

Knox County Schools Student Assessment Inventory Summary

Introduction

Knox County Schools received a grant from Achieve, Inc. in February, 2015 to conduct a comprehensive review and inventory of the student assessments that are administered across the district. A 27-person steering committee consisting of teachers, counselors, parents, principals, and central office members was formed to facilitate this work. The objective of the exercise was to ensure that every test that students take is required and/or useful in informing instructional decisions. As background, concerns had been voiced by school board members, teachers, and parents regarding the amount of classroom time spent on mandatory assessments, the stress that these tests cause for students and teachers, and the appropriateness of several assessments. Re-examining the assessment landscape was also included in the district's 2014-2019 strategic plan.

The Achieve, Inc. inventory tool catalogs specific details regarding each test (e.g. which students are required to take the test, the entity that requires the assessment, administration time, etc.) and includes the purpose and intended uses of each test. Stakeholder input was collected from teachers, administrators, parents, and students to understand the value of these assessments and to determine whether the tests are actually serving their intended purposes. Additionally, to supplement this data, Knox County Schools used qualitative research techniques to explore the emotional aspects of the testing culture in the district and to uncover the underlying causes for stakeholders' views and feelings.

Description of Project

While ultimately the goal of the assessment inventory was to ensure that the assessments given are either required or useful in informing instructional decisions, the scope of inquiry was broad. Rather than beginning the project with a few targeted questions in mind, the design was to cast a wide net and be open to exploring the topics that emerged from the inventory process. Prior to the committee kickoff, a series of meetings was helpful in gaining input on the desired outcomes of the study. In addition to asking district leaders what their questions were, it was particularly helpful to listen to the district's Teacher Advisory Council's questions and to discuss the inventory tool with the content supervisors in the Curriculum and Instruction department. The suggestions gleaned from these groups formed the foundation for a list of research questions that the district hoped to address as a result of the student assessment inventory process. A draft of this list was shared at the Student Assessment Committee kickoff meeting and then finalized based upon the additional recommendations proposed by that group.

Committee Action Plan

Due to the large size of the committee and the tight timeline for the project, it was necessary to engage the committee quickly in the substance of the work. We had one kickoff meeting to introduce the project, agree on the research questions and research activities, and clarify the roles of individuals on the team. Following the kickoff, we conducted six types of activities in parallel:

1. School Inventory Meetings: The grant development manager led a team of four University of Tennessee interns to conduct in-person school inventory visits with 85 schools during the month of April. The objectives of these interviews were to collect information from school administrators regarding the usefulness of various assessments, understand how assessment results were used in the school, identify optional assessments administered by the school, and

better understand other test-related impacts to the schools such as managing test logistics, computer and library availability, etc. Principals were also asked to comment on the alignment of tests to Tennessee standards and their perceptions regarding TNReady (new online tests that will be implemented in the 15-16 school year).

2. Teacher Focus Groups: Teacher committee members worked as pairs to organize two focus groups per pair, for a total of eight focus groups. (Teachers worked as pairs so that one person could serve as the focus group leader while the other person could take notes.) Immediately following the kickoff meeting, the teachers met to discuss the topics to be covered in the focus groups, brainstorm activities and conversation flow for the groups, and make decisions regarding the focus group logistics (e.g. who to invite, focus group dates, participant incentives, etc.) Following this in-person meeting, the individual pairs of teachers worked together to manage all aspects of their focus groups. As a result, the discussion guides, activities, and resulting presentations varied across the four grade levels (K-2, 3-5, 6-8, 9-12). Approximately eight teachers were invited to participate in each of the two-hour focus groups. Effort was made to select participants who represented a variety of viewpoints; the members included other teachers who had been nominated for the committee by principals (we received many more nominations than the eight available slots), teachers suggested by SPEAK (a group of teachers and parents that had voiced concerns at school board meetings and in the media regarding standardized tests), and colleagues suggested by the focus group leaders themselves.

3. Student Focus Groups/Interviews: The three counselors (elementary, middle, and high school) conducted the student focus groups/interviews. There was a total of six one-hour student focus groups; students from two different high schools and two different middle schools participated. For elementary students, we decided to conduct 10-minute one-on-one interviews

with students instead of focus groups. We met with a dozen students (two per grade level) at two schools for a total of 24 elementary student interviews.

