The Student & the Stopwatch:

How much time do American students spend on testing?
Key Findings

- Across 12 urban districts, the average amount of time students spend on state and district tests equals 1.7 percent of the school year in third and seventh grades and substantially less in kindergarten.

- The variation in test time across urban districts is large, with high-test districts spending 3.3x as much time-on-testing as low-test districts.

- Urban districts spend, on average, more time than their suburban counterparts on testing. Suburban districts in this study average 1.3 percent or less of the school year on testing.

- Teachers calculate test administration time to be more than double the length reported in district calendars in elementary grades.

Defining Test Time

For this research, we compare publicly available district and state test calendars to teacher reports of test administration time. District and state calendars are an important baseline in the test-time dialogue in that they are a primary way officials communicate the amount of time spent on testing to parents and the public. While most state and district officials would acknowledge that testing takes longer than the amount of time reflected in the district calendar, ours is the first piece of research to measure the gap between the minimum time allocated for tests by administrators and the real time costs experienced by teachers.

In addition to the time it takes for students to complete an assessment and for teachers and staff to administer it, teachers also experience an impact on instructional time when they have to prepare students for the assessment or when they put other instructional plans on hold for the administration of required assessments. Our research examines this impact on instructional time through survey data from over 300 classroom teachers.
Finding 4. Teachers calculate test administration time to be more than double the length reported in district calendars in elementary grades.

While these studies of the district assessment calendars are informative to learn about students’ time-on-testing, these hours express only the time allocated for students to complete these tests. For most teachers and administrators, it has long been clear that the technical administration time does not equal the amount of instructional time a teacher loses. However, this report is the first to quantify the difference.

To better understand how much instructional time is being spent on testing, we asked teachers in six urban sites about how much time is spent on administering tests, specifically asking, “Each time a [specific] test is given, how many minutes does the test take to administer?” We also asked them, in addition to the time it takes to administer these assessments, other ways in which their instructional time was impacted by these tests. In this analysis, only teacher responses from the six focal districts are used.

In this sample, we asked over 300 teachers, including those in kindergarten, third, and seventh grades, how much time they spent administering tests and found they reported spending, on average, about three times as much time in kindergarten and twice as much in third grade as the amount of time set aside for testing on district calendars. In seventh grade, the report on time-on-testing from teachers was closer to what the district calendars reported (see Figure 8).

Figure 8: Average math and ELA testing in the six urban focal districts according to district test calendars and teacher reports*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Kindergarten</th>
<th>Third Grade</th>
<th>Seventh Grade</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>14.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27.7</td>
<td>14.9</td>
<td>16.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Data revised for Illinois state test
In this analysis, the names of the tests that teachers reported they used were reviewed at the various grade levels and only those that were also required by the district or state were included, thus ensuring that there was a fair comparison between the teacher reports and the district calendars.

The difference between how elementary teachers are reporting on time spent on these assessments and the district time for student completion can be revealing in terms of how much time is actually being spent in schools on testing. In third grade, for instance, while time students spend on answering test questions might be 14.2 hours, the real cost is double that. In the younger grades, the process of executing test administration with inexperienced test-takers has high time costs which appear to diminish over time. These reports only reflect teachers’ calculations of administration, not the additional time burdens associated with testing such as preparing students and analyzing data. The additional time cost is taken up in the teacher report data in this section.

We also asked teachers to report on the assessments they give in their own classroom and those given throughout the school. While there was great variation on the amount of time spent on classroom- and school-based assessment, classroom and school based assessments absorbed substantially more time than state- and district-mandated assessments.

In addition to asking how much time they spent on testing, teachers were also asked an open-ended question on how state and district tests impacted instructional time in their classrooms. The teachers’ responses make it clear that they conceive of the time spent on testing as more than just the time it takes to complete the tests. In the analysis of these open-ended comments from teachers, four general themes emerged concerning the impact on instructional time. These themes were:

- Assessments done well can be a seamless part of a teacher’s curriculum and instructional practice.
- Some assessments are not well-aligned with state standards or district and school curricula.
- Test preparation can take up instructional time.
- The ways tests are administered can adversely impact instructional time.

Assessments done well can be a seamless part of a teacher’s curriculum and instructional practice.

A theme that emerged among teachers’ responses was how assessments, when used appropriately, had a positive impact on instructional time in classrooms. When teachers made positive comments on how student test results were useful to them in driving instructional improvements, it was often as part of a process that required them to incorporate assessment results as part of their curricular planning, differentiating of instruction, and student monitoring.

