EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
Understanding District & State Testing
Angela Bass & Rachel Canter
March 2018
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In this report, Mississippi First examines testing practices in four diverse Mississippi school districts as a means of understanding how many tests Mississippi students take and how much time they spend taking those tests. Though there has been a great deal of debate about standardized testing, state leaders and the general public are largely uninformed about testing due to a lack of quality data on testing practices in Mississippi.

At Mississippi First, we believe that tests are a necessary fact of both school and life. Good assessments help teachers determine what children should know and can do and help parents ensure that their children are learning. Assessments also help policymakers evaluate the effectiveness of various programs and reforms and help the public understand the quality and equity of our education system. Finally, good assessments help students better understand what they have learned and build their ability to remember important information in the future.

Despite the important role of assessments, they can become detrimental if used improperly. Every minute spent testing is one fewer minute for instruction. Additionally, testing can increase anxiety among students and teachers. Without knowledge about testing time in Mississippi school districts, state leaders cannot ensure that the benefits derived from time spent testing outweigh the costs in lost instructional time and anxiety.

This report offers initial answers about the state of standardized testing in Mississippi public schools. We also provide broad recommendations for improving standardized testing and suggest action steps that school districts, the Mississippi Department of Education (MDE), and legislators should take to solve this problem.

RESEARCH & SAMPLE

To learn more about standardized testing in Mississippi school districts, we conducted field research in four school districts from September to November 2015. In order to ensure we received candid responses, we granted anonymity to each district; all the district names in this report are pseudonyms.

HILLSIDE

A Small, Lower-Poverty School District with 1:1 Technology

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OVERTON

A Small, High-Poverty School District without 1:1 Technology

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SUNSET

A Mid-Sized, High-Poverty District with Partial 1:1 Technology

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MANNEQUIN

A Mid-Sized, Lower-Poverty District without 1:1 Technology

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GENERAL FINDINGS

The general findings presented here are true for each of the school districts we examined. More detail can be found in the General Findings section of the full report.

1. In 2014-2015, students spent an average of 7 hours, 53 minutes—less than 1% of a 180-day school year—taking state tests.

2. Students took more district tests than state tests in every district we studied, but they sometimes spent less time on district testing than on state testing.

3. Test completion hours do not reflect all the time schools devote to standardized testing.

4. Certain times of the year are more affected by testing.

5. Districts rely on vendor-created standardized testing products.

6. District testing choices are strongly linked to state testing.

7. Teachers evaluated tests according to four criteria: relevance, timeliness, usability of data, and affiliated support for data use.

8. Teachers report widespread confusion among students and parents as to whether tests are district or state mandated and why they are important.
**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

**COMPARATIVE FINDINGS**

The comparative findings show differences in standardized testing across the districts in our sample. More detail can be found in the Comparative Findings section of the full report.

1. Districts have **wide autonomy** in how they use testing, resulting in **very different student experiences** across districts.

2. Low-performing districts in our sample **administered more tests** and **spent more time** testing than high-performing districts.

3. Teachers in high-performing districts may **receive more support for data review and analysis**.

4. **1-to-1 technology** did not reduce test completion hours, although it may have reduced testing-related disruptions.

5. Low-performing schools **prioritized test prep over content instruction** for at least 25% of their instructional year.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

School districts, MDE, and the legislature all have a role in improving the use of standardized testing in Mississippi. We identify three broad recommendations followed by specific actions for each of these policymakers. More detail can be found in the Recommendations section of the full report.

1. **Mississippi should increase transparency about testing in public schools.**

2. **Mississippi must put testing back in its appropriate place in education.**

3. **End the overreliance on test prep.**

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2 “FRL percentage” stands for “free and reduced-price lunch percentage,” a measure of poverty using rates of students qualifying for free or reduced-price school lunch. Qualifying students come from homes at or below 185% of federal poverty guidelines.
Districts experience the costs and benefits of testing the most directly of all policymakers. They also have the power to decide how most testing occurs in classrooms.

