CARE-ED

California Alliance of Researchers for Equity in Education

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Common Core State Standards Assessments in California: Concerns and Recommendations

For the first time since 1990, the 2015 Nation's Report Card (the National Assessment of Educational Progress) showed a drop in test scores in reading and mathematics. SAT scores have also declined. But the amount of time and resources spent on testing and test preparation has dramatically increased. A report from the Council of Great City Schools[1] shows the extent to which students are being over-tested in our nation's schools, with no evidence that this over-testing has led to any significant gains in learning or achievement. The U.S. Department of Education acknowledged this overtesting, and in its Testing Action Plan[2] called for "fewer and smarter" tests. But the Department continued to call for annual testing, as well as the use of test scores for high-stakes decision-making, and Congress followed suit, reauthorizing the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (now called the Every Student Succeeds Act) in December 2015 with similar calls.

Here in California, public schools are gearing up for another round of heavy testing this spring, including another round of assessments that are tied to the Common Core State Standards. ***In this research brief, the California Alliance of Researchers for Equity in Education (CARE-ED), a statewide collaborative of university-based education researchers, analyzes the research basis for the assessments tied to the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) that have come to California.***

We provide historical background on the CCSS and the assessments that have accompanied them, as well as evidence of the negative impacts of high-stakes testing. We focus on the current implementation of CCSS assessments in California, and present several concerns. Finally, we offer several research-based recommendations for moving towards meaningful assessment in California's public schools.

Common Core State Standards and Testing

The call for a nationally unified set of parameters for K-12 curriculum is not new, as reflected in the push by conservative think tanks for a "national curriculum" over a quarter century ago.[3] In the decades since, federal policies—from Clinton's Goals 2000 to Bush's No Child Left Behind to Obama's Race to the Top—increasingly reinforced this idea that schools are failing because they are not held accountable for meeting high standards.[4] As this narrow framing of standards and accountability became the new "common sense" of school reform, parallel initiatives emerged from bipartisan or nonpartisan collectives that returned to the earlier goal of using a national curriculum to improve public schools, including the development of Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and of CCSS-aligned assessments that would be the basis for decision-making (although it should be noted that conservative

groups, including the Republican National Committee and the Heritage Foundation, have since changed position, critiquing the CCSS as federal overreach by the Obama Administration).

The stated intention of establishing the CCSS was to ensure that all students graduate from high school with the skills and knowledge necessary to succeed in college, career, and life, regardless of where they live.[5] In practice, the CCSS consist of a set of curriculum standards for certain grades and subject areas that are to be shared across the states. Spearheaded by the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers, and funded by now over $200 million from the Gates Foundation,[6] the CCSS were developed by a small group of academics and consultants, with almost no input from K-12 educators or from the broader education research profession. The CCSS were published in 2010 and quickly adopted by 46 states and the District of Columbia (four states never adopted the standards, and five more have since withdrawn). This quick adoption of the CCSS was motivated in large part by the federal government's making the receipt of Race to the Top funding and No Child Left Behind waivers contingent upon their adoption. California adopted a modified version of the CCSS, beginning incrementally in 2010.[7]

The rhetoric surrounding the CCSS is not supported by a compelling body of research. For example, the CCSS is often presented as a way to enhance rigor in public schools. However, state-level standards varied so widely that no definitive statement can be made as to whether the CCSS is more or less rigorous.[8] Proponents have argued that the CCSS ensures that all students receive an equal education, but even the courts[9] recognize that high expectations without adequate resources can further disadvantage the students in most need.[10] ***Overall, there is not a compelling body of research supporting the notion that a nationwide set of curriculum standards, including those like the CCSS, will either raise the quality of education for all children or close the gap between different groups of children.*** Therefore attaching high-stakes testing to the CCSS cannot be the solution for improving student learning.

Yet, with the CCSS comes even more testing than before, including pre-tests, interim tests, "benchmark" tests, post-tests, and computer-based performance assessments—and most of these consist of the same type of instrument as before, namely, multiple-choice tests. Based on those test scores, any number of high-stakes decisions may follow, including student promotion or graduation, teacher evaluation and compensation, school closure, and possibly the withholding of federal student financial aid for teacher-preparation programs (as proposed in the draft of the federal Teacher Preparation Regulations of Title II of the Higher Education Act, scheduled to be finalized and released around the time of this writing), all of which are decisions using scientifically discredited methods, namely, the use of value-added modeling that purport to attribute gains in test scores to such factors.[11] Perhaps not surprising, in California, public approval for implementation of the CCSS has declined 17% in just one year, with more voters now opposing the CCSS than supporting them.[12]

The recent reauthorization of ESSA leaves much uncertainty as to the role of the CCSS in school reform. The new law ends the NCLB requirement that states look almost exclusively at test scores to determine whether and how to reward or sanction schools, and also ends the Race to the Top requirement that states use tests that are linked to the CCSS in order to evaluate and reward or punish not only students and schools, but also teachers. However, the new law still presumes that testing is the magic bullet that will improve student learning. Under ESSA, students will continue to be tested annually in grades 3-8 and at least once in high school, and those test scores must figure prominently in how states evaluate individual school performance.

