

Baltimore Sun

Debate rages over how many hours Maryland students should be tested each year

By **Liz Bowie**, The Baltimore Sun
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Even as public school systems in Maryland and other states prepare to give longer and more challenging standardized tests this spring, a national debate has erupted over just how many hours students should be tested in a year.

Teachers unions deride the growing emphasis on testing as a mania that is hijacking American education. In Florida, parents are rebelling against new tests and threatening to keep their children out of testing. And national education leaders, who for years believed schools would improve if they were held accountable for test scores, are looking at whether testing has become too onerous.

"I think what you are seeing across the country is this backlash against state testing," said Baltimore County Schools Superintendent Dallas Dance, who believes there may be moves in coming years to reduce federally mandated testing.

This year, an eighth-grader in the Baltimore area will spend from 14 to 46 hours taking tests, depending on which school district he or she is in. And that doesn't include the tests teachers write and grade themselves — that pop quiz on "The Scarlet Letter" in English or fractions in an elementary school math class.

The data are similar to what is happening around the country. The **Council of Great City Schools** recently announced that a preliminary review of urban school system data showed that students take 24 to 30 hours of testing a year.

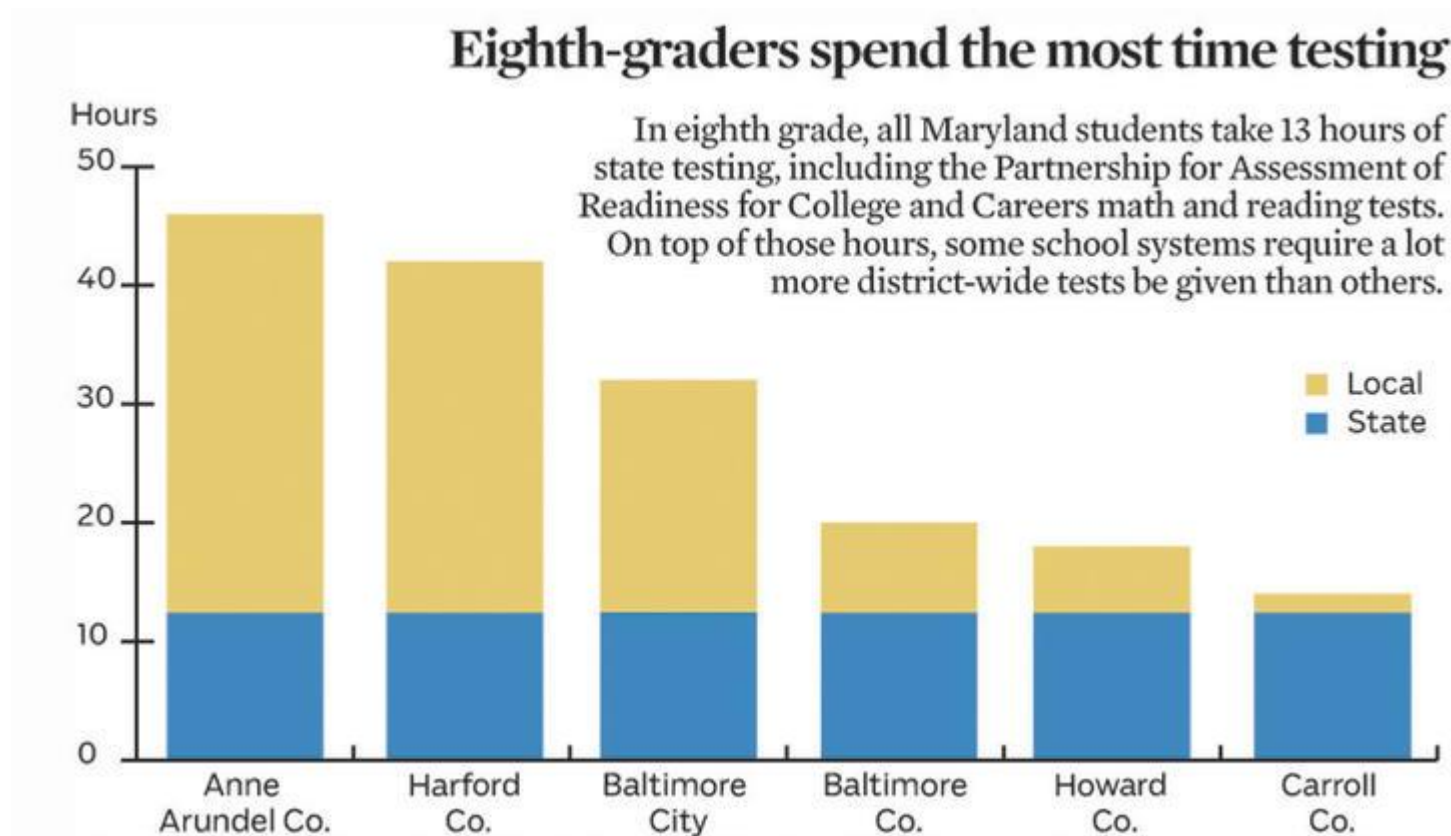
A Baltimore Sun analysis of testing at each grade level in Baltimore and the five surrounding counties shows that while the state and federal governments require many hours of testing — at least 13 hours for each child in third through eighth grade — some school systems layer on their own as well. Students in grades five and eight, the years before the transition to middle and high school, endure the most hours of testing.

