

## EDUCATION POLICY

## STANDARDIZED TESTING

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# Louisville Educators and School Board Work Together to Reduce Testing

BY JOHN ROSALES



When the Jefferson County Board of Education Kentucky hosted the first of 10 town hall meetings beginning in Louisville back in May, aspirations were high. Members were looking for feedback on which “big rock” education policies to address over the next five years.

“We wanted to learn from educators, parents, students, and community members what to continue, what to change, and what to stop,” says Brent McKim, president of the [Jefferson County Teachers Association](#) (JCTA) and a member of the district’s Strategy Work Group that coordinated the meetings. “A pretty consistent message was to cut back on the volume of testing.”

With the reauthorization of the [Elementary and Secondary Education Act \(ESEA\)](#) currently being rewritten in Congress and set for a vote possibly this session, school districts across the country are assessing the need to address over-testing and a one-size-fits all punitive culture that is a hallmark of the prior reauthorization known as No Child Left behind (NCLB). Overwhelmingly, educators, parents and policymakers alike are demanding that students be allowed more time to learn.

At Jefferson County Public Schools (JCPS), McKim and the eight other work group members will report their findings from the public meetings at the next board meeting November 9. There's a lot at stake.

Aspects of the report will be voted on, adopted and built into Vision 2020, the district's document that will be the basis for targeting resources and strategies for everything from kindergarten readiness and early childhood literacy to college- and career-readiness.

"One of those big rocks is to broaden assessment of student learning beyond what's currently covered by standardized tests to include capacities and dispositions – sometimes called soft skills – essential to 21st century success," says David Jones Jr., board chair.

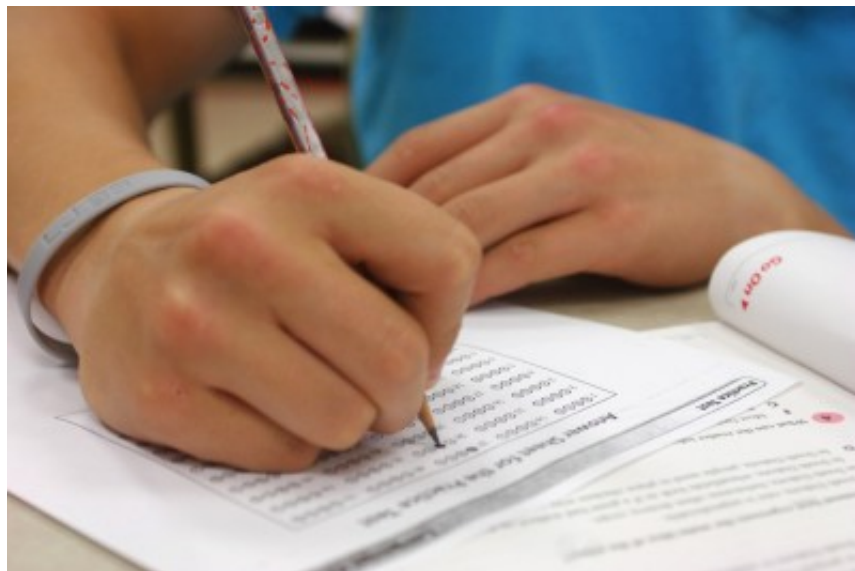
Jones says policies involving professional development, classroom time management, and other big-picture issues listed in the work group's report will take center stage at the much-anticipated board meeting. Of all policies referenced, community members were adamant about one thing: Cut back on testing so [educators can spend more time teaching problem solving, critical thinking and other marketable skills.](#)

"To create time for this activity and assessment we have asked that non-essential standardized tests be pruned away," Jones says.

In some school districts, students spend up to a third of their class time preparing for and taking state and federally mandated standardized tests. Some educators say this is excessive.

At a recent press conference, McKim cited results from a JCTA member survey on student discipline. Among other findings, the survey of 1,200 members revealed that 79 percent of teachers say that being required to "teach to the test" causes increased misbehavior in students. Respondents also revealed that the average amount of instructional time lost to administering and preparing for local, state and federally mandated tests was between three and five weeks per year.

“The excess of assessments and the fact that they interfere with student learning came up at every (public) meeting along with other concerns about student discipline and class size,” says Tammy Berlin, JCTA vice president. “We want to see diagnostic and proficiency assessments replaced with teacher-created, child-centered assessments and learning.”



In the county, the administration of federal and state standardized tests varies by grade and content area.

“Typically, our schools block out three to five days to administer the state assessment in the spring with most schools using a half-day testing calendar for those days,” says Berlin.

*A survey of Jefferson County educators revealed that the average amount of instructional time lost to administering and preparing for tests was between three and five weeks per year.*

Some grades in the district have additional federal and state mandated tests that occur at different points during the year, generally a single day at a time. At the district level, diagnostic and proficiency tests are administered in reading and math from grades 1-12; and in math, science and social studies from grades 3-12. These tests are administered four times a year for grades 1-12. The total number of district tests alone comes to 328.

“The time cost for the district assessments is approximately one hour each,” says Berlin. “This is too much!”

JCTA represents more than 6,000 teachers, librarians, speech clinicians, physical therapists and occupational therapists, most of who are concerned about over-testing either as educators, parents or both, says McKim.

“We must move beyond a primary focus on standardized testing,” he says. “We must also empower educators to design and score high-quality, authentic, project-based assessments that promote deeper learning and far more engaging experiences for kids.”

Among other statements in the work group's report is the recommendation that JCPS "develop, and guide our schools to implement, a broader definition of student learning, achievement and college/career/life readiness."

According to the report, "this will require adding new assessments, pruning away redundant standardized tests that waste time and other resources, and using the state accountability tests for their intended purpose and no other."

"We may reduce the number of redundant or misapplied assessments to allow space for other activities not within that format," says Jonathan Lowe, JCPS director of strategy and work group member.

At a May 28 meeting at Westport Middle School, speakers addressed the need to reduce standardized testing. Their comments, released by the district, include the following:

Stop "teaching to the test" and obsessing about data and employ more creative and engaging strategies like Project Based Learning

Stop the testing and labeling madness

Find more authentic ways to assess

We need the board to create policies to eliminate the avalanche of district assessments and provide funding for teacher training on developing interdisciplinary, project-based instruction and assessment

"We have the capacity to make great decisions about what we want to do in teaching and learning," Lowe says. "Teachers have to be at the core of those conversations."

After the May 21 meeting at Fairdale High School, speakers said the following about what they would improve:

Test to determine each student's progress; use test scores as a diagnostic aid



*Brent McKim, president of the Jefferson County Teachers Association*

## Provide authentic testing

Determine what we want students to know first and develop that curriculum; then design tests based on the curriculum.

Stop using student test results to compare performance of one school to another; do not label a school as “failing” based on student test results.

Lowe says other forces in play besides public input and work group recommendations are ESEA and state mandates.

“We still need to align with state assessments, but this is an opportunity where things are opening up about how we think about testing,” Lowe says. “Good assessing drives teaching and learning.”