4. Deeper Insight Interviews: The Director of Planning & Improvement led the deeper insight interviews with 9 principals, 9 teachers, and 11 parents. Participants selected pictures that represent their “thoughts and feelings about the assessment landscape at the school” in advance of the interview, and these were used as the basis for a lengthy one-on-one conversation. (Target time was one hour and forty minutes). The objective of this exercise was to deeply understand the emotional aspects of the testing culture and explore why people feel the way they do. Because assessment is a critical component of the teaching and learning process, and because schools are such an important part of the community in general, the breadth of topics initiated by participants during these interviews was wide-ranging. Rather than rely on a pre-set discussion guide or agenda for these interviews, the conversations flowed directly from the pictures and comments made by the participants.

5. Community Forum: A group of central office employees and both parents on the committee worked on the community forum. The format was modeled after previous sessions that the Knox County Schools used to gather community input on the strategic plan. During the forum, all participants assembled in a high school auditorium for a brief introduction and to receive a one-page handout that summarizes the KCS assessment landscape. Next, the crowd broke into distinct groups for discussion in individual classrooms. Ultimately, there ended up being six breakout rooms: Primary, Intermediate, High School, Special Education, English Language Learners, and General. Each room’s discussion was facilitated by a pair of trained volunteers from Leadership Knoxville, and the conversation was focused on what’s working and what’s not working with student assessment in Knox County Schools. All participants then reconvened in

the auditorium for a group share-out where one to two volunteers from each room highlighted the top 3-4 discussion themes.

6. Surveys: Teacher, parent, and student surveys were administered in May 2015 via Survey Monkey. 1,126 teachers responded to the survey, and 2,529 parents responded. Given that approximately seven different surveys were sent to teachers and three different surveys were sent to parents during this same period, these response rates were healthy.

The participation in the student survey was disappointing; only 220 high school students and 11 middle school students participated. Among the high school students, slightly over half of these students attend L&N STEM Academy. As a result, we should consider the student survey results as a directional indication of student response only.

Committee Summit: After these six stakeholder feedback activities were completed, the entire committee reconvened for a two-day summit on June 8-9 to review the results and engage in a robust discussion regarding the implications for the Knox County Schools. Following the summit, a subset of the committee continued to analyze and synthesize the data that was collected.

Summary of Results and Conclusions

Our stated goal for the inventory process was to ensure that the assessments we administer are either required or useful in informing instructional decisions. The assessments that received the lowest scores by teachers for usefulness in informing instructional decisions were those mandated by the state (and therefore required). The local end-of-course high school exams and Honors middle school midterms were the only district-mandated assessments identified by

the inventory process¹, and these were deemed to be somewhat useful or useful. (Data can be viewed in Attachment 1A-B.) Further, these exams did not appear to be “pain points” for stakeholders relative to other assessments within the portfolio. As a result, there was not a recommendation to eliminate any particular district-mandated assessment.

While we were able to collect useful feedback on the state-mandated TCAP and EOC exams, it is important to consider this stakeholder input in a broader context. First, given that these exams are mandated by law, our committee/district is not responsible for the content, format, timing, etc. of these tests; that is the purview of the Tennessee Department of Education. Second, the Reading/Language Arts and Math exams will be replaced by new TNReady assessments in the 2015-2016 school year that are very different than the previous TCAP tests. As we learn more about the new assessments, we are encouraged that many of the changes appear to be steps in the right direction relative to frustrations expressed by Knox County Schools’ stakeholders. Additionally, in parallel with the KCS student assessment inventory process, the Tennessee Department of Education led a separate task force regarding student assessment. A parent member of the KCS committee also served on the state’s task force; this ensured that there was a link between the two committees and that feedback heard in Knox County could influence the outcomes of the state’s effort.

¹ Based upon community feedback, several tests have been streamlined and/or eliminated over the past few years. If middle school students are taking a course that has a state-mandated EOC in math or science (with the exception of physical science), they are waived from the TCAP test. If students take an AP or IB exam in a course that would typically have a state-mandated EOC, they are waived from the EOC. Additionally, these students are exempt from teacher-made finals. Honors middle school finals (that used to be required by the district) have been eliminated. Furthermore, SAT-10 testing in elementary schools was abolished via a Board vote. Progress monitoring benchmark exams, which used to be required by the district, are now optional. As a result of all of these changes, the small number of remaining district-mandated tests in the KCS assessment inventory was a somewhat surprising result.