**TO INCREASE TRANSPARENCY**

- **School districts should publish a table of all their standardized tests, with state testing and district testing clearly delineated.** We do not recommend mandating this table through MDE or the legislature because we hesitate to add an additional legal or regulatory paperwork burden on school districts. Instead, we believe that districts that voluntarily take this step will find that it is a valuable tool for both district strategy planning and parent communication, and well worth the time it takes to construct. Districts can use a variety of formats for this table, but we have suggested one in Appendix D.

- **School districts should host a session on testing at “back-to-school” night, their “parent university,” or other regular parent meeting.** Most districts have long-established events for explaining school policies to parents, but many do not use these opportunities to discuss testing with parents. Mannequin began talking about testing in its parent university and found that parent angst over testing improved after parents had better knowledge about what tests measure and how they are used.

**TO PUT TESTING IN ITS APPROPRIATE PLACE**

- **Support teacher review of state testing data through formalized planning procedures in the new school year.** Teachers’ biggest gripe about state testing is that the data are not helpful in improving instruction, since most teachers get new students year-to-year and end-of-year results do not help teachers improve learning for students they no longer teach. If teachers cannot use the data to remediate the students who took the test, teachers’ next best use of the data would be to inform their planning for teaching the same objectives to new students. Some teachers do a deep analysis of their prior-year data in the week before school starts, which is generally all the time they have for this task. Many teachers, though, find last year’s test data too overwhelming to analyze beyond a cursory review, due to the hustle to get everything in order for a new year. With a little organization, districts can make state test data useful to teachers in their instructional planning by taking some of the legwork out of analysis, scheduling mandatory review time, and facilitating data conversations. A good model for this in our sample was Hillside’s: teachers found one-on-one data meetings with coaches to review end-of-year results valuable even though they no longer taught the same students. Districts can also provide students’ new teachers with detailed reports of their prior-year test scores as a diagnostic aid.

- **Conduct an audit of all standardized testing occurring throughout the district to collect information on the types of tests administered, how much time they require, and the purposes they serve.** Achieve, a nonprofit organization dedicated to working with states to improve assessments, provides a free tool for districts to conduct comprehensive testing audits. After the audit, administrators should work with teachers to determine the minimum testing necessary to serve essential instructional and accountability purposes. Administrators and teachers should ensure that every standardized test retained is high quality and supported by structures and routines so that assessment results can be used to help students.

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3 For more information about Achieve, visit their website at www.achieve.org.
**Increase support for rigorous teacher-created tests.** District staff can take a strong role in facilitating quality teacher-created tests that accurately and consistently track progress, thus eliminating the need for additional tests. Ongoing workshops and coaching on quality assessment practices would increase teacher skill for every formal assessment a teacher creates and administers. The district should also be mindful of how teachers of different experience levels need more or less support. Several teachers requested help in writing tests more aligned to state tests in format and rigor. One of the teachers interviewed for this project stated that as a newer teacher, she appreciated being given quality test questions from the district assessment because she does not have years of assessments to select questions from and needs examples of good tests. More experienced teachers may simply need to have their test questions reviewed for rigor and/or alignment.

**Only administer a test if there is a clear plan for using the data.** A district-mandated test should always support instructional decision-making. Districts assume that if a test is mandated, teachers will make use of the data without further action on the part of the district, but our research shows this is often a faulty assumption. Teachers in every district we sampled relied upon the district to organize data meetings and lead data discussions. Even with sophisticated data reports from vendor-created assessments, teachers still sought one-on-one and group data meetings in which they could make sense of all the data they receive. Due to the amount of data they are receiving from multiple assessments, teachers sometimes needed help prioritizing what they should focus on. Teachers in high-performing districts may be more likely to receive this type of support, but these teachers asked for more support anyway. Teachers in low-performing districts in our sample also sought this help and appeared less likely to receive it, a huge opportunity for improvement.

**Rewrite pacing guides to protect instructional time.** As part of their annual process to review and revise pacing guides, districts should pay special attention to how their pacing guides balance learning new content with review and remediation. Districts with pacing guides that end after three nine weeks should give teachers and students more time to learn content well on the front end. We suggest that districts begin revising pacing guides in ELA and math in grades 3-8 before moving to pacing guides in other grades and subjects.

