Effective assessment provides valuable feedback to students, teachers, and parents on student learning and progress, informing instruction and support for student success. This Spotlight will help you understand updated testing guidance from the U.S. Department of Education; learn how federal grants plan to make state assessments more equitable; examine research on how civics testing can be improved; analyze trends in college-placement test scores; and more.

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more flexible test, given on the devices schools and students are already using, that quickly produces actionable information for educators and policymakers: That’s the vision going forward for the test known as the Nation’s Report Card.

The National Assessment of Educational Progress, or NAEP, is the only national, comparative gauge of K-12 student achievement. The pandemic—as it did with so many other fields—utterly upended things, resulting in the disappointing cancellation of its 2021 administration. Now its leaders say they’ve taken what they’ve learned to heart and are devising plans for a more resilient, purposeful exam.

In a lengthy blog post last week, Peggy Carr—a longtime civil servant who was named the commissioner of NCES in August 2021—and Lesley Muldoon, the executive director of the National Assessment Governing Board, outlined these priorities in a joint statement. (The two agencies, both within the U.S. Department of Education, share the responsibility for the exam. NAGB develops the test frameworks and policies, while NCES analyzes all the numbers and reports out the results.)

In interviews with Education Week, the leaders explained more about what these priorities will mean for NAEP.

Their blueprint is expected to be bolstered by a report due out this week from the National Academies—one of a series commissioned in 2018 to study the NCES as part of its 150th anniversary.

Here’s a rundown of what’s to come for NAEP.

1. Soon, NAEP will be given on different devices.

It wasn’t that long ago, in 2017, that the venerable exam began to be given on devices rather than paper and pencil fill-in-the-bubble forms. Testing agents went out to schools with special laptops to administer the exams, eliminating the need for all those pesky scoring sheets.

But that wasn’t enough to keep NAEP going during the pandemic. Schools were operating in widely different modes—some in-person, some hybrid, some virtual only—and test contractors couldn’t access all of them. It all threatened to skew the results so badly that the data wouldn’t have been usable. The agencies had no choice but to push back the test.

Like many other fields, “When it came, we were kind of caught off guard—flat footed in a way. We could not reach these students,” said Carr. “And I think there was this awakening of the large-scale assessment community and stakeholders that we were not prepared to do what they needed us to do when the chips were down. Our infrastructure was not ready.”

That’s the impetus for plans to design a way for NAEP to be taken on different kinds of devices, like Chromebooks or school-issued laptops—whatever’s in use where students are taking the exam.

It will take until 2026 until this is completely up and running, but when it is, NAEP will be in much better shape to weather another massive disruption to schools. There will also be fewer contractors needed to make the testing happen. And over time, this could also potentially produce more accurate results. Here’s why.

A growing number of students are enrolled in some kind of online learning program. There used to be no way to capture these students because NAEP was only administered at physical school buildings. After this switch, though, these students could possibly be included—and that would help maintain an accurate picture of achievement as more students enroll in virtual offerings.

Making NAEP “device agnostic” does pose some interesting technical challenges for the agencies. They’ll have to ensure kids don’t have an unfair advantage from using one kind of device instead of another. (In the early days of online testing, researchers found a “mode effect” that produced higher scores for students tested using paper-and-pencil vs. online tests; NAEP will need to be sure some devices don’t produce their own mode effect.) This will require slow, steady work and pilot studies to perfect.

2. NAEP will experiment with adaptive testing and other innovations.

When we think of a test, we think of every student getting the same set of questions. Computer-adaptive testing is different. This kind of test varies the questions students get as they answer: Miss the first few and a student is given easier questions; get them right and they’ll get more difficult ones. The benefit, in theory, is getting better information about either very high- or low-performing students. (On a traditional exam, most questions are in the middle range, not at the very easy or hard levels.)

The approach is used by the Smarter Balanced series of K-12 state exams, as well as the GRE, a popular graduate school entrance exam.

Now, NAEP will investigate using computer-adaptive technology, too. This is a bit of
a challenge because unlike state tests or the GRE, NAEP doesn’t measure any one individual student’s outcomes. The results we see are a composite score of lots of students who all took different segments of the exam.

Still, Carr said, it’s possible to use the technology within the discrete block of questions each student takes. And if it’s successful, it should help to generate more fine-grained information on what students who are scoring at NAEP’s lowest achievement levels are having the most difficulty with, and similarly what sets apart top performers. (That’s important because of a disturbing recent trend, both on NAEP and international tests, of these two groups’ performance moving in opposite directions.)

