Griffin Walsh plays Kindville at Newnan Crossing Elementary School in Newnan, Ga. Some schools in the state, including Newnan Crossing, are piloting Kindville, a new formative education assessment program which looks, and plays, just like a video game, but will eventually spit out qualitative math and reading scores.

Assessment

EDITORS NOTE
School closures have made it difficult to assess how well children are learning. In this Spotlight, dive into best assessment practices; evaluate research on literacy and mathematics understanding; and gain a brief overview about what the new administration may bring for educators.

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Performance Assessment: 4 Best Practices

By Stephen Sawchuk

Let’s get this out of the way first: Performance assessment—the idea of measuring what students can do, not merely what they know—is not a new idea in K–12 education.

Teachers have been told to engage students in projects at least since the days of John Dewey, and probably long before that. (The famous Socratic method, after all, requires students to advance and sustain their positions in an argument, not repeat back knowledge.)

Nevertheless, performance assessment has a bit of a riddled history in the United States. In the 1990s—the last major period of experimentation—it was tried at scale and then abandoned in Kentucky, Maryland, and Vermont.

The challenges begin with a definitional problem: Does an essay test count as a performance assessment? What about a multiple-choice test to see if they’re able to do that?

SCOTT MARION
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE CENTER FOR ASSESSMENT

“There’s no point in teaching someone to write an article for a newspaper and giving them a multiple-choice test to see if they’re able to do that.”

In short, it’s hard to do performance on the individual student. That’s probably OK if the test is being used mainly to supplement curriculum or for classroom grading. But it’s a bigger problem if you want to use it for making decisions about whether a student should graduate from high school or for school ratings.

One well-known mishap occurred in Vermont in the early 1990s, when the state’s portfolio-assessment program rolled out. The program used teachers to score collections of students’ best math and writing work. Early results showed that the degree of agreement among teachers’ scores, known as rater reliability, was initially fairly low. In retrospect, RAND Corp. researcher Brian Stecher, who helped evaluate the program back then, wonders whether leaders there got the focus wrong.

“I think what was really beneficial in Vermont was the fact that this broadened to some extent how teachers were teaching mathematics, instead of a reductive ‘I do, we do, you do,’” Stecher said, referring to a common teaching method taught during teacher preparation. “That seems like a good thing to me and valuable in its own right—and might have been a better use of this unstructured portfolio than trying to have it be the basis for a standardized judgment.”

1. Decide on goals first.

First and foremost, the experts say: Know why you want the assessment and what benefits you expect to achieve by investing in it.

“There’s no point in teaching someone to write an article for a newspaper and giving them a multiple-choice test to see if they’re able to do that,” said Scott Marion, the executive director of the Center for Assessment, which advises states on testing. “Performance assessment is made for those situations. But if you’re filling in grammar rules, then maybe multiple choice is fine.”

A related issue concerns how the results will be used. Performance assessments are generally more difficult to standardize and less likely to produce comparable results for individual students. That’s probably OK if the

2. Keep costs in mind.

Coming up with good performance tasks can be expensive as well as time-consuming. In short, it’s hard to do performance on the
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fly or on the cheap. That’s especially the case if what’s valued is the comparability and reliability of scores, which requires creating and field-testing many tasks.

“When you open up assessments to getting students a wide range of response possibilities in terms of format, length, and activities, then it just becomes very hard to manage the time, and materials, and scheduling. It becomes hard to incorporate it into a structured system of assessments, and it also becomes more expensive,” Stecher said.

That’s one reason so few states have done so at scale under federal annual-testing requirements. New Hampshire, the sole exception for now, is using some traditional exams in the years it doesn’t administer its locally developed performance measures.

Finally, even if a performance exam is only used locally or for classroom purposes, teachers must invest time and energy to familiarize themselves with its scoring frameworks to make sure they’re grading fairly. Many districts with expertise in performance assessment, in fact, use blind scoring or double reviews of student work—and all that takes time.

And while teachers are generally more knowledgeable about scoring frameworks, or rubrics as they’re called in the field, than they were 20 years ago, there’s still often an expertise gap for teachers who are used to fill-in-the-blanks and true-false questions, said Steve Ferrara, who oversaw Maryland’s now-defunct performance-assessment program in the 1990s. (He’s now a senior adviser at Measured Progress, a testing company.)

3. **Prioritize teaching and learning—not just testing.**

Performance assessment in education should be part and parcel of reforms to teaching and learning.

Much of the criticism of multiple-choice tests is that they encourage teachers to focus on low-level, easily measured skills. The inverse should be true, too: Give students rich assessment tasks worth teaching to and help support educators to redesign their instruction to boost development of skills like analysis and inference.

In fact, studies from the 1990s on the Maryland State Performance Assessment Program found that under it, teachers had higher expectations for the learning of their students, and principals had higher expectations on what they expected teachers to do. Schools with a high degree of curriculum alignment to the tests showed the most improvement, Ferrara said.

In other words, performance assessment truly requires system change.

“If you don’t include at least parallel reforms in teaching and learning, an assessment isn’t enough,” Marion warns. “You have to improve the meaningfulness of the content, instructional quality, and improve student engagement, too. If you’re not doing those three things, then you’re just rearranging the deck chairs.”

There are also technical reasons why the mirroring of testing and instruction is desirable: Performance assessment hinges on students having had enough exposure to the content and skills needed to complete the task. Otherwise, the assessment might measure generic problem-solving intelligence, rather than how well students grasp and apply what they’ve learned, noted Sean P. “Jack” Buckley, the head of the U.S. Department of Education’s statistical wing from 2010 to 2013, during which he oversaw the development of the agency’s first performance tasks for exams administered as part of “the nation’s report card.”

