

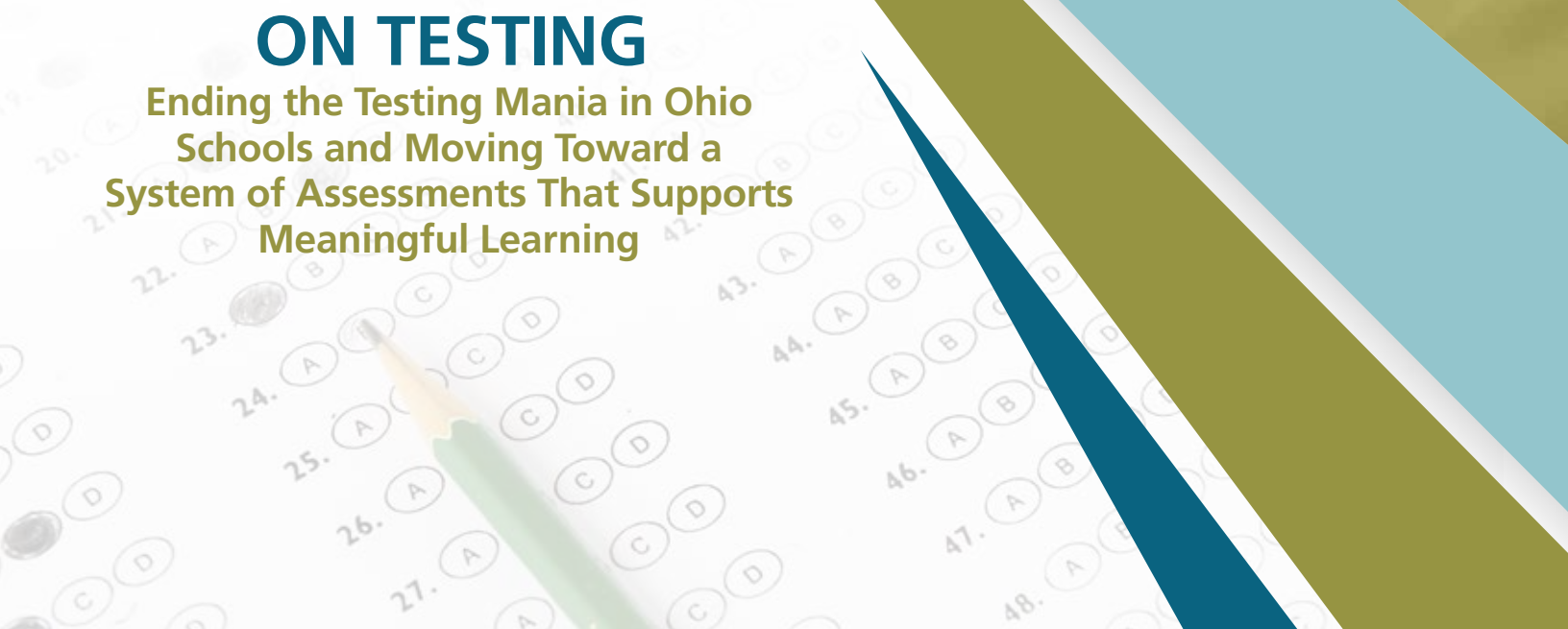


**Ohio Federation
of Teachers** AFT, AFL-CIO
A Union of Professionals



OFT POSITION PAPER ON TESTING

**Ending the Testing Mania in Ohio
Schools and Moving Toward a
System of Assessments That Supports
Meaningful Learning**



The Ohio Federation of Teachers would like to thank the following individuals who were instrumental in creating this report. We are grateful for their expertise and time:

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AN OPEN LETTER TO OHIO LEGISLATORS

It's time to end the testing mania. There is a better solution to ensure that our children are learning and thriving.

America's fixation on high-stakes testing is denying our children the rich, meaningful education they deserve. Across our country and here in Ohio, test-driven education policies are hijacking public education. The testing fixation is taking time and money from key educational priorities. It is narrowing the curriculum, forcing teachers to "teach to the test." It is causing unnecessary and cruel stress on children and their families. It is driving excellent teachers out of the profession and undermining school climate.

