



Testing and Accountability: The Federal Role



Between now and November 5th, we are running a series of 10 Q&As with NEPC Fellows about education issues relevant to the 2024 federal election. The goal of the series is to inform readers about the education-related stances of the nation's two major political parties, drawing upon the Republican and Democratic parties' national platforms and on Project 2025. Q&A participants were selected on the basis of their research expertise on the topics they have been asked to address. In addition to describing the parties' positions, each expert is providing background information, with a focus on summarizing research findings.

Today's Q&A focuses on the federal role assessment and accountability in K-12 education. Responses are provided by [Lorrie Shepard](#), Distinguished Professor Emerita in the School of Education, University of Colorado Boulder. Shepard is a nationally recognized expert on both large-scale assessment such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress and in [classroom assessment grounded in research on teaching and learning](#).

1. *From a historical perspective, why has the federal government been engaged in accountability and assessment?*

The federal government's involvement in education began with the first Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) passed in 1965 as part of President Johnson's War on Poverty. ESEA's core purpose was to provide resources to address the educational needs of children in impoverished school settings, but the allocation of federal funds also came with accountability strings attached. Senator Robert F. Kennedy (Sr.)

feared that educators lacked the ability to serve “disadvantaged” children effectively, so he added an amendment requiring that states adopt “appropriate objective measurements of educational achievement” to evaluate program effectiveness. Note that requiring states to conduct their own evaluations in exchange for federal funds was a way to maintain states’ constitutional authority over education. Early evaluations were only conducted at so-called Title I schools; i.e., schools that received ESEA funds because they served students from lower-income families. These evaluations were actually quite chaotic, involving a variety of tests, but within a decade a more uniform system of reporting was imposed. This led to a huge increase in the amount of standardized testing. In 2001, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) reauthorization of ESEA expanded the testing requirements so that they applied to all schools, while also imposing consequences when strict benchmarks for “adequate yearly progress” were not met.

2. *From a research perspective, how has federal involvement in accountability and assessment been helpful or harmful when it comes to preparing students to succeed in college, career and life?*

Many hundreds of studies have addressed both the positive and negative effects of test-based accountability. Using National Assessment of Educational Progress data, researchers have attempted to isolate the effects of NCLB accountability mandates *per se*, separate from programmatic interventions. They found an increase in fourth-grade mathematics achievement compared to what might have occurred without NCLB, but no significant benefit for eighth-grade mathematics or for reading achievement in fourth or eighth grade. Studies of the unintended or negative side effects of accountability pressures are myriad. Most policymakers are familiar with complaints about “teaching the test,” but they may not be aware of all it entails. Extensive survey data show that efforts to raise math and reading test scores have pushed science, social studies, art, and music out of the curriculum. These curriculum distortions happen disproportionately in schools serving poor students and students of color. Less obvious is the harm to student learning when low-performing students are drilled using worksheets with test-like formats and tested repeatedly with computer-delivered interim tests. The research evidence is unequivocal showing that these rote learning instructional practices do not lead to conceptual understanding and can be extremely demotivating. One anthropologist called it the “commodification” of learning. Psychologists have shown that *extrinsic motivation*, working to please the teacher or perform on a test, can actually drive out *intrinsic motivation*, which is the motivation to learn for learning’s sake.

3. *Based on your own research expertise, how (if at all) should the federal role on this issue shift? What is the justification for those recommendations?*

For the future, the most important shift in the federal role would be to *reduce substantially the amount of testing required* for accountability. The amount of testing mandated by NCLB not only had pervasive negative effects on instructional practices but also harmed the quality of educational achievement measures themselves. Reform efforts in the 1990s focused on developing assessments that were more authentic and

reflective of deeper learning. These were eliminated. State accountability tests in reading and mathematics in every grade combined with periodic interim tests made it too costly to score open-ended performance assessments where students could show their work and explain their thinking. If the amount of accountability testing were to be rolled back to what it had been before NCLB—grade spans rather than every grade—it would be possible to reintroduce more thoughtful representations of learning goals.

Less mandatory state testing should also be accompanied by greater clarity about the *program evaluation* purpose of Title I testing. That is not currently the case: Today, local districts control the curriculum, but the material tested by federally mandated accountability exams is determined at the state level, creating gaps between what is tested and what is taught. In addition, accountability tests occur once a year, usually in the spring. Results are typically not available until the fall, at which points students have advanced to the next grade level, with a different curriculum, and a new set of teachers. For these reasons, policymakers should not pretend that state-level tests can be effective for day-to-day instructional decisions and individual student feedback. There is a national need for better-designed curricula and instructional resources complete with embedded formative and summative assessment activities and instrumentation, but subject matter experts and experts in teaching and learning—not testing companies—should design these materials. Perhaps it is time for the federal government to consider again the funding of curricula through the National Science Foundation or another agency, as it did in the 1950s-1970s and in the 1990s. Title I accountability provisions are not the place to conceptualize the development of instructionally embedded assessments, but the reauthorization of the ESEA could allow states greater flexibility so that they could, in turn, allow districts to participate in curriculum-specific assessment models.

4. *Please briefly explain how Project 2025, the RNC national platform and the DNC national platform address this issue. (If this issue is not addressed by Project 2025, the RNC platform, or the DNC platform, please note that.)*

The RNC national platform and Project 2025 do not address how inequities in the quality of schooling will be addressed. Their predominant policy tool is Universal School Choice. Project 2025 specifically recommends that federal spending for Title I be phased out over a 10-year period and that responsibility for providing a quality education to children from low-income families be returned to the states.

The DNC platform endorses a set of interventions proven to improve student learning such as intensive tutoring and extended learning time that will help schools “lift student achievement, rather than punishing them based on state standardized tests.” The DNC also “supports efforts to provide more timely, well-rounded, actionable feedback on student learning and progress to educators and to families that will support instruction and student success, while upholding rigorous academic standards.”

5. *What is your response to the ways in which this issue is addressed by Project 2025, the RNC national platform and the DNC national platform, based on your knowledge of the research in this area?*

While the RNC platform is silent on the issue of accountability testing, we should note from past experience that support for accountability testing in Congress has been strong and decidedly bipartisan. The slight lessening of consequences with the Every Student Succeeds Act reauthorization of ESEA reflected some general concerns about “too much testing.” However, leaders of both parties and Obama administration authors carried forward the same amount of testing from NCLB to ESSA, insisting on technical features (such as comparability in the innovative assessment provision) that precluded any profound changes.

Today’s DNC platform recognizes the harm and the inadequacies of standardized testing as a primary tool for improving educational opportunity. And, of course, it’s generally a good thing to be in favor of instructionally supportive assessment practices, sometimes referred to as *formative assessment* or assessment *for learning*. It is a mistake, however, as explained above, if policy leaders think they should try to extract “actionable feedback on student learning” or instructionally supportive insights from Title I accountability tests.

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[Help or Harmful? The Federal Role in Supporting Students with Disabilities in Schools](#)

[Protections Against Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Discrimination in Schools: The Federal Role](#)

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