

## Issue Brief: Standardized Testing

With the advent of the standards and accountability movement, especially the passage of No Child Left Behind, thorough coverage of standardized testing (a multibillion-dollar industry) is now a given for any schools reporter. It's a complicated subject—and a gold mine of story ideas.

### Types of tests

**State tests.** The most widely reported-on tests are the annual exams given by states in compliance with No Child Left Behind. These tests—in reading, math, and recently science—are generally tailored for each state's standards by one of a few major testing companies, such as Pearson or CTB/McGraw-Hill, in coordination with the state education department. Usually a panel of teachers helps decide which questions a student should know, which is how the state's "cut score" for proficiency is set. Most states rely on multiple-choice tests. Where written answers are required, they are usually scored by hired graders, who may or may not be educators.

Under No Child Left Behind, the data you see is usually the percent of students scoring "proficient" rather than the actual average scores. Results of state tests are provided for one of two categories, and sometimes both: "criterion-referenced," which tells how well a student mastered the material, and "norm-referenced," which tells how he or she compared with peers. Some states require students to pass exams in order to graduate high school.

**NAEP tests.** The National Assessment of Educational Progress is the closest we come to a national test. The tests, in several subjects, are given to a sample of students around the country, and participation by school systems is voluntary. Pass rates on NAEP are much lower than on state tests. Depending on whom you ask, this is because NAEP is harder, because states set passing thresholds low, because NAEP doesn't match with state grade-level standards, because teachers don't know what's on NAEP and don't prepare students directly, or other reasons.

**Benchmark assessments.** Also called formative assessments, these increasingly popular exams are usually administered at the school district level throughout the year to determine where students are at and help teachers guide instruction.

### Some issues

**Test results.** There are questions of reliability and consistency in grading when written answers are required. Occasionally mistakes are made: sometimes by testing companies, in creating or scoring tests, or by educators who cheat.

**Secrecy.** Some states allow the public to see old tests; others only allow a few sample questions to be seen. This is a perpetual problem for reporters, since so much weight is given to a process that nobody really gets to see. It's worthwhile to try to see school system benchmark exams, since they often are facsimiles of what might be expected to appear on the state test.

**Pressure and focus.** Some say the pressure surrounding testing has become too great, or that schools are making questionable educational decisions in order to focus narrowly on what might show up on state tests.

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**Test bias.** Critics say some tests favor economically advantaged or white students, mainly because of the cultural references in the questions.

### Story ideas

Certainly you will have to write about the state test results each time they are released—including how schools brought their pass rates up, and what might have caused scores to go down. But there is far more to write about. As the pressure surrounding scores increases, the interesting (and sometimes bizarre) ways schools prepare students make for endless stories. It's important to show how states come up with questions and cut scores, and how test results are and aren't used to make curriculum decisions within schools. Are test results used to determine whether students get passed on to the next grade, or how much teachers are paid? Do state tests really cover all the standards for a given subject and grade? Since so much attention is given to NAEP results, it would be worth it to look closely at the administration of the test if and when it happens in your area.

### Sources

**Education Sector** is a particularly good source of research on the testing industry. **National Assessment Governing Board** administers the NAEP test. **FairTest** is the go-to source for quotes critical of standardized testing (not that it makes them the best place to go), while organizations like **Education Trust** and **Achieve** put a lot of stock in the importance of test results. **The College Board** administers the AP and Education Testing Service the SAT, but they still do some good general research on testing trends.

**Education Commission of the States** is always a good source of state-by-state information.

### When Test Data Is Released:

- Look for outliers in the data. Are there schools whose pass rates are significantly higher or lower than the district as a whole? Look for schools that perform better or worse than might be predicted given their demographics. Visit these schools and get a sense of what's behind the numbers.
- Use the longest time frame available. The numbers may have jumped from 2008 to 2009, but if they sank even more from 2007 to 2008, you're still looking at a decrease over two years.
- Study the numbers yourself, directly from the state database. Many districts will release their own set of data that shows you only what they want you to focus on.
- Rather than running lists of schools in order of performance, think of graphics that show interesting trends in the data.
- You are probably looking at the percentage of students passing the test, not average scores. If that is the case, writing that "pass rates increased" or "proficiency increased" might be true when "scores increased" is not. Pass rates can actually increase while average scores decrease.
- Whether schools do well or poorly, let readers know what is or is not covered on the test and whether educators feel the results are a fair indicator of achievement.

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