

While we debate whether standardized tests are good for kids during a pandemic, why don't we ask whether they measure up to their intended purpose in the first place? Current state tests results crawl in by fall – too late to help students after they've moved on to other teachers and schools. Then most results are simply total scores without data on each standard or skill, making them less informative than a gradebook. And the sheer multitude burns through weeks of learning. Is it any surprise that NAEP scores have flatlined?

Today's standardized tests are too long and too many. Math and English alone typically take 6-11 hours, although sometimes more than 20 for English Language Development and Special Education Students. Yet older tests like the Iowa took only 3 ½ hours for all subjects combined. Isn't it interesting that when shorter tests were common, NAEP scores were on the rise?

Before the testing craze, kids took only three standardized assessments: one in elementary, middle and high school. Each lasting about two hours. Now the average number is 112 throughout a K-12 pupil's career and it's growing, particularly for the little ones. Depending on the age, students take math English, science, social studies, EasyCBM, ELD tests, and others. All this replaces a month of actual curriculum. Not surprisingly, administrators also say this marathon leaves students so burned out that learning drops off for the rest of the year. Here is the May testing calendar for my local middle school:

(Insert PDF of middle school May testing calendar)

Test prep syphons off even more time. Beginning in the fall, students are peppered with pre-and practice tests, although offered less in-school tutoring, summer credit recovery and college counseling than ever before. Also in preparation, administrators must: 1. update computers and software 2. organize volunteers 3. hire substitutes as proctors 4. repurpose classrooms, libraries and computer labs; etc. Staff must then scramble to figure out room reassignments and class cancellations. In half-day shifts, some are proctoring while others are teaching. Wouldn't that herculean effort be better spent on helping individuals academically, socially and emotionally? Here is one elementary school's room and teacher reassignments for Monday and Tuesday alone – a real nightmare:

(Insert PDF of elementary school teacher and room reassignments for testing)

Imagine how kids react to such disruption and stress! One parent told me her eight-year-old takes one look at the test, then sits on the floor and cries. Other parents report their teens

have it worse. No wonder students' emotional and behavioral problems have escalated. Do we expect more patience and concentration from young kids than from college students?

We also expect them to know more than in any previous generation. That's according to "How High the Bar" by the Superintendents Roundtable as well as Tom Loveless of the Brookings Institution. Today's 8th grader knows more math than a 12th grader in 1990. But Common Core might have raised the bar out of reach for most when its developers changed the definition of proficiency from grade level to above average. That would make B the new passing grade. But that's absurd; how can everyone be above average?

In creating Common Core standards and tests, Race to the Top blithely back-mapped from college to kindergarten, completely ignoring what is developmentally possible for the majority. The writers were mostly college test makers and included only six teachers, none in elementary, special education, English Language Development or child development. Now kindergarten is more like first grade, and 11th graders are supposed to read at college level. They are tested on vocabulary like "plinth", "ephemeral" and "aeriform". But states know most kids can't do this, so rather than change the tests, they change the cut off score for passing.

Unfairly, it gives the impression that fewer students are at grade level. That's false. And highly profitable. As soon as my local students took their assessments, test makers sent parents ads for tutorials. Although public outrage put a stop to this, test makers nevertheless revealed their true motivation behind raising the bar.

Regardless of how many matching tutorials, textbooks, pre-tests, practice tests and summative tests schools buy, the Nation's Report Card hasn't budged. It's a big disappointment given all the time, money and energy invested.

Most well-meaning backers of our current tests have never even read them, let alone proctored, written or piloted standardized tests themselves. Each sees only a single tree, not the forest. The legislature uses them to monitor statewide progress and justify spending. Departments of Education use them to study learning gaps between ethnic or socio-economic groups. Teachers once used them to analyze individual and class progress in specific skill areas.

But today's reports no longer deliver such useful details because educator voices have been ignored. Even the original test backers, the National Governors Association, had only one K-12 educator on its entire task force. As a consequence, we have the first K-12 tests in history that don't help teachers teach and students learn.

From a teacher's perspective, total scores like "English 2500: Reading 1250, Writing 1250" are about as helpful as saying, "Gabi has a C, but I can't tell you why." Teachers gather quality data about Gabi's reading comprehension, phonetics, punctuation, spelling, and other skills. Teachers, not tests, then do the actual work of closing learning gaps. So, let's give them back the time and flexibility they need for this important work.

And let's give kids back the time to reestablish school routines and friendships. Standardized testing during a pandemic is not only cruel, but pointless.

Rachel Rich

While serving on state panels for education reform, I helped write standardized benchmarks and tests, and then piloted another for the University of Oregon. As either president or board member of various teacher professional organizations, I worked with other education leaders to shape what later became Common Core and advocated for the 0-4 proficiency scale to align with the GPA system.

Several years ago, I was also part of a national project on the effect of Race to the Top. I interviewed a Common Core writer, state test writer, psychometrician, legislators, superintendents, principals, school board members, teachers, parents, and students. State practice tests, internal documents and industry publications were revealing too. To my surprise, standardization and accountability measures have backfired.

I believe schools must cut back testing to one or two days and put their focus back on teaching and learning. Until then, opting out can help reduce students' pandemic stress.