“This was always something we worried about,” he said. “It is way easier to make a hard test that smart people can do well on than one that shows growth tied to teaching and learning.”

4. **Plan for scaling up the exams—and communicating the results.**

Parents and teachers can be a performance assessment’s biggest boosters or its toughest foes, which means it’s key to keep them apprised of the assessment program and the logic behind it as it’s piloted, rolled out, and scored.

Teachers, the experts say, should especially be intimately involved in test design and communications.

“It takes time to build the capacity to build quality assessments; it’s almost an apprenticeship approach,” said Paul Leather, who helped get New Hampshire’s performance-assessment system off the ground and now oversees state and local partnerships for the Center for Innovation and Education, a research and consulting group.

“As we built our common tasks, we selected content teacher-leaders who led development of the content and the common tasks,” he said.

“Over time, they start to lead the entire system because assessment literacy has reached such a high level, and we believe that actually has to happen for this kind of system to scale. You essentially create a way in which expertise is not just shared as a product, but something that helps others to gain that expertise over time.”

Even when teachers are involved in task design, they can feel left behind without the right training and supports, Ferrara cautioned.

“It took so much effort in the first few years of MSPAP to get the program up and running that all the investment went into the assessment program and not into professional development, he said. In fact, he recalled, missing materials and a lack of training in the 1992 assessment administration raised teacher ire and got the test slammed in newspapers as the “MSPAP Mishap.”

Finally, as performance assessments yield more nuanced information on students’ abilities, there’s a related challenge of communicating those results. For six years, Maine required high schools to prepare students to demonstrate competency in eight subjects to get the test slammed for its scoring frameworks, or rubrics as they’re called in the field, than they were 20 years ago, there’s still often an expertise gap for teachers who are used to fill-in-the-blanks and true-false questions, said Steve Ferrara, who oversaw Maryland’s now-defunct performance-assessment program in the 1990s. (He’s now a senior adviser at Measured Progress, a testing company.)

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Finally, as performance assessments yield more nuanced information on students’ abilities, there’s a related challenge of communicating those results. For six years, Maine required high schools to prepare students to demonstrate competency in eight subjects to earn a diploma. But the experiment faltered in part because districts struggled to communicate what the new grades, often issued on a 1-to-4 scale, meant — and how they’d affect students’ chances of getting into college, according to news reports on the system. By 2018, the pressure caused state lawmakers to roll back the requirements, giving districts the option to return to traditional diplomas.
It’s Official: National Test Is Postponed Due to COVID-19 Concerns

By Stephen Sawchuk

The head of the U.S. Department of Education’s statistical wing has officially postponed the 2021 administration of the Nation’s Report Card due to surging COVID-19 rates across the country, meaning it could be until 2022 before the agency administers its next reading and math exams and releases the results.

The delay means that the nation will lose what might have been the only opportunity to gather comparable state-by-state information on the extent of learning loss in those two subjects, after months of school closures and other disruptions.

Officially known as the National Assessment of Educational Progress, the test, given to representative samples of students in all 50 states, was scheduled to begin in early 2021. The venerable exam has gone forward, rain or shine, since the 1970s. But as it has with so many other aspects of schooling, the pandemic has wreaked havoc on the NAEP testing schedule.

Federal officials pointed to two main reasons for postponing NAEP. One was that the patchwork quilt of schools offering in-person, hybrid, or all-remote learning threatened to skew the sample of students as well as the results so seriously the data might not have been usable. (Earlier in the year, officials estimated that trying to account for all those issues would have added $50 million to the exam’s price tag.)

“To many students are receiving their education through distance learning or are physically attending schools in locations outside visitors to the schools are being kept at a minimum due to COVID levels,” said James Woodworth, the commissioner of the National Center for Education Statistics, in a statement. “The change in operations and lack of access to students to be assessed means that NAEP will not be able to produce estimates of what students know and can do that would be comparable to either past or future national or state estimates.”

The other reason was to ensure safety of both testing proctors and the students who sit the exams, which are given on shared laptops and other equipment.

“I was obviously concerned about sending outsiders into schools and possibly increasing the risk of COVID transmission,” Woodworth said.

Other education groups, while disappointed, felt the agency made the right call.

“I recognize this was not an easy decision, but I believe it is the right one based on what we know today about this virus and its impact on schools,” said Carissa Moffat Miller, the executive director of the Council of Chief State School Officers, which represents the 50 state superintendents.

A panel had recommended moving forward. Then the surge came.

Federal officials had earlier acknowledged potential problems and costs of moving forward and were trying to balance that against NAEP’s important role as a national yardstick.

At a meeting in late July, the panel that sets policy for NAEP approved a resolution advising the NCES to move forward with preparations for a 2021 math and reading assessment unless that agency determined that accurate reporting would not be possible.

Then the surge came, and with it, more and more schools began moving back into all-remote learning. NCES officials noted that, in many states, the sample of students available to take the exam in person—or located in areas with lower COVID-19 new-case rates—was far too small to produce results.

Even had the NCES moved forward, some data would likely not have been possible to report. NAGB officials had noted that it would not have been possible to produce data for the scores of urban districts who participate in a program that produces comparable district-level results. And the data would have been limited for some states and for certain subgroups of students.

COVID-19 has fractured the testing landscape.

NAEP is hardly the pandemic’s only testing casualty. Although the Education Department under U.S. Secretary Betsy DeVos has so far refused to issue waivers from the annual-testing requirements in federal education law, many other states are either canceling their own state-required exams or lessening the consequences that flow from them, such as school ratings or course fulfillment requirements.