The thousands of teachers, paraprofessionals and school support staff represented by the Ohio Federation of Teachers have witnessed firsthand the destructive effects of the testing mania. Today, we are seeing the joy of learning disappear as districts cut art, music, sports, social studies and science to focus strictly on math and reading tests. Our students, sadly, are missing out on learning experiences that promote innovation, creativity, problem solving, communication, critical thinking and deep subject-matter knowledge—the skills that will allow our children and Ohio to thrive in the global economy in the coming decades. Meanwhile, an ever-growing body of research has established that standardized testing is woefully inadequate as the central mechanism for capturing student learning. We are devastating our public schools to no end.

To your credit, our Legislature is now attempting to respond to parent and educator outrage about overtesting and to better understand the testing crisis. Unfortunately, recent bills and reports have focused far too much on quick fixes that create even more frustration and confusion, and policy debates have become entangled in the *mechanics*—which tests to use, how many tests should be given, and how much time should be spent on testing and test preparation. Instead, we need to look at the bigger picture of what we want to accomplish with testing and whether our current system accomplishes it—or needs to be replaced with a proven, comprehensive assessment system, such as those used in high-performing education systems around the world.

Ohio is to be commended for embarking on the first step in taking the debate about testing beyond mechanics. The Senate Advisory Committee on Testing is composed of practitioners in the field who can lend their experience and expertise to making thoughtful decisions to ensure Ohio has an assessment system that supports meaningful learning and student success.

We should not give up on assessment and accountability, but there are far better options than yet more standardized testing. There are assessment systems that truly capture what is happening in the classroom and give students, parents and teachers a clear sense of how well students are learning and achieving.

We cannot reach the right answers if we are asking the wrong questions. To devise a workable solution to overtesting, we need time to take a step back. ***We urge you, at this time, to put a hold on decisions attached to high-stakes testing for three years while you take the***



time to convene educators, evaluate the current system and develop a long-term strategy for how to provide a high-quality education for our children.

The attached issue paper on testing is our first step in helping with that process. It offers our professional perspective on how assessments drive student learning, our views on the current system, and our recommendations for further actions. We also offer you experience and expertise from the people in the classroom and in our schools every day. Our members are eager to engage in deep conversations with policymakers on how to improve the current system. Also, the Ohio Federation of Teachers is currently working on a series of issue papers that will clearly and succinctly address the issues involved in testing and accountability. We hope that you'll read these policy briefs and contact us in order to hear more from our members firsthand.

We can work together to reclaim the promise of public education and bring our schools the true support they need. Ohio needs a rational system of assessment that will benefit the most important people in this discussion: our students. Their future depends on getting this right.

Thank you for your time and attention.

Sincerely,

Melissa Cropper
President, Ohio Federation of Teachers



OFT POSITION PAPER ON TESTING

Ending the Testing Mania in Ohio Schools and Moving Toward a System of Assessments That Supports Meaningful Learning

Testing has become a hot topic in education, and for good reason: America's fixation on high-stakes testing is denying our children the rich, meaningful education they deserve.

Across our country and here in Ohio, test-driven education policies are hijacking public education and forcing educators to sacrifice time from key educational priorities in order to teach to the test. It is causing unnecessary and cruel stress on children and their families. It is driving excellent teachers out of the profession and undermining school climate.

The joy of learning is fast disappearing as districts cut back on art, music, sports, social studies, science and other subjects to focus on math and reading tests. Our students, sadly, are missing out on learning experiences that promote innovation, creativity, problem solving, collaboration, communication, critical thinking and deep subject-matter knowledge—the experiences and skills that will allow both our children and the state of Ohio to thrive in a democracy and global economy in the coming decades.