NAEP also wants to experiment with artificial intelligence to help it write new exam questions and to help score open-ended questions—both technically tricky ideas that could offer significant cost savings.

And it wants to support teachers, policymakers, and others to use the findings as they come out.

“How can we speed up the return of results and get them back in people’s hands faster? How can we help researchers dig into the raw data of NAEP more quickly so they can answer questions that, as federal agencies, are a bridge too far for us?” said Muldoon, ticking off some of the driving questions she, Carr, and their teams will consider. “How do we translate the results into language real people can understand? How do we modernize the infrastructure [to help] with things like speeding up results? We want to explore those kinds of ideas and utilities so NAEP is as relevant as it can be.”

3. An important measure of the pandemic’s impact on learning is on the runway.

In December 2021, NAGB gave the green light to administer its long-term trend exam for 13-year-olds, in addition to 9-year-olds. That work is beginning now.

The long-term trend exams are the only continuous measure of student achievement, dating from the 1970s. (By contrast, the trends for the main NAEP, which produces state-by-state results, get reset each time NAGB updates the testing blueprint.)

This is a bit of balm after the disappointing delay of the main NAEP in late 2020. And it will offer a tight pre- and post-pandemic gauge of learning, because the long-term trend exam for those two age groups was also the final exam given before nearly every school shuttered in spring 2020. (EdWeek’s Sarah Sparks took a look at the results from the last long-term trends test.)

Results for 9-year-olds are just finishing up now, and they’ll be completed for 13-year-olds this fall—alongside the regular NAEP exams. When the results are released, they will be the only national measure of the pandemic’s impact on learning.

The NAEP folks do face a small interpretative challenge in releasing these results. The long-term trend exams haven’t changed significantly since they were created, and they tend to measure foundational knowledge and skills rather than higher-order ones. This means that expected pandemic-related declines on this measure might not show up as steeply as they do on other measures—especially if basic content is what teachers have prioritized the last few years.

4. The NAEP experts will spotlight equity.

Via better yardsticks for poverty and more context in its reporting, the agencies want to add clarity to the discussions of achievement patterns on NAEP.

For example, NAEP reports often talk about gaps in student performance. That’s important, but without context, such findings risk fueling a narrative that somehow students are to blame for these disparities—rather than their varied experiences and uneven access to well-funded schools and good teaching. (Some K-12 researchers and media organizations, including Education Week, now generally prefer to call them “opportunity” rather than achievement gaps.)

And analyses of how students perform often counter stereotypes. Carr pointed out, for example, significant progress in the proportion of Black high school students who took calculus, according to the NCES’ most recent report on high school transcripts; such a picture is one of resiliency and improvement, she noted.

Equity is important, if somewhat politically touchy, territory for the organizations. The term “equity” has become a lightning rod in discussions about race and schooling, and even NAEP has been no exception. NAGB faced some internecine drama last year over equity when it was finalizing a new reading framework, though most of it ultimately centered on disagreements about how best to assess lower-performing students fairly.

Muldoon of NAGB said the organization is also commissioning studies about how new test frameworks, like its upcoming science revision, can continue to embrace equity and give all students a shot to show what they know—while maintaining technical quality.

NAEP will also continue to work to get a better indicator for students’ socioeconomic status. The usual measure, eligibility for free and reduced-price lunch, is increasingly problematic because of policy shifts that permit more students to receive those services regardless of income level.

5. NAEP’s architecture will continue to support new research.

During the pandemic, the Biden administration issued an executive order requiring the Education Department to track the pandemic’s impact on schools, which led to a series of surveys last spring showing the proportion of schools using different modes of learning. To pull this off, NCES used the NAEP architecture to get the surveys out quickly. After all, NAEP testing relies on a nationally representative sample of schools—and that happens to be just what researchers need for surveys.

In fall 2021, the NCES extended that approach for its new “pulse” surveys, designed to give additional quick-turnaround survey research. And the agency has set itself an ambitious agenda this year on topics like mental health, school staffing challenges, and parent concerns, while also slimming down how long the surveys take to fill out and number-crunch. (NCES’ other major collections, on principals, teachers, school finance, and scores of other indicators typically take a few years to complete.)

