

Going forth with standardized tests may cause more problems than it solves

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Despite the many ways that COVID-19 has disrupted schools, the U.S. Department of Education [will not give states a pass on giving](#)

[standardized tests](#) to students this year as it did in spring 2020. That's according to [new guidance](#) the department issued Feb. 22.

The guidance invites states to request waivers to shorten tests, give the tests in the fall or do the tests remotely. It allows states flexibility around testing depending on the particular circumstances in their state. It also urges states not to place as much emphasis on the results.

Some states, such as [Georgia](#), [Michigan](#) and [New York](#), had already requested waivers from testing in the spring before the Biden administration's new guidance came out.

In our view, as [education researchers](#) who specialize in [science education](#), the [learning sciences](#) and [educational assessment](#), we see an abundance of reasons to let states off the hook for testing this year.

[Policymakers have claimed](#) that the tests are necessary to promote equity, saying that [test](#) scores can help educators figure out which students need help.

But in the time since the Bush-era No Child Left Behind law, experience shows the tests will not make education more equitable in the United States.

Testing failures

Since 2001, federal law has [required states to test all students](#) in grades three through eight in reading and mathematics, and once in [high school](#). Policymakers had [set goals for all students to be proficient](#) in these subjects. The assumption of those goals was that tying incentives and punishments to test scores could [compel schools to increase test scores and reduce achievement gaps](#) linked to race, class and disability status.

Unfortunately, [national experts](#) and [research findings](#) indicate that high-stakes testing does not live up to its promise. Instead, research has shown serious negative side effects.

Regardless of whether testing proceeds this spring or in the fall, [studies](#) strongly suggest three consequences will likely result from going forth with the tests:

1. Teachers will be compelled to teach what is tested

Because of mandated reading and math testing, social studies and science [have become lower priorities](#), along with art and music, in schools feeling pressure to increase test scores. When science is taught, test score pressures lead teachers to focus on [reading skills and vocabulary](#) rather than [doing actual science](#).

Students learn best when what they do in [school](#) is [meaningful and has a sense of purpose](#). Yet reports that decry [learning loss](#), amplified in [headlines](#), narrowly emphasize reading and math skills instead of having opportunities to learn more, and at a deeper level.

2. Teachers will focus on test prep

When teachers are expected to increase test scores, the result is that they often focus narrowly on the [skills that are tested year after year](#). Class time is spent with students [practicing test questions](#). But practicing test questions won't lead to richer learning experiences. Important learning goals, such as how to use mathematics to solve a complex problem or write a creative essay, are more difficult to test.

3. Students will be blamed instead of systems

A focus on test scores instead of students and their work leads to "[gap gazing](#)," the phenomenon of looking at gaps in average scores among groups. This inevitably leads to seeing students—and not the system—as the problem.

Test scores don't point policymakers' and educators' attention to disparities in access to technology or opportunities to learn, or how these disparities are linked to long-standing racial segregation. In our opinion, ongoing discussions of how much "learning loss" there has been during this time will be an even [bigger distraction](#) from efforts to create more equitable funding for schools.

There is a strong case for the use of assessments as a guide to help parents, teachers and schools address disparities exposed and made worse by the pandemic. And the stark reality is the pandemic has harmed some communities more than others. But state tests covering a year's worth of content result in scores telling only whether a [student](#) is proficient or not. The tests don't provide actionable information to help teachers know what ideas students are next ready to learn. A better approach may be to use assessments to help support and strengthen learning and teaching this year and beyond.

What should schools do instead?

Test scores do not let parents or community members "see" what students are actually learning. Instead, education leaders can pay attention to what students are doing in their regular classroom activities, which can also provide opportunities for timely feedback to help them improve. This kind of assessment puts students' ideas and experiences first, not [test scores](#).

Research shows that [assessment can support learning](#), but only when teachers can adjust instruction based on what students actually know and

understand. Teachers can get information from everyday lessons that can help them adjust teaching to help students learn.

Time dedicated to testing could be spent with teachers strengthening relationships with students. Students [learn more](#) when they feel like they belong and are able to make choices about what they learn in school. Taking time to [ask students about their well-being](#) and getting to know their families can help teachers establish good connections with students.

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