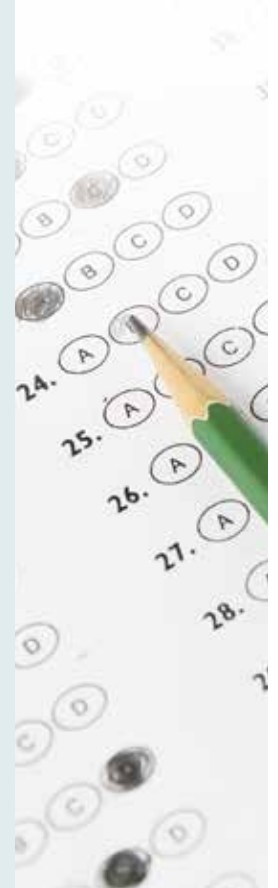
It is no surprise that overtesting and the resulting ills have sparked a growing outcry from parents and communities (including the widespread “opt-out” movement). Meanwhile, an ever-growing body of research has now established that standardized testing is woefully inadequate as the central mechanism for capturing student learning and progress.

Writing about her recent review of more than 300 studies of K-12 academic tests, Williams College developmental psychologist (and founder and director of the Williams Program in Teaching) Susan Engel concluded:¹

In the past few years, parents, teachers, and policy makers have furiously debated whether standardized tests should be used to promote or hold back children, fire teachers, and withhold funds from schools. The debate has focused for the most part on whether the tests are being used in unfair ways. But almost no one has publicly questioned a fundamental assumption—that the tests measure something meaningful or predict something significant beyond themselves. ... Most tests used to evaluate students, teachers, and school districts predict almost nothing except the likelihood of achieving similar scores on subsequent tests. I have found virtually no research demonstrating a relationship between those tests and measures of thinking or life outcomes. ... The answer is not to abandon testing, but to measure the things we most value, and find good ways to do that.

Within the past year, we have seen an escalation in the policy debate in Ohio concerning the Common Core, high-stakes testing, teacher evaluations, accountability, charter schools and other education issues. It is praiseworthy that our Legislature is attempting to respond

1. Susan Engel, “7 Things Every Kid Should Master: A Noted Williams College Psychologist Argues Standardized Tests Are Useful, If They Measure the Abilities Students Really Need,” *The Boston Globe Magazine*, Feb. 26, 2015.



to parent and educator outrage and to better understand the testing crisis.

Unfortunately, current legislative responses have not addressed the underlying issues.

The recent discussions on testing in our Legislature and in the public arena in Ohio have focused on the *mechanics* of the system—which and how many tests to use, and how much time should be spent on testing and test prep. Quick fixes such as eliminating one test or placing artificial limits on time spent testing do not go far enough to address what Ohio needs—and what high-performing education systems in other countries have: a comprehensive assessment system that improves teaching and learning.

Assessment and accountability systems *can* help improve teaching and learning, but, like taking your vitals at a doctor’s office, standardized tests *alone* do very little. What we do with the information we receive is the critically important piece. Do we use the information to simply produce a label or do we use the information to help change the future outcome?

Before we can answer that question though, we need to have a common understanding of the terminology used in the discussion. Below, in question-and-answer format, is an explanation of some key testing terminology, including how each of these types of assessments can work to promote student learning. In addition, we have included our professional perspective on the current system and our recommendations for future action.

WHAT IS THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN ASSESSMENT AND TESTING?

Assessment is part of a teacher’s effective practice. Assessments tell teachers what students have learned and what skills and content students haven’t mastered yet. A proficient teacher is constantly and continuously assessing his or her students through formal or informal methods to inform his or her understanding of where each student is in the learning process and what next steps are needed to help students meet standards.

Unfortunately, these types of assessments are often lost in discussions of **testing**, a term generally used to describe large-scale, standardized, end-of-the-year state or district tests. The two must work hand in hand. High-quality summative **testing** should be a component—not the be-all and end-all—of a comprehensive **assessment system**.

WHAT IS A DIAGNOSTIC ASSESSMENT?

A diagnostic assessment assesses a few concepts or skills (three or fewer) and typically comes prior to the *beginning* of instruction.² Teachers use the results of the diagnostic assessment to plan instruction and tailor interventions for individual students.

WHAT IS A FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT?