“It was an example of how nimble and flexible NAEP can be,” Carr said. “We need to take advantage of this infrastructure to help us quickly go in, ask a few questions of schools—thousands of schools—and gather the information that’s needed.”
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Don’t Use State Tests ‘Punitively,’ Ed. Secretary Cardona Warns

By Sarah Schwartz

As states begin to release results from their 2022 assessments, the U.S. Department of Education has emphasized that the scores must be used for accountability—but also that states should be cautious in how they interpret the results.

That’s the message conveyed in a “dear colleague” letter released earlier this month by U.S. Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona, as the department restarts the federal accountability process that it paused at the start of the pandemic.

In spring 2020, as COVID forced schools to abruptly shut their doors, then-Secretary Betsy DeVos let states cancel the tests, which are required annually under the federal Every Student Succeeds Act. The next school year, Cardona’s administration required that states resume the tests, but waived participation rules and the accountability consequences.

Now, the whole system is grinding back into gear. Cardona’s letter underscores just how complicated that process could be—and why interpreting the effects of the pandemic on student achievement will be an ongoing challenge.

Student participation in the tests varied greatly during the 2020-21 school year. More students took the tests this past school year, but not every state reached pre-pandemic levels of participation. All the while, student enrollment in many states has dropped or shifted during the pandemic, meaning that the students who took a state’s test in 2019 likely aren’t the same students who took it last year.

All of this makes it hard to reliably evaluate how much progress students have actually made over the past year, assessment experts say.

Cardona’s letter acknowledges this. “Local context matters in the interpretation of achievement results,” it reads. And it urges states to avoid using results “punitively,” to ding educators on evaluations or prevent students from graduating.

The department offered states some flexibility on how they calculate results from the 2021-22, and more than half the states plus the District of Columbia have been approved for that flexibility. Even so, the score releases will inform how states identify schools for improvement, and the letter insists that the test results will provide important information that can help states target support.

“We know that some education stakeholders would have preferred the Department to waive assessment requirements over the past two years, but it was not the time to do so, just as now is not the time to lower standards for students,” the letter reads. “Used in the right way, data from high-quality systems of assessment can inform instruction and help school leaders drive resources to the schools and students that need them the most.”

The message here is, “don’t let the perfect be the enemy of the good,” said Derek Briggs, the director of the University of Colorado Boulder’s Center for Assessment Design Research and Evaluation.

“These variations in local context provide a reason to be cautious, Briggs said. “That said, is it better to have no information rather than some information that has to be given some contextual flags?”

Experts advise careful interpretation, multiple sources of data

States and districts have offered up different answers to that question.

In Denver, for example, district officials have said that low student participation rates and the state’s modified testing schedule mean that the data are “no way an accurate representation of an entire student body at most of our schools.”

“In the past, many considered [school rating] data as a tool to compare schools’ performance to other schools, districts and statewide results. Some also used it as a way to find a school’s strengths and identify areas for improvement. We do not believe that the 2022 [school rating] data should be used in that way,” Denver’s Superintendent Alex Marrero
wrote in a letter published Sept. 9.

On the other hand, some states—including Mississippi, Tennessee, and Texas—have reported increases in scores from spring 2021 to 2022, in some cases reaching or exceeding prepandemic levels. In those states, education officials have claimed that the gains are evidence of academic recovery.

Still others have postponed releasing their results. California has delayed its public reporting process, despite telling districts that they can share the data on their own, the news site EdSource reported this week.

In general, though, states should be cautious when making comparisons between 2021 and 2022 results, assessment experts say.

It’s possible to do, but states need to report the data in ways that ensure they’re comparing apples to apples, said Scott Marion, the executive director of the Center for Assessment, a technical assistance group.

That means making clear how many students were enrolled at both timepoints, and what percentage of those students participated in testing. The question for states, he said, is: “How confident are you in your ability to put the 2022 scores on the same scale as 2019, or 2021? And what evidence do you have that worked as intended?”

It’s also important for systems to be able to track how the same students are progressing over time, said Briggs. This year’s 3rd graders might score higher than last year’s, but that could be because less of their formal education was disrupted by the pandemic—it doesn’t necessarily mean that schools are helping students regain lost ground, he said.

Experts also stressed the importance of triangulating multiple sources to get a fuller picture. For example, state-level results from the reading and math National Assessment of Educational Progress will be released later this fall, and could provide an “interesting check” on state test data, Briggs said.

