

To What End?

The Impact of High-Stakes Testing on Student Learning

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Abstract:

This paper considers the impact of high-stakes testing on student learning. As the amount of testing that students undertake during their education has increased, and the consequences of student performance on those tests have become increasingly important in determining official measures of progress and effectiveness for students, teachers, and districts, it is appropriate and important to try to understand how testing, in its current form, affects the learning process. This paper considers the impact of high-stakes testing on several major components of the learning process: the ability of students to learn a body of knowledge, the effect of high-stakes testing on the morale and behavior of students and teachers, and the impact of increased testing mandates on district finances. These three areas represent three major aspects of the educational system that are particularly affected by high-stakes testing mandates. Along with a review of the literature, data collected from a survey of instructional and administrative staff members in the Deer Park Union Free School District is analyzed and discussed. In the concluding remarks, recommendations for minimizing the negative impacts of high-stakes testing on the learning process are discussed.

Introduction:

“Teaching does not appear to be a humanitarian discipline anymore. It has become a sea of paperwork and technology fueled by a political machine.” (Anonymous teacher, District survey, March 2013)

This paper looks at the impact of testing on student learning. It is the result of a request by an administrator in the Deer Park Union Free School District (DPUFSD). As the amount of testing in New York State has increased with the implementation of increased federal regulations, and the impact of that testing in determination of school effectiveness and student learning has also increased, a review of the literature related to how testing impacts student learning was felt to be a topic of interest for the district. What follows is a review of the literature on the topic, with an emphasis on the impact of so-called “high-stakes testing” combined with a discussion of the impact of testing on the learning process at the district level in DPUFSD, as determined through surveys of the instructional and administrative staff.

Clarification of terminology:

Given the nature of this topic, it becomes somewhat easy to get lost in the rhetorical weeds when discussing different aspects of testing and its impact on student learning. The terminology associated with the topic is variable, with different authors using overlapping terms to describe disparate phenomena and different terms when talking about the same thing. To bring some clarity to what follows, several naming conventions will be employed to try to help the reader parse the material at hand.

The use of the term “testing” refers to a summative learning exercise designed to measure what a student does and does not know about a particular body of knowledge. “Standardized testing” refers to any testing situation where the content and administration of the exam is designed to be uniformly applied to all students who take the test. A typical example of a standardized test is the New York State Regents Examination in a particular subject, administered to the entire statewide cohort of students who have fulfilled a seat-time requirement for the subject, as dictated by the New York State Department of Education (NYSED). “High-stakes testing” refers to any testing situation where the performance of a population of students on the test results is connected to a specific consequence for students, teachers, administrators, or districts (Madaus, 1988). Though recent developments in the political educational landscape have led to a conflation of these two terms, it behooves the reader to keep their meanings separate. While all high-stakes tests are standardized, there is no particular requirement to connect them, outside of state and federal regulations. A “mandated” test is one which is required by an agency external to a school district. In this paper, these mandates are required by NYSED, and are connected to compliance with a variety of federal Department of Education regulations.

A note on the district survey:

In consideration of the topic, and its connection to DPUFSD, the author felt that it was appropriate to supplement the findings of the literature review with data gathered from a survey administered to the instructional and administrative staff of DPUFSD. Respondents were asked to indicate how strongly they agreed or disagreed with a series of statements that addressed the different areas of impact under analysis. The differences between the administrative and

instructional surveys were minor changes in language due to differences in the structures of teacher and administrative positions, while still allowing for correlation of responses between teachers and administrators. A five-point, Likert-type scale was employed to enable scoring responses, with a score of 1 indicating strong disagreement with a provided statement, a score of 3 indicating neutrality, and a score of 5 indicating strong agreement. Participants were also offered the option of providing any additional comments that they had on the topic^a. Cursory demographic data was also collected on respondents. Responses on the survey were collected anonymously from March 1, through March 15, 2013. 151 teachers (out of a total of approximately 350) and 17 administrators (out of a total of approximately 34) submitted responses. The aggregated data, and a sample survey instrument are provided in the appendices to this paper. Data from the surveys will be referenced throughout the Findings and Discussion section. For the purpose of discussion, ratings of 1 and 2 will be interpreted as indicating disagreement with a particular statement, ratings of 4 and 5 will be interpreted as indicating agreement, and a rating of 3 will be interpreted as indicating neutrality.

The historical development of the current testing regimen in New York State:

The progression of standardized testing in New York State is exemplary of the larger trends in public education nationwide. The emphasis on standardized testing as a major indicator of student learning has increased over time, and the importance that is placed on standardized tests

^a These comments serve as the source material for the epigraphs at the beginning of each major section of this paper.

in determining the academic progress of students, the financial resources and self-determinative abilities of school districts, and the continuing employment of teachers and administrators has similarly increased. It is not hyperbolic to say that the importance of high-stakes, standardized testing of students has never been greater in the public education system of New York State than it is at current.

Historically, New York State was the earliest American public education system to adopt the use of standardized testing to determine academic progress. The New York State Regents Examinations have existed, in some form or other, since November 1865. Initially a vehicle to determine the dispersal of state educational funds to develop the state's public education system, and administered at the end of a student's eighth grade year, the Regents became an exit assessment of student learning in 1876. The exams have transitioned in subject matter and structure at sporadic intervals since then, but they remain the major exit examinations for the majority of New York State's public education student population^b.

Exit assessments at the secondary level are not the only assessments that are administered to New York State students. During the 2012-2013 school year, New York State will administer English Language Arts (ELA) and Mathematics Assessments to all general education students in grades 3 through 8, and a Science Performance Test to students in grade 4 and grade 8, with additional assessments for special education students (the "Alternate Assessment") and ESL

^b The specifics of changes to New York State's Regents Examination Regimen over the years is interesting reading, but is not the major focus of this report. Interested parties are encouraged to consult the *History of regents examinations: 1865 to 1987*, (NYSED, 1987) listed in the reference section.

students (the NYSESLAT exams) (Slentz, 2012). Secondary-level students will sit for Regents Exams in English, Global History & Geography, U.S. History & Government, Living Environment, Earth Science, Chemistry, Physics, Integrated Algebra, Algebra 2/Trigonometry, and Geometry, with additional RCT examinations for qualifying special education students in Reading, Writing, Science, Mathematics, Global Studies, and U.S. History & Government (NYSESED, 2012). Assuming that the current regimen approximates the assessment battery for the next decade, a general education third grader in New York State will take 24 standardized exams during the next ten years of his or her public education in the state^c.

The implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) explicitly tied the implementation of high-stakes, standardized testing programs to the continuance of federal funding eligibility for all states. New York State modified its existing standardized testing system to achieve compliance. NCLB legislation has had a variety of effects on public education statewide, but the major effect that is germane to this discussion is the increased emphasis that was placed on standardized testing programs in determining which districts were demonstrating “adequate yearly progress” (AYP) toward meeting benchmarks established by the legislation^d. Under NCLB, districts that meet AYP are allowed to continue their educational programs without major interference from NYSED. Districts that do not meet AYP benchmarks over a continuing number of years risk classification as being “in need of improvement”, and are

^c Note: this does not include additional exams for college placement (e.g. the SAT exam), or other purposes (e.g. AP exams).

^d It should be noted that test performance is only part of a larger group of AYP indicators.

required to address those areas in which they are deficient, or risk forfeiture of operating funds and, in the most extreme cases, takeover by NYSED.

The implementation of the Race To The Top (RTTT) initiative in 2009 further broadened the impact of high-stakes testing in New York State (and throughout the country). RTTT is a fund established by the United States Department of Education that is awarded to states that demonstrate commitment to achieving a variety of benchmarks. Whereas accountability under NCLB was largely targeted at individual districts and schools, in order to be eligible to receive RTTT funds, states must establish teacher evaluation systems that explicitly connect student standardized test performance (where possible) to teacher ratings as part of an “Annual Professional Performance Review” (APPR)^c. New York State qualified for 700 million dollars in statewide RTTT funding as a “Round 2” winner. Qualification included the implementation of a teacher evaluation framework that utilizes student test performance as a sizeable portion of a teacher’s overall rating (typically 40% for a teacher who teaches a majority of courses that terminate in a standardized assessment). As of April, 2013, the vast majority of New York State’s 697 school districts have submitted approved APPR plans to NYSED, meaning that their instructional staff will be evaluated based in large part on the test scores of their students

^c The specifics of APPR agreements are collectively bargained at the local district level, but in all cases, NYSED regulations dictate that performance on standardized tests account for 40% of APPR ratings for teachers who teach subjects that terminate in standardized tests.

Findings:

“If I had known 17 years ago (when I first started) the direction that teaching was going to head in, I would not have become a teacher. If I didn't feel like it was too late, I would probably change careers now.” (Anonymous teacher, District survey, March 2013)

The role of testing in student learning:

There is very little argument made with the notion that testing can play a useful role in the learning process^f. The idea that testing serves important functions in determining what students do and do not know about a body of knowledge is well-established, and not found to be in any particular debate in the literature. Testing also serves an important role in providing teachers with a source of evidence from which to measure their instructional effectiveness and the modes in which they are teaching assessed skills and content. Steadman (1998) provides a detailed discussion of the benefits of regular, embedded, classroom assessment for both teachers and learners when used as a tool for informing instructional choices and student progress. A recent meta-analysis of the effect of a variety of techniques on student learning found that practice testing was the most effective technique to improve student learning that was analyzed (Dunlosky, Rawson, Marsh, Nathan & Willingham, 2013). Overall, there is a strong correlation between the academic ability of students and their performance on tests (Norton and Park, 1996).

^f Considerably more argument exists as to the utility of tests in determining deep understanding of a subject. A useful summary of the arguments for and against testing utility is provided by Chomsky (2012)

This is not to suggest that there are not confounding factors that can impact the performance of students on tests, outside of their academic ability. Considerations of socio-economic status effects on the test performance (and attitudes toward testing) of learners are well documented in the literature. As it is not the major thrust of this paper, these considerations will not be discussed in any large capacity herein, except to note that the correlation between SES and test performance is well documented and borne out by the data, though causal relationships are not easy to establish given the myriad of confounding variables[§] (Nichols, Glass, & Berliner, 2012), (Thompson & Allen, 2012). Like any tool, testing requires that the learner be trained as to how to use the instrument itself. Ubiquity of testing in the education of public school students goes a long way toward accomplishing this training simply due to exposure to tests. As students progress through the system, and the amount of testing that they receive increases, familiarity with testing procedures and practices likewise increases. But it is important to note that test training is plays a significant role in determining the success of learners when taking tests. Multiple researchers have demonstrated a correlation between test preparation and the ability of students to perform well on tests (Norton and Park, 1996) (Chittooran & Miles, 2001). Miyasaka (2000) describes several different types of test preparation that benefit student test performance. These modes of preparation range from content-based practices such as teaching the material of the domain that is to be tested, to skill-based practices like exposing learners to multiple question

[§] The author in no way wishes to imply that student groups of particular SES levels are less capable of performing well on standardized tests than other student groups. There are a variety of strategies that have been employed to deal with this issue, and any reader so interested will be able to find a wealth of material on the topic.

formats on practice exams, and time management skills, to attitudinally-based modes like decreasing test anxiety and increasing student motivation.

The focus on the need to train students to effectively utilize test instruments is an indicator that while tests are useful tools for student learning, they are not perfect, or able to be universally applied to a heterogeneous student population without time and attention paid to preparing students to engage with them. Studies of the roles that learner attitudes and motivation play in contributing to student exam performance are particularly indicative of the need to train learners in a variety of extra-curricular skills to prepare them to perform well on tests, or at least the need for the curriculum to include a variety of activities geared toward increasing test performance that focus on social and emotional intelligence, rather than the traditional views of content-centered curricula (Roth and Paris, 1991), (Roderick and Engel, 2001), (Haydel and Roeser, 2002). Gulek (2003) summarizes the major points made by Miyasaka (2000) to make the larger case that time and attention need to be paid to preparing students for exams, while remaining diligent in not succumbing to the urge to focus on exam preparation at the expense of a rigorous curriculum. Included in his discussion are five major factors that deal with increasing student motivation, as originally delineated by Guthrie and Wigfield (2000):

1. Clear instructional goals established by teachers and learners.
2. Connections between subject matter and real-world experiences.
3. Interest in subject matter.
4. Instruction in a variety of learning strategies.
5. Praise and rewards for learning.