- “District assessments are administered to students when it is convenient to teachers during a two-week window. The window of time is usually the last two weeks of a quarter. Teachers utilize these results much more successfully than state-mandated tests. They are timely and inform teaching immediately. Instructional time is often not missed because the tests are based on the standards being taught.” – Third grade teacher
• “By using the data from the assessments, instructional time can be maximized by focusing on the students’ specific needs. My planning is always focused around the data from these assessments.” – Third grade teacher

• “Instructional time is impacted as data is derived and used to plan to differentiate the needs of students in small group instruction and/or whole group emphasis of deficit areas.” – Third grade teacher

While these teachers were clear that student assessment results were useful to them in conjunction with standards and curriculum, this seemed to be evident when the assessments they used were tightly integrated with what they taught. In these instances, testing was not seen as an additional burden but as a seamless part of their instructional practices. It is when the assessments that teachers were using were not in alignment with standards or their curriculum that teachers perceived there to be a more negative impact of testing on their instructional time.

Some assessments are not well-aligned with state standards or district and school curricula.

An issue that was raised by a few teachers concerned how district-mandated tests or district-provided curricular materials could sometimes fall short of alignment with the state test, causing confusion or extra work. However, we also find that when district assessments are aligned with curricula or the state test, teachers found the assessments useful in their practice.

• “There is not a direct correlation between what is asked on the [district test] and the [state test].” – Seventh grade teacher

• “Yes, units of study need to be planned around them, the textbooks do not match up so there is a lot of skipping around which can be confusing for students.” – Seventh grade teacher

When teachers perceive a lack of alignment of tests with district or school curricula or state standards, teachers were observed to comment that the administration and preparation for these tests were an add-on to their regular instruction and not an integral part of their instruction.

Test preparation can take up instructional time.

In addition to the time it takes to administer them, a refrain heard among teachers was that they often set aside time to provide students with test-taking skills. This test preparation seemed to vary between setting a few days aside before the state test to being a regular part of the school day or week in other cases.

• “It takes a lot of time to prepare for the tests. We usually spend time making sure students review what they learned during the year to ensure they are ready.” – Third grade teacher

• “Yes, with daily test prep and standards review sessions. More than 35 percent of instructional time is spent on these assessments per year. That includes initial instruction, review, scoring, planning, preparation of additional assessment materials, and reassessments.” – Third grade teacher
• “The prepping for the test takes a lot of time. Instead of possibly doing projects or more hands-on learning, we really focused on the testing format and preparing our students to be comfortable taking the test. The prepping starts at the beginning of the year and ends in April. We also have to do the practice tests for the [state test] and [district test]. These practice tests can take up to an hour to do.” – Third grade teacher

• “We spend time practicing getting into our testing groups, taking practice tests, etc. We also typically take time from our usual instruction to focus on test prep in the week or two leading to the test. For example, I stop teaching the novel we are reading for a week to do multiple choice test prep. Also, during the week of the test, we have literally no instruction. I would say overall we lose about 15-20 days of instruction to testing to statewide testing. Another 20 days we are instructing, but it is focused on test prep.” – Seventh grade teacher

The ways tests are administered can adversely impact instructional time.

When it came to district testing, one of the most significant ways in which these tests impacted instructional time seemed to be in the logistics associated with administering these tests. Many districts have adopted formative or interim testing that requires them to be administered on computers. While computer-based testing often means results can be returned to students and teachers quickly, this often requires whole computer labs or libraries to be used exclusively for testing. Also, unlike state testing where there are very clear administrative routines concerning the delivery, administration, handling, and grading of assessments, there is often less infrastructure in schools and districts to manage and support district-based testing.

• “Grading the tests and tracking their scores takes a lot of time away from instruction. If students do not track their own data, the tests are worthless.” – Seventh grade teacher

Another area concerning testing logistics and the impact on instructional time that emerged concerned how kindergarten testing was handled. Some districts are using computer-based, whole-class assessment for their kindergarten students while others rely on teacher-determined assessments of kindergarten student development, often requiring them to work with students in a one-on-one setting at the exclusion of working with other students, as seen in the following comments.

• “It takes away from learning because students are given busy work in order to keep them quiet enough to administer the test in the classroom. It makes me unavailable to teach. There are positives too. I use the information to see what individual students need academically.” – Kindergarten teacher

• “While one on one tests offer much more valuable information than any computerized test can offer at the kindergarten level, they are extraordinarily time consuming. The beginning of the year is very difficult as most students have great challenges with keeping quiet independently while I am testing, which not only impacts their learning, but also the testing of the individual students.” – Kindergarten teacher

• “Scoring and entering results into computer or transferring data to answer sheets. Cannot test whole group at one time. Must test in small groups to get best results.” – Kindergarten teacher