

FairTest

National Center for Fair & Open Testing

Time for a Real Testing Moratorium

Resistance to the overuse and misuse of standardized tests is expanding rapidly across the nation (Guisbond, 2014). The movement's goals are to roll back testing overkill, eliminate damaging high stakes, and create an assessment system that supports teaching and learning while providing useful information to parents, communities and states. Some states have responded to the uprising by temporarily pausing some sanctions for teachers and schools.

What the nation really needs, however, is an indefinite moratorium, not only on sanctions but also on Common Core tests, other statewide accountability exams, and requirements to use student scores to judge teachers.

Such a moratorium will allow districts to cut back their own test mandates. It will also provide time and incentives for states and districts to revise their assessment and accountability programs. This cannot happen when punitive sanctions force educators and students to focus on boosting test scores to avoid damaging consequences. Nor can schools do it when they are required to test multiple times per year in every subject in order to provide "data" about teachers.

A short delay of sanctions is inadequate. To restore reason to assessment and accountability and sanity to our schools, we need a full-scale indefinite moratorium and an assessment overhaul. Already some school boards and state unions have begun work in this direction.

Some key questions and answers:

Aren't the new Common Core tests a vast improvement over existing tests?

No. Exams based on the Common Core Standards (e.g., PARCC, SBAC, and others) are inadequate measures of what students should know and be able to do (FairTest, 2013; Conley & Darling-Hammond, 2013). They are mostly multiple-choice with a few "performance" tasks – not enough to change the focus to deeper, richer education. High-stakes consequences will still distort teaching and learning.

Would the public support a moratorium?

National surveys find the general public, parents and educators think standardized testing does not help teaching and learning (Phi Delta Kappa, 2014). Local assessment reform campaigns in hundreds of communities now focus on undoing the damage caused by the testing regime. A moratorium addresses these widely held concerns and provides the opportunity to forge new systems.

What would states do during a moratorium?

States, with participation from all key stakeholders, can:

- Revise their standards as educators and content experts deem necessary.
- Rethink assessment from the classroom out to meet instructional needs (Expert Panel on Assessment, 2007; Forum, 2010).
- Design ways to combine assessment data with other vital information (e.g., surveys on school resources and climate) to provide comprehensive, efficient public reporting (Forum on Educational Accountability, 2014, 2009; California, 2013).

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- Determine how educators, parents, students and communities can best collaborate to improve schools.
- Decide how to identify and assist schools with serious problems that are unable to improve on their own.
- Establish a timeline for implementation.

Would there be any statewide standardized exams during the moratorium?

To maintain a basic flow of school-level information while designing the new system, states could administer tests to sample groups of students, as they do with the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). Alternatively, they could administer tests in just a few grades, as was done before No Child Left Behind. This would generate information on demographic “subgroups” such as low-income students, racial groups, English language learners and students with disabilities.

What kind of assessments could replace standardized tests?

The most important assessment data comes from ongoing student work. These can include projects and performance tasks such as essays, science labs, oral presentations, computer simulations, research reports, and more traditional teacher-made tests and quizzes. Schools can use portfolios and “learning records” -- systematic collections and evaluations of ongoing student products.

Would all schools in a state have to use the same performance assessments?

No. However, they all would be based on the same state standards and require evidence of academic progress that can be verified as reasonably comparable. The New York Performance Standards Consortium (n.d.) and the Learning Record (n.d.) have shown that individualized student tasks and portfolios can be scored accurately across schools if the collection and scoring guides are well constructed and educators are thoroughly prepared. It will take effort to establish comparability, but there is no technical obstacle to building such a grassroots, bottom-up system (Expert Panel, 2007; FairTest, 2010).

Should there be any standardized tests in the new system?

As during the moratorium period, sampling or occasional statewide testing with no stakes attached could be one way to ensure that teachers are grading accurately, fairly and to high standards. States could also use “school quality reviews” as a third way to check on student academic progress and school well-being (Rothstein, *et al.*, 2008).

Can't high stakes tests and performance assessments co-exist? Don't some places do both?

A few schools have accomplished this fairly well but, even then, the tests remain an impediment. It is very difficult to serve two masters. If the goal is rich, all around education of the whole child in a supportive environment, then it's best to avoid high-stakes standardized tests, which usually end up dominating curriculum and instruction. If the nation wants a school system that works well for all children, assessment and accountability must reflect and support high-quality teaching and learning.

Won't a moratorium prevent communities from knowing how well their schools are doing, undermine progress, and fail to hold schools serving low-income communities accountable?

That's what NCLB supporters keep saying. But they are wrong on the facts and end up defending a system that has yielded little progress for children of color, low-income youth, English language learners and students with disabilities. NAEP shows that overall gains in reading and math have just about halted (Guisbond, *et al.*, 2012). Progress toward closing achievement gaps has also slowed. Test-and-punish programs are wreaking havoc in many urban neighborhoods by contributing to school closures and resulting community destabilization (Journey for Justice, 2014; Weiss & Long, 2013). The new system would provide much stronger evidence of learning and progress, reveal far more about whether programs are working, and improve rather than undermine teaching and learning, for our most vulnerable children.

> See also Common Core testing fact sheet <http://www.fairtest.org/common-core-assessments-factsheet>.

Resources

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