



For the Success of Each Learner

Educational Leadership

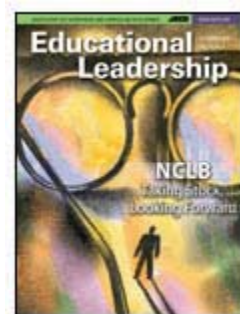
November 2006 | Volume 64 | Number 3

NCLB: Taking Stock, Looking Forward Pages 43-46

What Are NCLB's Instructional Costs?

Michael B. Zellmer, Anthony Frontier and Denise Pheifer

A survey conducted by Wisconsin ASCD finds that testing mandates have forced schools to divert resources away from teaching and learning.



November 2006

How do the testing mandates of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) affect schools and students? Last November, while bipartisan politics and philosophical debates continued, 435,000 Wisconsin students sat down for an average of six and one-half hours each and took the expanded Wisconsin Knowledge and Concepts Exam (WKCE) required for NCLB accountability. As the dialogue about the 2007 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) unfolds this fall in the United States, it is imperative that we look beyond the rhetoric and consider the effect of NCLB testing on students and schools.

Then and Now

In the last few years, Wisconsin has expanded its state testing to comply with NCLB. WKCE reading and mathematics tests, formerly administered to students in grades 4, 8, and 10, are now given in grades 3, 5, 6, and 7 as well. In all, these assessments require 4.75 to 8.66 hours of administration time annually for each student. In 2004–2005, Wisconsin students spent a total of about 1.4 million hours taking state tests; with full implementation of NCLB testing, that number will more than double, to 2.9 million. These figures do not include the time spent distributing and collecting materials, taking practice tests, giving instructions, and addressing other logistics of testing.

What does this testing really cost, not only in terms of money but also in terms of time (instructional time, staff time, and administrative time) and human resources (teachers, administrators, guidance counselors, specialists, and substitutes)? What is the cumulative cost to students? How do the numbers differ for subgroups, such as English language learners and students in special education?

Wisconsin ASCD, in the spirit of its mission to strengthen leadership and teaching for learning, decided to conduct a statewide survey to quantify the instructional costs of expanded NCLB testing and to capture the perceptions of education leaders who facilitate the administration of these tests in school districts across the state.

After the 2005–2006 testing window closed, Wisconsin ASCD sent an electronic survey to an administrator in each school district in the state.¹ The survey consisted of several components: general demographic information about the school district, information about NCLB effects on such factors as allocation of staff time, and an open-response section asking for comments on NCLB and WKCE testing. Over 40 percent of the school districts in the state responded to the

survey (171 of 426 districts), representing about 249,150 students—approximately 29 percent of Wisconsin's public school students.

Opportunity Costs

To borrow a term from the world of economics, the *opportunity costs* related to instructional and staff time refer to what schools might have accomplished with this time were it not devoted to testing. We categorized these testing costs into three areas: preparation, test administration, and loss of services and instructional time.

Logistical Preparation

The logistics of testing require a broad range of efforts from school staff. Pallets of testing boxes arrive in districts in mid-October. Before testing, data labels generated by the state must be verified for accuracy and affixed to individual test booklets. Booklets, which include three versions of the test at each grade level, must be placed in secure locations before and after each round of testing. After testing is completed, each school has to collect booklets, pack them, and ship them off for scoring.

The survey responses indicated that this process requires the efforts of the entire staff. Among districts reporting for each staffing group, secretaries spent a per-district average of 91 hours preparing labels and distributing and managing test booklets. Guidance counselors spent a per-district average of 92 hours preparing schedules and managing logistics.

Test Administration

Paraprofessionals spent a per-district average of 102 hours engaged in duties ranging from facilitating small groups of test takers to assisting teachers with whole-class testing. Teachers spent a per-district average of 976 hours administering the tests. Administrators spent a per-district average of 62 hours engaged in a variety of testing-related tasks. Some schools had to modify schedules and readjust staffing needs for several days.

