

EDUCATION WEEK

'Nation's Report Card' to Get Trimmed, Four Subjects Dropped

By Sarah D. Sparks
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In the next decade, the tests dubbed the “Nation’s Report Card” will include fewer subjects, fewer students, and longer testing times—but potentially more data for states and districts to use.

The National Assessment Governing Board on Wednesday released a 10-year plan intended to streamline the National Assessment of Educational Progress and cut costs. These tests of grades 4, 8, and 12 remain the nation’s only universal comparisons of students across states.

Going forward, NAEP will use a “more efficient design,” according to Peggy Carr, the associate commissioner of the National Center for Education Statistics, meaning 2,000 fewer schools and one-third fewer students nationwide would need to take the test to provide valid information. To put that in perspective, today as many as 148,000 students and more than 7,800 schools can participate in a single grade for NAEP reading or math.

The governing board also will eliminate assessments in arts, geography, and economics and cancel planned NAEP expansions in foreign language and in 12th grade technology and engineering tests.

Subjects Cut

None of the eliminated tests were administered frequently. In the last 30 years, economics and arts have been tested twice and geography has been tested four times.

Ayanna Hudson, the director of arts education for the National Endowment for the Arts, said NAEP’s art test provided a key snapshot to “leverage very important conversations on what students are actually learning in the arts,” and its contextual data gave insight into “fundamental issues of access and equity” in art classes and extracurricular activities in schools.

“We are disappointed to learn that the arts will not be among the subjects with its own assessment,” said Victoria Hutter, the spokeswoman for the National Endowment, which helped the governing board develop the original arts test for NAEP. However, she said the group was “heartened” by plans to continue to include questions about arts participation in the background questionnaire of the math test, which can be used to connect arts participation to academic achievement.

Lawrence Paska, the executive director of the National Council for the Social Studies was similarly disappointed by the loss of economics and geography, which he called “a devastating blow to our students.” But the new assessment schedule also calls for a more regular administration of civics and history tests, which he said has the potential to provide more “accurate, timely data.”

All four subjects are “a vital part of the social studies framework,” he said.

“Right now we’re talking nationally about a student debt crisis, we’re talking about student debt loan forgiveness, the cost of higher education, the cost of living in many of our communities. All of those are both geographic and economic issues,” Paska said. “We can’t underscore enough that ... we are actually crippling our understanding now of how we are preparing our students for college, career, and civic life.”

Howie Berman, the executive director of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, raised concerns that canceling the planned foreign language expansion could have a negative effect on the teaching force in the subject.

“Having this data and expanding it, and having more of a focus on being able to show that students are succeeding ... it would allow us to better recruit and retain teachers,” he said. “Our concern has always been that foreign language has been treated as a nice-to-have skill, and it’s seen as not really a core subject.”

The changes to NAEP got a more welcome reception from Michael Casserly, the executive director of the Council of the Great City Schools, which represents the 75 largest urban school districts.

“The truth of the matter is it won’t have a whole lot of direct effect on us” to eliminate the three tests, Casserly said. He added that among the urban districts, “There wasn’t any great appetite for expanding testing for those ancillary subjects.”

While some urban students did participate in the statewide NAEP tests for economics, geography, and the arts, Casserly said districts do not get local-level results from those tests as they do for NAEP’s Trial Urban District Assessments.

More State Data

The plan in fact would expand the NAEP data that comes from state and district assessment administrations.

“The national results provide important information,” said Lesley Muldoon, the executive director of the governing board, but added that state and district data has proven more “actionable. It allows education leaders to understand how students are progressing or not progressing with a finer grain.”

Casserly said urban districts had “strong interest” in the governing board’s plan to increase participation in NAEP’s Trial Urban District Assessment—which now includes 27 districts, up from six when it started in 2002.

“I do think if additional cities have the room [in the federal budget] to get in, ... we could easily go over 30 districts participating in TUDA, he said. The expanded TUDA will also begin to include students in grade 12 as well as grades 4 and 8.

Under NAEP’s new schedule, math and reading will continue to be tested every other year (including this year), and all other subjects will be assessed every four years. Beginning in 2020, NAEP will reinstate its long-term trends study in math and reading—which nearly had been eliminated—every four years.

Longer Testing, Fewer Students

However, the Nation's Report Card can never be used to hold individual students, schools, or districts accountable. Not only does Congress forbid it, but the NAEP does not give any individual student a full test.

Instead, NAEP randomly selects students in each state, and gives each one a random selection of the questions in a given subject.

From a practical standpoint, the biggest change for many jurisdictions may be the added testing time, which Muldoon called "a trade-off" for the reduction in numbers of test-takers. In the past, each student sat for two 30-minute tests in one subject, plus another 30 minutes for instructions and a background survey. Going forward, each student will sit for three 30-minute tests in two paired subjects: reading and math, civics and history, and science and technology, in addition to the time for instruction and background data.

As of 2024, all of NAEP's subjects will be tested digitally rather than with pencil and paper, allowing the Education Department's research agency to glean information not just on students' test answers, but the process by which they arrive at their answers. "We're very excited about the process data," Carr said; these data are intended to give insight into student engagement and common student mistakes or misconceptions.

"We appreciate the National Assessment Governing Board taking a thoughtful look at the assessment schedule and making sure every test a student takes is meaningful," said Carissa Moffat Miller, the executive director of the Council for the Chief State School Officers.

The governing board also plans to expand its transcript survey, which tracks the courses students take and how their choices affect their academic trajectory. The transcript study will be updated every four years, and will include grades 6 through 12 beginning with a pilot in 2019.