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Amid Cries of Overtesting, a Crazy Quilt of State Responses

By **Andrew Ujifusa**

After years of outcry and intensifying public debate about whether students are overtested, many states are attempting to definitively address the issue this year. But there's no consistent strategy across the country, and just what the proposed solutions will mean for assessments could vary dramatically.

The Council of Chief State School Officers says that **39 states are examining how to reduce overtesting** or cut redundant tests in some fashion, as part of their efforts to "reduce unnecessary burden" from testing.

Yet many states, rather than placing hard caps on testing time or cutting specific exams through legislation, are choosing to hand responsibility for reducing testing to new state commissions or to work directly with local schools.

"How it is in one district might be very different from what it is in another district in the same state," said Lynn Jennings, a legislative affairs associate with the Education Trust, a Washington-based advocacy group.

Although new tests tied to the Common Core State Standards have triggered much of the discussion about overtesting, many state chiefs and elected officials support how those tests will inform their policy decisions, or else can't dramatically cut back their administration because of federal law. Uncertainty about the fate of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in Congress also creates challenges for state officials.

That means the burden of cutting tests is also falling on many district administrators, who have to tread carefully.

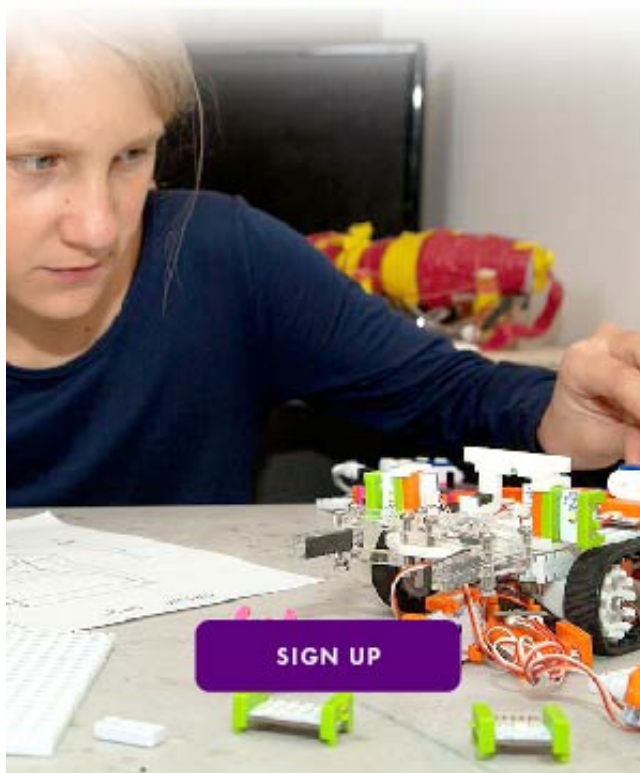
"There will be some teachers who will be very upset and say, 'That's my favorite assessment,'" said Donald D. Owen, the superintendent of the 4,200-student Urbana School District 116 in Illinois, one of three districts in the state to pilot the state's Student Assessment Inventory. That inventory is based on a tool created by Washington-based Achieve, which works

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Overtesting? A Self-Quiz For Districts

Amid a national debate over whether students take too many tests, the Achieve organization has created a tool designed to help districts catalog their tests, consider how they're used, and decide whether to

with states to implement standards and testing. "We want to talk about ... how can you get the same information another way?"

Traction in Legislatures

Colorado and Florida are two states that have taken direct legislative action to cut tests this year after significant backlash to their testing regimens.

In Colorado, House Bill 15-1323, signed into law by Democratic Gov. John Hickenlooper in May, eliminated the state social studies test altogether. It also cut the exams developed by the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers, in English/language arts and math, for high school juniors and seniors.

Florida House Bill 7069, signed into law by GOP Gov. Rick Scott in April, capped the amount of testing in a school year to 5 percent of school hours (or 45 hours), and also eliminated an 11th grade English/language arts test.

And in Ohio, the **2015-17 state budget** adopted in late June changed state policy to allow for just one testing window for state exams. It also required an unspecified reduction in the length of state tests. But other specific proposals from state officials, including a three-hour cap on certain exams and a 2 percent limit on the share of the school year that could be set aside for state, districtwide, and other exams, didn't make it into the budget.

Elsewhere, **Massachusetts House Bill 340**, introduced by Democratic state Rep. Marjorie Decker and backed by the 110,000-member Massachusetts Teachers Association, would impose a three-year moratorium on the use of state standardized tests like the PARCC and Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System in graduation decisions or teacher evaluations. The moratorium on such high stakes testing would create an opening for broader discussions about testing, said Barbara Madaloni, the MTA president.

"[If] we eliminate the high stakes, we're going to eliminate overtesting," Ms. Madaloni said.