It is interesting (and to the classroom teacher, reassuring) to note that this list does not include any majorly test-centric classroom practices, and suggestive of a larger notion that conflating factors affecting student test performance will not require the repurposing of large tracts of instructional time toward rote test practice to effectively address. At the same time, it is important to remember that the heterogeneity of student populations will mean that some educational settings will require considerably more instructional investment in these sorts of learning processes than others, a disparity that can easily become problematic as soon as incentives are connected to testing.

DPUFSD staff indicate that they are largely in agreement with the literature regarding the utility of assessments in the learning process. 84 percent of teacher respondents and 83 percent of administrative respondents agree with the statement “assessment serves an important pedagogical function when used correctly”. Respondents are less confident in the ability of assessment to serve as a universally applicable indicator of student learning. When asked to indicate how strongly they agreed with the statement “standardized assessment is a valid indicator of student learning if the data it generates is used appropriately”, 46 percent of teacher respondents indicated that they disagreed while 63 percent of administrative respondents indicated agreement. With regard to issues of test training, both teachers and administrators are in strong agreement with the statement that “the amount of instructional time spent on preparing district students for assessment has increased over the course of my career,” with 89 percent of teacher respondents and 93 percent of administrative respondents indicating agreement.

How appropriate are high-stakes tests?

The connection of incentives to test performance has tangible and complex effects on the learning process. The work done by Clarke and Stephens (1995) provides one of the most robust investigations of the link between high-stakes assessments and curriculum, and the interactions between the two, with a major finding being that the inclusion of high-stakes assessments in the curriculum lead to instructors spending more time on curricular practices that were explicitly connected to the high stakes assessments involved (the so-called “ripple effect”). A major effect that bears consideration is the phenomenon of “curriculum narrowing”: The removal of topic breadth from curriculum as dictated by the prevalence of material on high-stakes tests. It is easy to understand why such systems lead to this dynamic. If a student population, teacher, administrator, or district is going to be evaluated based on test performance, and that evaluation is going to be tied to decisions that will affect continuing education, employment, or funding, then a strong incentive to limit the curriculum to what will be tested is a natural consequence. Au (2009) documents the decline of K-5 social studies instruction in several different states across the country, including New York. Social studies is not a major focus of primary-level high-stakes testing, as dictated by NCLB legislation. A case-study of primary level teachers in Georgia conducted by Corput (2012), demonstrated that teachers were making curricular and instructional choices contrary to those that they evinced as most pedagogically sound when interviewed. The justification for these choices was Georgia’s mandated high-stakes testing regimen. Pringle and Martin (2005) demonstrate similar trends in K-5 science education in Florida.

It should be noted that testing does not need to negatively affect the curriculum. One of the major benefits that testing brings to a curriculum is a delineation of what is, and is not,

grounds for assessment. Standardized testing requires standardized curricula. Standardization of curricula does not necessarily require that the depth or breadth of a particular curriculum have to be sacrificed, but it does require that those parties responsible for determining curricular standards do so from a place of wide-reaching consensus among the stakeholders that will be responsible for implementing the changes to a curriculum that such standards will bring about. The primary-level teachers in Corput's case-study analysis (2012) indicate as much when they describe how the assessments that students will take at the end of their curriculum require planning to make sure that teachers are able to cover the mandated content. As is typically the case, negative impacts of standardization on the curriculum are not systemic to attempts at standardization, but they emerge from sub-optimal development and implementation of those standards, and the connection of testing to consequences for the educational system that extend beyond their purpose as measurements of student learning. More than any other, it seems that this aspect of the movement toward increasing the impact of testing on the educational system has led to the major arguments that permeate the issue. Gunzenhauser (2003) makes a typical opposition case that the focus on high-stakes testing stifles meaningful conversation about the nature of education outside of its utility for preparing students for testing. Proponents of the current testing program for students suggest that test performance should be a major indicator of the functioning of any particular educational system, as testing is a major evidentiary source for analyzing student learning, and therefore instructional effectiveness (Gates, 2011).

District survey responses suggest that in DPUFSD, the increased emphasis on testing has had tangible effects on the curriculum. 89 percent of teacher respondents agreed with the statement that “mandated assessment influences the instructional choices that I make^h,” and 83 percent of administrator respondents indicated agreement with a correlative statement (“mandated assessment influences the directives that I give the instructional/administrative staff that I am responsible for”). Teacher responses also indicate that the perceived effect of mandated testing has been largely negative, with 66 percent of respondents indicating agreement with the statement “mandated assessments have negatively impacted my curriculum” (59 percent of participating administrators ranked a correlative statement as a 3, indicating neutrality). Taken together, this pattern of responses suggests that, at least as far as the perception of DPUFSD staff is concerned, the movement to high-stakes testing in New York State, has not been accomplished with the broad support needed to provide teachers with a curriculum that is not negatively affected by the standards that have been developed, and their implementation in the curricula and testing regimen of the state.

The impact of high-stakes testing on morale and behavior:

The impact of high-stakes testing on education is not limited to curricular effects. Shriberg and Shriberg (2006) provide a review of the body of literature that demonstrates a correlation between the implementation of increased high-stakes testing regimens and increased

^h 51 percent of instructional staff respondents indicated that they “strongly agreed” with this statement.

dropout rates, including the observation by Clarke, Haney and Maday (2000) that the states with the highest dropout rates used higher-stakes tests with less flexible curricular standards than states with lower rates of dropouts. Kearns (2011) documents a variety of sentiments evinced by students who have failed high-stakes standardized testing that run the gamut from disbeliefⁱ to concerns about continuing education^j. Taken together with the differing impacts of high-stakes testing on different SES student groups and the role that other intrinsic factors (e.g. motivation) play in exam performance that have been discussed previously, the propriety of using high-stakes assessments to measure student performance is very much an open question.

As far as the morale and behavior of instructional staff is concerned, there is very little argument with the consensus view that standardized testing can serve an important role in determining instructional problems^k. This being noted, the literature demonstrates a similar pattern in consideration of how the increased impact of high-stakes testing affects the morale and behavior of teachers as it does when considering the effects of increased emphasis of testing on curriculum. Stetcher (2002) identifies the major negative effect of high stakes testing on teacher morale as being one of “devaluation” of a teacher’s concept of their ability as a professional.

There is a well-established relationship between morale and behavior. The relationship between the emphasis placed upon specific indicators of social behaviors and the corruption of

ⁱ “I thought I was going to do good.”

^j “Maybe I am not at an acceptable level...maybe I should not take academic courses.”

