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Many District Leaders Agree that New State Common Core Assessments Are Better Than Previous Tests, But Others Say It's Too Soon to Judge

Survey also reveals concerns about testing

WASHINGTON, D.C., Feb. 15, 2017 -- A nationally representative survey of school superintendents in states implementing the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) found that about half of district leaders agreed that new CCSS-aligned assessments do a better job than their previous states tests when it comes to measuring higher-order analytical and performance skills. About 40% said the new tests were driving instruction in positive ways.

Superintendents or their designees were asked about their districts' experiences with preparing for and administering CCSS-aligned assessments in the spring of 2015 (the first statewide administration in many states) and using student test data to inform and improve instruction. Results of the survey, conducted in early 2016 by the Center on Education Policy (CEP) at the George Washington University, are detailed in *District Leadership in the New Era of Assessment*, a companion to two other CEP reports released in 2016 that describe findings from a national teacher survey and teacher focus groups.

"As the new administration introduces its own agenda for the nation's schools, teachers and local leaders will continue their efforts to improve college and career readiness," said Maria Ferguson, Executive Director of CEP. "It is imperative that researchers study their efforts so policymakers at all levels understand the progress that is being made and the challenges that remain."

A majority of district leaders in Common Core states agreed that students spend too much time taking all types of school tests. To cut down on testing, most leaders suggested keeping teacher-developed tests and reducing the frequency or length of state-mandated tests rather than eliminating state tests altogether. These views of district leaders echo teachers' responses about testing time and reducing testing as charted in CEP's teacher survey. And although some media reports may give the impression that "opting out" of state tests is widespread among students, about one-third of district leaders reported that no students opted out and 43% experienced opt-out rates of 5% or less. Only 13% of districts reported student opt-out rates greater than 5%.

District leaders expressed mixed views about the usefulness of student data from new Common Core assessments. About half of the leaders (50%–55%) said it was too soon to tell whether data from the new tests is useful or informative for teachers, parents or students, and less than a third (28%–32%) of district leaders said the new tests meet their district’s need for student achievement information. Still, a majority of district leaders (52%–67%) reported that their school systems used the results of the 2015 spring assessments to revise instructional strategies, curriculum and teacher professional development and to tailor remediation services for students who did not score at the proficient level.

In other survey results, large majorities of district leaders believe their voices are not factored into decision-making at the state (69%) and federal levels (83%). This parallels a similar finding from the teacher survey.

And while most districts administered the spring 2015 Common Core exams by computer, only a small minority experienced frequent technology problems in the process, according to leaders of districts that gave at least a portion of these exams by computer.

CEP also has released a short summary of the three reports that contains recommendations for state leaders. The summary highlights that the three reports reinforce a common theme: while the move to more rigorous standards for the most part has been a positive step toward better preparing all students for college and careers, challenges remain, especially in the area of assessment.

“Although many districts leaders said they are using the results from the spring 2015 assessment to revise different aspects of curriculum and instruction, they also expressed concerns regarding how much testing is appropriate and how actionable the data from the new assessments really are at this point in time,” said Diane Stark Rentner, CEP’s deputy director. “Looking ahead it will be important for state and local leaders to engage *all* of their stakeholders in a conversation about testing and how it can best support school improvement.”

District Leadership in the New Era of Assessment and a technical appendix are available for free on the CEP website, www.cep-dc.org. Also available on the website are *Listen to Us: Teacher Views and Voices* (teacher survey report); *Listening to and Learning from Teachers: A Summary of Focus Groups on the Common Core and Assessments*; and the three-report summary, *How Do Teachers and District Leaders Feel about State Standards and Assessments?*

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