



# WHAT DISTRICTS CAN DO

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.<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>1</sup>For more information about Achieve, visit their website at [www.achieve.org](http://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.

## TO END THE OVERRELIANCE ON TEST PREP

✓ **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.