Advocates of the new law celebrate the shifting of authority from the federal government to the states to determine what the tests will consist of, how those scores will factor into the evaluations, and what rewards or sanctions will follow. But without a sound framework to guide this work, there is no evidence that the states will come up with strategies better than before. In fact, one of the purposes of this law, when first passed in 1965 in the height of the Civil Rights Movement, was to leverage federal funding in order to push states to better serve those students and communities who were being failed by our schools. This is one reason why many national civil rights groups have expressed deep concerns about ESSA and the weakening of the federal

government in its ability to advocate for the students who struggle the most.[13]

CCSS Assessments in California

This is a new era of testing for the California school system. For the first time since the late 1990s students are not taking the California Standards Tests (CSTs) as part of the Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR) system. The CSTs, developed in response to NCLB mandates for standards and testing, purported to assess students in English language arts and mathematics as well as in science and social studies. Student scores on the CSTs were central to determining school/district Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), which in turn were tied to rewards and sanctions. Recently, California received a one-year NCLB waiver of certain requirements of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. This waiver coincided with the development of a new CCSS-aligned testing system for the state in partnership with the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC).

Two consortia of states that have adopted the CCSS—the SBAC and the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC)—were in 2010 awarded $330 million in grants from the U.S. Department of Education to create CCSS-aligned assessments.[14] They turned to several of the leading testing companies, including Pearson, Educational Testing Service, and CTB/McGraw-Hill, to develop the instruments, including additional contracts with Pearson to develop a Technology Readiness Tool to support states as they transition to new computer-based assessments. California is a member of the SBAC and serves on its Executive Committee, which oversees the development of its assessment system and funding streams.[15] California has been working with the SBAC to develop CCSS assessments for California schools.

In California, pilot testing of CCSS assessments began in 2013, followed by widespread field-testing in the 24 member states of the SBAC in spring 2014. The field test is a practice test that allows teachers and students to gain experience with computerized assessments aligned to the CCSS before implementation, which was originally scheduled for the 2014-15 school year. The SBAC began transitioning from the field tests to implementing the high-stakes summative and interim standardized tests in fall 2014. According to the consortium, results from the summative tests will provide data related to student achievement as part of program evaluation and school, district, and state accountability systems, while the optional interim assessments will serve to help teachers, parents, and students track and identify students' strengths and weaknesses in relation to the CCSS.[16]

Testing experts have raised significant concerns about all (SBAC, PARCC, Pearson) assessments, including the lack of basic principles of sound science, such as construct validity, research-based cut scores, computer adaptability, inter-rater reliability, and most basic of all, independent verification of validity.[17] Here in California, the SBAC assessments have been carefully examined by independent examiners of the test content who concluded that they lack validity, reliability, and fairness, and should not be administered, much less be considered a basis for high-stakes decision making.[18] When asked for documentation of the validity of the CA tests, the CA Department of Education failed to make such documentation public.[19] Even SBAC's own contractor, Measured Progress, in 2012 gave several warnings, including against administering these tests on computers.

Nonetheless, CA has moved forward in full force. In spring 2015, 3.2 million students in California (grades 3-8 and 11) took the new, computerized Math and English Language Arts/Literacy CAASPP tests (California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress). The tests were developed by SBAC, and administered and scored by Educational Testing Service. Scores were released to the public in September 2015, and as many predicted, a majority of students failed (that is, were categorized to be below proficient). SBAC itself expected that pass rates would go down, and would be particularly low for certain groups, including English-language learners (who make up over 22% of the enrollment in CA public schools),[20] whom SBAC predicted would see an approximately 90% fail rate.[21]

The impact in California of high-stakes assessments (CCSS or otherwise) is not hard to predict. A compelling body of research exists on problems with high-stakes testing that range from the scientific

discrediting of high-stakes testing to the disparate impact of high-stakes testing that further widens educational inequities.[22] Although proponents argue that the CCSS promotes critical thinking skills and student-centered learning (instead of rote learning), research demonstrates that imposed standards, when linked with high-stakes testing, not only deprofessionalizes teaching[23] and narrows the curriculum,[24] but in so doing, also reduces the quality of education and student learning, engagement, and success. The impact is also on student psychological well-being: Without an understanding that the scores have not been proven to be valid or fair for determining proficiency or college readiness, students and their parents are likely to internalize failing labels with corresponding beliefs about academic potential.