In a letter to education leaders in Congress dated the day before the NCES announcement, DeVos continued to push for those state-level exams.

“While the data would have been helpful, the much more valuable and actionable measures of learning loss will be the annual assessments required of states by the Every Student Succeeds Act. I strongly believe that states should implement their own assessments on schedule in spring 2021,” given that
they do not face the same constraints as NAEP and have ample time to plan for successful test administration tailored to their unique circumstances,” she wrote. “This is an issue of bipartisan consensus, and one I hope continues to rise above politics.”

But only NAEP produces truly comparable, state-to-state results. States’ own exams will supply some information, but those tests measure different content standards across states, and they are set at differing levels of difficulty.

And while the pandemic has raged for months, the national picture of learning loss is still fuzzy and incomplete. Emerging data from some commonly administered “benchmark” exams—given by districts several times a year to measure progress trends—do suggest declines in student learning trajectories and indicate more pronounced problems in mathematics than in reading, but the breakdown by different states or regions remains unclear.

Another problem that no state or district has seemingly cracked yet is comparability of results for students attending in-person versus remote or hybrid learning.

Academic literature on psychometrics—the science of measurement—already points to a “mode” effect that affects scores based on whether an exam is taken digitally or in paper-and-pencil format. The difference between in-person and remote learning seems likely to exacerbate that effect. Remote monitoring of students as they take tests—commonly used in higher education—raises a host of privacy and other concerns at the K-12 level.

All of that has some testing experts seriously doubting whether states can produce comparable results across all their students in the spring.

Published on December 15, 2020, in Education Week

Students’ Reading Losses Could Strain Schools’ Capacity to Help Them Catch Up

By Sarah Sparks

Children beginning their school careers during the pandemic are likely to need a lot more support than usual to build their foundational skills for reading.

The most comprehensive study to date of pandemic-related learning loss in the earliest grades finds that some 40 percent of 1st graders have come to school this fall significantly behind in early literacy skills—particularly around phonics—and they will need intensive interventions to prevent them from ending the year reading below grade level. The study confirms that even the youngest students are experiencing the so-called “COVID slide,” and counters some recent studies that suggested there have been minimal losses in reading.

Researchers from Amplify, a digital learning company, analyzed data from 400,000 students from more than 1,400 schools in 41 states who participated in DIBELS, a commonly used early literacy test. Unlike the computer-administered Growth-MAP and iReady assessments used in other recent analyses of learning loss, the DIBELS is given by teachers one-on-one with students, either in person or over video conference. Direct teacher observation helps control for potential parent influence or child technology difficulties during the test.

Researchers tracked both the percentage of students scoring on grade level in various early literacy skills and the percentage who are considered in need of intensive intervention.

Fewer than 20 percent of students who score at that level typically read on grade level by the end of the year.

Students from grades K-5 all saw fewer students scoring at grade level and more students scoring significantly below grade level in fall 2020 compared to fall 2019, but Black and Hispanic students were particularly in need of support.

Among students of different racial groups, Black students had the most need for intensive reading interventions. Eleven percent more Black students in grades 4 and 5 needed intensive support this fall than last—twice as great a jump as for white and Hispanic students. In 1st grade, 17 percent more Black students, 13 percent more Hispanic students, and 9 percent more white students were significantly below grade level this fall.

The Amplify study comes on the heels of a flurry of new research clarifying the magnitude of the learning loss students are experiencing from the combination of sudden school
Assessment

Early Literacy Skills Hindered by Pandemic Learning Loss

The Amplify study finds phonics skills particularly hurt during the school shutdowns and move to remote learning since last spring. The chart below compares the average typical summer learning loss in specific early reading skills on the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills, or DIBELS, and the average additional learning loss seen in fall 2020. Individual skill scores are used to calculate a student’s composite score.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skill</th>
<th>2019-20</th>
<th>2020-21</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grade 1 Phoneme Segmentation</td>
<td>-6.8</td>
<td>-6.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 1 Letter Sounds</td>
<td>-6.8</td>
<td>-5.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 2 Letter Sounds</td>
<td>-6.8</td>
<td>-6.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 2 Blending Words</td>
<td>-3.6</td>
<td>-2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 2 Oral Reading Fluency</td>
<td>-6.8</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE: Individual raw skill measures on DIBELS follow different scales, and data should be compared within a skill, not among skills. The points in the chart above are based on the average score of students taking the test, out of a total 118 possible points in Grade 1 phonemes segmented correctly, 238 possible in Grade 1 correct letter sounds, 333 possible in Grade 2 correct letter sounds, 100 possible in Grade 2 words blended, and 255 possible in Grade 2 and reading fluency words read correctly. For context, a student who is considered on track at beginning of year can, within one minute: segment 31 phonemes and correctly sound out 30 letter sounds in Grade 1, and correctly sound out 56 letter sounds, blend 15 words, and read 48 words correctly within a reading passage in Grade 2.

SOURCE: Amplify. “mCLASS: Instructional Loss Due to COVID-19 Disruptions”

Costs of Remediation

The disruptions related to the pandemic hurt students’ foundational reading skills.

In particular, researchers found 1st grade students struggled more with phoneme segmentation and letter sounds, and 2nd graders showed significantly less progress in letter sounds, blending words, and fluency when reading aloud.

