Too Many Tests, Too Much Time
A New Opportunity to Create a More Streamlined Approach
Spring 2015

Standardized assessments long have played a role in public education. For much of that time, they have been faulted as too time-consuming, too restrictive and too removed from real teaching and learning.

The shift to new standards and assessments turns the page on this.

Illinois put in place the new Illinois Learning Standards to make clear what students must know and be able to do at every step from kindergarten through high school. When we have new standards, we need new ways to understand how our students progress on them. That’s why Illinois created a new assessment system rooted in the standards to ensure what’s tested reflects what’s taught. This opens the door for districts – the driver of most testing – to reduce the number of assessments that students take.

Students Take One Test a Month
On average, students take at least one standardized test a month that is required by either the district or state. This amounts to 1.6 percent of instructional time over the course of the school year, studies show.

Over the course of a student’s academic journey, students take an average of 113 standardized tests between preschool and their senior year of high school. The bulk of testing comes in grades three through eight – where federal law requires annual assessment in math and reading – and is driven by testing at the district level.

District Added Tests to Answer Questions Old State Tests Could Not
The youngest students in kindergarten through second grade are assessed three times as much on district exams as state exams, and high school students are assessed twice as much on district exams, a recent study found.

What’s more, the academic purpose of each assessment – the why and what for? – is not often clear to students, families or teachers, fueling concerns that this is an era of testing run amok.

Districts for years layered on assessments to answer questions that old state tests could not, questions like where do my students stand and how can I tailor instruction to help them improve? Old state tests could not provide this insight because they occurred once late in the year and tended to focus on skills that were easily measured, but not the most meaningful for student success. That the results of state assessments arrived months later, when they served little academic purpose, further diminished their value.

If we can get state assessments right – that is, if we can create a state assessment system that truly supports instruction – then it enables districts to reduce local testing.

New Standards, Assessments Offer Opportunity to Streamline
The new state assessment system called PARCC more fully measures students’ higher-order thinking, and includes mid-year resources for educators to provide an early check on what is needed to help students progress. In time, PARCC also will provide results within weeks so teachers might tailor their instruction.

That’s why the shift to new standards and assessments is a chance for districts to take stock of their assessments and create a more streamlined approach. Across Illinois, school districts are beginning to do just that.

Illinois committed to create a more transparent assessment system and help districts build an aligned, streamlined local assessment system. The Illinois State Board of Education offers an assessment inventory tool to support such streamlining.

With Fewer Assessments, Less Concern About Testing Time
The new state assessments have high-quality questions that challenge students to think deeply and problem solve. But it takes longer for a student to solve a math equation and write an explanation of their work than to fill in a bubble.

PARCC ends the race against the clock that occurs with many tests. It provides extra time for students to complete the test – 150 percent of the expected time needed. This ensures students can show what they can do, not how fast they can do it. Nine of every 10 students completed the assessment within the allotted time.

Even so, Illinois students likely will take about three-to-four hours longer to complete PARCC than old state tests, depending upon their grade level. This represents less than one-tenth of 1 percent of the average instructional time this school year.

Learn more about Illinois’ shift to new standards and assessments at www.advanceillinois.org/assessments
1 Lazarin, Melissa, Center for American Progress, “Testing Overload in America’s Schools,” 2014.
2 Ibid.
3 Ibid.
7 Illinois State Board of Education, “PARCC Unit Times,” 2014. NOTE: ISBE provides unit times, which are the blocks of time recommended to schedule the assessment, and estimated time on task, which is the time that students likely will need to complete the assessments.
10 Ibid.