More specific to California: a recent study on the effects of high-stakes testing, in particular of the CA High School Exit Examination (CAHSEE), found no positive effects on student achievement and large negative effects on graduation rates. The authors estimated that graduation rates declined by 3.6 to 4.5 percentage points as a result of the state exit-exam policy, and also found that these negative effects were "concentrated among low-achieving students, minority students, and female students."[25] In 2015 California discontinued the high school exit exam, and is retroactively granting diplomas to students from 2003 onward who did not pass the exam but met all other graduation requirements.[26]

Already the implementation of CCSS assessments in other states is raising concerns. As early as spring 2013 some states outside of the SBAC began full implementation of the CCSS assessments. New York was one of the first. There, students, parents, and teachers responded to the administration of the new assessment with an outcry against their length, difficulty, and inappropriate content. The tests sparked controversy over product placements within test questions, such as one for Mug™ Root Beer. Last year, following the second administration of the new CCSS-aligned tests, educators again argued that the tests are badly designed,[27] and in 2015, 200,000 students boycotted the tests. This should not be surprising: analyses of the assessments thus far, including by the Gordon Commission of measurement and testing experts, concluded that they are "far from what is ultimately needed for either accountability or classroom instructional improvement purposes."[28]

The implementation of the CCSS assessments raises at least four additional concerns of equity and access. First, the cost of implementing the CCSS assessments is high and unwarranted. The CCSS testing costs for CA are estimated at $360 million dollars in federal tax dollars[29] and $240 million dollars in state funds for three years of administration and scoring.[30] The CA general fund appropriation for pupil testing in the 2014-2015 school year was $126,850,000.[31] In practical terms, this means that standardized testing has taken precedence over other priorities such as class size reduction, quality teacher training and retention, programs in the arts, adequate science and technology equipment, and keeping neighborhood schools open. Across the country, total annual standardized testing costs more than doubled during the seven-year period between 2001 and 2008, rising from $423 million to $1.1 billion, and the CCSS is expected to cause testing costs to rise by several billion additional dollars.[32] Five states withdrew from CCSS assessment consortia because the cost would be so much higher than they currently spend on assessment.

Second, the technology and materials needed for CCSS assessments require high and unwarranted costs. Much of these additional costs relate to the computer-based assessments, which require upgrading equipment (computers, headphones, keyboards), bandwidth (for data-heavy tests that include videos, animated graphics, and interactive charts), and technical support in a short period of time, which means that already-struggling schools will be disproportionately impacted. In the 2013-2014 school year, field tests were conducted by districts and schools to assess technology capacities (i.e., connectivity, headsets, computers) across California. According to the information clearinghouse EdSource, California is the state least equipped with the technology needed to implement the tests.[33] Furthermore, while the state has established funds to support district implementation, it is unclear what inequities have been created across the state in the purchasing of materials for the CCSS and for the SBAC assessment, given that districts and schools may have drastically different needs from one another.

Third, the technology requirements raise concerns not only about cost, but also about access. The CCSS assessments involve computer use not only for the actual assessments, but also for the practice assessments, and both require that students have connectivity, computer access, and computer familiarity. As such, CCSS assessments favor middle- and high-income students who typically have easier access to technology, Internet connectivity, and keyboard practice both inside and outside of school.

Fourth, the CCSS assessments have not provided for adequate accommodations for students with disabilities and English-language learners, or for adequate communication about such accommodations to teachers. Standardized assessments often fail to separate the assessment of content with the assessment of learning disabilities and of language proficiency.[34] The U.S. Department of Education itself reviewed the consortia's assessment and concluded that they needed to better accommodate students with disabilities and students who are English-language learners.[35]

Recommendations

Educators, students, parents, and community members are leading a growing national movement to question the value of the CCSS and related assessments as a reform initiative.[36] The Learning First Alliance, a partnership of organizations committed to improving student learning (which includes the National Education Association, the American Federation of Teachers, the National PTA, and advocacy groups representing school boards, superintendents, and principals), has collectively raised concerns about the fast pace that the nation is moving to adopt the CCSS and implement related high-stakes testing.[37] More locally, the California NAACP passed a resolution in October 2015 opposing high-stakes testing and supporting more holistic assessments in CA schools. Such groups echo the research literature, which not only critiques the test-and-punish policies, but also offers a more robust vision for public education that strives towards macro-level goals and micro-level curriculum standards and student learning assessments that center on equity and emerge from a democratic process. Students themselves are pushing back: FairTest estimates that over 620,000 students nationwide refused to take standardized tests in 2015, and more are expected to opt-out in 2016.[38]