**Adopt district policies to protect instructional time.** District leaders, including the school board, are in the best position to prevent test prep from overwhelming school calendars. District policies governing pacing guides, review sessions, length of the school day and year, and district nine-weeks testing, to name a few, can deeply affect how much instructional time students receive. Districts should review their current policies to see which ones may be adversely impacting instructional time and make adjustments. They should also determine whether they need new policies to clarify expectations for teachers and administrators in relation to instructional time.
MDE often receives the brunt of criticism about testing, but its role in improving testing is mostly a supporting one. MDE should focus its efforts on helping stakeholders, particularly parents, teachers, and school district leaders, better understand and utilize testing for its intended purpose—gauging student progress.

**TO INCREASE TRANSPARENCY**

- **MDE should create an easily accessible parent testing guide about state tests for use on its website and for distribution to districts.** Currently, state testing information on MDE’s website is geared toward school districts rather than parents. There are specific parent guides for MAP, but these provide general information rather than testing times per grade. The parent guide we propose can be very short—a summary telling parents what to expect at each grade level and a table of testing times. MDE has recently produced a number of high-quality guides for stakeholder audiences, so this guide would be in line with that strategy.

**TO PUT TESTING IN ITS APPROPRIATE PLACE**

- **Press state test vendors on shortening turnaround time between test completion and score reporting.** Teachers expressed two desires for state testing that have historically been in tension: they want state tests administered as close to the end of the year as possible while at the same time wanting the results before they move on to the next school year. For 2017-2018, the state testing window is from mid-April to mid-May, and state test results are not expected until July. Teachers have usually left for the year by the beginning of June and do not return until the beginning of August. This leaves little time for teachers to analyze state test data before they must begin teaching a new set of students. Ideally, all state tests would have the same turnaround time as the MKAS², so that teachers could review data with their administration prior to leaving for the summer.

- **Consider test completion time when making state test decisions.** PARCC had an ambitious goal—design high-quality, “next generation” standardized tests measuring new state standards across dozens of states. As part of this next generation plan, PARCC prominently featured performance-based tasks completed during a separate test administration. While performance tasks are now the norm nationwide, the separate administration doubled not only the number of parts to the state assessment but also the time that students spent testing. Teachers we interviewed believe the additional time outweighed the value of the new information tested, a lesson to keep in mind for future testing decisions.

- **Over communicate big changes to the state testing program directly to teachers, and slowly implement those changes whenever possible.** Teachers repeatedly commented that the rapid change from MCT2 to PARCC to MAP (now MAAP!) was almost too much to bear. Having three tests in three years was no one’s optimal scenario, including MDE, which got stuck in the unenviable position of having to scramble for a new test after the PARCC contract was delayed during the test’s planned second year. From an educational perspective, teachers in our sample understood the need to replace the MCT2, not only because the standards changed but also because the MCT2 was not a good indicator of student knowledge. Nonetheless, PARCC ushered in several changes all at once, including testing entirely online, a performance-based assessment separate from the end-of-year test, new question types, and enhanced rigor. Because PARCC itself was new, the state did not have enough lead time to fully communicate the impact of all of these changes to teachers. Teachers felt that their own lack of knowledge about the test meant that they could not adequately prepare their...
students for all of the changes. After testing, the long delay in receiving the data made teachers feel like all of the frustration and anxiety did not even have a good purpose. Teachers were happy to see PARCC go, but they felt similar uncertainty and frustration about MAP. The circumstances leading to the rapid succession of state tests will hopefully not arise again any time soon, but one takeaway is that MDE could reduce feelings of anxiety caused during the roll-out of new tests by overcommunicating directly to teachers, especially by disseminating sample test items demonstrating the changes as early as possible. MDE should also slowly transition through major test upgrades, if at all possible.

