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## Too Much Testing? Ed. Dept. Outlines Steps to Help States and Districts Cut Back

By [Alyson Klein](#) on October 24, 2015 12:01 PM

### UPDATED

The Obama administration, which spent its first six years in office arguably upping the ante on standardized tests by calling for them to be a part of teacher evaluations, has instead spent the past year encouraging states and districts to make sure that assessments are of high quality, and don't take up too much instructional time.

The shift has come as many parents [have decided to opt their children out of standardized assessments](#), [states have sought to rein in testing time](#), and the Common Core State Standards have faced serious political pushback, in part because of concern about the tests that go along with them. ([More on changes to the administration's testing rhetoric here.](#))

Now, the U.S. Department of Education has released [some general principles](#) for states and districts to help them figure out how to cut back on assessments and ensure that they're used to drive instruction.

These principles aren't musts, just suggestions. And they are in line with much of what the department has been saying about testing over the past year.

For instance, the department has said tests should be "worth taking," easily understandable for parents, time-limited, and just one piece of the puzzle when it comes to getting a picture of student learning. And, importantly, the administration is suggesting that tests should take up no more than 2 percent of instructional time. (Some reaction to all this, including from Hillary Clinton, the front-runner for the Democratic presidential nomination, below.)

President Barack Obama gave the principles a shout-out in a [video](#) posted on the White House Facebook page over the weekend.

"In moderation, smart strategic [testing] can help us measure our kids progress in school," the president said. But he added that "tests shouldn't occupy too much classroom time or crowd out teaching and learning." Obama will be meeting with educators who have sought to trim testing time next week, according to the Associated Press.

In its principles, the administration also acknowledged its own role in what it described as the overuse of tests.

"In too many schools, there is unnecessary testing and not enough clarity of purpose applied to the task of assessing students, consuming too much instructional time and creating undue stress for educators and students," the principles read in part. "The administration bears some of the responsibility for this, and we are committed to being part of the solution."

The principles also included a list of steps the department has taken, or plans to take to help states and districts cutback on testing. Many of these steps are already in the works. And none of them make big changes to the testing requirements in the No Child Left Behind Act.

Some examples:

**No Child Left Behind Act waiver revisions:** The department will allow states to tweak their waiver plans to cut back on the frequency of testing in subjects that aren't required in federal law. That would seem to mean that annual tests in reading and math in grades 3 through 8 and once in high school (plus science in certain grades) must stand. But other tests can go, or be scaled back.

**Teacher evaluation:** The department noted that it has already allowed for a lot of flexibility when it comes to the timeline for getting new teacher performance reviews that take state scores into account in place. (Teacher evaluations through student outcomes are a key requirement under NCLB waivers, in place in more than 40 states.) For instance, the administration has allowed states to scale back the weight they give standardized tests in teacher performance reviews, and [push back the timeline for using the evaluations](#). (In some cases, they've been permitted to delay until the 2017-18 school year, beyond President Barack Obama's tenure, when waivers may no longer be a factor.) The department says it will continue to find ways to give states even more leeway, especially for evaluations of educators whose subjects aren't part of state standardized tests. (Like, say, the gym teacher.)

**Taking testing concerns into consideration when it comes to teacher preparation:** New teacher preparation regulations are supposed to be coming out by the end of year. [Under the proposed regulations](#), released last year, states have to weigh student growth as a "significant" part of the measure for programs. But importantly, the department has removed the word "significant," meaning that states can decide how big a factor testing data should be.

**Offering technical assistance to states that want to scale back assessments:** The department said it will hold "office hours" to help states figure out how to cut back tests or beef up their quality.

**Allowing states to try out "innovative" assessments:** The department has already granted a waiver to allow a [handful of New Hampshire districts to try out performance-based assessments](#) in certain grades, instead of using the test the rest of the state uses. The idea is for New Hampshire to eventually take the system statewide. But other states, [including Kansas](#), have put forth proposals and been rebuffed. It sounds like the department will be open to working with states further on this issue.

**Helping states use federal funds to curb or rethink testing:** The department has already proposed allowing some federal funds for state assessments to be used for "testing audits." It sounds like it will be looking for other pots of money that can be dedicated to rethinking testing. And the department will release guidance on best practices for scaling back tests by January.

**Pushing for cutting back tests in ESEA reauthorization:** Language encouraging states and districts to "audit" their tests has been a part of the [department's ESEA ask to Congress](#).

The principles come in conjunction with the release of a long-awaited report by the Council of the Great City Schools on [how much time students spend taking tests and how the tests are used](#). Last year, the CGCS and the Council of Chief State School Officers [pledged to help states and districts trim testing](#), while hanging on to annual assessments.

#### Reaction

The response to the principles has been a mixed bag.

Hillary Clinton, who is leading in the polls for the Democratic presidential nomination, gave the principles a thumbs-up in a statement.

"While testing can provide communities with full information about how our students are doing and help us determine whether we have achievement gaps, we can and must do better," she said. "We should be ruthless in looking at tests and eliminating them if they do not actually help us move our kids forward."

And Chris Minnich, the executive director of the Council of Chief State School Officers, said most states are already taking steps to trim testing time. But he cautioned he wants the solution to be state-led, and that he doesn't want to see a federal mandate to cap testing at a particular percentage of instructional time.

Randi Weingarten, the president of the American Federation of Teachers, a 1.6 million-member union which has endorsed Clinton, sees the move as a step in the right direction.

"The president and the Department of Education have just proven that advocacy based on evidence works. The fixation on high-stakes testing hasn't moved the needle on student achievement," she said in a statement. "Testing should help inform instruction, not drive instruction. We need to get back to focusing on the whole child--teaching our kids how to build relationships, how to be resilient and how to think critically."

For her part, Lily Eskelsen Garcia, the president of the National Education Association, a 3 million-member union, which has also endorsed Clinton, offered some cautious praise.

"We are optimistic that President Obama and Secretary Duncan have learned from the students, parents, and educators who see firsthand that overtesting acts as a barrier to student success and takes away time to learn," she said in a statement. "But that's just the first lesson. With a reauthorization of ESEA on the horizon, we hope this decision leads the administration and all policymakers to also address the high-stakes that too often accompany these standardized tests." For example, the NEA has raised big questions about whether student test scores should be a major factor in a teacher's firing.

**But others see the principles as too little, too late.**

The National Center for Fair & Open Testing (FairTest) said in a statement that the administration's ideas ultimately won't do much to curb testing. Instead, federal law needs to make changes to "test-and-punish mandates," said the organization's director, Bob Schaeffer.

And a senior GOP aide said that it's pretty rich for the administration to claim to be part of the "testing solution," since it continues to require waiver states to use state assessment scores in teacher evaluations.

"President Obama and Arne Duncan complaining about overtesting is a bit like a serial arsonist complaining about all the burned-out buildings," the aide said. "While it's nice that they have finally figured out what millions of teachers, parents, and students have been complaining about, for these two to think they are part of the solution is laughable at best."

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