Formative assessments are frequent interactive assessments or assignments used to give feedback to students or guide instruction. They provide data on student understanding and progress that informs day-to-day and moment-to-moment instructional decisions. They can range from formal to informal assessments that guide the teacher in ensuring that students’ needs are met. Examples include daily quizzes, discussions in class, reviews of student work

2. It is important to note that the timing of a test is not what makes it diagnostic; it is the type of information the test provides—timely and actionable information on which to base instructional strategies and activities.



in class, observations, exit slips, homework and any activity that allows the teacher to see where students are at that moment in time.

WHAT IS A SUMMATIVE ASSESSMENT?

Summative assessments are used to determine whether students have acquired the desired knowledge at the end of the teaching processes—typically at the conclusion of a particular unit or time period. They provide a summary of performance and include assessments that result in a grade, end-of-year or end-of-course exams, and performance-based assessments.

Summative assessments are best used to determine large-scale, systematic or programmatic changes, including changes in materials/textbooks to purchase, curricular decisions, staffing and professional development. They are generally not useful for day-to-day instruction for teachers but can shape system improvement in the future. Depending on the type and quality of the test and data, individual educators can benefit by reflecting on the data and taking steps to modify strategies and techniques going forward. Because summative assessments tend to come at a culmination point, students rarely glean meaningful information from them.

Summative assessments can be large-scale, state-mandated standardized assessments, but they can also be teacher-created, end-of-unit tests.

WHAT IS AN ASSESSMENT SYSTEM?

In an effective system, assessments are administered for **educationally sound reasons**. Diagnostic, formative and summative assessments work in concert as part of a *comprehensive* assessment system that provides actionable data to improve teaching and learning.

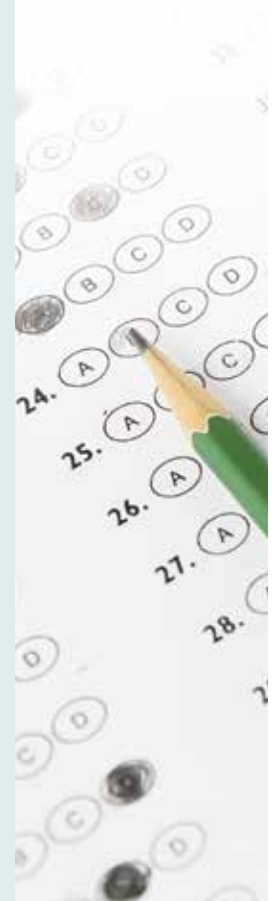
Formative and diagnostic assessments help teachers in the classroom monitor the progress and needs of *individual* students. High-quality summative assessments have a big-picture usefulness that can inform systematic and programmatic changes at the classroom, building, district and state levels.

To get the best benefit from any assessment, teachers and principals need to have time built into the day to collaborate, discuss results and plan how to best meet the needs of students. This sort of professional collaboration, with its process of continually checking in on student progress, reviewing data, assessing instructional strategies and supports, and circling back to ensure the success of the individual student, is a hallmark of most of the world's highest-performing educational systems, from Finland to Singapore.

DOES OHIO HAVE AN ASSESSMENT SYSTEM?

In Ohio, as is true around the country, a *testing* system has been devised for a snapshot measurement of relatively narrow outcomes, rather than an *assessment* system that both supports ongoing, meaningful 21st-century student learning *and* captures a real portrait of student achievement at a culminating point.

Instead of devising a system to improve student outcomes by informing instruction and building capacity, Ohio has built a system that uses the limited feedback standardized test results provide for high-stakes decisions. Evidence shows that this philosophy has failed.



HOW DOES ATTACHING HIGH STAKES TO STANDARDIZED TESTS IMPACT OUR EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM?

The goal of educators has always been to ensure all students attain the knowledge and skills necessary to succeed in life. However, the admirable goals of No Child Left Behind have sadly become a mechanism for punishing schools and teachers—and have reduced the learning experience to a conveyor belt of rote prep sessions and multiple-choice tests instead of providing the resources and building the capacity to improve.

As has been demonstrated, large-scale, standardized summative tests are poor indicators of meaningful learning. Yet, our test-and-punish accountability system has narrowed the curriculum and led to a range of onerous, compliance-driven, unrealistic and highly disruptive measures that do not improve educational outcomes for students.