^k There is considerable argument about the genesis of instructional problems that standardized testing might determine.

those indicators is famously stated by Donald Campbell, and is commonly referred to simply as “Campbell’s Law”:

The more any quantitative social indicator is used for social decision-making, the more subject it will be to corruption pressures and the more apt it will be to distort and corrupt the social processes it is intended to monitor. (Campbell, 1976, p. 49)

Proponents of Campbell’s Law would expect that as the impact of high-stakes testing has increased, a correlational increase in aberrant behavior by teachers and administrators should also be observed. The literature does suggest that this is, in fact, the case. A study by Jacobs & Levitt (2003) empirically demonstrated cheating in 4-5% of Chicago Public School elementary classes on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills for students in grades 3-8, following the implementation of a teacher quality rating system that tied exam performance to teacher rankings. Recent cheating scandals in Atlanta, and Washington D.C., both followed the implementation of evaluation systems that connected exam performance to teacher salary (ie. “merit pay”). Booher-Jennings (2005) documents a phenomenon referred to as “bubble kids”; students who are within a few points of passing high-stakes tests, who receive disproportionate attention from classroom teachers, a phenomenon that she coined “educational triage”. Indeed, most of the issues discussed in prior sections with regard to the effect of high-stakes testing on the structure of curriculum and the use

of instructional time can all be viewed as having a negative effect on teacher behavior and the relationship between the actions of educators and the curricula that they are tasked with teaching¹.

The literature is not wholly negative when investigating the relationship between high-stakes testing and teacher morale and behavior. Barth (2006) provides a review of the major supporting arguments for high stakes testing. They include:

1. Classroom teachers think that increased emphasis on testing will affect the learning process globally, but do not think that it will affect the learning process in their own classrooms.
2. Increased emphasis on testing provides a motivation for schools and students to work hard and increases the focus on academic achievement for all student populations.
3. “Teaching to the test” is only negative in as much as it moves learning practices toward rote test preparation. When districts embed assessment training in the style similar to what Guthrie and Wigfield (2000) describe^m, the curriculum benefits. In as much as high-stakes testing compel this type of curricular change, it has a beneficial effect on staff behavior.

Looking at issues of teacher morale and behavior, the DPUFSD survey echoes many of the concerns, and does not reflect the supporting arguments that Barth describes above. Along with the previously described widespread perception of the negative effects of mandated

¹ Particularly if one regards the function of education as something more than the conveyance of specific content knowledge and skills.

^m Discussed previously.

assessment on their curriculum, district teachers indicated major concerns about the ability of assessment data to indicate their instructional ability. 54 percent of teacher respondents strongly disagreed with the statement “I am confident that the performance of my students on mandated assessments will be an accurate indicator of my ability to teach my subjectⁿ.” 58 percent of teacher respondents strongly disagreed with the statement “The use of standardized assessment data in staff evaluation will accurately separate teachers based on their instructional effectiveness^o.” Teachers also have concerns about the use of assessment data in APPR ratings. 66 percent of teacher respondents indicated strong disagreement with the statement “I am in agreement with the role that mandated assessment plays in the state’s teacher evaluation framework as it pertains to the district’s APPR agreement^p.” Perhaps most concerning are the indicators related to teacher perspectives on their profession. 66 percent of teacher respondents indicated some level of agreement^q with the statement “the emphasis given to mandated assessments has negatively affected my perspective on being a teacher”. Administrator responses to correlative survey items indicate more neutrality across all of these items. Taken in total, the result of the survey on these items suggests that the increasing emphasis of testing has had a largely negative effect on the morale of the district’s teachers.

ⁿ 82 percent of teacher respondents rated this statement either a 1 or a 2.

^o 91 percent of teacher respondents rated this statement either a 1 or a 2.

^p 87 percent of teacher respondents rated this statement either a 1 or a 2.

^q 66 percent of teacher respondents rated this statement either a 4 or a 5.

The impact of testing mandates on school finances:

Unlike the previous sections, research into the effect of testing mandates on district finances is not a major area of investigation^r, and the results of the analysis that has been done present differing pictures depending on the frame of reference. For instance, a 2003 estimate by the Center for Education Policy places the total annual amount spent to implement high stakes testing at somewhere between 20 and 50 billion dollars (in Baines and Stanley, 2004). When considered at the state level, the issue is not as expensive in New York State as it might be in other places. Of the 50 states, New York spends the least per pupil in contracted testing expenses, at approximately six dollars per student at the state level (Chingos, 2012).

The above figure might suggest that a larger portion of expenses related to student testing are passed on to school districts in New York than might be the case in other states. This is a possibility, but expenses at the DPUFSD district level are not easily discernable for several reasons. The primary reason is that the structure of the DPUFSD budget does not clearly separate testing expenses from other district expenses. This is mostly due to the fact that many of the expenses to the district are not overtly related to testing mandates. To take one cursory example: If the district needs to purchase graphing calculators for all math students, it is not easy to determine what portion of that cost is related to classroom calculator use, and what portion is related to use of the same calculators on regents exams (a state mandate). Similar issues accompany the bulk of

^r The author acknowledges the change in terminology in this section from “high-stakes testing” to “testing mandates”. For all intents and purposes these terms are wholly congruent in the current landscape of New York State public education, but this does not have to be the case. For instance, it would be possible for the state to require that students take certain exams, without connecting those exams to the impacts typical of high-stakes testing.

district testing costs. It is not easy to determine the aggregate dollar cost of exam proctoring, materials, and all of the other components of test administration.

Which is not to discount the effect of testing mandates on the budget, particularly when new mandates have to be incorporated in to budget planning that is hamstrung by tax-cap limits. New York State has begun a transition to computer based testing with the move to the adoption of the Common Core State Standards. In his letter to District Superintendents from May of 2012, Commissioner King outlines the implementation timeline and the tools that the state has made available to districts to help them make the transition. Implicit in this move is the notion that districts are largely on their own in terms of budgeting for adequate technology infrastructure to support the new testing mode. And while this may well prove to be a financially beneficial move for district in the long term, in the short term, districts must divert money to cover the cost of the transition. To help make this transition, DPUFSD has budgeted an additional 30,000 dollars for school year 2013–2014 to cover expenses related to this mandate (M. Jimenez, personal communication, February 4, 2013). Items like this, and the previously mentioned calculator mandate are single-year budgetary expenses, but they are still expenses, and they still require that money be diverted from other areas of district functioning.