The Massachusetts bill would also create a task force to examine testing; Maryland and North Carolina have recently created similar commissions. But it's local schools that are best positioned to cut unnecessary testing, while ensuring that high-quality tests like PARCC are preserved, said Lindsay Sobel, the executive director of the Massachusetts chapter of TeachPlus, which provides leadership programs and policy fellowships to teachers.

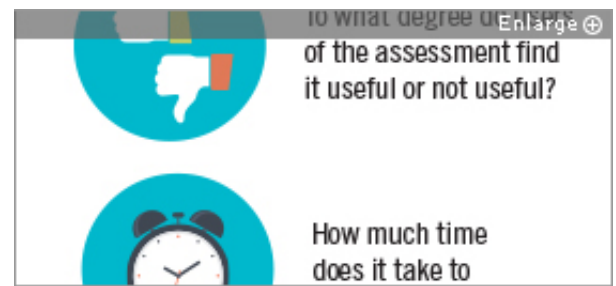
"A good solution is to have districts do audits of all of their tests they are giving, and make sure there isn't duplication in testing," Ms. Sobel said.

Counting Tests

That's precisely what a few Illinois districts have done over the past year, with the support of the Illinois state school board.

Through a representative sample of parents, teachers, students, and administrators from 52 districts, a **task force identified** 17 tests that districts gave to fulfill state and federal mandates. And 16 of those tests, in turn, were also used to "fulfill local purposes." On average, districts used roughly two nonrequired standardized tests other than the state's English/language

eliminate them.



Source: Achieve Inc.

arts and math tests to fulfill federal and state mandates, and roughly one such test for local purposes. The districts' inventory program was **modeled on Achieve's Student Assessment Inventory for School Districts**. The rubric asks for 25 data points about each test, including who uses it and how much it costs. Districts can also alter the provided data points at their discretion.

Diana Zaleski, the state board's assessment project administrator, said the board, as well as Achieve, worked with districts to help them focus not just on individual tests, but how the districts' benchmark, formative, and summative tests did (or did not) work together to create a strong testing system.

"We're very supportive of district-created common assessments, and making sure that teachers are empowered and are supported and have the resources to create high-quality assessments," Ms. Zaleski said.

The pilot districts had different reasons for cataloging and reconsidering their tests.

Mr. Owen of the Urbana district decided to participate in part because it would help the district's periodic reviews of assessment, not because of any pushback to testing from community members or teachers.

But Jeff Craig, the superintendent of the 13,000-student West Aurora School District 129, said some teachers stressed that, "we have a lot of assessment for our kids, and we spend a lot of time with those assessments, and it eats into our instruction time."

That sentiment was part of the district's motivation to participate in the inventory pilot, which found, for example, that 8th graders, on average, took 23 hours of tests per year.

Mr. Owen said he favored performance-based assessments and looked more skeptically at off-the-shelf exams used in his district.

As a result of the inventory process, the Urbana district could soon eliminate a few benchmark tests given to students early in the school year, although final decisions about test reduction haven't been made. And Mr. Craig's West Aurora district is looking to end required administration of literacy and English-language-learner tests, as well as the ACT Explore exam.

At the same time, Kathleen Kostos, West Aurora's director of assessment, noted that the district doesn't want to prohibit individual teachers from administering tests the district no longer requires if they find them useful in certain instances.

Districts also face choices about how to tell the public and their staff members about testing decisions.

Whatever it decides, the Urbana district doesn't plan to publicize how many tests it will cut or how many hours of testing it will eliminate—Mr. Owen said it's a "false pretense that I don't want to get caught up in." He also said the district wants to gradually phase out tests over more than one school year, in order to create a less-abrupt transition for teachers.

By contrast, West Aurora's Ms. Kostos said that at the start of the 2015-16 school year, the districts will send out a newsletter to staff highlighting tests the district will stop requiring, and the estimated number of testing hours the district has cut.

Ms. Zaleski also hopes the inventories would help focus attention on teachers' professional

development needs. And the state wants districts to continuously track the number and type of assessments they use, and not to stop after they take an inventory of tests just once.

"They're seeing that there's a need to streamline their assessment systems," Ms. Zaleski said of districts.

'Why Parents Are Frustrated'

But streamlining testing regimens can often lead to broader and more anxiety-filled discussions at the state level.

During a June meeting of North Carolina's Task Force on Summative Assessment, Wayne Foster, a researcher at the 53,000-student Winston-Salem/Forsyth County schools, representing elementary schools in the group, said that, "Overtesting is driving a lot of what I'm thinking about." He also raised the idea that shorter tests and a reduced focus on summative exams might help students.

And in Nevada, state Superintendent Dale Erquiaga said the state's technical problems administering the Smarter Balanced exam has forced him to rethink the place of tests in schools, even though he wants testing to be an important tool for schools.

In characterizing how many tests Nevada schools give, Mr. Erquiaga said, "We learn almost every month of a new band of testing. So now I understand why parents are frustrated."

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