**Build technical assistance capacity to help districts audit and redesign their testing practices.**

The school districts that we audited had never had a third party examine their testing practices to recommend improvements. What we found is that their testing practices had evolved over time, generally without specific strategic conversations as to why the district was employing certain tests or methods. In some cases, school-level administrators or even grade-level chairs had autonomy to choose assessment products, leading to an incoherent system districtwide that changed as personnel in decision-making roles changed, rather than by strategic design. This incoherence was especially acute in the lower-rated districts we studied. In these circumstances, both students and teachers experience testing as more of a burden than a help. MDE is well positioned to support districts in rethinking their testing programs and improving their effectiveness.

**Apply for funds through the State Assessment Grant Program to conduct testing audits, if and when such funds become available.** Under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), the U.S. Department of Education (Ed) has the ability to earmark funds from the State Assessment Grant Program for testing audits. If Ed chooses to do this, state grants would be up to $1.5 million, with at least 20% directed to districts. Thus far, the feds have not chosen to make these grants available.4 In the meantime, states can re-allocate funds they already receive by formula from the State Assessment Grant Program for this purpose.

**Encourage teacher and administer preparation programs to develop and implement courses on understanding, designing, developing, and analyzing assessments.** Far and away, teachers preferred their own tests for tracking student mastery of learning standards. From the perspective of teachers, their own tests were the most relevant and even the most rigorous. In a perfect world, teacher-created assessments—whether created jointly by grade-level teams or by individual teachers—would be all schools and districts need to evaluate student progress. In reality, teachers have varying levels of knowledge and skill in developing tests and analyzing results. This can lead to a muddied picture of student learning from classroom to classroom.

Research from the National Council on Teacher Quality shows that despite the heavy importance of data and assessment in modern education, teachers receive little to no instruction in teacher prep programs on how to develop a quality assessment or how to analyze data from one.5 The logical conclusion is that any knowledge teachers have of how to write or use a rigorous, valid, and beneficial test comes from professional development teachers receive while in service. It makes far more sense to strengthen teacher assessment skills during teacher preparation, rather than relying on districts to fill in this knowledge.

**Publish model pacing guides for all grade levels, beginning with grades 3-8.** Adults often learn best by seeing examples of effective practices. While MDE could invest staff resources in developing model pacing guides, we believe it may be more efficient to collect and publish exemplary pacing guides from high-performing school districts. MDE could also create a database of pacing guides that correspond to curricula in use by Mississippi districts so that districts using the same math curricula in fourth grade, for instance, could compare pacing guides and adjust when another district has a better model.

**Provide technical assistance to districts in rewriting pacing guides.** Even if districts adopt new, exemplary pacing guides created by their high-performing peers, the instructional planning skills required to develop pacing guides are necessary to every district. Districts with unique curricula in some or all subjects will also need support if there is no matching exemplary pacing guide.

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Legislators play a unique role in the education policy landscape. They can make change not only by passing legislation, but also by investigating problems and educating the public about issues. Legislators are most helpful to educators when they play to their strengths by focusing on setting broad policy goals and providing the resources to achieve those goals, rather than veering into functions best left to an executive agency or a school district.

**To Increase Transparency**

- **Avoid adding to the confusion with overblown rhetoric about testing.** Politics often does not lend itself to measured commentary on complex and arcane topics like testing. Nonetheless, legislators can create more public understanding by avoiding blanket statements about testing that no one has yet proven.

- **Investigate testing practices in the districts that they represent.** Knowing about the unique practices of each school district will give legislators context for parental or educator complaints and may suggest local solutions that can be more effective than broad or blunt state policy changes. After carefully examining each districts’ data in this study, we recommended different solutions to each. For Sunset, for example, we recommended reducing the length of each district benchmark test. If we had suggested a state policy requiring every district to reduce nine-weeks testing time, however, we would not have solved Overton’s biggest problem, which was having duplicative progress-monitoring tests in every grade. Legislators should understand the nuance of the testing issue through concrete examples in order to make effective policy.

