The Future of K-12 Education Data Design Challenge

Proposal: How to Speed Up State Test Results—and Why It Matters
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Pop quiz: Which of the following best describes the main purpose behind the federal requirement that states test all students in reading and math in grades 3-8 and once in high school?

A. The main purpose is for transparency, to inform the general public about school and district performance.

B. The main purpose is for accountability, to identify lower-performing schools that need extra support and interventions.

C. The main purpose is to provide actionable data to educators, so they can modify their instructional practices or target specific students for interventions.

D. The main purpose is to provide objective data to parents, so they can understand their child's performance against a common standard of measurement.

If asked this question, many state and federal policymakers might insist on adding an option "E" for all of the above. Unfortunately, the timeline for when states actually release their test results makes it hard for end users to act on the data (options "C" and "D" above). Only a few states process and release the results from their spring assessment windows in advance of the start of the following school year. That misses the crucial summer window, when teachers and educators have time to review the data and adjust their practices, and when parents have time to make other decisions about their child's education.

The slow release of the results contributes to a negative feedback cycle. If parents and educators don't receive the results from the state tests in time to make decisions, they're less likely to trust them. If parents and educators don't trust the data from the tests, that leaves accountability and vaguely defined public transparency purposes as the only remaining purposes. In turn, viewing the tests as solely about external accountability breeds further distrust and leads school districts to layer on other, more timely testing solutions.

In this proposal, I'm going to argue that Congress needs to break this cycle. It should require states to send *preliminary* score reports back to families and teachers within, say, two weeks of the close of the spring testing window. States could take longer to confirm the data for an official statewide release for accountability and transparency purposes, but they should prioritize getting the results back quickly into the hands of parents and educators, the two groups of people who are most equipped to use the data to change their decisions and affect student outcomes.

Such a shift would be good policy at any point, but it's especially urgent right now. Due to COVID-19 and the long periods of online learning, today's generation of students are far below where they otherwise would be. NAEP scores, state testing results, and subjective educator evaluations all point in the same direction: Kids are behind, and Black, Hispanic, and low-income students, and English learners and students with disabilities, are even further behind.

Many school district leaders are working to develop interventions to help address these gaps, but their ambitions may not be sufficient to the actual need. Worse, students aren't signing up for the summer school, after-school, or tutoring programs that are being offered. Parents could be receptive audiences and engaged as partners to help boost participation rates, but there's an unhelpful "perception gap" where parents think their kids are doing fine even as educators know that students are mostly behind where they should be.

In theory, state assessment systems should be serving as a helpful ballast against these problems. Even if an individual teacher, school, or districts failed to set high standards for their students, the objective data from state tests should be a helpful—and honest—counterweight. But in order to do that, states need to prioritize the timeliness of the reporting process.

The Problem: State Test Results Are Too Slow

The federal testing requirement has evolved over time. In 1994, the Improving America's Schools Act (IASA) required states to adopt academic achievement standards and test students at least once in elementary, middle, and high school. However, states used a variety of tests, some of which were not aligned to state standards or scored in reference to a pre-determined performance criterion.[1] These tests could provide rankings and relative performance information, such as how a given student compared to his or her peers, but it did not hold all students to the same standards or provide information on the specific content areas on which they might need to improve.

Starting in 2002, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) expanded and clarified the federal testing requirement. Now, states were required to test all students in grades 3-8 and once in high school on content aligned to state standards. There were exceptions carved out for students with the most severe disabilities, but otherwise the law was clear that *all* students should be held to the same standards. At the same time, Congress created new requirements for the results to be reported to the public on annual state "report cards."

Since then, there's been broad public debate over what exactly the tests are for and whether states could scale back the testing mandate. Critics of the federal testing requirement point out that, if the goals are purely for accountability and general

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[1] See: https://www.everycrsreport.com/reports/RL31407.html

transparency purposes, it could be technically feasible to scale back the testing requirement by gathering data from a "sample" of students—as opposed to all students in the specified grades—or even to go back to the IASA approach of testing students only once per grade band.

But in 2015, when Congress reconsidered this question and passed the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), it re-affirmed the existing federal testing requirements. Legislators sided with civil rights advocates who argued at the time that it was important to test *every* student in reading and math on grade-level content. That is, congressional leaders reiterated their answer that state testing systems should be about more than merely providing high-level data for the sake of accountability and public transparency.

So, how are states doing on executing against these goals? Unfortunately, not very well. The tests are typically administered over a multi-week window in April or May. Figure 1 below plots the timing of when states released the results of the 2022 tests to the public. Each dot represents one state and the date they released their results. As a reference point, the chart also includes dotted horizontal lines for the 1st of August and the 1st of September. Although school start dates vary across and within states, these lines are intended as rough proxies for when the following school year starts.