Throughout this brief, we argue that a fundamental flaw in the current test-and-punish policies is the presumption that the system is fair and that the problem lies in the underperformance of individuals (individual schools, leaders, educators, students), thus requiring measurement of individual performance and rewards or sanctions accordingly. Student test scores, or gains in scores over time, have been or still are being used to determine whether or not a student can graduate from high school, a teacher should receive merit pay, a school should be "turned around" or closed, and even, if the U.S. Department of Education finalizes what was drafted in its proposed federal Teacher Preparation Regulations, whether a teacher-preparation program (and the university that houses it) should continue to be eligible for federal student financial aid. This individualization of the "problem" obscures not only the myriad factors that contribute to or hinder student learning and success, but also the ways in which student success results from a system that works effectively, where the parts are working collectively.

We recommend asking four kinds of questions. First, assess why? Assessments should frequently be formative (providing ongoing feedback to improve teaching and learning) and only occasionally be summative (providing termed feedback to make evaluative decisions), and in either situation, should aim to provide feedback for building the capacity of systems, not for punishing individuals. ***Specific to California, we should link the development of a robust assessment framework with the new Local Control Accountability Plans, which specify parent and community involvement in developing and assessing clear measurable outcomes for school improvement and success.***

Second, assess how? Assessments should be holistic; that is, they should be multifaceted and comprehensive, as when using multiple data sources to assess multiple areas of development or performance, not instruments that measure only certain items in only certain ways. ***Doing so requires great investment, not disinvestment, in all of the things that we know make a positive difference in education: local curriculum development and materials, valid assessments, teacher quality, small***

class sizes, school capacity, wrap-around services, community and parent engagement, and so on.

Third, assess what? Assessments should align with our broad vision and goals for public education, not merely a narrow set of curriculum standards. Thomas Jefferson argued that the education offered to the elite should be the standard against which the education offered to all else be measured, and today, the schools for the elite are indeed instructive: they have locally developed, interdisciplinary, rigorous curriculum; teachers who are compensated well and given much autonomy in curriculum and assessment; and a calendar in which students not only spend less time preparing for tests, but actually take less tests. ***If we take seriously that "it takes a village to raise a child," then we should be assessing the effectiveness of systems, not merely the performance of individuals.***

And fourth, assess whom? When we assess students, the focus should be on formative assessments that reveal where they are struggling so as to improve instruction; in contrast, the occasional summative assessments should primarily be used to reveal where the system is ineffective (as when showing how historically underserved groups are faring, as already revealed in the National Assessment of Educational Progress data). Narrow assessments of student learning should not be used to make determinations and decisions about teachers, programs that prepared those teachers, schools, and school systems. ***Rather than ask what impact the individual teacher/school has on student test scores, assessments should focus on what contributions the individual teacher/school is making to the system, their engagement in the collective enterprise of education.*** After all, student learning is the result not of the individual teacher, but of the teacher working collectively with educational specialists, supplemental service providers, family and community members, health professionals, employers, safety officers, and so on.

For these reasons, ***we support the public call for a moratorium on high-stakes testing broadly, and in particular, on the use of scientifically discredited assessment instruments (like the current SBAC, PARCC, and Pearson instruments) and on faulty methods of analysis (like value-added modeling of test scores for high-stakes decision making). Instead, our schools require more robust instruments and the use of assessments in ways that are formative and that aim for improvement of systems, not merely individuals (see, for example, the resources prepared by FairTest and the National Educational Policy Center).***[39] We encourage the state of California to work collectively with other states that have already begun such reforms.

Public schools need a robust, research-based, and equity-oriented vision for assessment that aligns across federal, state, and local authorities. As our nation moves away from test-and-punish policies that centered on scientifically discredited instruments, methods of analysis, and frameworks for reform, we call on policy makers to work collectively with educators and communities (including students and parents) in articulating a new vision for assessment. ESSA pushes much decision-making to states and districts, and therefore we particularly urge states and districts to reframe the purpose and the substance of assessments. Here in California, we offer our statewide network, CARE-ED, as a resource for accessing the best that the research community has to offer as we work in solidarity to make our schools ones in which every student can truly succeed.

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CARE-ED, the California Alliance of Researchers for Equity in Education, is a statewide collaborative of university-based education researchers that aims to speak as educational researchers, collectively and publicly, and in solidarity with organizations and communities, to reframe the debate on education.

Notes

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