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New Common Core tests may overwhelm some students, seriously challenge others, the Council of the Great City Schools predicts

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CLEVELAND, Ohio -- The new **Common Core** tests coming to Ohio next year will force students to answer questions in ways they have never faced before on state tests.

And the results won't be pretty, a recent study by the **Council of Great City Schools** suggests, unless students start learning a few skills the tests will demand.

"A lot of people don't understand how fundamentally different the work is that these standards require," said **Michael Casserly**, executive director of the organization representing the country's largest urban districts. "It appears that a lot of our kids are not adequately prepared for the kinds of complex problem-solving response that they're being asked for."

Eric Gordon, chief executive officer of the **Cleveland school district**, heard the findings at a Council meeting late last month. He came back with a message for his school board and one that could apply to every school grappling with the Common Core: "We will have to do a great deal in changing how we think about instruction in the classroom."

Casserly and his staff predicted the new tests will pose several challenges for suburban and urban districts alike, but he and Gordon highlighted two patterns: Students not knowing how to solve problems involving multiple steps, and students not knowing how to **cite evidence from readings to support answers**.

"Kids were used to just filling in a bubble based on recalling something," Casserly said. "There are too many instances where kids taking state assessments were relying on their ability to recall a fact or formula or algorithm to fill in a bubble."

Both Common Core testing partnerships, **Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium** and the **Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC)**, the coalition that Ohio belongs to, **are doing trial runs with students now**, before starting for real next year.

Those trial exams are offering an early look at how students will handle new types of questions, and even highly-rated suburban schools report students are experiencing new challenges with them.

Casserly and his staff looked to another test, the **National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP)**, for additional hints on how students will fare. NAEP bills itself as the **nation's report card** and measures all states to a common standard.

The Council found questions on NAEP that mirror ones on Common Core exams and looked at how students did, along with offering some examples of the kind of written answers the Common Core tests will likely require.

NAEP, given every two years to a sampling of fourth- and eighth-graders across the country, generally sets higher standards for students than state tests. It leads many to predict that the new Common Core tests will produce similar results to those on NAEP, which will mean large decreases in the percentage of students rated as proficient.

"Students statewide are going to perform less well on these assessments," Gordon told his school board.

For fourth- and eighth-grade reading and math, NAEP found only 35 to 42 percent of students nationwide to be proficient. **In Ohio, 39 to 48 percent of students were proficient, depending on grade and subject.**

Since NAEP only samples students, instead of testing everyone, it doesn't have results for individual districts. But Cleveland volunteered for **extra sampling**.

Cleveland performed worse than almost any other district in the nation on the 2013 NAEP.

The Council's study found that students struggled with NAEP questions that force them to work through multiple steps and to give answers at each step, as tests will require from both Common Core testing groups.

One such question on NAEP asked students to find the shortest distance back to their tent from a point in a campground, by measuring a series of paths with a ruler. It asked which direction was longer and also how much longer, so the second question built off the answer to the first.

"Failure to understand A well, will make it impossible to answer B," Gordon said.

Nationwide, only 32 percent of fourth-graders answered the questions right and only 23 percent in the urban districts. In Cleveland, only 15 percent of students answered the questions correctly.

Students also struggle, the Council found, with questions that make them write out observations of graphs or literary passages. And they had poor results with questions that asked them to explain reasoning, another common requirement in both PARCC and Smarter Balanced Common Core tests.

In addition to giving answers that were incorrect, students often gave no answer at all. That's a big change from the multiple-choice questions used today, where kids can simply guess.

"They may be frustrated enough by a question to not even try it," Casserly said. "We need to do a better job of working with kids on how to apply their knowledge, solve problems and express their knowledge to somebody else."

Casserly pointed to questions, in both math and English, that require students to explain their answers. As the presentation from the Council noted:

“In addition to the large percentage of students across the country who do not answer these items correctly (82 percent nationally in the first example), one should note the percentage of students who make no attempt to answer these types of items.”

The Council showed an eighth-grade NAEP math question designed to see if students can understand how to run an experiment. Correct answers would show that students understand the need for a control group.

It read: “Liz is conducting an experiment to see whether students learn vocabulary words by a new method faster than they learn them by the old method. Fifty students will participate in the experiment. She pairs off the 50 students so that the two students in each pair have similar levels of vocabulary. One student in each pair then learns words by the old method. The other student in the pair learns words by the new method. Why did Liz pair off her 50 students instead of just having all 50 of them use the new method?”

In Cleveland, only eight of 101 students sampled answered the question correctly, with 12 giving no answer at all. In the separate statewide Ohio sample, only 15 answered the question correctly, with four giving no answer at all.

The Council also showed several English questions from NAEP in which students had to read an essay or a factual description and answer questions. Both Common Core testing groups will require students to cite passages from the text that support their answers.

Gordon told the board that students are used to describing how they feel about things they read for state tests and explaining how issues in the text relate to them, but not with making observations and having to quote passages to back them up. Students will have to learn to change the way they answer.

“It’s now going to be ‘This is why I know,’ instead of ‘I like this piece for these reasons,” Gordon said.

The Council showed results from a NAEP question that followed an essay that described differences in cultures.

“Provide an example from the story that shows that Miguel does not feel part of Dominican culture,” the question asked.

Only 33 percent of fourth-graders nationally answered this question correctly, with some not citing any examples and instead saying things like all cultures are unique and everyone should be happy about where they came from.

Only 18 of 99 students sampled in Cleveland answered this question acceptably, with 14 skipping it entirely. Results from all of Ohio were not included.

Casserly said the NAEP examples are not perfect comparisons to the upcoming Common Core tests, but should help guide districts in how to prepare students.

“It’s an illustration of how the new standards are being applied, and also suggests what kids are going to be asked to do and how it differs from what they’ve been asked in the past,” he said. “The goal here wasn’t to try to get an early prediction. The object here was to figure out what kind of instruction we were going to need to try to meet the standards.”