

Ineffective Standardized Tests in North Carolina: Moving Towards Stealth Assessments and Inspections

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THESIS

North Carolina's educational system currently relies on a series of standardized tests to measure student success. Student performance on standardized tests is then used to assess school and teacher quality. These assessments are publicized in end-of-year reports that compare each school's performance in relation to overall state performance. Moving forward, the state legislature should pivot toward a more comprehensive and holistic form of evaluation in order to reduce undue stress placed on students, allow instructors greater freedom in teaching methods, and replace the emphasis on studying with a focus on the joy of learning. The new evaluations should focus on a two-pronged approach: stealth assessments and randomized inspections.

BACKGROUND & ANALYSIS

The 1983 report, *A Nation at Risk*, kick started education reform in the United States. One of the popular reform measures emphasized standardized testing.¹ This practice is meant to show the knowledge students have gained after a set amount of time. Instead of effectively assessing students in this manner, standardized tests encourage teachers to utilize only teaching methods that will allow their students to be successful on tests, as opposed to methods that would more effectively curate knowledge. As a result, students' test results have become a measure merely of their ability to regurgitate and their teacher's ability to teach to the exam.² Additionally, high-stakes testing not only leads students to cheat on tests, but also incentivizes teachers to cheat because their students' performance on standardized tests impacts their career and salary.³ Standardized testing is also a costly investment, in both time and money. Students take roughly 60 to 100 tests during their K-12 years. This adds up to about 100 million tests taken nationwide per year, a number that costs the country roughly \$1.7 billion annually and causes American students to become some of the most tested in the world.⁴ Students undergo chronic stress due to the intense preparation necessary for heavily weighted exams that in the end fail to accurately gauge student knowledge.⁵ As a result of our reliance on standardized tests, teachers are limited in their ability to teach effectively, students' time and the educational budget is overextended, and the stress level of students increases.

THE POLICY IDEA

The North Carolina General Assembly should adopt a multifaceted approach to evaluating their students, teachers, and schools. This approach should include the newly formulated stealth assessment model in order to track students' progress, and randomized inspections in order to track school accountability. These two approaches should be utilized simultaneously and lead to an eventual phase-out of the existing standardized tests. Unlike standardized tests, this new approach can incorporate factors such as funding and demographics into the final assessment of a given school system while reducing the negative externalities associated with standardized tests in their current form.

POLICY ANALYSIS

The proposed replacements to standardized tests focus on tracking progress from a holistic perspective. First, stealth assessments embed performance-based assessments in digital learning environments, primarily in core subjects such as math and English.⁶ The students' answers are logged, tracked over time, and compared to the answers of peers.⁷ This information indicates individual student success, overall classroom success, and school-wide success as a whole over time. It also utilizes a format that 97 percent of students are already familiar with: online games and practice tools.⁸

Furthermore, inspections of student success make use of school documents, school administrators, faculty, and parental input.⁹ These assessments provide a detailed evaluation using both subjective and objective factors, as opposed to the objective and often simplified results that accompany standardized tests. Together, stealth assessments and inspections provide concrete evaluations that an individual can use to compare students, classrooms, and schools without the undue pressure caused by a test. The results are more holistic, as they evaluate students from a number of perspectives and across an entire school year as opposed to one administered test. For example, learning games are used throughout the school year, providing constant updates to student progress. Following the United Kingdom's public school model, we can measure across 27 different factors during inspections.¹⁰ These nuanced perspectives supersede the value that a students' test responses can provide. Financially, Craig Jerald, President of *Break the Curve Consulting*, estimates that English-styled inspections will cost between \$635 million and \$1.13 billion annually in the U.S.¹¹ The variance in these numbers comes from differences in the methodology of the estimates. Using the same methodology as Rothstein in his \$2.5 billion estimate, but with more recent numbers, the cost would be \$1.13 billion. However, an estimate based on the operating budget of Ofsted (England's Office for Standards in Education) and expenditures per inspection, the cost would be \$635 million.¹² The cost of standardized tests is significantly higher than either of these estimates, at \$1.7 billion annually.¹³ An estimated 83 percent of schools already have the Wi-Fi capacity needed to incorporate stealth assessments, which indicates a lower cost needed for implementation, and test administrators can be taught to be inspectors.¹⁴ This solution is more cost effective than the existing evaluation method, feasible on its own, and produces better results.

KEY FACTS

- Teachers are evaluated and financially rewarded based on growth in standardized test scores, incentivizing them to teach to the test.
- The United States is the only nation among developed nations to rely mainly on multiple choice exams as opposed to performance-based assessments.¹⁵
- Current methods of testing cost \$1.7 billion annually, while the cost of implementing an inspection-based system (as in the United Kingdom) is estimated to be between \$635 million and \$1.13 billion in the U.S. annually.¹⁶
- 50-80 percent of year-over-year test score improvements were temporary and not caused by long-term changes in learning.¹⁷

TALKING POINTS

Using a combined approach of stealth assessments and inspections will provide both a subjective and objective assessment that more accurately gauges student learning.¹⁸ During inspections, schools will be evaluated on around 25 different factors, creating a more nuanced and holistic understanding of school performance. Moving away from standardized tests towards a combined approach of stealth assessments and inspections will decrease the cost of gauging student and teacher performance by at least \$600 million per year.

NEXT STEPS

North Carolina should plan to slowly phase in stealth assessments and inspections as traditional standardized testing is phased out. The North Carolina General Assembly should plan to first implement the stealth assessments in schools that already use a variety of digital learning environments, such as practice games. Once this trial period begins to locate successes and failures in these model schools, program directors can expand the assessments statewide. Inspections will be implemented in these flagship model schools and then expanded in order to form control groups of schools that are receiving the new evaluation and schools that are not. This methodology will allow us to determine the success of the new evaluation method.

ENDNOTES

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