Beyond the assessment changes that are being led at the state level, we can also take action on the stakeholder feedback at the district level. As we transition to new TNReady assessments we have the opportunity to reflect on whether aspects of these tests that are within the district's control (e.g. how we prepare students for tests, the environment during the test window, how we spend instructional time after testing is complete, how we manage test-related logistics) can be optimized, and to attempt to mitigate factors that contribute to teacher and student stress. Additionally, there is a perception among stakeholders that too much emphasis is placed on standardized test scores, so we can use this insight to influence future communication regarding these tests and our schools' performance. Finally, it became evident that there is a lot of misinformation, misperceptions, and lack of understanding among stakeholders regarding the purpose of tests, the goals of accountability, the teacher evaluation system, and state requirements. The committee has identified the need to increase communication to parents, teachers, and students on these topics. Below is a detailed discussion of eight themes highlighted by the committee, and potential strategies, solutions and recommendations to address the concerns associated with each of these themes:

1. Student test prep:

Several stakeholders described their perception of a 2-3 week window prior to tests where normal instruction stops and a significant amount of time is dedicated to worksheets in an effort to review. Interestingly, teachers, administrators, and parents seem to agree that they do not like this approach because it does not represent authentic learning. The practice of dedicated "test prep" is not uniform across schools; Attachment 2 shows the range of approaches to test preparation reported by the schools. Conversation during the summit focused on the need to provide teachers with examples and resources for how to better integrate review and test prep topics into daily instruction using methods that are engaging for students.

Embedded within this discussion is a desire to estimate how much time teachers are actually spending on “test prep”. Opponents of standardized testing rightly point out that this time is not captured in the test administration times commonly reported by districts, nor is the lost instructional time when students are absent from a teacher’s class because they are taking an exam for a different course. Therefore, the student assessment committee attempted to develop a more inclusive estimate of how much time students/teachers are spending on testing. First, using the Achieve, Inc. inventory spreadsheet, the number of hours students spend on taking required tests was calculated by grade level. For the average student in 3rd through 12th grade, this estimated value ranged from 10-20 hours per year with a mean of 13 hours/year (Attachment 3). This amount represents approximately 0.9%-1.9% of the school year (assuming 6 hours/day for 180 days²). Next, based on estimates from the teacher survey (Attachment 4), the total time spent on high stakes testing (including test preparation and instructional time lost due to students taking exams for other classes) was calculated: 3.5% (based on median response) or 7.3% (based on the mean response) of the school year. Taking the exercise one step further, teachers were also asked to estimate the amount of time spent on other tests that are not high-stakes, such as unit exams, benchmarking assessments, formative assessments, etc. In general, teachers estimated spending 6.9% (median response) to 15.6% (mean response) of the school year on testing, including all high-stakes and non-high stakes testing and test preparation. To put this in perspective, these values were significantly under the proportion that teachers deemed to be an appropriate amount of time spent on assessment: 15% (median response) or 20.7% (mean response).

² Note that this is a conservative estimate since the school day is actually 7 hours long. For the basis of this exercise, we assumed 6 hours to acknowledge that students spend part of the school day in lunch, class change, etc.

The question for schools to ponder is: less than 2% of the school year is fixed by taking mandated tests; how do we want to optimize the remainder of school hours to maximize student learning? Regarding test prep activities, there is consensus that the best way to prepare students for the new exams is to focus on high-quality, standards-based instruction every day.

A caveat is that not all test prep is considered to be bad, especially in the minds of students. Only 26% of students in the survey agreed with the statement that “we spend too much time in class reviewing for tests”, while 53% disagreed. Student performance on state tests are incorporated as a percentage of their final grade, and 55% agreed that “TCAP and EOC tests are more challenging than the unit tests I take during the school year” (with 36% of students disagreeing). It appears that students appreciate some level of review for these tests, and it may be even more desired next year when the rigor of the tests will increase.

