

# EDUCATION WEEK

Published Online: October 24, 2015

Published in Print: October 28, 2015, as **Study Paints Chaotic View of Testing**

Updated: October 26, 2015

## Students Take Too Many Redundant Tests, Study Finds

### Review of 66 Urban Districts Gauges Scope of Practice

By **Denisa R. Superville**

Students across the nation are taking tests that are redundant, misaligned with college- and career-ready standards, and often don't address students' mastery of specific content, according to a long-awaited report that provides the first in-depth look at testing in the nation's largest urban school districts.

The comprehensive report by the Washington-based Council of the Great City Schools examines testing in 66 of the council's 68 member school districts, looking at the types of tests administered, their frequency, and how they are used. The findings are expected to add hard numbers and evidence to the fractious national debate around whether U.S. students are being overtested.

The study found, for instance, that 8th grade students in an urban district spent an average of 4.22 school days taking mandatory tests last school year—the most test-taking time of any grade level. That's not counting optional tests and those given periodically by teachers to gauge student progress. And the results of mandated tests were often returned to districts months after they had been taken, reducing their usefulness for classroom instruction.

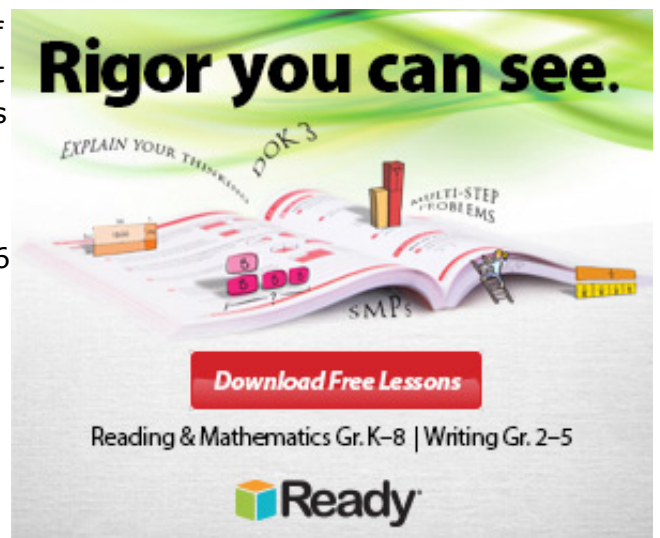
While national testing debates are often characterized by finger-pointing as to who is responsible for the aggressive testing regime, the council's report found that everyone—including classroom teachers, principals, districts, states, the federal government, and testing companies—bears some responsibility.

"The overarching take-away for us was that everybody was culpable here in one way or another," said Michael Casserly, the executive director of the Council of the Great City Schools. "There were so many actors involved, and there was so little coordination across them, that you ended up with an assessment system that was not terribly strategic."

On Saturday, the Obama administration acknowledged some responsibility for the increased amount of testing in schools and **released principles to help states and school districts dial back on assessments**, including ensuring that students do not spend more than 2 percent of classroom instructional time sitting for tests. It also called for Congress to scale back on testing in the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.

U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan and Deputy Education Secretary John King **participated in a panel discussion in Washington on Monday** to discuss how to improve assessments in the nation's schools.

[← Back to Story](#)



## Range of Findings

Among the report's other findings:

- Students in the 66 districts took 401 unique tests last year.
- There is no correlation between time spent testing and improved math and reading scores.
- Students in the 66 systems sat for tests more than 6,570 times last year.
- While testing for pre-K pupils was less common, even they were not exempt.
- Thirty-nine percent of districts waited two to four months to receive state test results.
- Tests were used for purposes for which they were not designed, such as evaluating school staff.

The report found that the time students spent taking tests differed from district to district. In St. Paul, Minn., for example, which the council characterized as a "low test" district, students spent an average of 10.8 hours a year taking mandatory tests. In Detroit, a "high test" district, that number was 30.5 hours.

While testing costs made up a small portion of the districts' total budgets, they did add up. The Hillsborough County, Fla., district, for example, spends about \$2.2 million of its estimated \$1.8 billion budget on testing, according to the report.

Richard Carranza, the superintendent of the San Francisco school district and the chairman of the council's board, said in a statement that with the increased focus on improving academic outcomes in the nation's urban schools, it was important to "have actionable data that can be used to guide instruction and help us focus on reducing learning gaps." He called the study "an important tool that will guide how we move forward to improve our local testing environments."

