

A District's Experiment: What Happens When Schools Do Less Testing?



By Evie Blad — October 03, 2024

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It's a common argument against standardized testing: It's left less time for creativity, collaboration, and depth in schools.

Now, a new pilot in the nation's second largest district will put that idea to the test.

The Los Angeles Unified School District will allow up to 10 of its full-service community schools to opt out of all standardized tests that aren't required by state and federal laws, provided they design their own ways of assessing student progress.

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Once schools are approved to join the pilot, their students will still have to take the state's Smarter Balanced Assessment, required as part of its federal accountability plan. But they will be excused from the district's regime of diagnostic assessments—most notably the i-Ready exam, a computerized test that is administered three times a year to measure students' progress in English/language arts and math and to assign personalized, online lessons to help them catch up in targeted areas.

The initiative, called Supporting Meaningful Teaching and Learning in the LAUSD Community Schools, was approved in a 4-3 school board vote Sept. 10. Supporters said it will give teachers the time and flexibility they need to engage students in more meaningful projects, gauging their success through measures like academic portfolios and public presentations.

Critics argued it would give teachers and district administrators less reliable, comparable data to track academic recovery efforts and to monitor the success of school strategies.

As test-based accountability has grown “the whole goal of life became not the love of learning, not the enjoyment of education, not the exchange of ideas, but whether or not your school could move up on its test scores,” said Los Angeles school board President Jackie Goldberg. “For at least 20 years, I have found that repugnant.”

A former teacher, Goldberg said she developed ways of continuously assessing her students, sometimes through quizzes and tests, and sometimes through informal conversations and class projects.

“If I didn't know what they didn't know, I didn't know where we had to go next,” she said.

District will still require state testing

L.A. schools began using i-Ready in 2022 as part of Superintendent Alberto Carvalho's data-driven plan to improve schools. At the time, Carvahlo promoted i-Ready as a way to reduce testing time and provide information to parents and teachers about student performance.

Diagnostic assessments like i-Ready, which aren't required by law, have been criticized by some teachers, who say the benefits aren't enough to make up for lost class time. Critics also say optional assessments contribute to student anxiety and may not effectively measure learning.

Starting in 2025-26, grant-funded lead teachers at community schools that participate in the LAUSD pilot will receive coaching and support from the UCLA Center for Community Schooling to help “integrate culturally relevant curriculum, community- and project-based learning, and civic engagement” into their instructional programs. They will also develop performance-based methods to measure students' learning.

The proposal came together after members of the district's community schools steering committee visited the Anaheim Union school district, which has adopted a similar approach, said Marisa Saunders, the associate director for research at the UCLA Center for Community Schooling, who serves on the committee.

“One of the big takeaways was that, to really reimagine teaching and learning, teachers need time to do this work,” Saunders said. “Let’s provide teachers with important flexibilities so they can tap into their professional expertise, knowledge, and relationships with students, families, and local communities to create meaningful learning opportunities.”

The committee was also inspired by existing district programs

, Saunders said. Through a program called Linked Learning, students at about 40 high schools participate in industry-themed learning pathways, doing hands-on, interdisciplinary projects about topics including the arts, public service, and health care. Seniors publicly present and defend a portfolio that demonstrates what they’ve learned, which is a more meaningful way to communicate learning with parents than a traditional fill-in-the-bubble test result, Saunders said.

Those ideas would fit well with the district’s community school strategy, which focused on responding to the needs of students and their communities, Saunders said. For example, when some secondary teachers noticed students’ Spanish skills slipping after they moved out of dual-language elementary school programs, they designed a project that requires students to explore an issue in their community, like gun violence, and present their findings in both languages.

The program is admittedly small for a district with more than 1,000 campuses, Saunders acknowledged.

“We see it as a little crack in the door” that could lead to further moves away from testing down the road, she said.

Broader arguments about testing

The small initiative fits into broader arguments about the value of testing and how to properly use student scores to judge school quality and drive interventions.

Movements for families to opt their children out of state-mandated tests have happened before, said Dale Chu, an educational consultant who previously worked as a teacher and school principal. It’s more unusual to see a district excuse some schools from local assessments, he said.

But he rejected the argument made by testing opponents that schools must choose between testing or creative, project-based approaches.

“That’s really a false binary,” Chu said.

Board members may underestimate how difficult it is to design performance assessments that aren’t prone to subjectivity or inconsistent results, he said, and the task could be cumbersome for teachers, whose time may be better spent focused on classroom work.

Efforts to redesign testing have proven difficult in the past. After states showed limited interest in the federal Innovative Assessment pilot, which allowed for experimentation with new types of tests used for their accountability systems, U.S. Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona announced new flexibilities in November 2023 to encourage greater participation.

States that had participated in the effort said they struggled with funding the work, meeting timelines to developing the assessments, and identifying ways to measure data that is comparable across schools and districts, as federal law requires. New Hampshire, which sought to create performance assessments, dropped out of the effort entirely.

There's a middle ground between a regime of time-consuming tests and no testing at all, Chu said. In weighing the benefits of diagnostic tests, districts should do occasional audits to review what tests measure, whether they overlap, and whether there are better alternatives, he said.

But removing diagnostic assessments entirely may make it more difficult to guide learning, Chu said. And, as studies show parents often don't realize their children aren't meeting grade-level learning expectations, the move may come at a cost, he said.

"As a steward of taxpayer dollars, it's our duty to be as candid with our parents as possible," Chu said. "Why would we put this tool to the side?"