“One of the most expensive problems you can create is a kid who does not master phonemic awareness by the end of 1st grade,” said Larry Berger, chief executive officer of Amplify, which in addition to its assessments provides consulting to districts on using student data. “So even if you have limited money, you might want to move it toward that problem, because that failure to learn has cascading downstream effects that are well known. I think districts that are taking this seriously are saying OK, I have limited resources but this is a triage situation.”

That means school leaders may face major budget costs to catch up students who have missed out on basic skills. Amplify’s analysts estimated even a 5 percent increase in the number of students who need intensive interventions could stress schools’ budgets this year.

“When schools change from 27 percent to 40 percent of students scoring significantly below grade level, that requires a massive capacity for reading interventions that they don’t have,” Berger said. “This is a sign that some of the plans that have worked in the past for making sure you have enough capacity to do intervention are going to be insufficient to the magnitude of the slide we are seeing in early grades.”

Likewise, the iReady study estimated it could cost $42 billion to provide two-week intensive reading academies to catch up six months of instruction for half of the U.S. public schoolchildren who need it, and $66 billion to catch those students up on one to two years’ worth of lost instruction using daily tutoring over the course of a year.

In the District of Columbia public schools, which participated in the DIBELS study, Emily Hammett, the director of English/language arts instruction, said her teachers have seen more “unfinished learning” among students of color, English-language learners, and special education students, both in the DIBELS data and their own district tests. They are planning for the need for long-term academic supports to help students recover from the instruction they’ve missed as well as broader disruption in the community.

“For this entire school year, we’ve planned out what that unfinished learning was for each student,” she said. “We’re doing a lot of [professional development] with instructional coaches on learning variability and perception of disability and basically making sure that students furthest from opportunity have teachers who are knowledgeable about differentiation.”

Children in Early Grades at Risk From Pandemic Learning Loss

A new study of early literacy skills by the testing research group Amplify, Inc. finds the pandemic dramatically increased the percentage of students in fall 2020 considered in need of significant intervention to read on grade level, compared to fall 2019.
Q: 2020 was a year like no other. Can you both tell us why assessments are so crucial in a school year with unique challenges?

**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, when instruction has been disrupted in unprecedented ways. 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 Good:** In this unprecedented time of COVID, when student education is compromised by school closures and remote learning, 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.

Q: How can assessments be used to help pinpoint where students are struggling?

**Dr. Roland Good:** 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>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Phonemic Awareness</td>
<td>First Sound Fluency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Phoneme Segmentation Fluency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alphabetic Principle and Basic Phonics</td>
<td>Nonsense Word Fluency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advanced Phonics and Word Attack Skills</td>
<td>Oral Reading Fluency Accuracy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accurate and Fluent Reading of Connected Text</td>
<td>Oral Reading Fluency Words Correct</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading Comprehension</td>
<td>Reading Composite Score</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Oral Reading Fluency Words Correct</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Oral Reading Fluency Retell Maze</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocabulary and Oral Language</td>
<td>Word Use Fluency—Revised</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Q: When it comes to assessment, what is the reality of some students being in person and others being remote, or a blend of both?

Dr. Ruth Kaminski: The reality is that assessment has been disrupted in a major way. Assessment has occurred and is occurring in a variety of ways different from the past and different from the ways the assessment was intended to be conducted. Educators are doing the very best they can to meet the challenges, but the reality is that we won’t know about whether scores obtained using different assessment methods are comparable. It is important to provide instruction within the guidelines for safe instruction in each community, and it is essential to understand where each student is and what skills they need to learn and to practice using whatever means are available.

Q: What should educators consider when assessing students this year, and how does inequity factor into those considerations?

Dr. Roland Good: We are greatly concerned about the potential inequity due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. We think the research is too preliminary to draw firm conclusions, but it seems reasonable to expect the negative impact of the pandemic to be more pronounced for those students who do not have access to high-speed Internet, and who may not have home and community support to access remote learning. For these students, it is especially important that instruction be carefully targeted to their individual needs.

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

Dr. Roland Good: DIBELS Next has a new name: 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 have renamed the assessment to Acadience because we feel we have 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, and Acadience® Math and are all available through Voyager Sopris Learning®, now a part of Lexia® Learning.

Q: What do you think assessment will look like in the spring and fall of 2021?

Dr. Ruth Kaminski: I don’t think any of us can predict what assessment will look like in the spring and fall of 2021. What 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 as they are used for remote testing. We are looking at the impact of the COVID-19 disruption to learning on student outcomes.

IN CONCLUSION:

Looking forward to 2021, 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.

Explore Acadience Assessment Solutions
voyagersopris.com/acadience
Assessment


By Stephen Sawchuk & Sarah D. Sparks

Are students’ math struggles during the COVID-19 pandemic completely unprecedented? Yes and no.

Disruption in schools has also meant disruption in testing, so it’s been hard to pin down exactly how much the school closures and transitions in and out of virtual learning have affected students’ learning—but the evidence so far doesn’t bode well, particularly in math.

But research on math development and anxiety, summer learning loss, and math achievement after other disasters can all provide windows into why math learning seems to be taking a bigger hit during the pandemic, and what educators and school leaders can do to stop it. Here are the key things to know.

How much math learning will students really lose during the pandemic?

A handful of studies since last spring have used data from millions of students participating in computer-adaptive tests, such as the Northwest Evaluation Association’s MAP Growth test and Illuminate Education’s FastBridge assessments, to estimate students’ learning growth during school closures last spring compared to prior years, and project how much that rate of growth is likely to slow during 2020-21.