In some districts, test administration required substitute teachers to proctor tests or supervise the classrooms of teachers who were engaged in other testing tasks. In fact, across all districts in the sample, 1,021 substitute teachers facilitated testing or supervised students. The data also revealed that guidance counselors spent a greater percentage of their time facilitating the testing process than any other group, suggesting a marked loss of guidance services because of these professionals' responsibilities in the testing process.

Specialists were also needed to provide accommodations and modifications for students in special education and English language learners. To ensure valid scores for these students, various accommodations and modifications are allowed, such as expanded testing time, reading test items aloud to students, and hand-entering student responses in test booklets. Special education teachers expressed concern about the challenge of administering so many different tests simultaneously.

Loss of Services

If special education teachers are testing, they are not teaching. Some schools reported that disadvantaged student populations experienced as many as 15 days—three weeks—of disrupted instructional services because the specialists were involved in test administration. Across a student's 12-year span in a district, that could result in as many as 36 weeks, or a full year, of disrupted services for the disadvantaged students who are at the greatest risk of not meeting NCLB objectives. Figure 1 shows the average days of instruction lost for different subgroups of disadvantaged students in the responding districts.

Figure 1. Average Days of Instruction Disrupted by Testing for

Disadvantaged Students

	Elementary	Middle School	High School
Special Education Students	8.5	7.7	6.3
Title I Students	8.6	7.9	6.1
English Language Learners	7.4	7.4	7.4

Survey respondents were given the opportunity to list positive or negative unintended consequences of NCLB testing. Seventy-three percent of the responses were negative, and of these, the largest number (34 percent) were directly related to the disruption of education services. One survey respondent summarized his thoughts:

One huge consequence is that the testing shifts the focus, for at least a month, from learning to testing. This plays out in many ways from the time actually spent testing to loss of guidance and reading specialist support to loss of administrative support.

— Another wrote,

There is far too much time taken away from classrooms where students and teachers are working to meet the goals of IEPs, and from ELL, Title I, and other remedial support services.

Loss of Instructional Time

In a separate open-ended question about the most serious implementation challenges of NCLB testing requirements, the largest percentage of responses (34 percent) were again related to the loss of instructional time and the time it took to administer the tests (for example, "time off from learning," "all programming stops," "disruption to educational flow," "staff not being able to teach their regular program"). One respondent wrote,

The intrusion on classroom time and continuity of instruction cannot be underscored enough. Our teachers and students suffered significant disruption to the important jobs of teaching and learning.

The loss of instructional time was also mentioned in responses to an open-ended question about which requirements of NCLB, if any, should be changed. Forty-two percent of the responses recommended shortening or eliminating large-scale testing. These responses were often accompanied by suggested alternatives, such as "have local measures," "change testing to every other year," and "consider testing reading in grades 3, 5, 7, 9 and math in grades 4, 6, 8, and 10 to make smaller chunks of testing."

Direct Fiscal Costs

In addition to the opportunity costs, the survey results shed light on the direct fiscal costs of mandatory NCLB testing. In the responding districts, administration of Wisconsin's state tests cost an average of \$33.91 per student.² Extrapolating this average cost per pupil across the

435,000 students who took the tests statewide, we can estimate that Wisconsin public schools allocated a total of more than \$14,700,000 for WKCE testing in 2005–2006.³ This number does not include dollars spent by the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction for development, publication, shipment to and from schools, scoring services, and reporting of student results.

Further, the open-ended survey responses documented respondents' concern about costs. In response to the question about unintended consequences of NCLB testing, 9 percent of the comments were related to fiscal costs. In response to the question about serious implementation challenges, 7 percent of the comments cited costs. For example, comments included, "Federal dollars for supporting teaching and learning are being diverted to pay for testing," and "Unfunded mandates in difficult budget times expect schools to do more with less." The fact that two different questions elicited comments about finances supports the conclusion that financial costs are a real concern.

Curriculum Narrowing

Eighteen percent of the comments about unintended negative consequences of NCLB testing were related to a narrowing of the curriculum. The following examples capture the flavor of these comments:

The downside is the loss of higher-level instruction related to the limited exposure to higher-level thinking skills. The test is a demotivator for quality of instruction, especially for differentiation of instruction.