2. Test logistics:

The logistical burdens associated with testing are significant, as illustrated by the information collected in the school inventories and teacher surveys. It was eye-opening to see the broad ranges of estimated hours to prepare for various tests. Data collected during the school inventory meetings may be viewed in Attachment 5. One reason for the variability could be due to school size; obviously large high schools serve more students than some of our small elementary schools. To account for this size difference, the data was converted to a statistic reflecting logistical preparation time spent per student. Attachment 6 shows that approximately half of schools report spending less than 5 minutes per student on TCAP/EOC logistics, but some schools report spending more than 20 minutes per student.

We also sought to understand other impacts of testing on the school’s schedule. Some schools use the library or computer labs for testing, making these resources unavailable to other classes.

Based upon semi-quantitative input, an attempt was made to highlight the number of schools that articulated these issues for various tests. The results for the TCAP Writing Assessment are shown in Attachment 7; the Writing Assessment was selected because it is an online test (and may therefore be indicative of challenges that school will experience with TNReady). Note that the schools who communicated that there was “little to no impact” were usually PLE schools that have 1:1 technology in the building. Attachment 8 shows some of the ways that teachers are personally impacted by the modified schedules during test windows. Clearly, the majority of teachers appear to be affected in some way.

Given that the new tests will be administered online, schools that do not have 1:1 technology may need to develop new and/or creative strategies to optimize their test schedules. We need to proactively share best practices on how to plan for and execute TNReady. One source of insights may be our elementary schools, which implemented online STAR testing for the first time last year. Schools frequently reported that after “getting the kinks worked out” in the first round of STAR testing, subsequent rounds went more smoothly.

3. TCAP hoopla:

Another theme emerging from the qualitative interviews is concern that the environment surrounding TCAP tests is artificial and hyped up, which (at minimum) seems unnecessary and may actually contribute to the anxiety of students. Below are a few direct quotes from parents to illustrate this point:

- “We’ve always been tested, but I don’t remember candy, playing in the afternoon of the test, or having a week without homework. Continue with Encore. No TCAP party or teacher skits. Do not ask me to send candy on test day. The wrappers in the backpack are ridiculous! Guidelines and rules don’t apply for TCAP.”
- “The whole week building up to the test, we get notes from school: make sure you get breakfast and a good night’s sleep. The more you talk about sleep ... do you know what happens if I put them to bed early? They also tell kids in the classroom. Kids come home:

'Ms. So-and-so says' By the time the day comes around, every member of the family has heard it multiple times."

- "People want antibiotics at Thanksgiving, Christmas, and now TCAP is on the list. There is so much build up and talk about it (like a dread). What goes through a kid's mind? What is so important about this test that I can't have a runny nose? This is a really big deal." [*Note: This parent works in healthcare.*]
- "Monday night was a frenzy about everything. It was a psychotic moment because nothing else really mattered besides getting ready for this test. But it's not reading through something to make sure you understand, it's this other kind of preparation: the snacks, the pencils, the sleep. It makes them so whacked out."

However, there is an alternative perspective. Some educators conveyed that the test can serve as an important milestone in the learning process, and therefore should be acknowledged as a special event. Below are comments from a principal and a teacher:

- *Principal:* "Finally! The big day is here. Recognize it as an event. Make it a big deal for kids; it's their Super Bowl. They've worked, worked, worked and deserve a final show. I believe firmly that if it is in the culture and processes, kids see it as a finish line. Since it is an event for kids, make the best of it. Monday have a big pep rally – big and bold. You got this! You worked hard. Students leave feeling proud."
- *Teacher:* "It's like practice for a ballgame. Without the test, it is like practicing but never having a competition."

Moving forward, there is an opportunity for school leaders to reflect upon the role of test day in the overall school climate and to re-evaluate whether current practices are contributing to the desired environment and tone.

4. Use of post TCAP/EOC time:

Several parents and teachers expressed frustration that instruction seems to stop in some classrooms during the weeks following the test:

- *Teacher:* "Kids feel like school is over after the test: they believe anything of value must happen prior to the test since it is 25% of grade."

- *Teacher*: “There is emphasis on test, so instruction ends when EOCs are over. Taxpayer dollars are wasted as babysitters. 7 days 1st semester, 7 days 2nd semester. Two weeks wasted, but then people complain about a snow day. It’s problematic; I struggle with that.”
- *Parent*: “It’s done for the rest of the year after TCAP. The teacher stops. School is basically done. It is a waste of 3 weeks to a month of instruction. There is no reading coming home. There is no reading log ... maybe once after the test. No homework; just classroom instruction.”

