

Why the 'good' news about new standardized test scores really isn't



By **Valerie Strauss** August 16 at 4:10 PM

New York state education officials recently announced that standardized test scores had gone up in 2016 over 2015, and they said that this was very good news. But was it? When is “good” news not really good? This is explained in the following post, 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 a member of the school board in the Kingston City School District. Tobin is the center’s associate director.

By Robin Jacobowitz and KT Tobin

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The *seeming* good news from the New York State Education Department at the end of July was that our students from third through eighth grades who tested as proficient this year was up 6.6 percent in English and 1 percent in Math. The *actual* bad news is that this year’s results simply cannot be compared to last year’s. The 2016 tests were shorter and were given without a time limit, as long as students continued to “work productively.” Because the time given to testing varied from school to school, and even student to student, the assessments are no longer standardized.

These changes to the 2016 assessment – fewer questions and no time limit – were made in response to widespread protests against the time in school that testing takes and the anxiety these tests produce for children. But, in an effort to be responsive

to these concerns— a good thing—test standardization was sacrificed—a bad thing. Bad because without standardization, scores cannot be compared across districts, schools, classrooms, or time. This lack of comparability renders the assessments virtually useless.

We argued previously that the NYS 3-8 assessments are not needed for individual student evaluation. NYS school districts assess children throughout the school year in Common Core-aligned curriculum. This allows students' strengths and weaknesses to be identified – and acted upon – in a timely fashion *during that* school year. NYS 3-8 tests are not needed to guide instruction; parents, teachers, and students have been receiving this information, and responding to it, all year long. The purpose of the NYS 3-8 assessments, then, should be to measure institutional performance, to provide school and district based accountability. If the tests are not standardized, they cannot serve this function.

The small increase in those who opted out of the statewide tests this year, from 20 percent to 21 percent of potential test takers, suggests that parental protest against testing may be solidifying. Ironically, the SED's revisions of the tests actually provide an additional rationale for opting out; because the test results now do not provide institutional accountability, they've lost their primary purpose.

We do not believe that it is fair or ethical to ask students to sit through seven or eight hours of now un-standardized testing, especially with one in five opting out. (This average testing time is the SED's estimate for the 2016 assessments across all grades over the six days.)

Accountability is important. And we can have it, if we proceed in another way, preserving standardized measurement while cutting the demands on kids. Rather than continuing with the current regime of three ELA assessments and three math assessments administered over six days, we can, instead, 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 in total. Except for very small places, where some modification of this approach may be needed, performance of the schools and districts can then be assessed by examining the outcomes of the three ELA exams and the three math exams.

If we are going to test our students each year – and we must, given requirements of the federal Every Student Succeeds Act – results must be meaningful and useful for school and district-based accountability. Otherwise, we are just wasting time.

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