At the state level, NYSED has provided several documents that aid in determining the cost of administration of some testing mandates. During an October, 2010 meeting, the New York State Board of Regents proposed several options that are illuminative of the financial cost of

administering wide-scale standardized tests to the state's student population. These proposals included charging districts six dollars per student⁸ to cover the cost of administering mandated exams, and the request for fifteen million dollars in legislative funds to cover the continuing development and administration of a variety of non-NCLB mandated Regents exams (e.g. chemistry, geometry and U.S. History and Government) (Munks, 2010). If this cost were ever to be passed on to the district, it would cost DPUFSD approximately \$20,000 to cover the cost for its testing student population.

As difficult as it is to parse the impact of testing mandates on the finances of DPUFSD, the district survey indicates that, at least in so far as the perspective of district teachers and administrators are concerned, testing does result in costs to the district. 92 percent of teacher respondents and 76 percent of administrator respondents (including 100 percent of participating central office administrators) agreed with the statement that “mandated assessment requires financial and material resources that could be better used in other aspects of educating district students”. How much of this sentiment is reflective of real circumstances or perceived impacts is an open question, but the results of the survey suggest that there is a real resource cost to the district from testing mandates.

⁸ The figure quoted was \$5.93 per student. The author hopes that the reader will forgive his approximation.

Discussion:

“As a ‘seasoned’ teacher (which we all are) I find that I am barely keeping my head above water. The administration can not seem to adapt a single program.” (Anonymous teacher, District survey, March 2013)

An unfortunate picture:

In light of all of the documented negative effects of high-stakes testing, and the comparatively less-documented positive effects, on the learning process, it might become difficult to understand why high-stakes testing systems remain a major and increasing focus of education throughout the country. That being said, it would be foolish to suggest that the high stakes testing regime in New York State is going to disappear any time soon. With this in mind, there are several areas where district personnel can direct their attention if they are interested in mitigating the negative effects that high-stakes testing has on curricula, and on the morale of instructional staff.

An important role for administrators:

There are many recommendations in the literature for administrators who are interested in blunting the impact of high-stakes testing on their schools. Reich and Bally (2010) describe how a focus on ongoing staff development can provide a base of support and strength for any faculty dealing with the pressures of high-stakes testing. In particular, the authors analyze the “communities of practice” model, wherein groups of teachers meet regularly to discuss their practice and work together to analyze their pedagogy and curriculum. Though the authors do

not suggest that this, or any other single staff development practice will be completely effective in and of itself in mitigating the negative effects of high-stakes testing, they suggest that structures like the “communities of practice” model help empower teachers to implement the types of pedagogy that they find most rewarding, while providing a constructive forum for troubleshooting as the need arises.

Along with discussion of professional development, the literature also stresses the need for administrators to demonstrate an understanding of the role that assessment plays in the overall evaluation of learning. Knowledge of many of the factors that were described in the findings section of this paper will go a long way toward helping administrators understand where the use of testing data is appropriate, and the inherent limitations of testing as a tool for measurement of learning. McMillan (2000) provides a useful set of guidelines to keep in mind when considering the testing process, and assessment in general, ranging from discussion of concrete issues related to assessment tools (“Assessment is based on separate but related principles of measurement evidence and evaluation.”, “Assessment contains error.”) to philosophical issues related to the process of assessing learning (“Assessment influences student motivation and learning.”, “Good assessment enhances instruction.”).

It is important that administrators demonstrate to instructional staff that they are aware of these issues, and that their communications and actions related to testing connote deep understanding of the topic. In a high-stakes testing environment, it becomes all too easy for teachers to feel as if they are under attack. A functional educational system cannot afford to let this belief permeate the administrator-teacher dynamic.

The picture of things in DPUFSD:

The survey data from the DPUFSD staff suggests that the impact of testing on the learning process in the district is extensive, and that many of the negative effects that have been discussed in the Findings section of this paper are being felt among the district staff. What is perhaps most interesting about the survey data is just how uniform perceptions about the impact of testing on the learning process are among both district instructional and administrative staff. Unfortunately while those perceptions are uniform, they are also quite negative.

The DPUFSD staff is very supportive of the use of assessment in the learning process. As a whole, there is no argument with giving testing an important place within the larger educational process. While this is the case, the movement toward high-stakes, mandated testing, has engendered a lot of negativity. Teachers and administrators indicate that they feel that the amount of instructional time devoted to test preparation has increased, and that testing requires the diversion of financial and material resources that could be better used for other purposes. Teachers and administrators express doubts about the ability of mandated assessments to accurately indicate student learning, or to separate teachers on the basis of their instructional ability. Perhaps most concerning, teachers and administrators both agree that the emphasis given to mandated testing has negatively impacted the morale of the teaching staff in the district. Taken together, all of these threads suggest that whatever benefits might be conferred by increased emphasis of testing, there are considerable challenges that accompany them.

Looking at the survey data, there are only two major items where the sentiment of instructional staff differs noticeably in their perspective from the administrative perspective. On one of these items, the difference in opinion is largely a function of the differences in job

descriptions between administrators and teachers. For the statement “The data that standardized assessment generates is being used appropriately by district decision makers”, 68 percent of the instructional staff disagree, while 65 percent of participating administrators agree. This difference is not all that surprising, as the administrators represent the “district decision makers.” The other area where there is sizeable disagreement between teachers and administrators is in relation to perceptions about the amount of professional development that staff have been provided with for using the data that testing generates to inform instruction. 51 of instructional staff indicate that they do not feel that they have received enough professional development on the use of testing data to inform instruction (an additional 30 percent are neutral on the topic). 53 percent of district administrators indicate that they feel that the instructional staff has been provided with adequate professional development on the topic.

Taken together, these two areas of disagreement are suggestive of the notion that the administration of DPUFSD should continue in the effort to communicate with instructional staff about the common perspective that the staff shares about the utility of testing, and how to best continue to teach students given what is perceived as the more unfortunate aspects of the current assessment scheme that NYSED requires. Administration should also continue to provide staff with professional development as relates to integrating testing data in the instructional process, and the relationship between sound pedagogy and assessment performance. As the literature demonstrates, the negative consequences of “teaching to the test” are only major problems when the curriculum on offer in a district does not seek to integrate test training holistically through the cultivation of a rich curriculum. By helping teachers to realize that good teaching will bring good test performance along for the ride, administration can help teachers feel less beset by testing

mandates. By communicating common purpose and perspective, administration can help teachers understand that decision makers at all levels in the district understand that the current situation is not optimal, but that everyone is trying their best to make the situation as agreeable as possible.