Given that teachers, administrators, and parents agree that project-based learning is important, the weeks following the state-mandated tests are a prime opportunity to incorporate this type of learning in the classroom. These projects could be assigned a meaningful percentage of the student’s grade to signify their importance.

5. Teacher anxiety:

The images and quotes obtained during the deeper insight interviews were powerful statements of the degree of stress that teachers are experiencing.

- *Teacher*: “If you don’t show growth, hasta la vista. Either the boulder [in this picture] has to break, or he does. I’ve worked with a lot of great teachers who have quit.”
- *Principal*: “This is really impacting teachers’ health. My friend, a physician, sees many teachers who ask for medicine for blood pressure and nerves. They talk about evaluations, students’ scores, and job security. It’s changing, which is impacting teachers’ health.”
- *Parent*: “The teacher starts refreshed and ready, with hope and an expectation for the year to go in a certain way. Then as the year goes on the teacher becomes stressed to the point of being unproductive for the rest of the class.”

This perspective is corroborated by the survey data, which shows that 88.6% of teachers reported moderate to high levels of stress. Interestingly, teachers that receive individual growth scores for evaluation purposes and those that do not both indicated moderate to high stress levels. (Attachment 9).

Teachers and students do experience higher levels of stress in April/May. One suggestion from committee members is to reinforce personal wellness and share stress management strategies with teachers and students as this period approaches.

6. Student stress:

Students care about their grades, and in Tennessee the TCAP or EOC exams account for a significant portion of a student's grade. Performance on the TCAP exams can also influence the placement of students in classes, and some students are motivated to do well because they want to be placed in Honors classes. Our student survey data, though limited in base size, suggests that many students do experience stress during testing.

A concern raised in the qualitative feedback across all stakeholder groups (parents, principals, teachers, and students) is the impact of tying student scores on TCAP and EOC exams to teachers' evaluations. Not only does this produce anxiety among teachers, but the inventory process confirms that the teachers' stress is unintentionally (or in some cases explicitly) imparted to students. This creates an additional level of test-related stress for kids. Below are some of the interview quotes that informed this conclusion:

- *Student:* "I get angry. Half of the tests are not for us. TCAP is really for teachers. They say: 'I'm going to get fired if you don't do well.' 'Kids don't like me, so they don't bubble.' They are the ones that are stressed. We're not stressed until they say, 'This test is 15% of your grade. If you miss two questions, your grades will drop.'"
- *Student:* "Stress comes more from teachers than me. They give a packet with 25 pages just for this [test]."
- *Student:* "TCAP atmosphere: "how important it is" is crazy. Teachers are stressed out."
- *Principal:* "Adults say, 'This is horrible.' Kids are happy in the middle. They don't have adult worries. Quit telling them 'don't take the test'. This would not occur to elementary students. If they don't see us like this, they will be happy. We set the tone as parents, as teachers. Left alone, they'll be fine. This doesn't have to be a negative, all-consuming thing. Just stop it. We have the ability to make it great for kids. We should be celebrating with kids for kids."

- *Parent:* “Kids can pick up on tension. It is palpable around test time. At 16, you know why everyone is on a short fuse. You see more tears; teachers are crying over testing. In 7th or 8th grade teachers talk to kids like they are adults. Kids have heard: ‘It’s ridiculous that we have to teach to the test’; ‘Teacher raises depend on students.’”

It is important to note that many of the comments and examples people gave to explain how student scores are used in the teacher evaluation process were either inaccurate, based upon misconceptions, or not grounded in reality of how the system usually works. As a result, we recommend developing communication tools to help dispel the misinformation. While the committee acknowledges that sharing information alone will not eliminate the anxiety felt by teachers, we hope to reduce it. In some cases teachers are actively worrying about scenarios that are impossible or highly unlikely, and we want to mitigate their fears. Effort spent on reducing teacher stress will likely carry over to students as well.