As the graph shows, in 2022 only five states released their results in June or July, well before the new school year started. Another 10 released results in August, just before or right around the start of the new year. Another 35 states and the District of Columbia all released their results in September or later. (That includes two states, Maine and Vermont, which still had not released their results as of early February 2023.)

Figure 1: 2022 State Test Score Release Dates
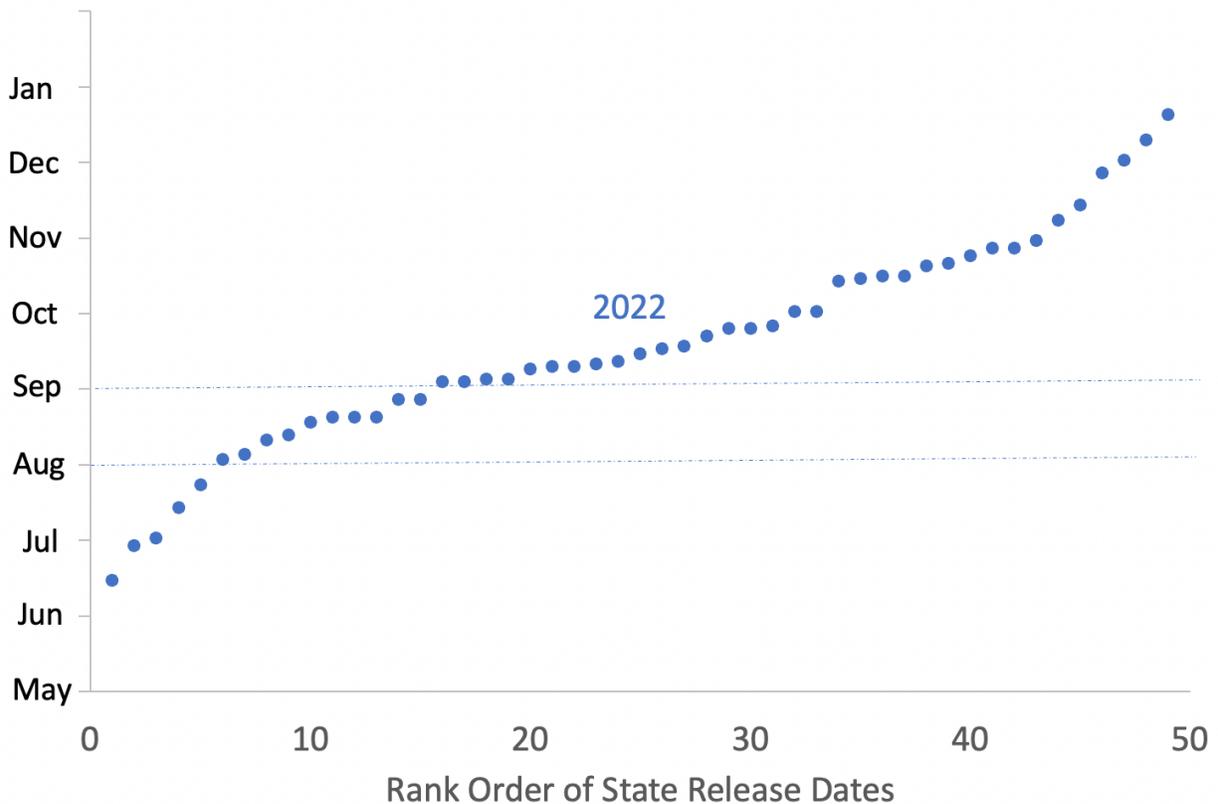
Source: 2022 data comes from the author's scan of state department of education websites.

These data reflect the date on which states released their official results to the public. Although it's not measured here, a handful of states also share preliminary data with parents and educators in advance of the official public release. However, that's far from standard practice.

While we can't easily put numbers around it, the process by which states release their results has one other major flaw. Namely, states typically rely on districts to share each student's scores with school leaders and teachers and, eventually, with parents. All those touchpoints add time between the taking of the test and the delivery of the results, and they put educators in the role of explaining the state test results to parents.

Having educators deliver the results makes sense on one level, because parents trust teachers and principals as reliable sources of information and partners in their child's education. But it can put classroom teachers in the awkward role of having to explain the state's test results. Teachers might downplay or dilute the message that the test is intended to deliver, especially if the state testing system is meant as an objective check on local grading practices. It would be faster, and send a clearer signal, if the state sent the test results directly back to parents.

It's possible the 2022 testing administration was an aberration. After all, the U.S. Department of Education waived the annual testing requirement in the spring of 2020 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and it allowed states to shorten or modify their tests as needed in 2021. 2022 was the first return to a more normal testing year.

