**Debate over standardized testing is focusing on the wrong questions**

By Celine CogginsOp-ed contributor

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*Dr. Celine Coggins is founder and chief executive officer of* [*Teach Plus*](http://www.teachplus.org/)*, a nonprofit advocacy organization dedicated to improving educational outcomes for urban children by ensuring that a greater proportion of students have access to effective, experienced teachers.*

The education debate should not be over whether students spend too must time testing, but on which tests are actually useful to teachers and improving instruction. Then we need to make district, state, and federal policy decisions based on this information.

In February, a [Massachusetts](https://www.csmonitor.com/tags/topic/Massachusetts) kindergarten teacher publicly resigned from her position citing the school system’s emphasis on standardized testing.

As a parent, former teacher, and head of Teach Plus, an organization that puts teachers at the center of school and system-level reform, I was glad to see her story generate overwhelming interest.

Americans should be looking closely at educational testing and asking tough questions. But this means that we need to ask more than simply, “Are our kids being tested too much or too little?”

The debate over standardized testing in [America](https://www.csmonitor.com/tags/topic/United+States)’s public schools is too often framed around problematic black and white stances. Tests are neither the destroyers of the art of teaching and meaningful student learning nor are they the panacea for measuring and raising teacher performance and student achievement.

If we’re really asking the tough questions about testing, we need to know which tests are the good ones – those that can give teachers the information they need to help students succeed. And we need to make district, state, and federal policy decisions based on this information.

**Surprising findings**

This February, Teach Plus released a key report on testing, [“The Student and the Stopwatch: How Much Time do American Students Spend on Testing?”](http://www.teachplus.org/uploads/Documents/1391446664_The%20Student%20and%20the%20Stopwatch.pdf) – the first of its kind. Our findings surprised us and will probably surprise most people attuned to the current testing debate.

Across 12 urban districts, from [Boston](https://www.csmonitor.com/tags/topic/Boston) to [Los Angeles](https://www.csmonitor.com/tags/topic/Los+Angeles), the average amount of time students spend taking state and district tests is just 1.7 percent of the school year. This means that, on average, third-grade and seventh-grade students spend only about 10 hours a year taking mandated English Language Arts tests and about six hours a year taking math tests. The amount of testing is substantially less in kindergarten.

(These calculations do not include time teachers spend preparing students for testing, which is often the source of more controversy than the testing itself. “Test prep” is almost impossible to quantify: Some teachers report that all teaching is focused on preparing students to succeed at tests and that they need the data to drive instructional improvement, while others report hours of mindless practice at filling in bubbles.)

The implications of the report’s findings are clear: Instead of focusing on the amount of time spent on testing, the national conversation on testing needs to shift to discussing the quality of tests and the effect they have on teachers’ practice and student learning.

**Tests aren’t bad – if they’re good**

Tests are not inherently damaging to instruction. In fact, a good test will improve student outcomes by helping teachers target instruction. And effective tests are surely necessary to gauge student progress. The imperative then is not to eliminate testing; it is to make sure that tests are aligned with meaningful curriculum, rigorous standards, and useful professional development – and that teachers are involved in the test adoption process.

Teachers in our Teach Plus network agree.

A special education teacher in Massachusetts wrote, “We need to look at the data tests provide ... to understand the grade level at which my students perform, the difference between where they are and the grade level they need to be, and the rate at which they are progressing towards their grade level standards.”

And according to a first-grade teacher in Massachusetts: “There is no question that assessment data is extremely important to moving my students forward. First and foremost, assessments should measure growth at given interims during the year to see a student’s overall improvement.”

Over and over, teachers have said to me that they welcome tests that have a positive effect on their time in the classroom. Our February report surveyed more than 300 teachers nationwide. Teachers across subjects and grade levels concurred: Good tests are the ones that can be used in conjunction with curriculum, test appropriate standards, and are part of regular instructional practice. When the tests are good, teachers look forward to incorporating the results into their curricular planning, instruction, and student monitoring.

**A Common Core opportunity**

This March, field testing began in 36 states and the [District of Columbia](https://www.csmonitor.com/tags/topic/Washington%2c+DC) on Common Core-based assessments. These are tests based on the new set of national standards developed by educators and a bipartisan consortium of state leaders with support from philanthropies such as the Bill & [Melinda Gates Foundation](https://www.csmonitor.com/tags/topic/Bill+%26+Melinda+Gates+Foundation). They have now been adopted by 44 states.

The field tests are an opportunity for education officials to judge, among other things, the quality of each test question. Since the Common Core-aligned tests are intended to correct some of the problems that teachers have identified with the current tests, it’s incredibly important that we hear from teachers about which new tests are useful for measuring student progress and which ones need to be improved.  Once fully implemented, the assessments linked to Common Core will reflect higher standards at each grade level. They are also likely to take more time to administer because of their emphasis on testing the higher-order skills American students need to be college- and career-ready.

**Teacher input a must**

The debate on testing is an important one, but debating time devoted to testing without a discussion of test type and content misses the point. With Common Core standards implementation and assessment field-testing under way, the time is now for district, state, and federal policymakers to ensure that all tests meet teachers’ high bar on quality.

Now this is a debate that I – and many teachers I know – would welcome.