Outside of the sentiments of district staff, the other major indicator of the utility of the current testing regimen in the district is the actual performance of students on the assessments that they are taking. In this, DPUFSD is fairly typical. The 2010–2011 New York State District Report Card shows a district that is succeeding in almost every assessed measure. Students classified, as having “disabilities” did not meet AYP goals for English Language Arts at all levels and the Limited English Proficient student population also did not meet Elementary Level English Language Arts performance goals. But outside of these areas, the district is meeting AYP goals for all student populations in all subjects.

The previous paragraph demonstrates that there is definite utility in the generation of a report like the District Report Card, a tool that has been developed by NYSED to meet NCLB requirements for tracking district progress. At the same time, such a tool could be implemented regardless of the impact it had on the operation of the district. Similarly, an argument could be made that in as much as student exam performance is a product of the curriculum of the district, and the curriculum of the district is informed by the data in documents like the District Report Card, the implementation of high-stakes testing in New York State has benefitted the students of DPUFSD. This is not an argument that can be wholly discounted, but anyone who makes it has to balance the benefit to students with the impacts that have been discussed in this report. Put another way, if the accountability aspects of the current NYS testing regimen were to suddenly disappear, how would the decrease in the impacts on the learning process affect the test

performance of DPUFSD students? It is not a question that can be answered, but it is one that deserves consideration.

Concluding remarks:

The relationship between testing and learning is complex. Assessment serves a very important function in the learning process as a major mode by which teachers can measure student understanding. Philosophical issues about the nature of education and the measurement of learning aside, tests remain the major assessment tool available to most educators.

The connection of incentives to testing in the form of high-stakes tests adds another level of complexity to the issue. Connecting exam performance to consequences for learners, teachers, and schools, brings with it the potential for many negative effects on the learning process, on the morale of students and staff, and adds an additional burden to district finances that are already strained by the tax cap and a variety of unrelieved mandates. Add to this a transition by NYSED to increased emphasis on testing that is widely perceived to have been done in a less-than-optimal manner, and the stage is set to realize most of the negative effects of high-stakes testing on the learning process, while recouping very few positives.

As educators we can be forgiven for feeling that our schools and our students deserve better than what they are getting. At the same time, it is not appropriate for teachers and administrators to give in to an attitude of resignation and despair. There is much that can be done to blunt the most disagreeable effects of the current testing mandates on the learning that takes place in our schools. It is important to remember that good teaching, grounded in solid

pedagogical practice, remains the most effective way to prepare students for the battery of tests that they will face during their progression through the educational system of New York State.

This paper is being written at a major time of transition for the state educational system. This school year marks the first year that the new APPR process is being implemented for the vast majority of the instructional staff in the state. It is unrealistic to expect that much of the unease that is voiced by teachers will not be tempered until this transition is complete. It will be interesting to see how teachers might respond to a survey similar to the one that was administered for this paper next year. Will the same amount of discomfort and low morale be seen after this first year is finished?

Educators are not the only ones who are affected by this transition. While teachers have been active in their efforts to focus the discussion^t, parents and school boards are also becoming increasingly involved in the discussion about relationship between testing and the learning process. In the age of social media and interconnectedness, activist parent groups are able to organize with ease^u. At its February 21, 2013 meeting, the Board of Education for New Paltz Central School District unanimously passed a resolution against the current (and planned future) high-stakes testing regiment in New York State, declaring in part that:

^t With initiatives like the recent teacher-lead boycott of the Measures of Academic Progress test by the staff of Garfield High School in Seattle.

^u As a local example, consider “Class Size Matters”: An activist group of New York City parents that initially formed in response to increasing class sizes in New York City schools, the group has since broadened its efforts to address a variety of issues that affect students.

“ the over-reliance on high-stakes standardized testing in state and federal accountability systems is undermining educational quality and equity in U.S. public schools by hampering educators' efforts to focus on the broad range of learning experiences that promote the innovation, creativity, problem solving, collaboration, communication, critical thinking and deep subject-matter knowledge that will allow students to thrive in a democracy and an increasingly global society and economy; and...it is widely recognized that standardized testing is an inadequate and often unreliable measure of both student learning and educator effectiveness”

Just as it will take time to fully understand how the increase in high-stakes testing affects the learning process for the students in New York State, it will also take time to see if voices like these strengthen or fade away. And while the data is being gathered, and the studies are being written, educators will still need to continue working to make sure that students are being given the best possible learning experiences that can be provided to them. Regardless of how high-stakes tests are perceived, how they impact our schools, or how we might feel about them, at the end of it all teachers will still be teaching students.

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Appendix A- District Survey Results

Table 1: Average Agreement Index Scores For Instructional Staff

Criteria	Average Agreement Index Score	Response Frequencies				
		1	2	3	4	5
Assessment serves an important pedagogical function when used correctly.	3.75	0.04	0.05	0.07	0.38	0.46
The amount of instructional time spent on preparing my students for assessment has increased over the course of my career.	3.86	0.03	0.01	0.07	0.18	0.71
Standardized assessment is a valid indicator of student learning if the data it generates is used appropriately.	2.89	0.10	0.36	0.19	0.28	0.07
The data that standardized assessment generates is being used appropriately by district decision makers.	2.27	0.25	0.43	0.23	0.07	0.03
Mandated assessment requires financial and material resources that could be better used in other aspects of educating district students.	3.80	0.01	0.03	0.05	0.24	0.68
Mandated assessment influences the instructional choices that I make.	3.87	0.03	0.03	0.05	0.38	0.51
Mandated assessments have negatively impacted my curriculum.	3.51	0.04	0.09	0.21	0.26	0.40
I am confident that the performance of my students on mandated assessments will be an accurate indicator of my ability to teach my subject.	2.17	0.54	0.28	0.13	0.03	0.02
I have received adequate professional development to be able to use the data from assessment to inform my instruction.	2.64	0.17	0.34	0.30	0.16	0.04
The use of standardized assessment data in staff evaluation will accurately separate teachers based on their instructional effectiveness.	2.08	0.58	0.33	0.06	0.01	0.01
I am in agreement with the role that mandated assessment plays in the state's teacher evaluation framework as it pertains to the district's APPR agreement.	2.27	0.66	0.21	0.09	0.03	0.01
The emphasis given to mandated assessments has negatively affected my perspective on being a teacher.	3.48	0.08	0.08	0.19	0.23	0.43