The studies vary in how severe they gauge the so-called “COVID slide” to be, but all of them found on average, students would lose more ground in math than in reading. Three studies based on NWEA data predicted students could learn half or up to a full year less math in 2020-21, compared to what they would learn in a typical year. The study based on the FastBridge test data showed smaller but still troubling learning losses across every grade: two-and-a-half to four-and-a-half months of learning lost, compared to a month or two in reading.

There are some basic caveats here. These studies looked at spring 2020, when schools shuttered abruptly amid statewide emergency orders and many districts scrambled to set up services and instructional plans for remote learning. The studies assume students in remote learning look like students during the summer, with little formal instruction. That’s not the same picture as the 2020-21 school year, in which districts have reopened with formal instructional plans, but classes that may shift from day to day and week to week from in-person to virtual instruction.

Early testing data from this past fall seem to bear out that the pandemic has hit students harder in math than reading.

NWEA researchers compared the results of more than 4.4 million students in grades 3-8 tested this fall to their peers tested in fall 2019. They found no difference in reading gains, but on average a 5 to 10 percentile-point difference in math, with Black and Hispanic students in upper elementary seeing the worst learning losses.

Similarly, Curriculum Associates, a company that offers testing, curriculum, and professional development services, compared the test results from a nonrepresentative sample of students in grades 1 to 5 in more than 1,000 schools to those of students for the last three years. It also found students lost more ground in math than reading, and 5 to 9 percentage points more students scored two or more grade levels behind in math.

In any case, none of the research so far is granular enough to say that students have lost specific skills, content, or foundations in math, like fractions or number sense.

Moreover, a national survey from the Understanding Coronavirus in America study found that while parents of K-12 students generally think instruction has not gone back to pre-COVID-19 quality, they were significantly more concerned about math than reading, and particularly if their students attended virtual or hybrid classes.

Why might pandemic learning loss be worse in math than other subjects?

Math may be more sensitive to pandemic-related schooling disruptions for a few reasons, experts say:

• Unlike reading, math is almost always formally learned at school. Parents are often less well-equipped to help their children with math, at a time when parent support can be even more crucial to student progress.

• Broader stress and trauma related to the pandemic may worsen existing math anxiety in some students, and math anxiety can exacerbate students’ other stress while in class.

• It can be more challenging for teachers to engage in effective math instructional practices via remote platforms.
What’s the role of stress and trauma in math learning loss?

As many as 1 in 5 U.S. adults report severe math anxiety. An EdWeek Research Center study published in January last year found 67 percent of teachers reported students’ math anxiety was a challenge. That existing stress may be magnified now by increased worries about illness, money troubles, housing instability, and parent tensions.

In that, the COVID-19 slide may mirror natural disasters more closely than summer slumps. After Hurricane Katrina, for example, researchers found students lost the most ground in math, coming back to school two years below grade level on average. Some of this academic loss was chalked up to outright missed instruction—due to closures or evacuations, for example—but researchers have found stress and trauma from the disasters weighed on students academically and mentally for months or even years. And there’s evidence that test anxiety and post-traumatic stress may have fed off each other.

It may be helpful for schools to partner teachers with school psychologists and other support staff to identify students with existing math anxieties as well as those who have higher stress and trauma exposure during the pandemic.

Experts in math anxiety also suggest teachers incorporate short anti-stress exercises into remote instruction and ask about students’ stress levels explicitly, as it may be difficult to impossible to read expressions in virtual settings.

How will remote learning affect math teaching?

While hybrid and virtual schools have been gaining traction in the last decade, the sudden and complete move to virtual learning for most districts last spring and the ongoing shifts in format have been highly disruptive to instruction.

The need for teacher training in new ed-tech platforms and tools may crow out needs for other professional development, according to Sarah Johnson, chief executive officer of the nonprofit Teaching Lab. “One pre-COVID problem was a lack of [math elementary teacher content knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge],” Johnson said. “As we shift to online instruction and teachers have to manage so much more, teachers might just not have the time to develop their content knowledge skills in that.”

David Blazar, an assistant professor of education policy and economics at the University of Maryland, who has studied math teaching, agreed. In one study of elementary math teachers, Blazar found the more teachers used inquiry-oriented instruction—in which teachers pose questions and scenarios to help students think through a problem and connect procedures to broader math concepts—the greater students’ math learning. But it’s a kind of teaching that is challenging even in physical classrooms.

In online settings, teachers will need to draw “super explicit links to help make sense of mathematical concepts,” Blazar said, and find ways for students to show their work. And while apps and worksheets can help students practice procedures they’ve learned, some math researchers worry that, especially in the upper elementary grades, teachers might rely on them too much to the detriment of reasoning and modeling with math.

“I think what’s going to fall through the cracks is the kind of discussions around meaning-making in math that they will be challenged to do remotely,” said Jon R. Star, a professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education who studies children’s math learning. “I think that’s going to be so hard to do, and in some ways could make the curriculum less meaningful, and less conceptual, and less kind of deeply mathematical, which is already something we struggle with.”

Star and Blazar both voiced concern that it can be more difficult for teachers to monitor and guide small groups of students tackling a problem together online without the right tools.

What should happen with curriculum?

There’s a movement in some states and districts to identify “power standards,” or the most critical elements of learning in each grade. But some math experts warn about those approaches because newer math curricula tend to be spiral, with concepts introduced in early grades reappearing. That means in later grades the curriculum will assume students have learned things they may not have learned.

“This is a choice about which is the lesser evil, from the teacher’s perspective,” Star said.

“There are smart ways to do this and not-so-smart ways to do this, and the smart way is to see the standards fitting into a progression, rather than saying, ‘This is important, and these ones aren’t,’” said William McCallum, professor emeritus of math at the University of Arizona and CEO of Illustrative Mathematics, an open-source math curriculum. “You merge and combine and give greater emphasis to your main points.”

