good job. Our New York State schools give more time to testing than we think they do. We need to pay attention to the real costs, and the educational consequences.

Here's the report:



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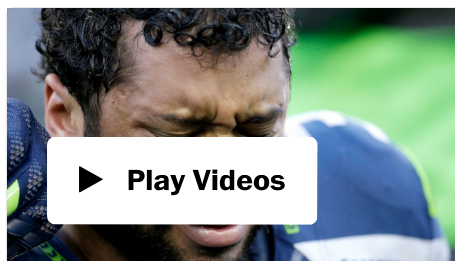
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Valerie Strauss covers education and runs The Answer Sheet blog.

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