Pressures have led districts to require more and more benchmarking, progress-monitoring and district-mandated tests. Regimented testing schedules, whether locally dictated or state mandated, are often on artificial timelines that do not reflect the pace of learning in the classroom. The purpose of the test has transformed from providing data to make next-step educational decisions to becoming a way to pass judgment on districts, schools, teachers and students. This approach defeats the purpose of Ohio's New Learning Standards, which aim to promote deeper learning and greater understanding of content. Time devoted to testing and test prep has greatly increased, and members of the Ohio Federation of Teachers can provide firsthand accounts of the toll that testing is taking, diverting valuable energy and resources away from student learning.

HOW DOES ATTACHING HIGH STAKES TO STANDARDIZED TESTS THROUGH THE OHIO TEACHER EVALUATION SYSTEM IMPACT TEACHERS AND TEACHING?

The Ohio Teacher Evaluation System, the current teacher evaluation system in Ohio, requires that between 42.5 and 50 percent of a teacher's individual evaluation is based on student growth measures. In order to determine the "growth" of students for teachers' individual evaluations, more formalized tests have been put in place to provide the data needed. Therefore, students are taking tests for the sole purpose of providing data to be used in teacher evaluations. Students are being put through this testing despite the fact that study after study has shown that this "value-added" approach is flawed. In fact, the National Research Council, the American Statistical Association and the Rand Corporation have all cautioned against using value-added scores to make personnel decisions.

Education systems that outcompete us globally simply don't do this. Instead, they focus on strategies that are proven to improve both teacher and student success. Such strategies include:

- professional collaboration and mentoring;
- high-quality teacher training and professional development;
- holistic and effective assessment systems;
- early childhood education and support programs to help children start school ready to learn; and

- Community Learning Centers, which provide the social services that help students succeed, from school meals to in-school medical and dental clinics to dropout prevention counseling.

The job of every teacher is, of course, to provide instruction that allows all students to make progress. There are questions that still need to be asked and answered though, such as: What is the proper vehicle to provide information on student progress? Are the results that provide student growth measures for the Ohio Teacher Evaluation System accurate? Are there better indicators of student progress than a state-mandated test? Should the state be determining evaluation measures or should that decision be made at a local level? There are better, deeper tools for assessing student achievement as part of a comprehensive assessment system. The Ohio Federation of Teachers will describe some of these tools for measuring student growth, as well as more defensible and effective ways to evaluate and nurture good teachers, in a future document.

IS THERE VALUE IN STATE-MANDATED TESTS?

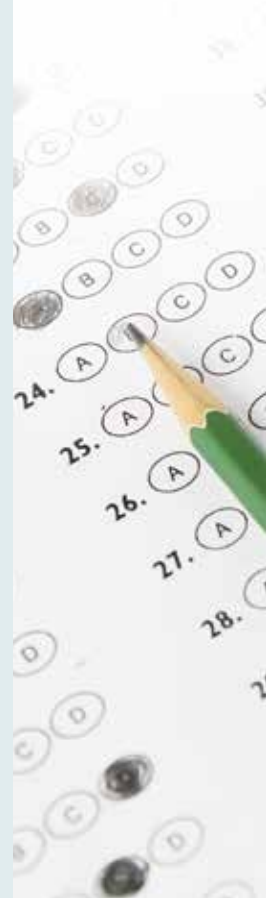
To serve a useful purpose for students, parents and teachers, tests should be aligned to high-quality standards and a curriculum that supports them, be an objective measure of progress toward college and career readiness, and support meaningful 21st-century learning. There is an appropriate role for state testing in a valid, comprehensive assessment system. It allows us to identify groups of students who are falling behind and to examine what resources and educational strategies are needed to ensure that these students succeed alongside their peer groups. Using results from state tests, schools and districts can identify curricular, material, staffing and professional development needs to help further student progress. In collaboration with the teaching staff, the data from state tests can be analyzed to make large-scale school- and district-level decisions about such issues.

