



TESTING ON TRIAL

Controversy over testing is nothing new. But it has become a flashpoint in an often-heated debate about education reforms like the Common Core. Grantmakers who use test results to monitor the progress of their work and inform their decisions can help ensure the debate about testing is informed, too.

Standardized tests have been part of the American education landscape for a century – and the controversy over the practice has as long a history as the exams themselves.

This age-old debate has reached a fever pitch at an unprecedented moment, as states prepare to administer new [PARCC](#)¹ or [Smarter Balanced](#)² tests in 2015.

The new tests are part of districts' transition to [Common Core State Standards](#),³ a rigorous set of academic expectations intended to close the gap between what schools ask of their students and what colleges and employers demand graduates know and are able to do. The standards are designed to ensure that all students – no matter their socio-economic background, zip code or gender – will be held to the same, high academic expectations.

These goals should not be controversial. Recent research finds that almost two-fifths of high-school graduates are [unprepared for college or a job](#),⁴ and that graduates of color are [far less likely](#) to meet college- and career-readiness benchmarks than white students.⁵ A wide-ranging coalition of civil rights groups has [explicitly endorsed testing](#) as an important tool in promoting educational equity.⁶

But in a sector that remains predominately local and accustomed to glacial change, such simultaneous changes can easily provoke strong reactions and drown out reasoned debate. A testing backlash is drawing attention away from the important goals of Common Core. Grantmakers have a critical role to play in keeping the focus on the reasons for reform.

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Putting Challenges in Context

By addressing concerns about testing and helping frame the larger conversation, funders can take important steps to preserve a critical source of information about school, teacher and student performance. Below are five major challenges to current testing programs, along with responses and context to ground the conversation.

CHALLENGE 1

TESTING TAKES AWAY FROM INSTRUCTIONAL TIME.

Testing is a core part of good, broad instruction.

Tests can efficiently measure what material students have mastered.

Tests can efficiently measure what material students have mastered. Teachers use them as an instructional tool, to determine whether their lessons were effective. While other sorts of assessments, like portfolios of student work, are important, teachers and schools need reliable, standard information about students' skills to determine whether they are meeting their goals for learning.

In addition, current changes to academic standards aren't ushering in a new era of testing. Schools have used standardized testing for **more than a century**.⁷ Annual tests in grades 3-8, and once again in high school, have been required for more than a decade under the federal No Child Left Behind Act. Other exams, such as subject-based high school graduation tests, are required by individual states, not Common Core.

CHALLENGE 2

THERE ARE TOO MANY TESTS.

Districts are giving more tests than usual right now, but it's just temporary.

Some students are **temporarily**⁸ being "**double-tested**"⁹ as districts phase in new PARCC and Smarter Balanced exams, while continuing with the older state tests that are being replaced.

In addition, **some districts**¹⁰ have responded to other changes, such as new teacher evaluation systems, by adding smaller-scale tests throughout the school year. These additional exams are not mandated by federal law, but are largely local decisions.

A **recent review**¹¹ found that districts order more tests than states or the federal law require. The federal No Child Left Behind law requires just nine tests from K-12: one per year in grades 3-8, and one more during high school.

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The states are stepping in to help districts limit testing time. An audit tool to help districts pare back their testing schedules was successfully piloted in Connecticut and **released nationally**¹² in 2014. Another group of states is **exploring ways to streamline testing**¹³ after the new tests begin in 2015, which U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has said **he supports**¹⁴.

► **An Opportunity for Funders:** Education leaders in **New York State** and **Connecticut**¹⁵ have begun grant programs to support districts' efforts to audit their testing programs and reduce the amount of time students spend taking tests. Grantmakers can fund similar efforts in their states, regions or districts of impact.

CHALLENGE **3**

A TESTING BACKLASH¹⁶ IS CASTING A SHADOW OVER NEW AND IMPROVED TESTS.

Parents, educators and advocates generally support testing.

A broad coalition of civil-rights groups has explicitly endorsed annual standardized testing.

Current controversy isn't focused on testing itself, but on the **bumpy transition**¹⁷ to the new tests, including the current, temporary spate of double-testing.

In addition, standards-based education policies have become politicized recently, which is **negatively affecting public opinion poll data**.¹⁸ The Common Core "brand" may be part of the challenge in current testing debate. One **recent survey**¹⁹ found 53 percent of the public still supports Common Core State Standards – and 68 percent support the notion of common academic standards when the label "Common Core" is not used.

Still, many parents, educators and advocates support what testing achieves. A **recent 2013 poll**²⁰ found that three out of four parents supported regularly assessing student progress. The **U.S. Department of Education**,²¹ the **Council of Chief State School Officers**²² and a **broad coalition of civil-rights groups**²³ have all explicitly endorsed annual standardized testing as a necessary tool to ensure all students have access to a rigorous education, regardless of their background or zip code.

CHALLENGE 4

SCHOOLS ARE
“TEACHING
TO THE TEST.”

Teachers are focused
on the same high
standards that new
tests measure.

Common Core standards, and the tests aligned to them, were designed with career and college readiness in mind.

Testing is an important tool for teaching and learning – assuming that the tests measure the right goals and provide timely, accurate information about what students do and do not know.

When districts are giving meaningful tests, their content will look familiar to students at testing time. That’s because the tests and the academic standards they measure are fully aligned. Such alignment means that teachers and students have been focused on the content and skills that will help them achieve important academic goals.

