

## TESTING BURDEN DETAILED

# Study: Testing costs up to \$78 million, covers most of school year

*Report provides important data for testing task force*

by [Todd Engdahl](#) on November 20, 2014 8:11 pm



Colorado state government and school districts spend up to \$78 million a year on testing, and some kind of standardized testing takes place during every week of the school year, according to a new study.

“Only accounting for direct costs, and not the additional opportunity costs incurred by redirected staff time, in total \$70-\$90 a student is spent on assessments in Colorado. This is between \$61.1 to \$78.4 million annually,” said the study by Augenblick, Palaich and Associates, a Denver education research firm.

On the issue of testing time, the study said, “When considered in the context of a typical school year of 175 days ... between 7 percent and 15 percent of time in the school year [is spent] preparing for or taking assessments.”

The study was done for the Standards and Assessments Task Force, the 15-member appointed group that is studying the state testing system and which will develop recommendations for the 2015 legislative session. The task force and the study were authorized by a 2014 law that was a legislative compromise in response to growing concerns about assessments. The group was briefed on the study last Monday.

The study's conclusions were based primarily on information provided by surveys of district-level administrators, building administrators and teachers. Information about testing costs was based on the survey, state data and interviews with administrators in five districts.

Other key findings of the study include:

- "It is clear that both teachers and students are spending a significant amount of time that could otherwise be devoted to instruction on these assessment-related activities," despite variations among respondents about specific amounts of time spent on test prep and test taking.
- "Respondents from all three levels indicated significant impacts and relatively few benefits for most assessments. ... A majority of respondents at all levels reported disagreement that the benefits of assessments outweighed the impacts." (The one exception was general agreement that the benefits of the ACT tests given to high school juniors outweigh its impacts.)
- "Respondents ... suggested changes to assessments, focusing on reducing the length and number of grades of students taking assessment or reducing to the federal minimum."

The educator opinions collected by the study mirror those captured in an earlier Department of Education survey (see [this story](#) for details). But the APA study does combine a wide range of testing data in a single document and provides a fresh look at the alphabet soup of tests facing Colorado students every year – DIBELS, STAR, CMAS, ACCESS and many more.

Here's a quick look at some of the study's major findings.

## Tests and the school year

From a week of school readiness assessments in August to three weeks of early literacy progress monitoring in May, testing goes on across the school year, the study found.

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“In this ... example, over 40 weeks of assessment windows are open for 10 unique assessments (with specific date ranges overlapping) over a typical 36 week school year. This does not include additional formative assessments, course exams, or AP/IB exams. As is apparent, assessment is a year long process with at least one assessment testing window being open nearly every week of the school year.”

- [FULL TEXT OF STUDY](#)
- [TASK FORCE WEBPAGE](#)

## Student time on tests

“While the number of assessments administered varies by grade level, students at every level spend over a week of school time preparing for assessments, with students at key grade levels spending over two weeks of school time preparing for assessments. Time spent taking assessments is similarly high, taking at least a week of school time for students at all levels and more than two weeks of school time for students in some grade levels.”

## Teacher time on tests

In the context of a 175-day school year, teachers spend between 5 percent and 26 percent of their time “preparing for or administering assessments.” The variation is accounted for partly by different loads for teachers depending on the grades and subjects they teach.

## Costs of testing

The study found direct per-student costs for testing varying between \$5 and \$50 for state tests and \$15-\$58 for district tests.

“These figures would be much higher if opportunity costs due to diverted staff time were included. The costs range dramatically between districts and represent different resource starting points and capacity capabilities. Though there is not a perfect correlation the smaller districts tended to have higher costs than the larger districts.”

## Costs & benefits

“Ratings of assessment impacts were remarkably similar across district, school, and teacher

**Table 5.3**  
**Total Time Spent by General Education Students**  
**Preparing for State and Local Assessments**

Grade	Total Number of Hours	Number of Days
Kindergarten	34.8	5.8
1st	38.1	6.4
2nd	39.9	6.7
3rd	70.8	11.8
4th	83.6	13.9
5th	83.2	13.9
6th	52.9	8.8
7th	69.6	11.6
8th	68.9	11.5
9th	48.4	8.1
10th	48.9	8.2
11th	67.2	11.2
12th	54.1	9.0

respondents. Teacher respondents tended to rate the impact of assessments as slightly higher than district and school respondents, but differences were not large. Impact ratings did, however, vary significantly by assessment, with all respondents indicating high level of impact from the CMAS and TCAP/PARCC assessments across all impact areas. Conversely, respondents indicated lower impacts from the ACT.”

## What should be done

“A minority of respondents at all levels suggested keeping assessments as they were, with the exception of the ACT. Across all assessments, respondents at all levels favored reducing the length of assessments. There were not major differences in suggested changes from respondents at the district, school, and teacher level.”

The study found about 60 percent of district administrators want to reduce language arts and math tests to the federal minimum of testing 3rd-8th graders and once in high school. Only about a third of building administrators supported that. There was majority support across all three groups for reducing the length of tests.

## What happens next

The study is expected to be a key piece of evidence in the task force’s deliberations as it works to prepare its report – or possibly reports – during its final two scheduled meetings on Dec. 16 and Jan. 12.

The group also has gathered a wide variety of information, including comments at several public meetings around the state. (See [this page](#) for links to summaries of those meetings.)

An outside advocacy group, the [Denver Alliance for Public Education](#), also is seeking additional parent comment through an online survey, which it intends to present to the task force.

Some members of the task force have indicated support for trimming the testing system back to federal minimums. But there is a wide variety of views represented on the group, and members representing education reform groups are nervous about tinkering too much with the current system. (See the list of members at the bottom of [this page](#).)

While the task force is still deliberating, members of the legislature already are at work on the issue.

“The legislators are drafting their own bills. We’re going to see bills that are across the

spectrum,” said one lobbyist. “The legislature is going to have to pick and choose.”

## How study was done

APA gathered information through document review, an online survey of district administrators, school administrators and teachers, follow-up interviews with five districts (Aurora, Center, Eagle, Kit Carson and Poudre) on costs and from CDE information. Here’s the breakdown of responses:

- District-level administrators – Responses represent 64 districts, or 36 percent
- School-level administrators – Responses represent 12 percent of schools
- Teachers – Responses represent 4 percent of statewide workforce

The study concluded that the responses were representative of statewide opinion.

Grade	Total Number of Hours	Number of Days
Kindergarten	34.3	5.7
1st	47.9	8.0
2nd	51.1	8.5
3rd	67.4	11.2
4th	72.7	12.1
5th	71.8	12.0
6th	40.5	6.7
7th	47.7	8.0
8th	46.4	7.7
9th	39.1	6.5
10th	36.5	6.1
11th	42.8	7.1
12th	35.0	5.8

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