But states have never been particularly speedy at getting their results out. Figure 2 below shows the same blue dots representing the 2022 testing results, plus orange dots representing the respective figures for 2006, one of the early years under NCLB. As the graph shows, even in 2006 many states were releasing their test scores right around back-to-school time. While some states are faster or slower to release their data in certain years, as a country we've gotten worse. Combined, these results suggest that states are failing to giving parents and educators the summer to act on the data.

Figure 2: State Test Score Release Dates, 2006 versus 2022
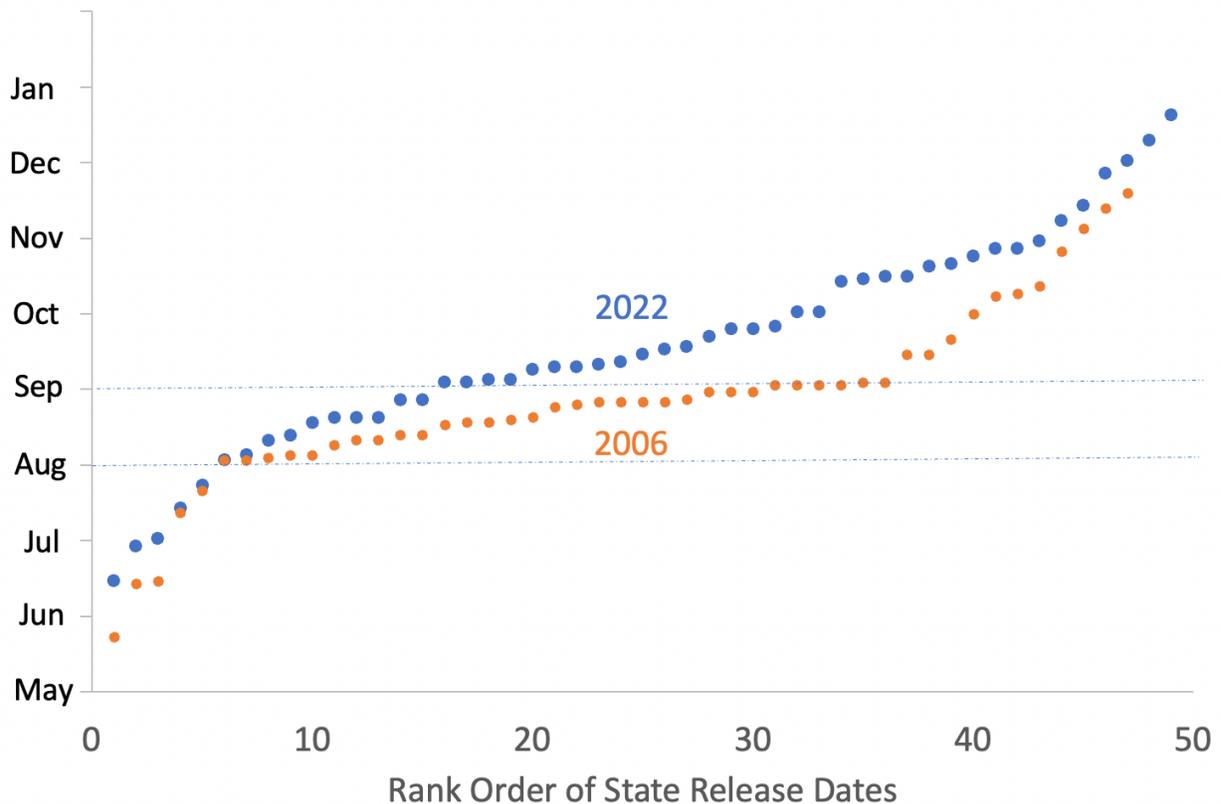
Source: 2022 data comes from the author's scan of state department of education websites. 2006 data comes from Manna, Paul. "NCLB in the states: Fragmented governance, uneven implementation." No Remedy Left Behind: Lessons from a Half-Decade of NCLB, *edited by Frederick M. Hess and Chester E. Finn, Jr., 2007, AEI Press, pp. 17-42.*

Why aren't states releasing their results faster? States have been administering annual tests for two decades, and the tests themselves are now routinely taken on computers. It should be easier—not harder—to process the data when students take the tests on computers than when most students were taking them with paper and pencil.

This suggests the delays are mostly a function of political processes, not technical ones. NWEA, the makers of the MAP Growth interim assessments, provides results to schools within 24 hours after a student completes a test.[2] Students who take the ACT[3], SAT[4], GRE[5], and AP[6] tests can all expect their results online within about two weeks. These are for the easy-to-score multiple choice components of the tests, but the makers of the ACT and SAT tests warn that results may take another few days or up to two weeks to score written test items. In contrast to the state tests, which typically have no stakes attached to them for individual students[7], these examples are all vetted results that have high-stakes for students—they are quickly forwarded on to colleges and universities making admissions decisions.

