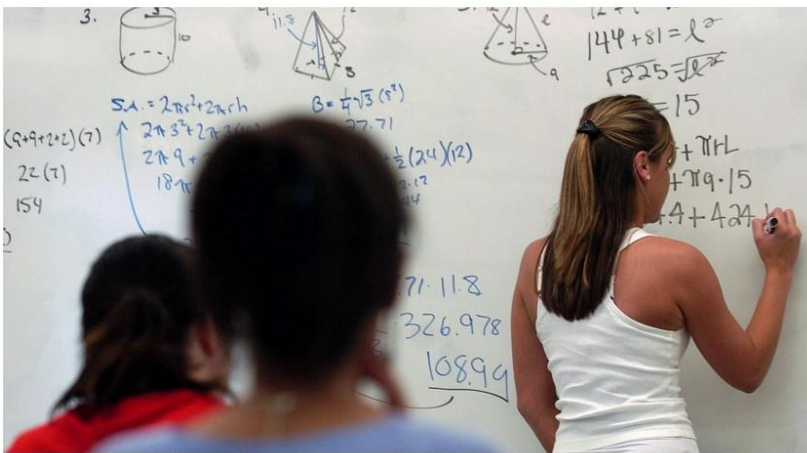


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Hillsborough weighing crush of testing in schools



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Hillsborough School Board members are scrutinizing the amount of tests given to students throughout the year. Some even say it's becoming harmful. TRIBUNE FILE

By Erin Kourkounis | Tribune Staff
Published: September 20, 2014
Updated: September 21, 2014 at 06:39 PM

TAMPA – The Hillsborough County school district is joining others across the state in scrutinizing the crush of tests given to students throughout the school year.

"I think testing has metastasized," school board member Candy Olson said at a recent board meeting. "At this point, it's doing horrendous damage. It's damaging our teachers. It's disrespectful. It can be demeaning."

Educators say the frustration stems from the sheer number of tests administered – but also from a new factor: the added time it takes for schools to work through each test because they don't have enough computers.

State law requires that most state tests this year be given on computers. So until the district acquires a computer for each student, up to six years from now, students will have to take turns using the available computers. That stretches some testing periods from a few days with paper exams to several weeks.

"It's a major change in what we do in school," said Sam Whitten, Hillsborough's director of assessment and accountability. "We're caught in that transition window right now."

Hillsborough's tentative testing calendar for this school year spans three pages and includes state-mandated assessments as well as national exams and district tests used to measure students' progress in subjects including reading, math, art and physical education.

Some are given only to students in certain grades, to takers of certain classes or to specific groups such as those still learning English and those with disabilities.

Some tests, such as the Florida Assessments for Instruction in Reading, are repeated throughout the year. Others, such as Advanced Placement tests, are optional.

Hillsborough this year will give 17 kinds of state-mandated tests, including the new Florida Standards Assessment in reading and math and the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test science exam.

There are also end-of-course exams in every single subject, as well as diagnostic tests throughout the year that are used solely to help classroom teachers gauge what their students know.

The issue carries wide-ranging effects. Students' test scores figure into their teachers' evaluations and help determine whether they keep their jobs and how much they are paid. Test scores also count toward state-issued school grades. And, most importantly, they play a major role in student advancement.

"In every school on almost any given day, someone is pulling some kids out of class to test something," Olson said. "That means the teacher isn't teaching all the kids."

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The debate over standardized testing has reached a crescendo this fall as new education standards take full effect in schools across the state and new tests replace most parts of the high-stakes Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test in the spring.

When the Lee County School Board voted to opt out of all state tests last month, then reversed its decision several days later because it feared the consequences, it drew national attention and sparked a statewide discussion over testing in Florida.

Additionally, Gov. Rick Scott, who is seeking re-election this year, has called for an investigation into all Florida standardized tests.

An Alachua County kindergarten teacher made headlines this month when she refused to give her students the FAIR test, a state reading comprehension assessment, because of the amount of time it takes out of the school day to administer.

Florida Education Commissioner Pam Stewart suspended the test for the rest of the school year for kindergarten through second-grade students because of problems teachers were experiencing with new technology used to administer it.

Still, testing critics saw it as a victory.

The Florida Education Association passed a resolution last week calling for an "immediate end to the misuse and abuse of testing." And the Florida PTA has recommended that the state education department stop giving school grades until schools can get a handle on the new test that will be given in 2015 — the Florida Standards Assessment.

This most consequential of tests is still being developed and will be aligned to the state's new Common Core-based standards.

Stephanie Baxter-Jenkins, executive director of the Hillsborough Classroom Teachers Association, agrees that the district needs to look into all assessments, especially the ones that the school district controls.

"We've just gone completely overboard," Baxter-Jenkins said. "The amount of instructional time lost to tests is excessive. Teachers want to teach. We're spending all our time proctoring tests. What we have to do is try to balance as best we can so we know where kids are but that we aren't taking away time."

Whitten expects technology to improve over the next several years. Hillsborough aims to have one computer for every single student by the year 2020. This year, it has one computer for every four students.

For now, groups of students shift in and out of computer labs to take tests rather than taking them all at the same time using paper and pencil.