Two kinds of tests are given: state-mandated tests designed to hold schools accountable and local tests designed to assess students' progress during the school year.

With so much testing, both the Council of State Chief School Officers, of which Maryland Superintendent of Schools Lillian Lowery is a member, and the urban school leaders are taking a closer look at the quality and quantity of testing.

"I think that we need to find the reasonable middle. We have gone from slim or no accountability to kind of uber-accountability," said Chris Minnich, executive director of the Council of State Chief School Officers. "We owe it to our students and our families to figure it out."

The White House has endorsed the work and U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan said this summer that in some schools, tests have "simply been layered on top of one another without a clear sense of strategy. ... Too much testing can rob school buildings of joy and cause unnecessary stress."



Eighth-graders spend the most time testing
Sun Graphic / Emma Patti Harris

Maryland officials have not moved to reduce the amount of state testing they require, but they are encouraging local schools to use a different approach, asking teachers to incorporate daily verbal check-ins with their students instead of regular testing. They have also recently backed off making new statewide high school tests count as a graduation requirement right away.

Some national educators are suggesting a much more radical downsizing.

Marc S. Tucker, president of the National Center on Education and the Economy, a policy analysis and development organization based in Washington, argues that schools should only give standardized tests three times in a student's school career: at the end of fifth, eighth and 11th

grades. The argument gained some traction recently when former President Bill Clinton suggested similar testing. Teachers unions have also signed on to the idea.

Tucker said nations with the highest-performing students use less frequent tests that are more extensive and require more thinking.

"Because we are testing so often, we are cheating our kids of the education they should get," he said. "We have gone data crazy, and what is really sad is that we are producing vastly more data with bad tests."

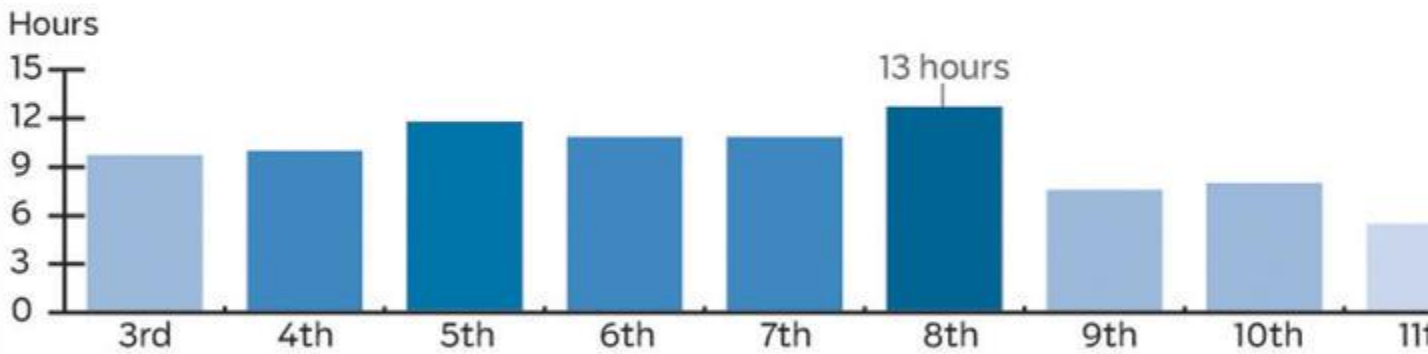
Maryland and other states have generally set bare minimum standards for passing statewide tests. In dozens of schools throughout the state, more than 90 percent of students were able to pass the tests.

Local add-ons

This year, Maryland moves to the tougher state test, which is aligned to new standards called the Common Core. The Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers test is designed to gauge students' thinking skills and to ensure that if they pass each year, they will be able to graduate ready for college.

State testing by grade

Students spend more time being tested in grades three through eight. Fifth- and eighth-graders receive the most testing before moving on to middle and high school. Darker colors on the bar represent the highest number of testing hours while the light colors represent fewer hours.



**No state tests are required for first, second or 12th grade.*

State testing by grade

Sun Graphic / Emma Patti Harris

Students in grades three through eight will take the test in math and reading in two sittings in March and May; some high-schoolers will take algebra and English tests. The amount of time will vary by grade but will be between 10 and 11 hours total — or about five hours longer than the former state tests known as the Maryland School Assessments.

But those statewide tests are just the beginning. The Sun analysis showed that some school systems have heaped on hours of other coordinated testing.

In Anne Arundel and Harford counties and Baltimore City, more than 60 percent of the testing is required by the local school board and not the state. For example, a sixth- or eighth-grader in Harford will take 29 hours of locally mandated testing while a student in the same grade in Baltimore County will take only four hours.

Baltimore County recently dropped the frequent quarterly testing in many grades, called benchmark tests, that were given to determine whether a child was keeping up. Instead, Baltimore and Howard counties have introduced a standardized test called Measures of Academic Progress that serves a similar purpose and is given less frequently.