It’s still too early to know whether some states that reported strong test results this year have started an upward trend, or “if it’s just a blip,” said Marianne Perie, the director of assessment research and innovation at WestEd, a research and consulting group.

For now, she emphasized the importance of continuing to collect data, including on where pandemic funding is going, and what kind of impact it has. It might not always show up in test scores, she added.

Hiring bus drivers, for example, might not have a direct effect on student achievement, “but that doesn’t mean it’s not a good place to put the money.”
Latest Round of Federal Grants Aims to Make States' Assessments More Equitable, Precise

By Libby Stanford

The U.S. Department of Education has released the latest batch of federal money aimed at making state assessments more “high-quality, innovative, and authentic,” with over $29 million in grants going to 10 state education agencies this time around.

State agencies will be able to use the money under the Competitive Grants for State Assessments program to improve their testing systems after years of COVID-19 disruptions. States paused testing during the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and many didn’t see testing data until the results of spring 2021 tests, which had historically low student participation in many areas.

This year’s funding priorities under the grant program emphasize the importance of better understanding students’ academic achievement and creating more-equitable testing systems for English-learners and students with disabilities, the department’s announcement said.

And the department encouraged agencies to use funds to help parents and families better understand assessment data.

Better assessments will also help school leaders “personalize instruction to meet student’s diverse needs; make critical, data-informed decisions that can positively affect student opportunities and outcomes,” U.S. Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona said in a statement.

The new grants also come as the National Assessment of Educational Progress, otherwise known as the “Nation’s Report Card,” prepares to overhaul its design. The revamp will expand the list of devices used to take the exam, experimenting with computer-adaptive testing to alter questions as students get answers right or wrong, and gain a better understanding of achievement gaps to promote equity.

How the states plan to use their money

The states that received grants in this year’s program will be able to use the money for similar plans to improve equity and redesign assessment systems. Here’s the breakdown for this round of grants:

- Arkansas received $2.15 million for “making improved decisions for students on the cusp of alternate assessment participation using multiple measures of academic achievement from multiple sources”;
- Hawaii received nearly $3 million for “expanding the classroom-based assessment system components in Hawaii’s Comprehensive Assessment Program”;
- Illinois received $3 million for its “Transición Early High School Spanish Language Arts Assessment” program;
- Kentucky received $3 million for its program, “United We Learn: transforming educational opportunity for Kentucky’s youth through the creation and scaling of competency-based assessment and accountability”;
- Louisiana received $5.9 million for its projects, “Testing What’s Taught: Equity in Test Design Project” and “Project INTEL: Interim Assessments for English Learners”;
- Missouri received $2.5 million for its “Pathways for Instructionally Embedded Assessment” program;
- Montana received nearly $3 million for “demonstrating the full potential of a through-year assessment system in Montana”;
- Nebraska received nearly $3 million for its program, “Coherence and Alignment for Science Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment”;
- New York received nearly $3 million for its pilot program, “Performance Learning and Assessment Networks”; and
- North Carolina received $1.1 million for its “Multilingual-Multimodal Science Inventory” program.
Elections Depend on Young Voters. Can Civics Tests Drive Up Their Turnout?

By Sarah D. Sparks

Schools can help instill students with long-term habits of civic engagement and voting—but a new study suggests that requiring students to take a civics test may not be the best way to do it.

Though the results of the 2022 elections have not entirely shaken out, exit poll data from the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement at Tufts University suggest 27 percent of young voters turned out. If confirmed, that would be the second-highest midterm election participation for those ages 18-29 since 1994 (second only to the rate of youth voting in 2018’s midterms.)

But the new Pennsylvania State University study calls into question the usefulness of civics education accountability to drive students’ voting behaviors later on.

In a working paper released this month by the Annenberg Institute at Brown University, Penn State researchers Maithreyi Gopalan, an education and public policy assistant, and doctoral researcher Jilli Jung analyzed voting trends among 18- to 22-year-olds in elections from 1996 to 2020.

Starting with Arizona in 1996, 18 states adopted the Civics Education Initiative, which requires students to take and/or pass a test of civics knowledge in order to graduate high school. In many states, the test questions are drawn from the 100 basic federal historical and civic facts included in the United States naturalization test, which immigrants must pass to become U.S. citizens, though some states later expanded the test content or called for the tests to be administered as part of broader civics education courses and assessments. The researchers tracked youth voting in individual states before and after they adopted CEI policies. They also compared voter turnout among states that had strong or weak implementation of the civics education requirements, or no policy at all.

