Duncan Relaxes Testing Push, but Teachers Want More

States can request another year to adjust to new tests before tying results to teacher evaluations.

Concerns about standardized testing, long a point of contention in public schools, from parents who worry their children are being reduced to scores to teachers who are evaluated largely based on the results, have made their way onto Education Secretary Arne Duncan's radar.

Duncan announced Thursday a policy change that would release some states from the requirement that they begin incorporating student test scores into teacher evaluations this coming school year. In exchange for receiving waivers from No Child Left Behind – which have been extended to 43 states and the District of Columbia – states are required to provide plans for implementing choice education reforms, including teacher and principal evaluation systems in which student growth measurements make up a significant amount. That created problems as many states were already adopting and implementing the Common Core State Standards and aligned assessments. Teachers' unions, who have accused the Department of Education of having a fixation on over-testing, have lobbied for a moratorium on the high-stakes consequences of the tests until schools and teachers have ample time to adjust to the new assessments.
As a result of Duncan’s decision, states with waivers can request an additional year before tying evaluations to test scores, until the 2015-16 school year.

"I believe testing issues today are sucking the oxygen out of the room in a lot of schools – oxygen that is needed for a healthy transition to higher standards, improved systems for data, better aligned assessments, teacher professional development, evaluation and support and more," Duncan said at the Jefferson Academy Middle School in Washington.

Duncan said there is a recognized and growing concern that the quantity of required testing is troubling, in some cases repetitive or "not sufficiently helpful for instruction." He said the department will work through the fall to reduce over-testing.

"Too much testing can rob school buildings of joy, and cause unnecessary stress," Duncan said.

Education advocates and teacher groups embraced the announcement, but implored the department to put actions behind its words, while emphasizing the issue goes much deeper than how tests affect teachers.

"Allowing for more time and flexibility to ensure fair educator evaluations based on the new student assessments shows a willingness to listen and learn from parents, teachers and students," said Carmel Martin, executive vice president for policy at the Center for American Progress, in a statement.

Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers, said the department "spawned this testing fixation" through No Child Left Behind waivers and its Race to the Top program, which gave states financial rewards for implementing reforms it backed. She said Duncan's admission that testing has gone too far "is a good step, if there is real course-correction that is linked to concrete action and not just words."

"We shouldn't be testing every child, every year. We need assessments that meaningfully measure student learning. We need to invest the time and resources wasted on excessive and unhelpful testing back into art and music and other enriching curriculum," Weingarten said in a statement. "And we need a new accountability system that moves from a test-and-punish model to a support-and-improve model."

Marc Tucker, president and chief executive officer of the National Center on Education and the Economy, argues in a paper released Thursday that there are several measures to reform the nation's accountability model – essentially a complete overhaul that includes reducing test-taking in schools and creating a career ladder for teachers, among other suggestions.

"The test-based accountability system now universally mandated in the United States – a system that reflects in every way the blue-collar conception of teaching as an occupation – has had 10 years to prove itself," Tucker writes. "There is no evidence that it is contributing anything to improved student performance of the very low-income and minority students for which it was in the first instance created."

Part of that dilemma, Tucker told reporters during a press briefing Wednesday, stems from the fact that upon the enactment of No Child Left Behind, states were required to stretch their testing budgets thin, resulting in more frequent and lower quality tests.
Rather than a sweeping, yearly standardized test, Tucker argues students should be tested on a large scale just three times in their academic careers: at the end of fourth grade, at the end of middle school and at the end of the sophomore year of high school. Additionally, Tucker says schools should use cheaper, multiple-choice assessments to test a sample of students (with an over-sampling of vulnerable students) in second and sixth grade. Those "off-year" tests would cover English and math, as well as science in sixth grade, while the three large-scale tests would cover the entire curriculum, such as science, American and world history, economics, music, the arts, engineering and physical fitness.

Notably, though, Tucker proposes that these tests be used to hold students and schools accountable—not teachers. The data would be used to identify schools that might be in trouble, and to send help to investigate and make improvement suggestions.

Tucker has also argued that the entire idea of evaluating teachers is illogical.

"Teacher evaluation is not going to get us a supply of great teachers. And an oversupply of great teachers is the only thing that is going to fill our schools with great teachers," Tucker concludes in an Education Week blog post. "The logic of test-based teacher evaluation is deeply faulty, a strategic dead end."