



**The New York Times** | <http://nyti.ms/1PJiOPw>

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U.S.

# Obama Administration Calls for Limits on Testing in Schools

By **KATE ZERNIKE** OCT. 24, 2015

Faced with mounting and bipartisan opposition to increased and often high-stakes testing in the nation's public schools, the Obama administration declared Saturday that the push had gone too far, acknowledged its own role in the proliferation of tests, and urged schools to step back and make exams less onerous and more purposeful.

Specifically, the administration called for a cap on assessment so that no child would spend more than 2 percent of classroom instruction time taking tests. It called on Congress to "reduce over-testing" as it reauthorizes the federal legislation governing the nation's public elementary and secondary schools.

"I still have no question that we need to check at least once a year to make sure our kids are on track or identify areas where they need support," said Arne Duncan, the secretary of education, who has announced that he will leave office in December. "But I can't tell you how many conversations I'm in with educators who are understandably stressed and concerned about an overemphasis on testing in some places and how much time testing and test prep are taking from instruction."

"It's important that we're all honest with ourselves," he continued. "At the

federal, state and local level, we have all supported policies that have contributed to the problem in implementation. We can and will work with states, districts and educators to help solve it.”

Teachers’ unions, which had led the opposition on the left to the amount of testing, declared the reversal of sorts a victory. “Parents, students, educators, your voice matters and was heard,” said Randi Weingarten, the president of the American Federation of Teachers.

And even some proponents of newer, tougher tests said they appreciated the administration’s acknowledgment that it had helped create the problem, saying it did particular damage by encouraging states to evaluate teachers in part on test scores.

But the administration’s so-called “testing action plan” — which guides school districts but does not have the force of law — also risks creating new uncertainty on the role of tests in America’s schools. Many teachers have felt whiplash as they rushed to rewrite curriculum based on new standards and new assessments, only to have politicians in many states pull back because of political pressure.

Some who agreed that testing has run rampant also urged the administration not to throw out the No. 2 pencils with the bath water, saying tests can be a powerful tool for schools to identify weaknesses and direct resources. They worried that the cap on time spent testing — which the administration said it would ask Congress to enshrine in legislation — would only tangle schools in more federal regulations and questions of what, exactly, counts as a test.

“What happens if somebody puts a cap on testing, and to meet the cap ends up eliminating tests that could actually be helpful, or leaves the redundancy in the test and gets rid of a test that teachers can use to inform their instruction?” asked Michael Casserly, the executive director of the Council of the Great City Schools, an organization that represents about 70

large urban school districts.

Michael J. Petrilli, the president of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute and one of the most vocal proponents for higher standards and tougher tests, said, “There’s plenty of agreement that there’s too much testing going on.” But, he added, “we have to be careful, as with anything federal, that it doesn’t lead to unintended consequences.”

The administration’s move seemed a reckoning on a two-decade push that began during the Bush administration and intensified under President Obama. Programs with aspirational names — **No Child Left Behind**, **Race to the Top** — were responding to swelling agreement among Democrats and Republicans that higher expectations and accountability could lift the performance of American students, who chronically lag their peers in other countries on international measures, and could help close a chronic achievement gap between black and white students.

States, led by the National Governors Association and advised by local educators, created the so-called Common Core standards, which outlined the skills students should have upon graduation, and signed on to tests tied to those standards.

But as the Obama administration pushed testing as an incentive for states to win more federal money in the Race for the Top program, it was bedeviled by an unlikely left-right alliance. Conservatives argued that the standards and tests were federal overreach — some called them a federal takeover — and called on parents and local school committees to resist what they called a “one size fits all” approach to teaching.

On the left, parents and unions objected to tying tests to teacher evaluations and said tests hamstrung educators’ creativity. They accused the companies writing the assessments of commercializing the fiercely local tradition of American schooling.

As a new generation of tests tied to the Common Core was rolled out last spring, several states abandoned plans to use the tests, while others renounced the Common Core, or rebranded it as a new set of local standards. And some parents, mostly in suburban areas, had their children opt out of the tests.

Mr. Duncan's announcement — which was backed by his designated successor, John B. King Jr. — was prompted in part by the anticipation of a new survey from the Council of the Great City Schools, which set out to determine exactly how much testing is happening among its members.

That survey, also released Saturday, found that students in the nation's big-city schools will take, on average, about 112 mandatory standardized tests between prekindergarten and high school graduation — eight tests a year. In eighth grade, when tests fall most heavily, they consume an average of 20 to 25 hours, or 2.3 percent of school time. The totals did not include tests like Advanced Placement exams or the ACT.

There was no evidence, the study found, that more time spent on tests improved academic performance, at least as measured by the National Assessment of Educational Progress, a longstanding test sometimes referred to as the nation's report card.

“Because so many actors are adopting and requiring tests, you often find a whole portfolio of tests not being very strategic,” said Mr. Casserly, the council's executive director. “It's often disjointed and disconnected and incoherent in many ways, and it results in a fair amount of redundancy and overlap.”

Still, he said: “We don't think tests are the enemy. We think there's an appropriate place for them.”

The administration said it would issue “clear guidance” on testing by January. Some of the language of the announcement Saturday was general; it said, for example, that tests should be “worth taking” and “fair.” Like new

guidance from many states, it stressed that academic standards and curriculum are to be fleshed out locally.

But it also said that tests should be “just one of multiple measures” of student achievement, and that “no single assessment should ever be the sole factor in making an educational decision about a student, an educator or a school.”

Still, it emphasized that the administration was not backing away entirely from tests: The announcement said tests should cover “the full range of relevant state standards,” and elicit “complex student demonstrations or applications of knowledge and skills.”

A version of this article appears in print on October 25, 2015, on page A1 of the New York edition with the headline: White House Moves to Limit School Testing .

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