**To Put Testing in its Appropriate Place**

- **Leave vendor testing decisions to MDE.** For the last few years, at least one legislator has filed a bill each session to dictate the vendor for state testing. The 2018 efforts by Representative Tom Miles and Representative Gary Chism died on committee day without a hearing. Although both bills were widely characterized as replacing only the four high school subject-area tests with the ACT college entrance exam, Rep. Miles’s bill would have also replaced ELA and math state tests in grades 3-8 with the ACT Aspire products. In February 2017, the U.S. Department of Education questioned whether Alabama, one of three states in the country which used ACT Aspire for state testing, could show that the ACT Aspire aligned to Alabama’s state standards, which are very similar to Mississippi’s.6 Alabama voted to end its ACT Aspire contract in June 2017, citing problems with ACT Aspire as a vendor.7 Currently, Arkansas and Wisconsin are the only states using ACT Aspire for accountability. Both states use the test for grades 3-10, but neither state has yet passed peer review for its use of the ACT Aspire.

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The ACT college entrance exam has also not yet been approved through peer review for primary accountability use in any state. In early 2017, the U.S. Department of Education questioned whether the ACT college entrance exam was aligned to high school standards in Wisconsin and Wyoming.8 Both Wisconsin and Wyoming have similar ELA and math standards to Mississippi’s. National alignment studies show clear problems with using the ACT in this way.9 For example, January 2018 research comparing the ACT and Florida’s state standards, which are also similar to Mississippi’s, revealed that the ACT was not well aligned.10 If Mississippi were to adopt the ACT as its high school exam or if Mississippi were to allow districts the flexibility to choose ACT as the exam, Mississippi would have to produce independent technical documents demonstrating ACT’s alignment to our state standards and its suitability for use as an accountability test.11 While no state has been approved to use the ACT for accountability, North Dakota applied for a waiver of the peer review process in February 2018 in order to allow districts to choose ACT over North Dakota’s high school exam this year. That waiver was granted on March 5, 2018, but North Dakota must complete peer review prior to 2019 in order to continue this practice.12 Even if North Dakota successfully completes peer review, it is no guarantee that Mississippi will.

Not only did Rep. Chism’s bill replace current high school tests with the ACT, it also explicitly made a minimum score on the ACT a requirement for graduation. Setting and requiring a cut-score on a college-readiness exam as a basis for high school graduation when not all students intend to pursue college is inherently problematic. ACT has further stated that its exam is not intended for use as a high school exit exam.13 A more appropriate use of the ACT is how Mississippi is using it now—to demonstrate college readiness.

Lastly, the issue of adopting a test via legislation is problematic beyond whether or not the ACT or ACT Aspire are specifically appropriate. Legislators are often not in the best position to understand and weigh all of the complex factors that must be part of the decision about which test to adopt. With the ACT, for example, there are a number of key technical issues to consider, including the ACT’s inability to differentiate among student scores lower than a 12 and its challenges with testing children with disabilities who require accommodations. Furthermore, sole-source contracting via legislation opens a lot of ethical questions. Contracting via a request for proposals is a job best left to a state agency like MDE, with appropriate oversight.

Appropriate funds allowing MDE to help districts audit and redesign their testing practices. MDE is frequently called upon to assume new duties or re-prioritize their work based on changing conditions, but these requests rarely come with the resources to support the new work. While MDE can likely re-allocate some funding to support this technical assistance, the legislature should boost MDE’s budget for this purpose to prevent the Department from having to reduce its effectiveness in another area.

Create a taskforce to study inequities in access to instructional time across districts. Districts engaged in over-testing or long test-prep periods rob their students of instructional time best dedicated to learning new material in the first place. It is not at all clear to us from this research that regulating testing time as Rep. Guice sought to do in his 2017 bill would be the best solution, as the appropriate amount of time for testing is context dependent. We recommend that the legislature convene a blue-ribbon panel to determine the scope and causes of the problem before settling on a solution.

Learn More

The executive summary and full report can also be found online at [mississippifirst.org](http://mississippifirst.org). Mississippi First is a non-partisan, non-profit that champions transformative policy solutions ensuring educational excellence for every Mississippi child.