

CARE-ED

California Alliance of Researchers for Equity in Education

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HIGHLIGHTS OF RESEARCH BRIEF #1:

Common Core State Standards Assessments in California: Concerns and Recommendations

Here in California, public schools are gearing up for another round of heavy testing this spring, including another round of Common Core State Standards assessments. In this research brief, the California Alliance of Researchers for Equity in Education (CARE-ED), a statewide collaborative of university-based education researchers, analyzes the research basis for the assessments tied to the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) that have come to California. We provide historical background on the CCSS and the assessments that have accompanied them, as well as evidence of the negative impacts of high-stakes testing. We focus on the current implementation of CCSS assessments in California, and present several concerns. Finally, we offer several research-based recommendations for moving towards meaningful assessment in California's public schools.

The complete text of Research Brief #1 can be downloaded at
<http://www.care-ed.org>.

Common Core State Standards and Testing

The stated intention of establishing the CCSS was to ensure that all students graduate from high school with the skills and knowledge necessary to succeed in college, career, and life, regardless of where they live. In practice, the CCSS consist of a set of curriculum standards for certain grades and subject areas that are to be shared across the states. California adopted a modified version of the CCSS, beginning incrementally in 2010.

- ***Overall, there is not a compelling body of research supporting the notion that a nationwide set of curriculum standards, including those like the CCSS, will either raise the quality of education for all children or close the gap between different groups of children.*** Therefore attaching high-stakes testing to the CCSS cannot be the solution for improving student learning.
- Yet, with the CCSS comes even more testing than before, and based on those test scores, any number of high-stakes decisions may follow, all of which are decisions using scientifically discredited methods, namely, the use of value-added modeling that purport to attribute gains in test scores to such factors.

CCSS Assessments in California

Recently, California began the development of a new CCSS-aligned testing system.

- The assessments have been carefully examined by independent examiners of the test content who concluded that they lack validity, reliability, and fairness, and should not be administered, much less be considered a basis for high-stakes decision making.
- Nonetheless, CA has moved forward in full force. In spring 2015, 3.2 million students in California (grades 3-8 and 11) took the new, computerized Math and English Language Arts/Literacy CAASPP tests (California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress). Scores were released to the public in September 2015, and as many predicted, a majority of students failed.

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- Although proponents argue that the CCSS promotes critical thinking skills and student-centered learning (instead of rote learning), research demonstrates that imposed standards, when linked with high-stakes testing, not only deprofessionalizes teaching and narrows the curriculum, but in so doing, also reduces the quality of education and student learning, engagement, and success.
- The implementation of the CCSS assessments raises at least four additional concerns of equity and access. First, the cost of implementing the CCSS assessments is high and unwarranted, diverting hundreds of millions of dollars from other areas of need. Second, the technology and materials needed for CCSS assessments require high and unwarranted costs, and California is not well-equipped to implement the tests. Third, the technology requirements raise concerns not only about cost, but also about access. Fourth, the CCSS assessments have not provided for adequate accommodations for students with disabilities and English-language learners, or for adequate communication about such accommodations to teachers.

Recommendations

Throughout this brief, we argue that a fundamental flaw in the current test-and-punish policies is the presumption that the system is fair and that the problem lies in the underperformance of individuals (individual schools, leaders, educators, students), thus requiring measurement of individual performance and rewards or sanctions accordingly. This individualization of the “problem” obscures not only the myriad factors that contribute to or hinder student learning and success, but also the ways in which student success results from a system that works effectively, where the parts are working collectively. We recommend asking four kinds of questions.

- First, assess why? Assessments should frequently be formative and only occasionally be summative, and specific to California, we should link the development of a robust assessment framework with the new Local Control Accountability Plans, which specify parent and community involvement in developing and assessing clear measurable outcomes for school improvement and success.
- Second, assess how? Assessments should be holistic; that is, they should be multifaceted and comprehensive, as when using multiple data sources to assess multiple areas of development or performance, not instruments that measure only certain items in only certain ways.
- Third, assess what? Assessments should align with our broad vision and goals for public education, not merely a narrow set of curriculum standards.
- And fourth, assess whom? Rather than ask what impact the individual teacher or school has on student test scores, assessments should focus on what contributions the individual teacher or school is making to the system.
- For these reasons, ***we support the public call for a moratorium on high-stakes testing broadly, and in particular, on the use of scientifically discredited assessment instruments (like the current SBAC, PARCC, and Pearson instruments) and on faulty methods of analysis (like value-added modeling of test scores for high-stakes decision making). Instead, our schools require more robust instruments and the use of assessments in ways that are formative and that aim for improvement of systems, not merely individuals.***

Public schools need a robust, research-based, and equity-oriented vision for assessment that aligns across federal, state, and local authorities. Here in California, we offer our statewide network, CARE-ED, as a resource for accessing the best that the research community has to offer as we work in solidarity to make our schools ones in which every student can truly succeed.

CARE-ED

CARE-ED, the California Alliance of Researchers for Equity in Education, is a statewide collaborative of university-based education researchers that aims to speak as educational researchers, collectively and publicly, and in solidarity with organizations and communities, to reframe the debate on education.

To learn more about CARE-ED, or to read the full brief, please visit <http://www.care-ed.org>.