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# School testing: How much is too much?

**Anya Kamenetz | NPR** November 17, 2014

"In some places, tests — and preparation for them — are dominating the calendar and culture of schools and causing undue stress for students and educators."

The quote comes not from an angry parent or firebrand school leader but from Education Secretary Arne Duncan. Of course, he's the guy currently in charge of a big chunk of those tests: the No Child Left Behind requirement of annual standardized testing in grades 3-8, plus once during grades 10-12.

And those tests are just the start. Lately everyone from the president on down has been weighing in on the question: Are kids really being tested too much? And their answer, mostly, is a big "Yes."

President Obama said last month that he "welcomes" a pledge from state and big-city school leaders to work together to "cut back on unnecessary testing and test preparation."

The groups, the Council of Chief State School Officers and the Council of the Great City Schools, announced the initial results of an attempt to quantify the current state of testing in America.

Their survey of large districts showed students taking an average of 113 standardized tests between pre-K and grade 12, with 11th grade the most tested.

Another recent study by the Center for American Progress looked at 14 school districts. It found that students in grades 3-8 take an average of 10, up to a high of 20, standardized assessments per year. That doesn't count tests required of smaller groups of students, like English-language learners.

What may be a little trickier is defining just which tests qualify as "unnecessary." The CCSSO survey describes testing requirements that have seemingly multiplied on their own without human intervention, like hangers piling up in a closet.

They found at least 23 distinct purposes for tests, including: state and federal accountability, grade promotions, English proficiency, program evaluation, teacher evaluation, diagnostics, end-of-year predictions, or to fulfill the requirements of specific grants.

They also found a lot of overlap, with some of these tests collecting nearly the same information.

## Resources 'sucked up'

Kathleen Jasper left her post as an assistant principal of a Florida high school in early 2014 because, she says, of her mounting frustrations with testing. "I was being forced to implement bad education policy, especially with respect to testing," she said.

Florida is one of at least 36 states, by NPR Ed's count, that require or plan to require high school end-of-course exams in an array of subjects, as a condition of graduation.

If you want a high school diploma in the Sunshine State, you must pass tests in algebra, geometry, civics and U.S. history. That's on top of the state standardized tests (the FCAT) in math and reading, and every other test on the list.

These end-of-course tests are given throughout 10th, 11th and 12th grade, and each year there is time set aside for retakes. Schools, naturally, want to give students as many chances as possible to pass the tests, because the students need them to graduate.

The result? "I watched tests take up 40 to 50 percent of the year," says Jasper, who now maintains a blog and podcast about education. "Media centers were closed for the entire month of January. Laptops, every resource was sucked up into testing."

Debbie Brockett reports the same scenario unfolding on the other side of the country. She is the principal of Las Vegas High School, a 3,000-student, predominantly Hispanic and low-income school.

Nevada is another state that requires end-of-course exams, two each in reading and math.

"Thirty-seven percent of the month of October was taken up with testing," Brockett said. "And the same is true in March. January is another heavy testing month. But the test prep may kill us even more." She estimates one day entirely devoted to prep for every day of testing.

The average pass rate for an end-of-course exam at Brockett's school is 33 percent. That means most students have at least one retake, which are given several times a year. They may retake as many times as needed to pass, even as the material covered on the test fades farther and farther behind them.

"The kids who retake are the ones who need more instruction, but the more they retake, the less instructional time they get," she said.

These tests are not graded quickly. In some cases, a student who fails a test may have just a few days before the next retake — not enough time to work on what he or she got wrong.

Both Brockett and Jasper said test days disrupt an entire school. Even students who aren't sitting for a specific test may find themselves moved all over the building, or they may end up marking time watching movies for several days.

## Signs of change

There may be a glimmer of change on the horizon. Individual districts, such as Palm Beach County in Florida, are voting to simplify testing requirements. And states including Rhode Island have adopted moratoriums on high-stakes, end-of-course exams.

The Center for American Progress report suggests that the shift to Common Core assessments, which are designed to be better aligned with instruction, could help eliminate duplication. Brockett is optimistic about that idea too.

"If we do this right, good instruction should lead to higher test scores, where every day that you teach, you're preparing," she said. "I can put that 30 to 40 percent [of time spent on prep] back into sound instruction."

But in the meantime, she says, testing is defining the school experience for thousands of students, and not in a positive way:

"Two weeks ago I talked to a kid who had just walked out of exams. He was very frustrated. He had tears in his eyes. He has Bs and Cs in chemistry, but he can't pass the science exam. If he doesn't pass, he doesn't graduate."