Inevitably, though, some things are going to receive less emphasis than in prior years, and teachers in later grades will need to be made aware of what was de-emphasized. One likely loss? Star predicts it will be geometric concepts introduced in grades 3-5. Because algebra is a key gatekeeper to higher-level math courses and an entrance requirement to higher education, teachers are likely to focus on the underpinnings of algebraic reasoning over geometry.

Schools in more than 10 states have experimented with computer-based “curriculum playlists,” which use algorithms to map out and deliver customized lessons to students as they master different skills. This format, which may be easier to transfer back and forth between remote and hybrid classes, is likely to see more use during the pandemic. But large-scale studies of programs using the approach on math have found widely disparate implementation and mixed results on whether this curriculum format accelerates student learning.

How can teachers and parents work together to bolster students’ math learning during the pandemic?

One of the most common themes across learning loss research is the importance of par-
Assessment

ent support in student learning. Students with highly involved parents who report participating in educational activities over the summer tend to lose less ground. And early studies of responses to the pandemic have found schools are “increasingly dependent on families to facilitate instruction during the current crisis,” according to Douglas Harris of the Education Research Alliance for New Orleans, in a study of district reopenings during the pandemic.

That can be a heavier lift in math. Studies have suggested families may be less likely to engage in math versus reading activities with their children due to math anxiety and new instructional methods for teaching Common Core State Standards that differ from how parents themselves learned math.

Kelly McCormick, a professional learning consultant for NWEA, said if a district moved to a common-core-aligned program or another kind of new curriculum, teachers can use their own training as a model to think of math processes that are likely to trip up parents and provide short videos or chats with parents to help them prepare.

Educators may suggest math-related games and apps that encourage families to integrate math conversations into their home lives. Some studies have found children of math-anxious parents who regularly used a family-focused math app showed more progress in math than students of similar parents who did not use the app.

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Could Biden Find a Middle Path on Student Testing During the Pandemic?

By Andrew Ujifusa

The appetite for data on how the pandemic has affected student learning will confront the Biden administration with a tough decision: whether to waive the main federal K-12 law’s requirement for annual assessments. While tension is only likely to grow about that choice, it’s worth exploring how the new president could provide states flexibility on this front while still keeping political sensitivities in mind.

First, the federal government announced a postponement of the National Assessment of Educational Progress, the “nation’s report card,” considered to be the gold standard of assessment in schools. In response, Sen. Patty Murray, D-Wash., the ranking Democrat on the Senate education committee, said this decision made it critical for states to administer exams mandated by the Every Student Succeeds Act.

A Northwest Evaluation Association study showed a greater toll on students’ academic growth in math than in reading, according to assessments given in the fall 2020. But a host of questions surround the results. In Fall 2020, we also surveyed how states are downplaying the role of standardized exams when it comes to student and school accountability.

Giving States Options and Power

Given this complex environment, one option for the Biden team is to offer states targeted waivers from ESSA requirements for these exams, not blanket waivers to cancel the tests like they got last spring. This would give states more control over assessment decisions. (State education leaders have stressed the importance of assessment during the pandemic, although that doesn’t mean they want summative exams like the kind ESSA mandates.) It could also shift political controversy toward states and away from a brand-new Biden Education Department. During President-elect Joe Biden’s campaign, his policy advisors avoided taking a position on the issue.

While states shouldn’t get a green light to just “take a break” from testing and related issues, they should be able to demonstrate a clear plan how they’ll use any assessment data to help students, rather than lean on platitudes about the importance of data, said Scott Marion, the executive director of the Center for Assessment, a nonprofit that studies K-12 assessment and accountability.

Murray and Rep. Bobby Scott, D-Va., the chairman of the House education committee, said in a joint statement that they “urge the Department to work with states to allow for flexibilities that are consistent with the Elementary and Secondary Education Act to maximize student participation.” They don’t suggest what those flexibilities could or should be, although they do say there should be “student level data.”

Even if what states choose to do looks different than what they’ve done in past years,
In the podcast, *New Year, New Name, Same Assessment: What Happened to DIBELS Next?*, guest presenters Alisa Dorman and Kristen Biadasz discuss a school year like no other, and provide listeners with a few reasons why reliable, accurate assessments matter more now than ever. In their conversation, both thought leaders recognize how educators are now left seeking meaningful assessment data they can trust to assist their students in remote and face-to-face learning environments.

**1. There’s No Data Last Year on Student Learning Loss**
According to Biadasz, senior product marketing manager at Voyager Sopris Learning®, assessment is crucial this year because the data helps inform instructional decisions so educators can help move student progress along the path of growth and proficiency. “Many educators were coming into the fall with no previous year’s data from a summative (assessment) and (they) really needed to understand how much learning loss had happened,” says Biadasz.

**2. Tools that Support Hybrid Learning Are Needed Today**
Dorman, chief operating officer and vice president for strategic partnerships at Acadience® Learning Inc., is excited about how Acadience Learning assessments offer educators new methods for administering assessments. “We were able to bring Acadience® Reading K–6 (formerly published as DIBELS Next®) to a digital platform, Acadience® Learning Online. What Acadience Learning Online offers, is it offers the educators, the schools, and districts who use the assessment, to choose between paper, pencil, and or digital,” adds Dorman.