Some local school officials argue that requiring teachers to give the same quarterly tests systemwide standardizes teaching and raises expectations. They also say teachers can use the tests to see if a student is learning the material as the school year goes on. Administrators say the results provide guidance on making adjustments to curriculum, but they acknowledge that sometimes changes need to be made in which tests are given.

Harford spokeswoman Jillian V. Lader said the school system "continually re-evaluates our assessment program in order to improve student achievement."

But city schools CEO Gregory Thornton, whose school system gives 165 local and state tests a year in kindergarten through 12th grade, said high-stakes tests provide little feedback for teachers to adjust their instruction.

"Determining the right amount of testing is a challenge," he said. "We recognize that in the coming years, as we continue to implement the [Common Core], we will need to review our assessment strategy and make revisions as appropriate."

To some degree, comparisons among school districts give an incomplete picture of the time students spend taking tests. Anne Arundel, for instance, has uniform tests in core subjects in many grades and requires teachers to give the tests and report students' scores. Other school systems allow teachers to create their own tests, which means those tests were not included in the data.

Anne Arundel spokesman Bob Mosier said its testing program is meant to ensure teachers throughout the county are teaching the same material. In addition, he said, Anne Arundel teachers do not have to spend time making up their own tests.

But such uniformity also means that teachers are reluctant to deviate from the lesson plan for fear their students will not be able to pass the local test.

While most of the national uproar is over statewide testing, Maryland State Education Association President Betty Weller is more concerned about the amount of local testing. She said teachers complain that the amount of time they have to teach has been reduced because of the local tests they must give.

"A teacher can tell you what is going to be more useful to them. And they should be heard in this discussion," said Weller, whose organization represents most of the teachers in the state.

Pros and cons

As far back as the 1920s and 1930s, testing was common, education researcher Tom Loveless said, but it has increased markedly in recent years.

Maryland was one of the first states to adopt an accountability system when it started giving the Maryland School Performance Assessment Program in the 1990s. That test was designed to assess thinking skills, and students were asked to write, do science experiments collaboratively and graph math problems.

When the No Child Left Behind law was passed in 2002 during the George W. Bush administration, states were to give tests that would require an increasing number of students to pass every year, with consequences for schools that failed to meet the goals. Every child in the nation was supposed to be able to pass the reading and math tests by 2014, a goal that was later acknowledged as unattainable. The state threw out its test for a much simpler one with multiple choice questions and short writing exercises that would enable more students to pass.

While many view the No Child Left Behind-era testing as setting a low bar, the federal law highlighted for the first time the disparities for minority, low-income and special-education students in each school. When the achievement gaps were laid bare, education reformers pressed for improvements in teaching at the lowest-performing schools, calling the inequities the civil rights issue of our time.

Tucker, of the National Center on Education and the Economy, said testing has had a different impact on the lowest-performing schools, where teachers are more likely to narrow the curriculum to what is tested and "teach to the test."

A small percentage of parents hate standardized testing so much they are choosing to have their children opt out of the statewide tests.

"The research shows again and again that standardized testing is not indicative of future success," said Carmita Vogel of Reisterstown, who is part of the national "Opt-Out" movement and has a daughter at Cedarmere Elementary School in Baltimore County. "They are not tests

that are going to test my child's educational abilities. They are not tests that are going to tell me whether my child will be college- and career-ready."

Students are not supposed to opt out of the tests, but some parents ask their schools to allow students to skip tests or simply keep their children home. Still, more than 99 percent of public school students in Maryland are taking the standardized tests.

Other parents say their objection to the testing is based on a belief that it takes away valuable instruction time and that for teachers, too much is riding on the scores.

"I don't know if it is a great way to judge schools," said Amy Myers, the mother of a first-grade girl and a fifth-grade boy at Cromwell Valley Elementary Regional Magnet School in Baltimore County. Still, when standardized tests are given, she does want to see her son's score to gauge how well he is doing compared with peers around the state or nation.

The case for retaining standardized testing at more grade levels still has plenty of backers.

Loveless said that ever since the federal No Child Left Behind law, school leaders have become accustomed to tracking students to see if they are progressing each year. They also seek to understand the learning gaps between African-American students or special-education students and the rest of the students.

It's unlikely schools would want to wait until fifth grade to know if a child is on track, he said. "In the end, schools are publicly funded and politicians and taxpayers are going to say, 'Look, we have to find a way to know whether you are doing a good job.' "

The quarterly countywide tests that Susan Casler, an eighth-grade teacher at Crofton Middle School in Anne Arundel County, is required to give this year require a lot of writing, and she views them as an instructional tool.

"Is this preparing them for the test? Yes. But it is preparing them for becoming better writers and readers," she said.

Dance, the Baltimore County superintendent, believes the federal government should continue to focus on ensuring equity for students, including those who are in special education, living in poverty or are new to the country and learning English. But he said tests don't need to be given every year, and the state might allow a variety of measures to ensure students are progressing.

"We are going to ask ourselves what are we doing during the course of the year to show and demonstrate that a student is gaining mastery, instead of looking at the end of the year with a thumbs down or thumbs up," he said.

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