Parents are sending the message loud and clear that they are tired of the toll overtesting is taking on their children. Like teachers though, parents want to know how their own children are doing in real time throughout the year and at year's end. Classroom-based assessments, administered in the natural instructional cycle, and once-a-year state tests can work together to further student learning, giving educators and parents the information they truly need. Unfortunately, as long as high stakes are attached to a standardized-testing-centered system, the real purpose of assessing and testing students is tainted.

A WAY FORWARD: OFT RECOMMENDATIONS ON TESTING PRACTICES

We believe in assessments that support teaching and learning and align with curriculum rather than narrow it; that are developed through collaborative efforts, not picked off a shelf; that are focused on measuring growth and continuous development instead of arbitrary targets unconnected to how students learn; that rely on diverse, authentic and multiple indicators of student performance rather than filling in bubbles; and that provide information leading to appropriate interventions that help students, teachers and schools improve, not sanctions that undermine them.

Further, we believe that assessments designed to support teaching and learning must contribute to school and classroom environments that nurture growth, collaboration, curiosity and invention—essential elements of a 21st-century education that have too often been sacrificed in favor of test prep and testing. The crucial voices of teachers must be included in



the development of assessments. We know that collaboration with educators is necessary to ensure that high-quality instruction and content are given their proper emphasis.

Ohio's public school accountability system must be re-examined and rebuilt. We must bring balance to public education by prioritizing high-quality instruction informed by appropriate and useful assessments. Anything less would be unworthy of our children and of the world-class public schools they deserve.

To improve the current testing climate and move toward assessment and accountability systems that improve teaching and learning, the Ohio Federation of Teachers recommends the following actions:

1. Pause stakes

For the next three years, there should be a pause to high-stakes decisions attached to testing. Schools, teachers and students should have time to adjust to the new tests—and test makers should have time to adjust to feedback—before they are used for graduation requirements or teacher evaluation.

2. Increase transparency and end gag orders

At least 70 percent of test items should be released to the public each year, and no testing company or education agency should impose gag orders that bar educators from speaking about the test content and its effects on students. Additionally, at the beginning of each year, parents should receive a testing schedule for all state and locally mandated tests that will be administered throughout the year, including the purpose for each test.

3. Examine current tests and testing practices

Support the Senate Advisory Committee on Testing as it does its work. This body, which includes current classroom teachers who span across the grades and content areas, has the expertise and experience to analyze and evaluate current tests and testing procedures. In assessing the implementation of the administration of current tests, the committee members can draw on their firsthand knowledge to identify the issues that arose, as well as the cause of any problems, and whether the assessments measure Ohio's New Learning Standards in an effective and valid way. In addition to teachers, this body also includes superintendents, principals, testing coordinators, parents, and other education stakeholders who can provide valuable insight and advice from their areas of expertise to give a well-rounded analysis of the current situation and recommendations for improvement.

4. Develop a new approach to testing

Continue to work with the Senate Advisory Committee to discuss testing and begin to determine what makes a positive, comprehensive assessment system that fosters student success. We need to determine ways to use annual testing and value-added data as sources of information that can be used locally to guide decisions that support student learning rather than as state-mandated measurements that label students, educators, schools and districts. This work should provide the foundation for making thoughtful, substantive recommendations for changes to the testing system that can make Ohio a model for the nation.



5. Allow local control on determining growth measures

As long as student growth measures are attached to teacher and principal evaluations, the decisions on how to determine the measures should be made at the local level though teacher-administration collaboration. We need to get away from creating artificial layers simply to provide data for a teacher evaluation. Instead, measuring student growth should be a natural function of the instructional process.

6. Require that classroom teachers be involved in determining the formative/diagnostic assessment system at the local level.

It is important to include the voices from the classroom in determining the assessments that support the standards and provide information that can guide educators in taking the next steps to ensure students are learning the standards. With an effective formative/diagnostic assessment system in place, teachers will be able to maximize instructional time and focus on creating positive learning environments that foster student growth and provide the supports students need in order to advance their learning.

Assessments and tests are integral parts of the instructional process; however, focusing on assessments and tests to provide a number for a report card or a rating in an educator evaluation produces a toxic environment that does not support learning. It is time to devise a rational system of assessment that will benefit the most important people in this discussion: our students. Their future depends on getting this right.





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