**3. Educators Need Reliable Data to Make Instructional Decisions**
As a first rule, Dorman recommends assessments that are research-based and that offer reliability and validity. Biadasz adds, “I’ve always looked to see what kind of research base has been used in order to create an assessment for those exact reasons, because you want to have a reliable and valid assessment, because it all comes down to that confidence. 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.”

If you used *DIBELS Next* in the past, wonder what assessment will look like in 2021, or are pondering how to use assessment to drive student instruction in your school or district in remote or face-to-face learning environments, this is a can’t-miss podcast.

Marion said, “You should have to do something.” And incorporating data about student access to broadband internet and connected devices could play a vital role in how states talk about and address this issue, he noted.

Here’s a list of narrower potential waivers, as well as related testing issues that could come into play, given how ESSA is written.

- **Sampling:** This would require a waiver of ESSA’s requirement that all students in grades 3-8, and one grade in high school, take certain state exams. Instead, as the term suggests, a sample of students from those grades would take a statewide exam. (The NAEP also relies on samples of students.)

Marion suggested that if the Biden education team grants a waiver and lets states test using student samples, schools should oversample students from groups that have been disproportionately hurt by the pandemic. But sampling students properly can become quite complex and easily disrupted, Marion noted.

- **Grade-span testing:** This essentially would require the same waiver as sampling, but states using this approach would test only certain grades. Often, this is formulated as one statewide test in a subject in grades 3-5, one in grades 6-8, and one in high school. (Before the No Child Left Behind Act, federal education law required grade-span testing.)

Teachers’ unions have previously backed this idea, which could make the concept more appealing to Biden, who received a lot of support from the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association. But cutting back on the number of grades—or students—tested doesn’t resolve practical challenges of how to administer the tests states do choose to give students, or tests’ effectiveness in measuring student learning during the pandemic and its associated disruptions.

- **Ditching the diagnostic:** ESSA requires states to use the mandated tests to produce “diagnostic reports” on individual students. For example, a math test with diagnostic information gives not just an overall score, but how a student did in different areas of math like geometry, fractions, and so on.

Giving states waivers from this part of the law could help shorten the tests and efficiently provide some information about where students stand, Marion said. (California has shortened its state assessment this year.) That’s because diagnostic reports require a certain number of test questions on a particular domain to provide enough relevant information. Yet this approach could mean sacrificing some of the more-detailed data on student performance that educators and others might find particularly useful during the pandemic.

- **Standards:** ESSA says the state tests are supposed to be aligned to the states’ content standards. In theory, the Education Department could waive this requirement. However, states presumably would want exams to have some significant relationship to their standards even if testing itself looks different next spring.

Beyond these technical considerations, the NWEA results underscore that there are different types of assessments out there. Marion, for example, backs curriculum-based assessments to provide the most helpful information about students during the pandemic. But Murray emphasized the need for “state level” tests, and assessments that could provide valuable feedback about students during the pandemic aren’t necessarily designed to be administered on a large scale by states.

Biden himself has criticized high-stakes testing. But that doesn’t necessarily mean he’d oppose any or all federal testing requirements during the pandemic.

Targeted waivers would provide flexibility to states and districts, but not comprehensive answers to serious questions:

- Would the Biden Education Department offer states the option of not giving ESSA-mandated tests at all in addition to offering up narrower waivers?

- If states haven’t prepared much or at all for these changes, could they implement them well in a compressed time frame?

- What arrangements or renegotiations would states have to make with assessment companies or other providers?

- How would such changes affect students who might take the tests remotely?

- What if any waivers from ESSA’s accountability requirements would the department grant in addition to any testing flexibility?

- Would such changes not just make some form of state testing more practical, but also provide useful information for educators and policymakers about students’ academic needs? ■

**What to Do About Cheating on Assessments in Virtual Learning?**

By Thomas R. Guskey

As we reopen schools with a return to virtual instruction, teachers remain concerned about how to prevent students from cheating on assessments. To provide meaningful grades, teachers need accurate information on what students have learned. But how can we ensure accurate assessment results if we can’t prevent students from cheating?

To address this problem requires that we first consider why students cheat. Evidence indicates that students don’t cheat on assessments because they’re lazy or unmotivated. In many instances, cheating actually requires more effort than determined preparation. Students cheat on assessments because of the consequences attached to their performance and uncertainty about results. In other words, they fear what might happen if they don’t do well and they’re unsure about how best to prepare.

Students know that teachers generally use assessments for two purposes: (1) to hold students accountable, and (2) to determine students’ grades. Past experience tells them, however, that assessments don’t always align with what teachers emphasize in teaching or what was practiced during instruction. Pre-
paring for assessments, therefore, becomes a guessing game where students try to anticipate what their teachers are likely to require. This uncertainty prompts the question that teachers disdain but students so frequently ask, “Will this be on the test?”

Teachers generally try to discourage or prevent students from cheating on assessments in one of three ways. The first approach is to strictly control the context of assessment administration, especially in virtual environments. Teachers who use this option set a specific time for the assessment, limit the time they allow students to complete the assessment, and try to restrict students’ access to resources that might aid their performance, such as cellphones, books, online materials, or other students. Testing organizations concerned with the validity of assessment results and assessment security use this approach.

A second approach is to increase the severity of consequences for cheating. In using this option, teachers try to heighten students’ fear about what will happen if they are caught cheating. For example, students may face public embarrassment, huge amounts of extra work, penalties that make achieving a passing grade all but impossible, or assignment of a failing grade that cannot be rectified.

A third, potentially more effective but far less frequently used approach, is to change the purpose of assessments. Teachers using this option make assessments about feedback and learning rather than about accountability and grading. They focus on the formative purposes of assessments where results serve primarily to guide students and teachers in making improvements.