Math and reading are important, but are not the only things that we want our students to get out of school. I am afraid that what gets tested may become what gets taught. What about the arts and other skills that cannot be tested?

Positive Effects of NCLB

In the open-ended survey question that asked respondents to list either positive or negative unintended consequences of NCLB testing, only 27 percent of the responses were positive. Another question, however, directly asked, "What benefits have occurred in your district because of NCLB testing?" In response to this question, 17 percent of respondents maintained that they saw no benefits or few benefits. Thirty-six percent of the respondents, however, cited the useful data provided by testing (for example, "We are working harder at analyzing data to measure student success"). Another 21 percent mentioned an increased focus on standards (for example, "I have to admit we have taken a closer look at the standards, on when and how much they are taught"). A third large group, 20 percent, gave answers related to increased awareness of NCLB subgroups (for example, "Closer scrutiny of the gap between students with disabilities and regular education students").

As we head toward the re-authorization of ESEA in 2007, it is vital that the U.S. Department of Education and federal legislators find ways to preserve these positive aspects of the legislation while addressing the concerns and eliminating the negative consequences.

Suggested Revisions to NCLB

The final open-ended question in the survey asked, "Which testing requirements of NCLB, if any, would you change, and why?" Given the other data and responses, it is not surprising that the most common response (42 percent) was to shorten, eliminate, or revise the large-scale tests. Smaller percentages of responses mentioned using a growth formula or value-added system, allowing multiple measures to show student progress, or relaxing sanctions.

Redirecting the Reauthorization

The Wisconsin ASCD survey results provide documentation to support what many educators

already know. The responses to the survey show that the very resources that are central to the ideals of NCLB—instructional time, staff time, and fiscal resources allocated to improve student achievement—have been diverted away from teaching and learning and have been reinvested in test preparation, administration, and reporting.

From the portrait painted by this look at the effect of NCLB testing, the necessary conversations about improving the legislation become possible. Recognizing that the survey is only part of a picture of education in the United States, it is important to use this documentation along with research on the broader impact of NCLB so that the education community can advise the U.S. Department of Education and federal legislators about meaningful revisions for the 2007 reauthorization.

Wisconsin ASCD plans to conduct a followup survey in fall 2006, and, in collaboration with other organizations, to use the combined results to provide solid recommendations to improve federally mandated testing and other aspects of NCLB implementation for the benefit of all students.

Endnotes

¹ A list of school district representatives who would receive the survey was developed by first identifying Wisconsin ASCD members in each district (Director of Curriculum and Instruction, Superintendent, or Principal). If a district did not have a Wisconsin ASCD member in any of those positions, the survey was sent to the Director of Curriculum and Instruction or the Superintendent. The invitation to participate in the survey asked the recipient to complete the survey or pass it on to the appropriate person in the school district.

² For the 83 districts including salary data and hours-per-employee-group data. The figures represent both the cost of redirecting teacher, administrative, and support staff away from normal duties and additional monies spent on substitutes, extra-duty pay for teachers, and secretarial overtime.

³ The 95 percent confidence interval for average per-pupil outlay shows that the actual cost for this sample could be as low as \$29 per pupil or as high as \$38.80 per pupil, making the total cost statewide as low as about \$12,500,000 or as high as about \$17,000,200.

Michael B. Zellmer is Instructional Administrator for the Franklin Public Schools, 8255 W. Forest Hill Ave., Franklin, WI 53136 and Immediate Past President of Wisconsin ASCD; 414-529-8224, ext. 400; zellmerm@franklin.k12.wi.us. **Anthony Frontier** is Director of Curriculum and Instruction for the School District of Whitefish Bay, 1200 E. Fairmount Ave., Whitefish Bay, WI 53217; 414-963-3927; tfron.do.wfb@wfbschools.com. **Denise Pheifer** is the Executive Director of Wisconsin ASCD; denise@wascd.org; www.wascd.org; 262-242-3771.

Copyright © 2006 by Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development

© Copyright ASCD. All rights reserved.