

Is It Time to Kill Annual Testing?

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Editor's Note: Associate Editor Stephen Sawchuk covers curriculum and instruction. This analysis is part of a special report exploring pressing trends in education. Read the full report: [10 Big Ideas in Education](#). [← Back to Story](#)

Ask anyone from a school accountability expert to a parent of a school-age child, and you will get near universal agreement that we have a dysfunctional standardized-testing system in the United States.

Educators do not like the annual statewide tests: They inform school penalties, not learning, because the results come so late in the school year. They fail to match any specific curriculum, and generally don't deeply measure students' analytical capabilities or the dispositions employers and colleges value.

Our nearly 20-year experiment with yearly federally required exams has boosted math scores, research indicates, but those gains have petered out as accountability pressures have grown more acute. And efforts over the last decade to produce better tests have been met with tepid enthusiasm.

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For most teachers and students, testing remains the educational equivalent of a root canal. It's endured, and then recalled with relief. It's not something deeply integrated with teaching that reinforces long-term educational goals like developing students' ability to engage in thoughtful, reasoned argumentation.

The opt-out movement was a warning sign, the first rumble of a sentiment that has spread, just like the teacher protests of the past year. If policymakers want to preserve the long-term health of our testing ecosystem—and help teachers feel invested in, rather than victimized by it—the time to act is now.

The main questions on the table: Should we rethink the annual testing of every student? Could such a revision be balanced against the clear need to maintain a focus on those students who have been least well-served by K-12 education?

For now, annual testing isn't going anywhere; it's enshrined in federal law. But if the politics of the last two years prove anything, it's that longstanding policies, even those long thought inviolable, can be rewritten.

With testing, you can't have your cake and eat it too: Year-end testing offers longitudinal, comparable data in each state on student performance. But it's severely limited in scope and depth. The alternative—testing that better captures student learning, including portfolios and extended writing prompts—costs far more in money and time and is harder to make valid and comparable.

The Obama administration attempted to square this circle by providing seed funding for richer annual tests, but the results were less revolutionary than proponents had hoped, and they were quickly caught up by the anti-common-core and opt-out movements.

What would a world with less-frequent testing look like? There are alternatives worth considering, although each contains significant tradeoffs:

- Do what the National Assessment of Educational Progress does, by measuring samples of students rather than every student. The resulting savings could be put into test formats that better measure students' ability to integrate knowledge and analyze.
- Continue to test every student, but do so only every two to three years, again investing the cost savings into more useful systems.

- Integrate testing with curriculum practices, as is the case in the United Kingdom and most European countries—where mandatory tests used to grant "leaving certificates" and other student credentials directly reflect the actual curriculum taught in schools and require the extensive use of essays.
- Revisit the notion of drawing from classroom artifacts of student work to inform less-frequent testing results.

No discussion of these alternatives can be complete without pointing out their very real disadvantages, for equity and transparency, at a time when education advocates are pushing harder for both.

The point of testing every child, every year, was to expose the serious performance gaps among and within schools. That's why many civil rights groups support the practice so strongly, and fear what could happen if it's lost.

Doing away with annual testing could also hurt efforts to study what's working at scale. After all, annual testing led to the development of data systems that could track kids' trajectories over time, prompting a new wave of empirical research on school and teacher quality.

Finally, the ideas above are also ambitious. Linking classroom practice to testing is rarely done in the United States, and previous attempts to use informal data from classroom work samples have faltered. Technology could help, but in the age of Big Data, it also raises all kinds of privacy challenges.

Nevertheless, there are signs of the beginnings of a transformation: States and school districts are experimenting with several ideas.

Georgia is revisiting the idea of using a series of smaller, classroom-based tests better aligned to everyday lessons under its own state-level initiative.

A few other innovations are emerging thanks to a small (and not terribly popular) pilot run by the U.S. Department of Education. Louisiana, for instance, is hard at work creating a reading test based on the actual novels and texts students read, rather than dull, random reading passages that favor students with the most background knowledge. And with federal permission, New Hampshire allows districts to use shared performance-based tasks developed by teachers for some grades, and traditional tests in others.

Some individual districts are also charting their own paths: Prince William County, Va., among others, uses a British exam system more tightly integrated with curriculum goals in a handful of its schools.

What will happen next in testing? It's largely anyone's guess. **But our current divorcing of standardized testing from the everyday aims of schooling seems untenable for the long haul. It's time for smart policymakers, educators, and testing experts to lay out a new path.**