In other words, instead of changing the assessment context or altering the severity of consequences, teachers simply take away students’ reasons for cheating. Why cheat on an assessment if that hurts your chances of getting the individualized assistance you need to do well? Some teachers go so far as to make every assessment formative until students get it, and only then do they consider results for summative purposes related to accountability and grading.

**The Power of Feedback**

Making assessments about feedback and learning requires distinguishing the gradebook from the report card and disabling any gradebook function that calculates a grade before the end of the grading period. This allows teachers to record formative assessment results in the gradebook, even when they don’t count those results as part of students’ report card grades. Families need to know how students perform on formative assessments so they can monitor progress, provide support when needed, and celebrate successes. However, by making the formative-assessment results in the gradebook about feedback, teachers ensure the attention of families and students is on learning rather than on accumulating points to earn a grade.

Focusing on feedback and learning also requires disabling the grade computations built into online grading programs. For example, when students’ report card grades are based on their level of achievement at the end of the grading period, scores from the beginning of the grading period cannot be averaged in when determining those grades. Summative tallies are important, but not until the end of the grading period when teachers will make grade decisions based on the best evidence available at that time related to their grading purpose. This allows students to make mistakes along the way and not worry about irreparable consequences. It also gives students the chance to experiment, be creative, try new ideas and new approaches. If something doesn’t work, they have opportunities to fix things, to recover, and to improve.

Perhaps most important, making assessments about feedback and learning changes the teacher’s role, especially in virtual learning environments. Instead of being an assessment constable, concerned with the sanctity of the assessment process, teachers can become learning facilitators, focused on helping students master important learning goals. Instead of worrying about how to detect cheating and how to prevent students from cheating, teachers can concentrate on helping students use assessment results to improve their learning and reach higher levels of achievement. Taking away students’ reasons to cheat not only lessens teachers’ burden in a virtual learning environment, it also allows teachers to do what they really want to do: help their students succeed in learning and gain the many valuable benefits of that success.

**Treat NAEP as a Reality Check, Not an Advocacy Exercise**

By Rick Hess

If you’re like me, the election, COVID spikes, and the rest mean that October’s NAEP scores haven’t exactly been top of mind. But, with the election behind us, I’m inclined to say a few words about the weak 2019 12th grade numbers, which showed math performance flat and reading declining noticeably since 2015.

Overall, just 37 percent of 12th graders were “proficient” in reading and 24 percent in math. And keep in mind that these aren’t COVID-impacted scores. The tests were administered in fall 2019, six months before COVID reared its ugly head. As Haley Barbour, chair of the National Assessment Governing Board, put it, “These results demonstrate that far too many of our nation’s high school seniors do not have sufficient math and reading skills for postsecondary endeavors.”

So, not great. At the same time, let’s keep in mind that NAEP results are a snapshot. They’re useful for tracking big-picture student achievement but need to be handled with care. Unfortunately, too many appear disposed to disregard such caution, treating NAEP less as an essential reality check than as a festival of agendas and dubious narratives. That’s been especially true during this election season.

As is true with each new NAEP release, the teachers’ unions and self-described “public school advocates” have a universal excuse for any crummy results—the “disinvestment” in public education. Never mind what the actual spending figures show, or that after-inflation per-pupil spending has increased steadily over the past two decades. In their eyes, the lesson of NAEP is always more spending.

Meanwhile, there’s a segment of school choice advocates who eagerly greet any lousy new NAEP numbers by shouting, “Ah-ha, schools are failing!” For them, the lesson of NAEP is simple: more school choice. Of course, given that NAEP proficiency was purposefully set at an aspirational level from in-
ception, aggregate proficiency results should be taken with more than a few grains of salt.

And then there are efforts to weave complex narratives to explain the results. For instance, some holdout Common Core enthusiasts have gone to great lengths to insist that we not blame the long-standing stagnation in NAEP on Common Core. Of course, this involves devising convoluted alternative explanations—such as attributing them to the aftermath of the 2008 recession. This argument was dusted off, once again this year, with adherents implying that we should trace changes in reading and math scores to decade-old economic circumstances rather than a massive push to change reading and math instruction.

The truth is that there’s no clear or defensible way to determine what’s responsible for NAEP results, and all of the predictable spinning should be treated accordingly. It may be wishful thinking, but we’d all be better off if analysts restrained themselves from offering convenient, one-shot explanations for NAEP changes.

It’s equally important that we safeguard NAEP from its purported friends. NAEP is our one reliable tool to measure academic progress over time. On that score, recent efforts to overhaul NAEP’s reading framework are deeply troubling. In a major push to “update” NAEP’s reading framework, the National Assessment Governing Board has now developed a massive draft framework that aims, at enormous cost, to turn NAEP’s reading assessment from a straightforward snapshot of reading performance into a complicated, amorphous gauge of 21st-century “literacy” as understood by the education school set. Specially, the framework calls for the inclusion of multimedia texts, such as video clips, alongside (or instead of) textual passages. The result would compromise our ability to know how well students can actually read, introduce an array of potential distortions, and sorely reduce our ability to compare future results with past performance. As Checker Finn, the National Assessment Governing Board’s very first chair, has observed, “One of the framework developers’ key impulses is a truly worrying overreach for NAEP.”

NAEP can play a useful role in providing a respected baseline for assessing whether states or the nation are making academic progress, grounding our sense of where we are and what we’ve done. But NAEP plays that role best when we recognize its limitations.

Frederick Hess is a resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute and the director of the think tank’s Education Policy Studies.
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