NEPC
NATIONAL EDUCATION POLICY CENTER

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Newsletter

Why Is It So Hard to Reduce Testing? And What Can Be Done About It?



Districts administer a lot of tests. The average public school student spends 20-25 hours per year taking eight state- or district-mandated standardized exams, with higher rates reported in urban schools. These figures include off-the-shelf summative tests that "sum up" what students know at the end of a school year or term, interim tests designed to predict how students might perform on summative exams, and formative assessments that are supposed to help teachers and students figure out how to make adjustments to address knowledge and skill gaps.

Students in certain subgroups (e.g., multilingual learners and students not yet reading at grade level) may take additional exams related to their specific learning trajectories. And then there are teacher-created assessments such as pop quizzes or spelling tests.

The testing opt-out movement that took hold about 10 years ago did lead some districts and states to explore or implement caps on the amount of time students spend testing. And the pandemic put many testing pro-

grams on hold while students were learning from home. But NEPC Fellow Scott Marion of the Center for Assessment writes that districts still struggle to streamline their testing programs—even after hiring experts to conduct testing audits that starkly demonstrate how many they are administering.

"Audits have an inherent limitation in asking people to drop something they likely thought was important at some point," Marion explains. "This is related to the behavioral economics concept of loss aversion, which is our tendency to fear the pain of loss rather than pursue the hope of gain. Many people experience this when trying to purge clothes from their closets."

To counter this tendency, Marion proposes an idea borrowed not from psychometry, but from finance: zero-based budgeting. Rather than working from last year's budget and adjusting line items up or down, zero-based budgeters start from scratch by identifying upcoming goals, clarifying what needs to be done to meet those goals, and estimating the costs of each item. Similarly, what Marion calls "zero-based assessment" would call for leaders to map curricular and instructional systems to learning goals to determine what specific types of information need to be collected, consider who actually uses each assessment (and for what purpose), ask whether individual tests contribute to the creation of rich and equitable learning environments, and finally to evaluate whether there is evidence that each assessment can and should be used to meet key goals.

"I do not have any illusions that districts are going to completely strip away all assessments and start over." Marion concludes. "Nevertheless, a zero-based budgeting approach to assessment design should be employed to help clear out overstuffed assessment systems and help districts move towards more balanced assessment systems."

NEPC Resources on Assessment

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