They found that young people in states that required the civics tests for graduation were at most 1.5 percentage points more likely to vote than peers in states that didn’t have such civics requirements—statistically, no difference. Nor did high school civics requirements increase voting among underrepresented groups of students—Black students actually saw a decrease in voting, though again, not a significant one.

In part, this may be because of ongoing differences in how educators approach civics education. In one recent RAND survey, only 3 percent of public school teachers said they thought civics education should prepare students for future political engagement. Nearly 70 percent said the main goal of civics education was to foster critical thinking.

“If states hope to improve civic participation among successive generations of citizen leaders, they need to do a lot more (or a lot different) than just mandate a civic test policy aimed at testing civic and political knowledge for high school graduation,” they concluded.

“Because civics is literally baked into all that we do—it is an education in the relationships that we have structured around one another—I think [civics education] has to be a very big picture activity,” said Christopher Riano, the president of the Center for Civic Education. “It doesn’t begin and or end in any classroom and it doesn’t begin and or end at any age. It’s something that actually sticks with us from cradle through career, and it’s a constant educational experience.”

For example, other studies have found civics interventions geared to more practical instruction—such as instructions on how to register and vote, or school-based registration and get-out-the-vote campaigns—boosted voting among young people by 5 percent to 7 percent or more, depending on the intervention.

However, studies conducted earlier this fall found many schools do not help their eligible high schoolers register to vote—even in states where this is required.

And class discussions that ask students to reflect on what they have already experienced in past elections can encourage them to be more active in the future. In one study published earlier this summer, young adults who were asked to think about how they had felt during the U.S. presidential election in 2016 were more likely to say they would vote in a new election if it were held today.
Recent years have seen such upheaval for students and teachers, causing learning disruptions and setbacks. Can you both tell us why assessments are so crucial now, as things have returned to “normal?”

Dr. Ruth Kaminski: Assessments are always crucial in helping us know which students are on track and making adequate progress toward reading goals and which students may need additional instructional support. This assessment information has never been more important than it is at this time, on the heels of disrupted instruction. We must find effective means to provide instructional support to our most vulnerable students, and assessment is the first step in doing so.

Dr. Roland H. Good, III: Students and teachers are regaining their footing, and in order to go forward in an informed way, it is critical that we have fast, accurate information about the educational needs and progress of each student and that our instruction is as powerful and effective as possible. Screening and diagnostic assessment tell us what skills a student has and which skills the student has yet to learn. With this information, we can provide targeted instruction to best meet the student’s needs. Setting an individual student learning goal that is ambitious, meaningful, and attainable is part of making any curriculum, instruction, or intervention more effective.
**How can assessments be used to help pinpoint where students are struggling?**

**Dr. Roland H. Good, III:** It is important to focus assessment and instruction on the essential early literacy and reading skills: (1) vocabulary and oral language, (2) phonemic awareness, (3) phonics, (4) accuracy and fluency with connected text, and (5) reading comprehension. Acadience Reading K–6 provides brief powerful indicators in these essential skills. I’ve created this chart to make it easy to review those indicators:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ESSENTIAL EARLY LITERACY/READING SKILL</th>
<th>ACADIENCE READING MEASURE</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vocabulary and Oral Language</td>
<td>Word Use Fluency—Revised*</td>
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<td>Phonemic Awareness</td>
<td>First Sound Fluency</td>
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<td>Phoneme Segmentation Fluency</td>
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<td>Alphabetic Principle and Basic Phonics</td>
<td>Nonsense Word Fluency</td>
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<td>Advanced Phonics and Word Attack Skills</td>
<td>Oral Reading Fluency Accuracy</td>
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<td>Accurate and Fluent Reading of Connected Text</td>
<td>Oral Reading Fluency Words Correct</td>
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<td>Reading Comprehension</td>
<td>Reading Composite Score</td>
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<td>Oral Reading Fluency Words Correct</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Oral Reading Fluency Retell Maze</td>
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**Why is it important for schools to use tools that support hybrid learning?**

**Dr. Ruth Kaminski:** As teaching and learning have evolved—and continue to evolve in the wake of the pandemic and disrupted learning—it’s critical that busy educators have the tools they need to quickly and accurately assess student progress and gather the data they need to plan instruction accordingly. We’re proud that Acadience Learning assessments offer educators new methods for administering assessments. Acadience Reading K–6 (formerly published as DIBELS Next®) and Acadience Reading 7–8 are both now available on a digital platform, Acadience® Learning Online, which gives educators and the schools and districts who use the assessment, the opportunity to choose between paper, pencil, or digital.