7. Accountability balance:

There is a perception among some stakeholders that performance on standardized tests is over-emphasized, potentially to the exclusion of other factors. Quantitatively, 75% of parents in the survey agreed that “in general, there is too much emphasis placed on students’ test scores”. We also heard this feedback qualitatively:

- *Teacher:* “Tests are helpful as a pulse check; harmful when it is used as sole assessment. It doesn’t capture all of the educational experience: creativity, problem solving, generating ideas, critical thinking, writing and research.”
- *Teacher:* “Life skills are just as important. Compassion, that kind of wisdom, makes a full cookie. Learning to be comfortable in your own skin is not on a standardized test.”
- *Parent:* “It is not all about the numbers. The ultimate goal is to produce good leaders and independent thinkers: people who know *why* they do what they do.”
- *Parent:* “Maybe our response to the test (and especially tying it to performance) makes it a bigger deal. ... When the test is the only thing that teachers care about, it becomes inflated. I do think it is overinflated and has more effect than it was meant to on the classroom.”
- *Principal:* “Everything is about testing. I hate it.”

- *Principal*: “I feel like assessments are the only way to define my worth. It is currently the way to play the game; how the rules are set up.”

This sentiment can manifest itself by creeping into the everyday experience of learning in unexpected ways:

- *Parent*: “The math textbook has a countdown to the assessment written in it. This is another reminder that we want data, and it ignores the human aspect. They are children, not machines.”
- *Teacher*: “We talk about kids as test scores. ‘He’s going to be advanced.’ We think about them as test scores! If we sincerely care about kids, test scores will happen because they will do it for me. Some kids just need someone to like them. It will be a teacher, not an RTI program, that moves him.”

The takeaways from the conversation surrounding this topic during the summit are reminders to keep student learning and demonstration of mastery of the standards as our primary focus, to reinforce a growth mindset, and to involve students in goal setting. As we have critical conversations (e.g. Data Days, teacher evaluation conversations, parent/teacher conferences, reporting annual results to the school board), there is an opportunity to overtly incorporate other measures beyond standardized tests into the conversation to convey a more balanced message.

8. Communication:

We need to do a better job of communicating with parents. Especially given that TNReady will be new in 2015-2016, we need a concerted and comprehensive effort to share information about the new assessments, clarify the purpose of all tests in the KCS assessment portfolio, and engage parents in the effort to reshape the culture surrounding tests. As we develop the communication tools, we need to be mindful to keep our messages simple and avoid terminology that is unfamiliar to non-educators.

Separately, the survey data also suggests that we need to review the purpose of each test in our assessment portfolio with educators. In particular, we need to review the difference between formative and summative assessment and be more explicit in sharing how summative data is used to influence strategies at the school level or district level. This will help to reinforce the “why” behind some of the mandated tests. To illustrate this point:

- Less than half of teachers surveyed thought that the purpose of Local EOCs was to serve as the summative assessment for a class.
- 39% said the purpose of the ACT was to determine if a student is on the path to college and career readiness.
- Only 50% of high school teachers said that the purpose of classroom formative assessments was to inform or adjust instructional strategies throughout the school year.

Culture

The eight sections above are all components of the culture of testing at the Knox County Schools. During the project, we collected a lot of information to quantify the impact of testing in terms of time, logistics, etc. However, one of the most compelling and urgent calls to action surrounded how the tests makes people feel:

Teacher Focus Group Presentation: We are resigned to it, although we hate it. We feel powerless, we do it whether we like it or not. We are employees and we can't control the regulations. ... There is no positive aspect on the school culture in relation to the testing time, use of results.

Teachers have experienced a significant amount of change, and the accountability pressures along with many others factors have had a toll. This is a real factor that we must acknowledge.

In the words of a principal:

“Teachers are under real stress, and they have a right to it. This is legitimate. Emotions are real and deep. It has become so public; this deepens the impact. Don't gloss over it.”

Across the country, district leaders need to proactively develop strategies to address this challenge head on. Fortunately, the trends locally appear to be turning. Surveys within the Knox County Schools (Teacher Survey Shows Significant Improvement, 2015) and the state of Tennessee (Tatter, 2015) indicate that morale is improving. Despite progress, it is important to continue to focus on the climate. “Wounds” may not have fully healed, and more change is on the horizon. The current culture needs to be robust enough to withstand the next round of changes without slipping backwards to a place of discontent. This is important not only for the well-being of teachers, but for students as well.