In a conference call with reporters Oct. 23, three urban superintendents from Orange County, Fla., Cleveland, Ohio, and San Francisco noted the importance of the report in the national debate around testing.

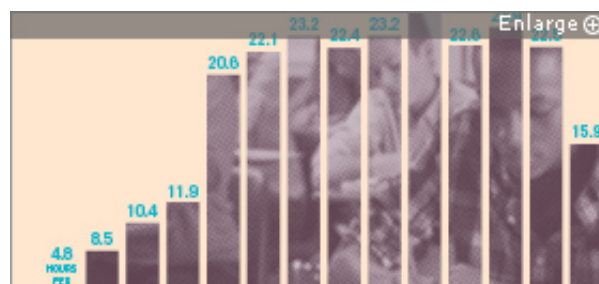
Barbara Jenkins, the superintendent of Orange County schools, said it comes at the right time to refocus the conversation around assessments, the purpose behind those assessments, "and what is really reasonable."

Eric Gordon, the CEO of Cleveland Metropolitan School District, said district leaders believed that there was value in assessments — including to inform instruction and also to hold school leaders publicly accountable for their students' performance.

The superintendents said that it was important that the tests provide districts with actionable data to use to help their students.

### Time Spent on Test-Taking

A study by the Council of the Great City Schools, which represents the nation's largest urban school districts, found that students spend a lot of time taking tests. Some of those tests are redundant, and others are used for purposes for which they were not designed. Eighth graders spent an average of 25.3 hours—or more than four school days—taking mandatory tests in the 2014-15 school year, the highest number of hours in any of the tested grades, according to the study.



SOURCE: Council of the Great City Schools

Gordon said the report also "helps us to figure out what is the right way to consider how to assess our students, as opposed to the debate in the nation of whether we should or should not."

Carranza, from San Francisco, said the report highlights the need to have high-quality tests and high-quality assessments.

"A test for a test's sake is not sufficient in our schools," he said. "They must be actionable, they must be robust, they must be rigorous, but they must be tied to a defined outcome, and they must actually measure for that defined outcome."

### **Nobody 'Asked the Question'**

The council's board of directors commissioned the two-year testing review in 2013, realizing that the national discussion around testing was not always grounded in good evidence, Casserly said.

"Nobody had really asked the question before about how much testing there really was in our schools," he said.

Opposition to testing, which increased under the No Child Left Behind Act, has grown with the advent of the widely adopted Common Core State Standards. The backlash spawned an opt-out movement, as some parents chose not to have their children participate in the tests developed to align to the newer, more rigorous standards.

National data on the extent of that movement, however, have been hard to come by. Among the council districts, opt-out rates varied from 20 percent in Rochester, N.Y., to less than 1 percent in many of the districts. The median figure across the districts was less than 1 percent.

Since the review was commissioned, many states and districts have taken steps to cut back on the number of tests they administer.

Duval County schools, in Jacksonville, Fla., reduced the number of district-required assessments at the elementary school level to 10 from 23 and at the secondary school level to 12 from 29. And a study released in June by the Council of Chief State School Officers, the Washington-based organization that represents the top education officials in the states, showed that at least 39 states were working on reducing unnecessary tests.

### **Next Steps**

Chris Minnich, the CCSSO's executive director, said the organization will use the new data to inform its efforts around improving the quality of assessments and **reducing redundancies**. (The CCSSO was a key player in the common-core effort.)

"We need to continue to work together to have a frank dialogue around which tests provide valuable information," Minnich said.

The report comes with recommendations for the state and federal governments and local school districts. It suggests that the federal government maintain oversight for annual statewide testing for all students in reading and math in grades 3 to 8 and once in high school. It also recommends that states cut down on the time it takes for districts and schools to get test results.

It calls for revisiting the U.S. Department of Education's

#### **RELATED BLOG**



policy of using test scores and student learning

[Visit this blog.](#)

objectives in untested grades for teacher evaluations,

and it urges extending the one-year testing exemption for recently arrived English-language learners. It also calls for more consistency in the annual assessments that states use for accountability purposes.

The report recommends that districts review their tests to reduce duplication, attend to the quality of tests before adopting them, and ensure that tests are really assessing how students are doing.

The council plans to keep monitoring how the nation tests its students. The next phase includes creating a commission of researchers, parents, and educators to develop a more "thoughtful," "rational" and "intelligent" system. The commission members will be named within the next two weeks, Casserly said.

Vol. 35, Issue 10, Pages 1,9