**Research-based assessments are critical for today’s educators. Why is that the case?**

**Dr. Roland H. Good, III:** When selecting an assessment, educators should always check to see what type of research base has been used, because you want to have a reliable and valid assessment. Educators need to feel confident that the measure or the assessment tool they’re using is going to give them data that is useful and can help with student learning and with their teaching.

**What happened to DIBELS Next? Where can educators find it and is it the same product educators have trusted for years?**

**Dr. Roland H. Good, III:** DIBELS Next is now known as Acadience Reading K–6. My colleague, Ruth Kaminski, and I are the lead authors of DIBELS 6th Edition, DIBELS Next, and all prior versions of DIBELS. We renamed the assessment to Acadience because we felt we had outgrown the old name. Our family of assessments now includes Acadience® Reading Pre–K: PELI®, Acadience Reading 7–8, Acadience® Reading Survey, Acadience® Reading Diagnostic, Acadience Learning Online, and Acadience® Math, and are all available through Voyager Sopris Learning®.

**How and why does assessment change year to year?**

**Dr. Ruth Kaminski:** No one can predict the future, but we do know is that all of us—assessment developers and researchers, educators, leaders, and parents—are learning immensely and will all get better at doing what we do. At Acadience Learning, we are actively conducting research to evaluate the viability of our assessments and develop new assessments.

**IN CONCLUSION:**

Experts agree assessment continues to be an essential part of instruction. Setting an individual student learning goal that is ambitious, meaningful, and attainable is a vital part of making any curriculum, instruction, or intervention more powerful and effective. As the new year unfolds, it is critical to have the assessment tools in place to give all students their best chances at success.

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*Word Use Fluency-Revised is available to research partners from info@acadiencelearning.org*
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OPINION

Published March 7, 2022

It’s Time to Debunk the Myths About Standardized Tests

By Larry Ferlazzo

What are other ways than standardized-test scores to evaluate the effectiveness of schools?

T

oday, Joseph Rodgers, Lorie Barber, Cindy Garcia, and Mike Kaechele contribute their reflections.

Standardized Test ‘Myths’

Joseph Rodgers has experience as a teacher, middle school basketball coach, elementary and middle school administrator, and Title I program director. He is the author of a new Routledge Eye on Education book, A Guide to Impactful Teacher Evaluations: Five Myths of Standardized Testing and How Schools Should Be Assessed

Myth #1. Parents trust the results.

This may have been true 15 years ago. The recent round of testing changes has made parents sceptical of the results. Parents just aren’t that concerned anymore. They are thinking about college or jobs for their kids.

Myth #2. Students are motivated to do well on tests.

Students are not concerned with state-level testing. To a teenager or a younger child, it’s just a crummy day at school behind a computer. Students do not see value in testing and openly admit to rushing through or giving poor effort to “get it over.”

Myth #3. Tests scores are a valid measurement of teacher effectiveness.

There are an infinite number of ways teachers demonstrate their effectiveness. Standardized tests are only a small sample. All students enter school at varying levels and learn and grow at different rates. Student-test scores are influenced by several factors, only one of which is instructional quality.

Myth #4. Standardized tests are an objective measure of success.

The validity of state-level standardized tests has been brought into question. Schools across the country saw their scores drop 50 percent, 60 percent, and even 70 percent with the latest round of testing changes. Schools that were achieving well into the 90 percent passing rate dropped below 50 percent in just one year. The systems just aren’t valid anymore.

Myth #5. Standardized tests are the primary measure of school quality.

There is a place for standardized testing in schools; it just shouldn’t be the dominating factor in determining school quality. Standardized tests don’t allow for human variation. Not all kids learn the same skills at the same age. Standardized tests are one data point, not a foundation for assessing school quality.

What are other ways than standardized-test scores to evaluate the effectiveness of schools?

There are a few broad areas that states should consider as guides for districts and schools to assess their programming. If states could construct broad areas of prioritization, the local schools could assess, plan, implement, and revise their actions locally.