Role/Importance of Assessment

Despite the challenges presented by assessment and accountability, stakeholders agree that testing is an important part of the teaching and learning process. Assessment survey data indicates that:

- 77.8% of teachers agreed that student assessment was an important or very important part of the teaching and learning process.
- 84.1% of teachers say that data from assessments is sometimes or often used in PLCs to examine teaching practices.
- 74% of parents agree that it is important to have a test at the end of a grade level/course to measure how much a student has learned (vs. 17% that disagree). There are mixed responses on whether standardized tests are an effective method for accomplishing this.

Principals also discussed how critical assessment is to schools during the deeper insight interviews:

- “If you didn’t have assessments, it is like traveling without a road map. You’d be shooting in the dark. The consequence is misdiagnosis, like giving you chemo when you need TheraFlu.”
- “Assessments are tools in the toolbox. It is the most important tool because it lets you know the next step. Without it, there is no map, no plan. You just go with your gut. Even saying that bothers me; it is not fair to kids. Guts are fallible. It’s not fair to assume I know everything; it cheats our kids. I feel like we are very pompous if we say that.”

- “Accountability around tests makes schools better. No Child Left Behind is crap, and it still made schools better.”

Additionally, while we heard from parents who were frustrated by the assessment portfolio, other parents communicated support:

- “There is a lot of hot air about testing. There is a group of teachers and students that don’t like it. They are more vocal and public about what they perceive to be wrong. The larger group doesn’t think that, but you don’t hear from there. At Hardin Valley, kids take Honors and AP to get tested. That is the whole point of it. How the curriculum is taught is up to the teacher/Academy.”
- “I think we do need assessments. I want to see how my kids compare to other kids and how schools compare to other schools.”
- “I am pro-testing because it gives me feedback. It is not based on what teacher says: not on what someone thinks but what my son did. Grades reflect whether the teacher likes him or not; with testing, it doesn’t. They are tested the same way each time. I like STAR because it gives a lot of data points. I can see how my son progressed. To me, the report is perfect. I can see his goals, and I get a report once a month.”

These parents are not alone. In fact, in a recent Education Next survey, 67% of the public said it supports testing students annually in reading and math. 21% opposed it and others were neutral. (Emma, First look: Poll finds support for testing — Pell grants for prisoners — Washington state chief: Put more dollars into edu, 2015) Current versions of the House and Senate revisions of the Elementary & Secondary Education Act (ESEA) include annual testing. For the time being, it appears that standardized tests are here to stay.

What this means for the Knox County Schools

While state law dictates the high stakes assessments and teacher evaluation requirements for the upcoming school year, the choice of how we respond to these requirements, as individuals and as a Knox County Schools community, is within our control. Therefore, our committee recommends viewing TNReady as an opportunity to reshape the test culture in the Knox County Schools. Because the test itself is substantially changing, we need to hit the “reset” button anyway. We can seize this as an opportunity to revisit practices surrounding the eight

stakeholder feedback themes and, if desired, decide to try a different approach. TNReady can serve as a fresh start in the Knox County culture surrounding testing. We recognize that changing the culture will require leadership within each school building. Therefore, enrolling principals in this effort is critical. To initiate this process, we presented the topline findings of this research to principals at the July Principals Meeting, then provided time for principals to begin brainstorming their “fresh start” messages for staff.

Another critical next step is to develop a communication toolkit to disseminate information to principals, teachers, parents, and students regarding TNReady and the 2015-2016 assessment landscape. It will be especially important to convey the purpose and motivation behind the TNReady changes. Additionally, we should proactively share the resources that are available to assist teachers and parents during this transition to the new assessments.

Appendix: Bibliography

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Usefulness of State-Mandated Tests

1-not useful 2-somewhat useful 3-useful 4-very useful

Name of Assessment	Parent	Student	Teacher	Principal
Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program (TCAP) Achievement Test	2.4	Low Base	1.8	3.1
TCAP End of Course (EOC) Tests	2.4	2.2		
TCAP Writing Assessment	2.3	1.9	1.5	2.2
TCAP Social Studies Field Test				2.0
Universal Screener & Progress Monitoring			2.5	3.6*
ACT Suite – EXPLORE, PLAN and ACT	2.9	2.5	2.0	3.4
ACCESS/WIDA for English Learners	2.7	2.1	2.1	2.9
Progressive Aerobic Cardiovascular Endurance Run (PACER)				
NAEP				

