

## **A Fundamental Principle: No Unnecessary Testing (NUT)**

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**Summary: Do not invest 4.5 billion on new standards and tests. Instead, work on improving the NAEP to get a picture of how our students are performing, and continue to use teacher evaluation to evaluate individual student performance. We should begin by cutting back testing, not adding testing.**

No Unnecessary Testing (NUT) is the principle that school should include only those tests and parts of tests that are necessary, that contribute to essential evaluation and learning. Every minute testing and doing “test preparation” (activities to boost scores on tests that do not involve genuine learning) is stolen from students’ lives, in addition to costing money that we cannot afford these days.

If we accept the NUT principle, it leads to this question: Do we need yearly standardized tests closely linked to the curriculum? Do they tell us more than teacher evaluation does? This issue must be looked at scientifically. If, for example, standardized tests given in every stage are shortened, given less frequently or abandoned, will student performance be affected? Would NAEP scores be affected, or high school graduation rates, or life success?

My prediction is that teacher evaluation does a better job of evaluating students than standardized testing: The repeated judgments of professionals who are with children every day is more valid than a test created by distant strangers. Moreover, teacher evaluations are “multiple measures,” are closely aligned to the curriculum, and cover a variety of subjects.

There is evidence supporting this view for high school students: In a study published in 2007, UC Berkeley scholars Saul Geiser and Maria Veronica Saltelices found that adding SAT scores to high school students grades in college prep courses did not provide much more information than grades alone, which suggests that we may not need standardized tests at all. More recently, Bowen, Chingos, and McPherson (2009) reached similar conclusions.

For those who argue that we need national standardized tests in order to compare student achievement over time and to compare subgroups of students, we already have an instrument for this, the NAEP.

The NAEP is administered to small groups of children who each take a portion of the test every few years. Results are extrapolated to estimate how the larger groups would score. No test prep is done, as the tests are zero stakes: There are no (or should be no)

consequences for low or high scores. Our efforts should be to improve the NAEP, not start all over again, and go through years of fine-tuning with new instruments.

Gradually improving the NAEP will also solve the "standards" problem, as the NAEP is adjusted to reflect competencies experts in education consider to be important.

If we are interested in a general picture of how children are doing, this is the way to do it. If we are interested in finding out about a patient's health, we only need to look at a small sample of their blood, not all of it.

My predictions, however, need to be put to the empirical test. A conservative path is to start to cut back on standardized tests, both in length and frequency, and determine if this has any negative consequences.

A radical path is to throw everything we have out, without any evidence that it is inadequate, and waste \$4.5 billion on new standards and new tests, tests for all subjects and to be given to every child every year.

The conservative path is the only rational option, when funds are so scarce, and it is an essential exercise of our responsibility to students. It is also the solution to those who are calling for a longer school year and a longer school day: less time testing and doing test-prep means more time for instruction and learning.

Bowen, W., Chingos, M., and McPherson, M. 2009. *Crossing the Finish Line: Completing College at America's Universities*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Geiser, S. and Santelices, M.V., 2007. Validity of high-school grades in predicting student success beyond the freshman year: High-school record vs. standardized tests as indicators of four-year college outcomes. *Research and Occasional Papers Series: CSHE 6.07*, University of California, Berkeley. <http://cshe.berkeley.edu>