Common Core standards, and the tests aligned to them, were designed with career and college readiness in mind. Unlike old fill-in-the-bubble exams, the new tests focus on **“performance tasks”**²⁴ – questions clustered around a theme or central question that can measure how well students **apply knowledge**.²⁵ To succeed at such tasks, students can’t just memorize rote facts. They need a deep understanding of component skills and the ability to use those skills to solve problems.

Those tasks are intended to mirror the sorts of skills students will need in adult life. That’s because the academic standards that guide the tests were devised by a broad group of experts, including leaders in the **higher education**²⁶ and **business communities**.²⁷ As a result, in addition to the basic “3Rs” of reading, writing and arithmetic, the standards and tests include a broad range of real-world skills, such as problem solving and analysis.

The tests can give teachers and parents more accurate, actionable information about whether students are on track to meet academic standards that are shared across much of the country. They will also provide important information about areas where students need to improve.

CHALLENGE 5

TESTING IS
IMPERSONAL.
ONE TEST DOESN'T
FIT ALL KIDS.

Tests are one
of several
sources of
information.

Test results can help teachers tailor instruction to individual student needs, by revealing areas of strength and weakness.

New Common Core State Standards set common, rigorous goals for every student, based on what they need to know and be able to do after graduation. Those high, uniform expectations are an important way to ensure equal educational opportunity for all. Testing is one way to ensure that that promise is kept to **all students**.²⁸

To be sure, not all students will progress at the same pace throughout their school years. But standards and the tests that measure growth provide reliable checkpoints along the way. Results can help teachers **tailor instruction**²⁹ to individual student needs, by revealing areas of strength and weakness.

Regular testing can help teachers make sure that all students are on track to access the broadest range of options by the time they reach high school graduation. Standardized testing supports **equal opportunity for all**.³⁰

If testing is important to your work, speaking up about testing is important too. Helping others understand why standard assessments can improve education and ensure equity is a critical way funders can extend their support.

More Challenges, More Resources

A lack of high-quality curriculum aligned to Common Core standards is hampering districts' implementation efforts. Check out "The Curriculum Gap," a new **Grantmakers for Education** resource that suggests strategies for grantmakers to help meet the need.

Endnotes

- ¹ <http://www.parcconline.org/>
- ² <http://www.smarterbalanced.org/>
- ³ <http://www.corestandards.org/>
- ⁴ <http://www.centerforpubliceducation.org/Main-Menu/Instruction/Is-high-school-tough-enough-At-a-glance/Is-high-school-tough-enough-Full-report.html>
- ⁵ <http://www.act.org/research/policymakers/cccr13/pdf/CCCR13-NationalReadinessRpt.pdf>
- ⁶ <http://theequityline.org/wp/2015/01/11/civil-rights-organizations-agree-students-arent-tested-wont-count/>
- ⁷ <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/21/opinion/sunday/the-first-testing-race-to-the-top.html?pagewanted=all>
- ⁸ <http://cdn.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/CCSS-Testing-2-25.pdf>
- ⁹ <http://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/guid/secletter/130917.html>
- ¹⁰ <http://stateimpact.npr.org/florida/2013/03/06/why-hillsborough-county-schools-add-extra-tests-to-the-schedule/>
- ¹¹ <http://cdn.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/LazarinOvertestingReport.pdf>
- ¹² <http://www.achieve.org/launch-student-assessment-inventory-tool>
- ¹³ http://www.wsj.com/articles/group-will-rethink-school-testing-1413394557?mod=WSJ_hpp_MIDDLENexttoWhatsNewsForth
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- ¹⁶ http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/10/us/states-listen-as-parents-give-rampant-testing-an-f.html?_r=0
- ¹⁷ <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/10/us/states-listen-as-parents-give-rampant-testing-an-f.html>
- ¹⁸ <http://www.usnews.com/news/blogs/data-mine/2014/10/28/gallup-more-parents-now-oppose-commoncore-standards>
- ¹⁹ <http://educationnext.org/support-common-core-slips-majority-public-still-favor/>
- ²⁰ Trevor Tompson, Jennifer Benz, and Jennifer Agiesta, "Parents' Attitudes on the Quality of Education in the United States" (Chicago, IL: Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research, 2013), available at <http://www.apnorc.org/news-media/Pages/News%2BMedia/ap-norc-poll-parents-back-high-stakes-testing.aspx>
- ²¹ <http://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/us-education-secretary-arne-duncan-calls-strong-education-law-protects-all-stude>
- ²² http://www.ccsso.org/News_and_Events/Press_Releases/CCSSO_Outlines_Priorities_for_ESEA_Reauthorization.html
- ²³ http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/civil-rights-groups-back-standardized-testing-in-no-child-left-behind-rewrite/2015/01/12/511c99e4-99fd-11e4-a7ee-526210d665b4_story.html
- ²⁴ <http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2014/11/12/12cc-performance.h34.html?qs=performance+tasks>
- ²⁵ http://www.washingtonpost.com/national/states-reconsider-common-core-tests/2014/02/20/9e16efd4-8779-11e3-a5bd-844629433ba3_story.html
- ²⁶ <http://higheredforhigherstandards.org/>
- ²⁷ <http://www.politico.com/story/2014/03/big-business-takes-on-tea-party-over-common-core-104662.html>
- ²⁸ <http://theequityline.org/wp/2015/01/11/civil-rights-organizations-agree-students-arent-tested-wont-count/>
- ²⁹ <http://www2.ed.gov/teachers/nclbguid/datadriven.pdf>
- ³⁰ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/michelle-rhee/accommodate-dont-discriminate_b_866187.html

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Grantmakers for Education thanks The Leona M. and Harry B. Helmsley Charitable Trust for underwriting this issue brief.

This paper was written by Kathleen Carroll for Grantmakers for Education.