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Common Core Assessment Myths and Realities: Moratorium Needed From More Tests, Costs, Stress

Under No Child Left Behind (NCLB), each state set its own learning standards and developed tests to measure them. But NCLB's failure to spur overall test score gains or close racial gaps led "reformers" to push for national, or "common," standards. With millions in federal Race to the Top money and NCLB "waivers" as incentives, all but a few states agreed to adopt Common Core standards. Two multi-state consortia — the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) and the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) — won federal grants to develop Common Core tests, which are due to be rolled out in 2014-15. Here are the realities behind major Common Core myths.

Myth: *Common Core tests will be much better than current exams, with many items measuring higher-order skills.*

Reality: *New tests will largely consist of the same old, multiple-choice questions.*

Proponents initially hyped new assessments that they said would measure – and help teachers promote – critical thinking. In fact, the exams will remain [predominantly multiple choice](#). Heavy reliance on such items continues to promote rote teaching and learning. Assessments will generally include just one session of short performance tasks per subject. Some short-answer and “essay” questions will appear, just as on many current state tests. Common Core math items are often simple computation tasks buried in [complex and sometimes confusing “word problems”](#) (PARCC, 2012; SBAC, 2012). The prominent [Gordon Commission](#) of measurement and education experts concluded Common Core tests are currently “far from what is ultimately needed for either accountability or classroom instructional improvement purposes” (Gordon Commission, 2013).

Myth: *Adoption of Common Core exams will end NCLB testing overkill.*

Reality: *Under Common Core, there will be many more tests and the same misuses.*

NCLB triggered a testing tsunami (Guisbond, *et al.*, 2012); the Common Core will flood classrooms with even more tests. Both consortia keep mandatory annual English/language arts (ELA) and math testing in grades 3-8 and once in high school, as with NCLB. However, the tests will be longer than current state exams. [PARCC](#) will test reading and math in three high school grades instead of one; [SBAC](#) moves reading and math tests from 10th grade to 11th. In PARCC states, high schoolers will also take a speaking and listening test. PARCC also offers “formative” tests for kindergarten through second grade. Both consortia produce and encourage additional interim testing two to three times a year (PARCC, 2012; SBAC, 2012). As with NCLB, Common Core tests will be used improperly to make high-stakes decisions, including [high school graduation](#) (Gewertz, 2012), teacher evaluation, and school accountability.

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Myth: *New multi-state assessments will save taxpayers money.*

Reality: *Test costs will increase for most states. Schools will spend even more for computer infrastructure upgrades.*

Costs have been a big concern, especially for the five states that dropped out of a testing consortium as of August 2013. PARCC acknowledges that half its member states will spend more than they do for current tests. Georgia pulled out when PARCC announced costs of new, computer-delivered summative math and ELA tests alone totaled \$2.5 million more than its existing state assessment budget. [States lack resources to upgrade equipment](#), bandwidth and provide technical support, a cost likely to exceed that of the tests themselves (Herbert, 2012). One analysis indicates that Race to the Top would provide districts with less than ten cents on the dollar to defray these expenses plus [mandated teacher evaluations](#) (Mitchell, 2012).

Myth: *New assessment consortia will replace error-prone test manufacturers.*

Reality: *The same, incompetent, profit-driven companies will make new exams and prep materials.*

The same old firms, including Pearson, Educational Testing Service and CTB/McGraw-Hill, are producing the tests. These firms have long histories of mistakes and incompetence. The multi-national [Pearson](#), for example, has been responsible for poor-quality items, scoring errors, computer system crashes and missed deadlines (Strauss, 2013). Despite these failures, [Pearson shared \\$23 million in contracts](#) to design the first 18,000 PARCC test items (Gewertz, 2012).

Myth: *More rigor means more, or better, learning.*

Reality: *Harder tests do not make kids smarter.*

In New York, teachers witnessed [students brought to tears](#) (Hernandez & Baker, 2013), faced with confusing instructions and unfamiliar material on Common Core tests. New York tests gave fifth graders questions written at an 8th grade level (Ravitch, 2013). New York and Kentucky showed dramatic drops in proficiency and wider achievement gaps. Poor results hammer students' self-confidence and disengage them from learning. They also bolster misperceptions about public school failure, place urban schools in the cross hairs and lend ammunition to privatization schemes. If a child struggles to clear the high bar at five feet, she will not become a "world class" jumper because someone raised the bar to six feet and yelled "jump higher," or if her "poor" performance is used to punish her coach.

Myth: *Common Core assessments are designed to meet the needs of all students.*

Reality: *The new tests put students with disabilities and English language learners at risk.*

Advocates for [English language learners](#) (Maxwell, 2013) have raised concerns about a lack of appropriate accommodations. A U.S. Education Department's technical review assessed the consortia's efforts in July 2013 and issued a stern warning, saying that attempts to accommodate students with disabilities and ELLs [need more attention](#) (Gewertz, 2013).

Myth: *Common Core "proficiency" is an objective measure of college- and career-readiness.*

Reality: *Proficiency levels on Common Core tests are subjective, like all performance levels.*

Recent disclosures demonstrate that New York State [set passing scores arbitrarily](#) (Burris, 2013). There is no evidence that these standards or tests are linked to the skills and knowledge students need for their wide range of college and career choices (Ravitch, 2013). In addition, school officials have often yielded to the temptation to cheat and manipulate test results to bolster the credibility of their favored reforms. [Examples](#) include Atlanta, New York, Washington, DC, Indiana, Florida, and more (FairTest, 2012).

Myth: *States have to implement the Common Core assessments; they have no other choice.*

Reality: *Yes they do. Activists should call for an indefinite moratorium on Common Core tests to allow time for implementation of truly better assessments.*

High-quality assessment improves teaching and learning and provides useful information about schools. Examples of better assessments include well-designed [formative assessments](#) (FairTest, 2006), [performance assessments](#) that are part of the curriculum (New York Performance Standards Consortium), and portfolios or [Learning Records](#) (FairTest, 2007) of actual student work. [Schools can be evaluated](#) using multiple sources of evidence that includes limited, low-stakes testing, school quality reviews, and samples of ongoing student work (Neill, 2010). **It's time to step back and reconsider what kinds of assessments will help our students and teachers succeed in school and life.**

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