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Dialing Back on School Testing

By [THE EDITORIAL BOARD](#) OCT. 29, 2015



President Obama struck just the right balance last week when he addressed the highly contentious issue of student testing. He [urged](#) state and local officials to do away with the many meaningless, make-work tests they give each year, while preserving essential, high-quality exams that allow them to tell whether students are making progress and, importantly, whether minority children are being fairly educated.

The [president's comments](#) come at a time when school districts across the nation have angered parents by deluging children with trash exams that serve only to heighten classroom anxiety and eat up precious instructional time.

Congress made a reasonable decision a decade ago when it required the states to give annual math and reading tests in grades three through eight, and once in high school, in exchange for federal education aid. Schools that failed to meet performance targets for two years were labeled as needing improvement and subjected to sanctions.

But Congress could not have [anticipated the reaction](#) — more precisely, the overreaction — among school officials who, afraid of being tagged as low-performing, rolled out wave after wave of “diagnostic” exams that were actually practice rounds for the real thing. Worse still, districts often deployed primitive, fill-in-the-bubble exams that gave no sense at all of whether or not children were developing the writing and reasoning skills essential for jobs in the new economy. These junk exams are sometimes still used even after the curriculum they were based on has been abandoned.

The scope of the problem is outlined [in a new study](#) from the Council of the Great City Schools, which represents the country’s large urban districts. It shows that the typical student in 66 of these districts takes about eight standardized tests a year, only two of which are required by the federal government. On average, students are required to take an astonishing 112 standardized tests between prekindergarten and 12th grade. The report found that more test time does not pay off in improved learning as measured by student performance on the rigorous, federally backed math and reading exam known as the National Assessment of Educational Progress.

The Obama administration is rightly urging the states to give fewer tests and to choose exams that are clearly tied to student learning. To that end, Mr. Obama is asking Congress for a total of \$403 million to be used by the states to put in place tests that are aligned with college- and career-ready learning standards. In addition, the Department of Education will give the states guidance in how to improve their testing programs.

The administration [suggests](#) further that states require students to spend no more than 2 percent of classroom time taking required statewide standardized tests. Professional organizations and think tanks are already resisting that idea. They worry that such a measure would be burdensome to administer and would limit their flexibility.

Congress can help to de-emphasize testing by changing how schools are evaluated under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. Student test scores should continue to be an important factor, but modest weight should also be given to other indicators, like advanced courses, promotion rates and college matriculation. These common sense measures would help the country dial back the testing mania.

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