Community Support

If the overall community, businesses, places of worship, chambers of commerce work together and create an environment of support, families will be more engaged and have the basic resources to support their own children.

What is the extent of the involvement of the community in the schools? What investment—resource, human, capital, or tangible—is the community making in the local schools?

Parental Satisfaction, Support, and Involvement

A school that is supported by the community must have parental support, and involvement. Quality schools have active parents.

What is the perception of the school by the parents? What is the level of satisfaction parents have with the school? What is the level of parental involvement?

Professional Staff

Professional staff should be judged on their ability to collaborate, build community partnerships, and develop relationships with families.

What is the perception of the school by the staff? Are the professional educators satisfied with the work? Is the organizational climate healthy?

Students’ Accomplishments

Communities, families, and educators working together, providing mutual support and respect, will result in positive and productive students ready to lead and contribute as adults.

What are students accomplishing? How are students involved in the life of the school?

Student accomplishment can be broad—state awards, honor societies, scholarships. Student accomplishments can also be very narrow and personalized.
Why do states, districts, and schools insist on hammering a square peg into a round hole?

Lorie Barber
Education Week

Conclusion

Standardized-tests scores are a small snapshot of a bigger picture. They do not even begin to tell the story of the great things happening in schools. They also don’t give us any insight on how to improve. Schools should be assessed by the broad constructs, community involvement, parental involvement/satisfaction, a productive and satisfied professional staff, and student accomplishments.

What is ‘Standard’?

Lorie Barber is a former elementary school teacher turned educational director for an independent bookstore:

Why do states, districts, and schools insist on hammering a square peg into a round hole? After all, that’s what standardized tests are: ill-fitting, inaccurate, and unjust “solutions” used to measure schools’ effectiveness. They are written by for-profit companies with questions designed to confuse students all in the name of “rigor” and have little, if any, connection to the standards they are deemed to measure. Moreover, standardized tests are achievement-based in a pedagogical world where individual growth over a period of time is a more accurate measure of success.

Oxford Dictionary defines standard as, “an idea or thing used as a measure, norm, or model in comparative evaluations.” Using that definition, we must ask, “What is normal?” Teachers work with students who are beautifully unique in countless ways. We differentiate for that uniqueness in countless ways. We know that one size never fits all and that each student should receive what they need to succeed, which is rarely the same thing.

Yet we test them the same.

The same test for every student.

The same allotted dates and times.

The same passages, questions, problems, and solutions.

We measure for “normal,” which does not exist. This is not an effective measure of school success.

So what are some ways we can effectively measure school success that don’t provoke anger in parents, anxiety in children, and stress in teachers and staff? To do that, we must look at the whole child and how they are growing.

What if part of measuring a school’s success involved the students it serves? What if it was based on what the kids could show as evidence of their learning? For example, a 3rd grade student could share their math fact data over a period of time, explaining their growth and what they are working toward. A 5th grade student could share their reading journal from the beginning of the year to the end of the year, with marked pages to demonstrate where they were really understanding a standard. An 8th grade student could share their attendance record from last year to this year, explaining their work on being to school on time. This could add a social/emotional/behavioral growth piece to the complex puzzle that is a human being.

What if part of measuring a school’s success involved the staff it employs to serve those students? What if it were based on what the teachers thought about the school in which they worked? After all, a supported teacher is a more confident teacher, and a more confident teacher is more likely to continually want to strengthen and grow their practice. For example, a teacher could, as part of their evaluation, evaluate the school. What is going well? What, from their perspective, needs to be immediately changed? What needs changing, but could be part of a longer-term plan? Yes, this takes trust between teacher and evaluator, but this is where we dream big. Teachers must trust that honest feedback will not be met with rebuke or retribution. Teachers and administrators must trust that all are working toward the common goal of serving the students effectively, which is the job of schools in a nutshell.

What if part of measuring a school’s success involved the caregivers of those students it serves? What if it was based on what families thought about the school in which their kids attend? Not those annual, state-driven “Essentials” surveys. I’m talking about a conference where caregivers have a voice. Instead of teachers presenting how the child “is doing,” educators could partner with families and ask: What could administrators and teachers be doing better in service to the students? What changes need to be made now? In the future? Asking our families to dream big creates a sense of community and trust that both educators and caregivers often say is missing from the family/school partnership. This would mean that educators must first have a deep understanding of their professional and personal biases and be open (without retribution toward the caregiver or student) to change in their pedagogy based on the student’s lived experience.