What's different is that these tests are sold on the private market and must be responsive to end users. In contrast, states have configured their testing systems toward providing precise and accurate data at the expense of timely and actionable information to parents and educators. The federal government does not help in this regard. Congress imposed a long list of data points that must be included and disaggregated on school report cards, but it is silent about how fast the results must be relayed to parents, teachers, or the public.

The U.S. Department of Education has layered on its own technical specifications for state tests. Its most recent assessment peer review process focused much more heavily on technical concerns around the test itself than it did on timeliness and usability of the results. For example, that process included a single question on reporting and asked for states to provide evidence of a, "timeline that shows results are reported to districts, schools, and teachers in time to allow for the use of the results in planning for the following school year."[8] However, the same process evaluated state tests on 29 other "critical elements" related to the test itself and the processes by which the tests are administered and monitored. Taken as a whole, the peer review process nudges states to adopt more technically complex tests at the expense of simplicity and speed.

In short, we need a new thumb on the scale to make the federal tests timely and actionable for the intended users.

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[2] See:
https://teach.mapnwea.org/impl/maphelp/Content/StateTAM/NYC_AfterTesting.htm#:~:text=MAP%20Growth%20assessments%20are%20scored,a%20student%20completes%20a%20test.

[3] See: https://www.act.org/content/act/en/products-and-services/the-act/scores.html#:~:text=ACT%20Customer%20Support%20cannot%20provide,take%20up%20to%20eight%20weeks.&text=your%20multiple%2Dchoice%20scores.

[4] See: https://blog.collegeboard.org/when-do-sat-scores-come-out

[5] See: https://www.ets.org/gre/test-takers/general-test/scores/get-scores.html#:~:text=Your%20official%20GRE%20General%20Test,days%20after%20your%20test%20date.

[6] See: https://apstudents.collegeboard.org/faqs/when-will-my-colleges-receive-my-scores#:~:text=Standard%3A%20Your%20scores%20will%20be,location%20of%20your%20score%20recipient.

[7] Exceptions include states with 3rd grade reading retention policies or high school graduation exams, but timeliness is even more important for those students.

[8] See: https://www2.ed.gov/admins/lead/account/saa/assessmentpeerreview.pdf

The Solution: Require States to Release Preliminary Results to Parents and Educators Within 2 Weeks

Congress should amend the federal testing rule to require states to send *preliminary* results to parents and educators within two weeks of the test's administration. A two-week window for preliminary results falls well in line with the standards in the private sector. States could take more time to produce vetted results for state report cards and accountability purposes, but the preliminary results would provide actionable information to the people in the best positions to act on the results. As mentioned above, some states already choose to send score reports back to parents and educators earlier than the public release, but a quick return of results should be the standard operating practice across the country, and that will only happen with congressional action.

Requiring states to take over the distribution of results would also help speed up the reporting process and might change the conversations between families and schools. Educators sometimes struggle to deliver hard news to parents that their son or daughter is not on track academically. Maybe the child is behind in math but behaves well, or the teacher simply prefers to focus on signs of progress. The state test is meant to be a counter-balance in those conversations and alert parents when their child is behind where they need for their age. Making the state responsible for delivering that message improves the odds that the test actually serves that function.

There's a case to be made that even the vetted results should be released much faster than they are today in order to truly capitalize on the value of the tests. After all, the summer is a critical planning period for the next school year. It is hard to expect school or district leaders to write—let alone implement—a meaningful improvement plan after the next school year has already begun.

But this proposal is focused on getting preliminary results back quickly to parents and educators, because they can take immediate actions. If parents had the state test results in hand by mid-May or early June, they might be able to make different decisions for their child for the summer, such as finding a tutor or signing up for summer school. They would also have time to consider alternative schooling options for their son or daughter for the following school year.

Processing the results quickly would also provide teachers and school leaders the time to actually look at and reflect on their students' performance. Given enough lead time, a teacher might be able to change their instructional practices for the following year. A principal might be able to respond to schoolwide challenges, such as problems with early reading skills, or they might consider a student's test score when making classroom assignments for the following year. District leaders might adopt different curricula—and provide staff the time and training to adapt—or change their school-level staffing assignments.

Policymakers and advocates have touted all of these use cases before, but they're impossible to do well with the current slow pace of the results. A key portion of the theory of action behind the federal testing requirement depends on processing the results quickly. State administrators need to be nudged to focus on speed and getting test results back to parents and educators as quickly as possible.