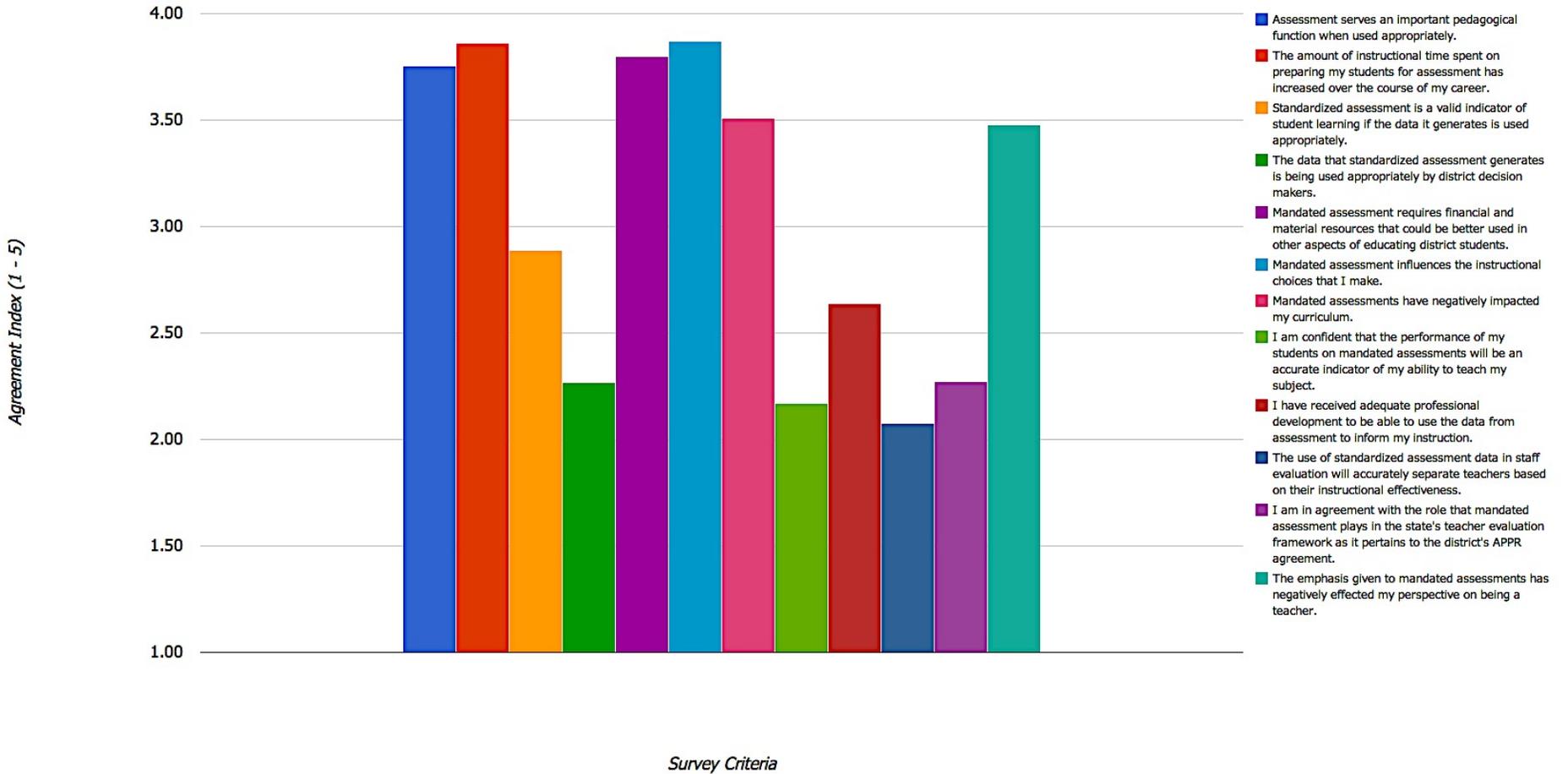
(N = 151)