"It's school disruption," Whitten said. "It's taking away from instructional time."

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During the last four days of the school year, at least 400 different end-of-course tests are given on paper to all of the county's high schoolers and middle schoolers.

But the state's four computer-based end-of-course exams, in algebra, geometry, biology and history, take up to four weeks, Whitten said.

The district's diagnostic tests, Whitten said, in subjects such as math, writing and science, don't figure in to students' grades, teacher evaluations or the state-issued school grades. They've been given for years, and she sees value in them.

"It's not high stakes," he said. "It's simply to support teacher instruction, to give them feedback on how the kids are doing so far."

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Deputy Superintendent Jeff Eakins said district staff will explore each of the assessments to see whether the information they provide could be gleaned elsewhere, maybe through robust district data systems that already track student progress.

"That's a prudent thing to do right now," Eakins said. "Assessment has its purpose, but we have to make sure every assessment we use does something positive."

In addition to eliminating some tests established by the school district, board member Olson wants to lobby legislators to consider doing away with some exams required by the state.

"I know there will be pushback," said Olson, a longtime board member who is finishing up her last term. "Every test that's on the list, somebody thought it was a good idea."

Other board members backed up the idea to reduce testing where possible.

"I truly believe that if we were to eliminate some of the tests that the district has control over, the irony would be that our students would perform better on state-mandated tests," board member Stacy White said during a school board meeting Sept. 9.

Board member Doretha Edgcomb said she supports the idea of creating a committee.

"What can we then substitute that's ongoing in terms of instructional data?" Edgcomb asked. "I don't think anybody's suggesting we eliminate everything."

Parent Lisa Ledbetter, who thinks her children are tested too much, was encouraged to hear the district is looking at the testing.

Ledbetter, who lives in eastern Hillsborough County, estimates that her 10th-grade son will take more than a dozen standardized tests this year.

"I know they take this data, figure out what they need to know and follow progress all the way through, but come on,"

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"I know they take this data, figure out what they need to know and follow progress all the way through, but come on," Ledbetter said. "When did our children stop being students and just became data?"

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Tony Salas

Teachers go to school to learn how to teach. Most states and educational jurisdictions even require advanced degrees in Education. But, teachers aren't teaching anymore. They have completely succumb to a state-mandated curriculum, written for them. Do they even write lesson plans any more? My daughter is a 9th grader, and is so stressed by the number of tests forthcoming. She used to love math. Now, not so much, and is anxious about the rest of there high school years. Teaching is so focused on these mandated tests, it's ridiculous. And the teachers are under immense pressure, and then pass that same level of pressure on to their students. My daughter says her Geometry teacher always seems angry. Gee... I wonder why. Administrators should employ something I can almost guarantee none of them were ever tested on - It's called common sense.

Like · Reply · Sep 23, 2014 12:35pm · Edited



Christi Crowley Smith - General Manager at House of Smith

I had no idea they give that many tests in school. It's horrible! It's too much for everyone. I'm sure this all stems from common core.

Like · Reply · Sep 22, 2014 8:50am



Maude Alice Whitfield - Tampa, Florida

I feel that the schools are making our children grow up to fast. I feel that the old way the schools were set up was much better. K-6th, 7-9, 10-12. Also my 6th grader's wt. is 58 lbs. and she has a book bag that wts. 20 lbs. Each teacher wants a different three ring note book . Why? I am so disappointed in the school system.

Like · Reply · 1 · Sep 21, 2014 10:08pm



Dale A Griffin

;my 30 year old said 15 years ago he couldn;t be taught for testing..., now I have a grandson who say's the same thing..., they are destroying what good teachers we have left and making the students contemptuous.

Like · Reply · 2 · Sep 21, 2014 9:15pm



Scott Alexander - Works at United States of America

Not to take away from the subject at hand of too many tests, but how do they not have enough computers? I mean first you implement a rule that says testing must be done on computers but you don't have enough to go around? That is just failure to plan. But okay, you need more computers. These tests don't require the latest technology to power them. There is always a sea of computers on the market that came off lease from large businesses. These computers are a few years old, in good condition, and cheap. Do some marketing with businesses to donate these kinds of computers. Brand each one of them with "Donated by ABC, Inc" to give that company some recognition. I just can't accept the answer of not enough computers when they lay down requirements like this.

Like · Reply · Sep 21, 2014 8:35pm



Laura Novatny West

When Mr. Whitten says we currently have one computer for every four students, that is not computers available for testing. That is counting every computer in the school, teacher computers, laptops, classroom computers, everything. There is nowhere near that number available to be used for testing. The number is probably closer to 1:8 or 1:10 if you're talking about computers that are actually available to be used for testing.

Like · Reply · 1 · Sep 21, 2014 8:30pm



Jennifer Burrows · Elementary Music Teacher K-5 at School District of Hillsborough County

Finally! Somebody's thinking! Teachers are spending so much time giving tests that they have no time to teach. I've taught music in the elementary school for 22 years and it sure has changed. They split classes up once a month so that they can FAIR test. Not only do those students miss their music (or art or PE) for the day but they miss an entire day of instruction once a month!

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