None of these solutions is standard. None of them are tests. All of them are measurable and attainable.

Professional Learning Communities

Cindy Garcia has been a bilingual educator for 15 years and is currently a districtwide specialist for P-6 bilingual/ESL mathematics. She is active on Twitter at @CindyGarciaTX and on her blog: 

An effective school is one with a safe environment where all students are learning at high levels. One way to gauge effectiveness is by the existence of a strong professional learning community.

Effective schools have a consistent system in place for campus faculty to meet and continuously analyze multiple data points in order to figure out what instructional strategies are working. While engaging in the PLC process, campus faculty determine what is not working and what changes need to be made in order to support student learning.

Student engagement is another way to eval-
uate school effectiveness. Student engagement goes beyond listening attentively and paying attention to the teacher. Students are engaged when they are actively working, are curious, ask questions, and are motivated. Engaged students are not just completing and working on knowledge-level assignments. Students are being challenged and taking part in a productive struggle as they work to figure out how to complete a task. When students are engaged, they take ownership of their learning and they have some choice in either process, content, or product. Engaged students are eager to be in school, work hard, and are open to new learning.

An effective school needs administrators that are strong instructional leaders. They do not need to be experts in all content areas, but they should provide ample opportunities for learning and collaboration for their faculty. Campus administrators prioritize classroom visits as a way to gauge student engagement and implementation of strategies learned during professional development. Part of being an instructional leader is taking part in PLCs and getting to know which students are not being successful and then following up to make sure the necessary supports are provided for students. Leaders that seek feedback from faculty, staff, and students throughout the school year are able to make adjustments as needed before problems and issues escalate.

‘Wasted’ Test-Prep Time

Mike Kaechele is a teacher, author, and consultant of social-emotional learning and project-based learning. He believes in student-centered learning by giving kids authentic opportunities to do real work with local community partners. His upcoming book, The Pulse of PBL: Seamlessly Integrating Social and Emotional Learning, explores how to fuse SEL into the daily practices of the PBL classroom:

Standardized tests are great at measuring what they are designed to: student’s abilities to score well on a sterile test with a specific format, centered on a limited subset of knowledge deemed critical by some committee. We know that there is so much more to learning and education than what is on these tests. Too many of our students’ abilities fall outside of their narrow scope and are not measured. While standardized tests have demonstrated gaps between the educational opportunities for certain subsets of learners in this country, they have not offered any helpful solutions to educational inequity. It’s past time to reject the deficit thinking of standardized testing as a path forward.

The first thing that I would “measure” to determine a school’s effectiveness is student, parent, and community feedback. Schools would send multiple surveys throughout the year to elicit feedback from the community about the culture and effectiveness of the school. Regular meetings would connect students, teachers, and the community to reflect on school practices and local opportunities for students to learn and contribute.

Imagine for a moment all of the time, energy, focus, and money currently wasted on test preparation shifting to making sure that students and parents felt that school was meeting their needs. School improvement meetings would be required to have students and parents not only present but at the center. School improvement topics and goals would not be based on test scores but the data from the feedback surveys. Money squandered on test preparation could be reallocated to fieldwork opportunities for students in the community. Social and emotional learning would be prioritized to help students grow holistically. Project-based learning would be the framework for meaningful academic work addressing local issues. At the end of each project, students would reflect on the process and offer feedback on how they, the teacher, and their group could improve.

The second thing that I would use to measure schools are the portfolios of authentic work from the PBL projects students are embarking on. Throughout their school career, students would be demonstrating content knowledge alongside SEL skills of confidence, public speaking, problem-solving, autonomous learning, and collaboration with their classmates and community members. Physical and digital artifacts would be curated and selected by the students themselves to represent their progress. At the end of each year, they would present to the community to demonstrate their cumulative growth.

Rather than measuring schools to reward or punish them, the emphasis should be on growth and increased opportunities for all children. As a result of the partnerships between the students and the community and the teacher responsiveness to student and parent feedback, schools would be viewed as relevant, vital institutions in the community. Standardized testing is often treated as inevitable, a necessity that cannot be removed, but it is not. We know better and can do better.

Thanks to Joseph, Lorie, Cindy, and Mike for contributing their thoughts!

Larry Ferlazzo is an English and social studies teacher at Luther Burbank High School in Sacramento, Calif.
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