Table 2: Average Agreement Index Scores for Administrative Staff

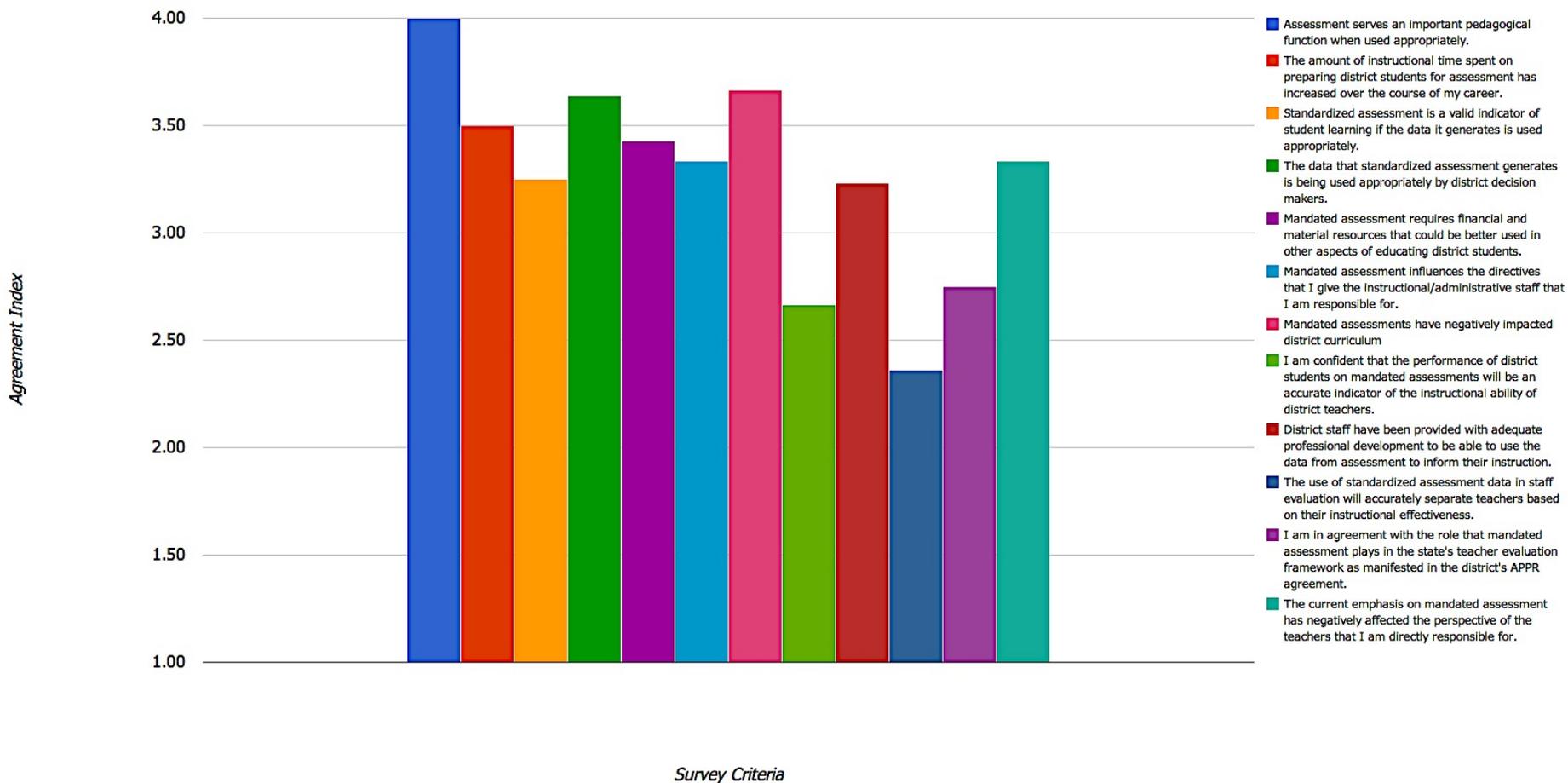
Criteria	Average Agreement Index Score	Response Frequencies				
		1	2	3	4	5
Assessment serves an important pedagogical function when used correctly.	4.00	0.12	0.00	0.06	0.18	0.65
The amount of instructional time spent on preparing district students for assessment has increased over the course of my career.	3.50	0.00	0.06	0.00	0.18	0.76
Standardized assessment is a valid indicator of student learning if the data it generates is used appropriately.	3.25	0.06	0.18	0.12	0.29	0.35
The data that standardized assessment generates is being used appropriately by district decision makers.	3.64	0.06	0.12	0.18	0.53	0.12
Mandated assessment requires financial and material resources that could be better used in other aspects of educating district students.	3.43	0.00	0.12	0.12	0.29	0.47
Mandated assessment influences the directives that I give the instructional/administrative staff that I am responsible for.	3.33	0.06	0.06	0.06	0.12	0.71
Mandated assessments have negatively impacted district curriculum.	3.67	0.00	0.06	0.59	0.29	0.06
I am confident that the performance of district students on mandated assessments will be an accurate indicator of the instructional ability of district teachers	2.67	0.12	0.35	0.35	0.18	0.00
District staff has been provided with adequate professional development to be able to use the data from assessment to inform my instruction.	3.23	0.00	0.29	0.18	0.47	0.06
The use of standardized assessment data in staff evaluation will accurately separate teachers based on their instructional effectiveness.	2.36	0.06	0.53	0.29	0.12	0.00
I am in agreement with the role that mandated assessment plays in the state's teacher evaluation framework as it pertains to the district's APPR agreement.	2.75	0.18	0.29	0.35	0.18	0.00
The emphasis given to mandated assessments has negatively affected the perspective of the teachers that I am directly responsible for.	3.33	0.00	0.06	0.41	0.12	0.41

(N = 17)

Average Agreement Scores Among Participating District Instructional Staff (n = 151)



Average Agreement Scores Among Participating District Administrators (n = 17)



Appendix B- Sample Survey Instrument

Assessment Impact Survey (Instructional Staff Version)

This survey has been created to analyze staff perceptions about the impact of assessment on their instructional choices and student learning. All results are being collected anonymously, for the purpose of a paper being written about the impact of testing on student learning. This paper will be made available to any interested party. Thank you for taking a few minutes out of your busy day to fill out this survey. Your participation is appreciated. This survey will remain open for submissions until March 15th, 2013.

* Required

What grade do you teach? *

Indicate the grade level that you teach. If you teach multiple grades, please fill out the survey for the grade level that you spend the majority of your day teaching.

----- (please select) ----- ▾

What Subject Do You Teach *

Indicate the subject that you teach. If you teach multiple subject, please indicate the subject that you spend the majority of your day teaching.

----- (please select) ----- ▾

Indicate how strongly you agree with the following statements: *

For each of the following statements, please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Please note that some questions ask about assessment in general, some ask about mandated assessment (assessments that you are required to administer by administrative directive/state regulations), and some ask about standardized assessment (assessments that are administered to large groups of students that are statistically calibrated to generate certain score distributions)

	1 (strongly disagree)	2	3 (neither agree or disagree)	4	5 (strongly agree)
Assessment serves an important pedagogical function when used appropriately.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The amount of instructional time spent on preparing my students for assessment has increased over the course of my career.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Standardized assessment is a valid indicator of student learning if the data it generates is used appropriately.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

The data that standardized assessment generates is being used appropriately by district decision makers.	<input type="radio"/>				
Mandated assessment requires financial and material resources that could be better used in other aspects of educating district students	<input type="radio"/>				
Mandated assessment influences the instructional choices that I make.	<input type="radio"/>				
Mandated assessments have negatively impacted my curriculum.	<input type="radio"/>				
I am confident that the performance of my students on mandated assessments will be an accurate indicator of my ability to teach my subject.	<input type="radio"/>				
I have received adequate professional development to be able to use the data from assessment to inform my instruction.	<input type="radio"/>				
The use of standardized assessment data in staff evaluation will accurately separate teachers based on their instructional effectiveness.	<input type="radio"/>				
I am in agreement with the role that mandated assessment plays in the state's teacher evaluation framework as it pertains to the district's APPR agreement.	<input type="radio"/>				
The emphasis given to mandated assessments has negatively effected my perspective on being a teacher.	<input type="radio"/>				

Optional Comment Space:

Please feel free to leave any additional comments in the area below. This is NOT a required question.

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