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TIME SPENT ON TESTING

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INTRODUCTION

In an era of standards-based school reform and the No Child Left Behind legislation, standardized testing has figured more prominently in discussions involving K-12 education. In Arkansas, one does not have to look far or listen too intently to hear concerns voiced about the amount of testing going on in public schools. Today's conventional wisdom holds that our students spend far too much time on these exams.

However, since the conventional wisdom is not always true, we decided it was a good idea to ask the question: *How much time are our students spending on standardized exams?*

In this brief, therefore, we present information about the amount of time spent on standardized exams and the characteristics of the exams. Here, we also discuss the testing changes coming to Arkansas schools this spring.

WHAT ARE THE TESTING REQUIREMENTS FOR ARKANSAS SCHOOLS?

To answer this question, we consulted the Arkansas Department of Education website and confirmed the implementation of testing practices with local school leaders.

Arkansas's testing initiative is called the Arkansas Comprehensive Testing, Assessment, and Accountability Program, or ACTAAP. The requirements of this testing program have evolved over the past several years. Between 2005 and 2007, students in grades 3-8 took two different tests each spring. In March, they participated in the week-long Benchmark tests – a criterion-referenced exam aimed at measuring progress against state standards. The Benchmark tests were the instrument for determining a school's Adequate Yearly Progress, or AYP.

Table 1: Standardized Testing Requirements in Arkansas Public Schools, Spring 2008

Grade	Test Name	Subjects Tested	Date	Hours Total	Range of Hours Per Day
K	SAT 10	Sounds and Letters, Math	4/7 - 4/18	1h 25m	
1	SAT 10	Reading, Math	4/7 - 4/18	1h 50m	
2	SAT 10	Reading, Math	4/7 - 4/18	1h 50m	
3	Augmented Benchmark	Reading, Writing, Math	4/14 - 4/17	9	1h 45m - 2h 45m
4	Augmented Benchmark	Reading, Writing, Math	4/14 - 4/17	9	1h 45m - 2h 45m
5	Augmented Benchmark	Reading, Writing, Math, Science	4/14 - 4/18	12h 12m	1h 45m - 3h30m
6	Augmented Benchmark	Reading, Writing, Math	4/14 - 4/17	9	1h 45m - 2h 45m
7	Augmented Benchmark	Reading, Writing, Math, Science	4/14 - 4/18	12h 12m	1h 45m - 3h30m
8	Augmented Benchmark	Reading, Writing, Math	4/14 - 4/17	9	1h 45m - 2h 45m
9	SAT 10	Reading, Writing, Math	4/7 - 4/18	2h 40m	

Source: Arkansas Department of Education: <http://www.arkansased.org/testing/assessment.html>

In April, students would spend another week taking the SAT-9 or ITBS tests. These norm-referenced tests were administered so that Arkansas student progress could be gauged against the progress of students nationwide. Throughout, students in grades K-2 and grade 9 only took the norm-referenced tests.

This year marks a significant change in the testing process, which has become more streamlined as Arkansas schools transition to the “Augmented Benchmark” exam. This augmented test incorporates criterion-referenced items based on Arkansas curricular standards as well as norm-referenced items that allow for comparisons to national student populations.

The current schedule for the 2008 testing season is highlighted in Table 1. For each grade, we list the name of the test, the subject areas tested, the dates for those tests, the total hours spent annually on the given tests, and the range of hours spent on testing per day during the testing window.

A quick analysis of the testing requirements reveals the following key findings:

- Arkansas students in grades K-2 will spend less than 2 hours on standardized tests -- only on the norm-referenced SAT 10 -- this spring.
- Students in grades 3-8 will take both the criterion-referenced section and the norm-referenced section of the exam.
- Students in 5th and 7th grade will spend the most time in standardized testing this spring – 12 hours total over a period of 5 school days. Students participate in testing fewer than 3 hours per day.
- Students in grades 3, 4, 6, and 8 will spend slightly less time in standardized testing this Spring – 9 hours total over a period of 4 school days. These students also participate in testing fewer than 3 hours per day.
- High school students take Mid-Year End-of-Course (EOC) exams in January in Algebra, Geometry, and Biology and the actual EOC in these subjects in April. All students also take the Literacy exam in March of their 11th grade year. The total testing burden for these exams is less than 8 hours annually.

WHAT ABOUT TEACHING TO THE TEST?

When we think about the time dedicated to testing, some have argued that it is not fair or accurate to count only the actual test-taking time when measuring the burden

imposed by standardized tests. We are reminded that the tally must also include the time spent by students preparing for the test or by teachers “teaching to the test.”

Of course, the term “teaching to the test” connotes dreary images of teachers relentlessly drilling students on rote memorization, basic facts, and filling in bubble sheets. It is certainly true that such test-preparation represents poor pedagogy and is not in keeping with the standards of the profession.

On the other hand, what if we viewed “teaching to the test” as preparing students to master the material that will be tested? Further, what if the material tested were well-aligned with the state curricular standards? Finally, what if those standards were developed by diverse and carefully chosen committees of parents, educators, and other experts?

In Arkansas, the standardized exams are rigorous, thought-provoking, and based on our curricular standards. And our standards have been developed by thoughtful Arkansans. In our case, then, time spent “teaching to the test” may well be very productive time.

Focusing instruction on curricular standards is just one of the values of this testing regimen. The second benefit is that the test data on student progress are valuable for diagnosing student learning difficulties. Standardized tests enhance educators’ abilities to pinpoint learning needs. The value of standardized assessments is that the measuring stick is external, and therefore, more objective.

SO, ARE OUR STUDENTS OVER-TESTED?

In the end, the data do not support the allegations of an overly burdensome testing schedule. In fact, even the students in our most heavily tested grades (5 and 7) participate in standardized assessments for only 12 hours of the approximately 900 instructional hours availed to the students each year. This represents only about 1% of total instructional time. As a point of comparison, state law mandates that 5th grade students spend 36 hours each year in physical education classes.

Some educators across the state have actually decided that the state testing mandates do not provide enough data to drive instructional planning and to measure student progress. These districts and charter schools have instituted the NWEA “chunk tests,” which are computer-adaptive assessments that help teachers and administrators to identify student progress on grade level skills.

Stay tuned for an OEP policy brief outlining this testing initiative in the coming months.