* - Principal rating includes STAR Renaissance only

Usefulness of Local Tests

1-not useful 2-somewhat useful 3-useful 4-very useful

Name of Assessment	Parent	Student	Teacher	Principal
<u>District-Mandated</u>				
District End of Course Tests			2.1	3.4
Middle School Honors Mid-Term		Low Base [3.2]		2.9
<u>School/Teacher/Student Choice</u>				
AP Exams/IB Exams	2.9	2.7	2.5	3.7
CTE Certification	2.6	2.3	2.4	
District Created Module Assessments	2.7*	2.5*	2.2	3.2
Common Assessments by PLCs			2.7	3.7
Classroom Formative		3.1	3.3	
Quizzes		2.8		
Homework	2.9	2.7		

* - Unit test or Benchmarking test

Varied Student Preparation Strategies

	No Prep	Prep Throughout Year/Integrated	Dedicated Prep Time/Student
TCAP Achievement/EOC	0% (Elementary)	25% (Elementary)	75% (Elementary)
	0% (Middle)	23% (Middle)	77% (Middle)
	0% (High)	43% (High)	57% (High)
TCAP Writing	7% (Elementary)	35% (Elementary)	60% (Elementary)
	0% (Middle)	38% (Middle)	63% (Middle)
	7% (High)	29% (High)	64% (High)
District EOC	0% (Middle)	20% (Middle)	80% (Middle)
	0% (High)	53% (High)	47% (High)
ACT	67% (Middle)	11% (Middle)	22% (Middle)
	18% (High)	18% (High)	64% (High)
STAR Renaissance	69% (Elementary)	23% (Elementary)	9% (Elementary)

Elementary TCAP Achievement

Min Prep Time	2.5 hours/student
Max Prep Time	40 hours/student
Ave. Prep Time	21 hours/student

Middle School TCAP Achievement

Min Prep Time	1 week/student
Max Prep Time	4 weeks/student
Ave Prep Time	2.2 weeks/student

High School State EOC

Min Prep Time	4 hours/student
Max Prep Time	15 days/student

Estimated Hours Students Spend on Tests

Grade Level	Required Test Hours Estimate	Includes	Special Circumstance
K-2 nd	1.3	STAR Screener	Addtl Progress Monitoring for Tier II and III Students - 2.1 to 6.6 hours
3rd-5th	11.5	TCAP Achievement, TCAP Science, TCAP Social Studies, STAR Screener	
6th-7th	9.6	TCAP Achievement, TCAP Writing, TCAP Social Studies	+ 1 hr/Honors Midterm
8th	12.1	TCAP Achievement, TCAP Writing, TCAP Social Studies, ACT Explore	+ 1 hr/Honors Midterm + 2 hr if taking HS Physical Science EOC
9th	15.75	Finals (TCAP EOC, District EOC, Teacher Final), TCAP Writing	
10th	18	Finals (TCAP EOC, District EOC, Teacher Final), TCAP Writing, ACT Plan	+ extra 2hr/AP exam
11th	20	Finals (TCAP EOC, District EOC, Teacher Final), TCAP Writing, TCAP Social Studies, ACT	
12th	14	Finals (TCAP EOC, District EOC, Teacher Final)	
3-12 Ave.	13.4	10-20 Hours = 0.9-1.9% of School Year	

Teacher Estimates of Time (Hours) Spent on Testing

	High Stakes Mean	High Stakes Median	Non-HS Mean	Non-HS Median	Comb Mean	Comb Median
Administering	13	9	39	20	52	29
Planning/Preparing during class	47	20	51	16	98	36
Planning/Preparing outside class	31	10	53	21	84	31
Lost time due to testing for another class	19	9			19	9
“Estimated School Impact”	79	38	90	36	169	74

Teacher Estimates of Time (Hours) Spent on Testing

	High Stakes Mean	High Stakes Median	Non-HS Mean	Non-HS Median	Comb Mean	Comb Median
“Estimated School Impact”	79	38	90	36	169	74

13. During an average school year, what is an appropriate amount of time that should be spent on assessing student learning? (Please include all types of assessment, including high stakes tests, unit exams, benchmarking assessments, formative assessments, etc.)

Percent of time during my class:

<i>Assuming 6 hr/day for 180 days</i>	Mean	Median
Appropriate Percentage	20.7%	15%
Appropriate # of Hours	224	162

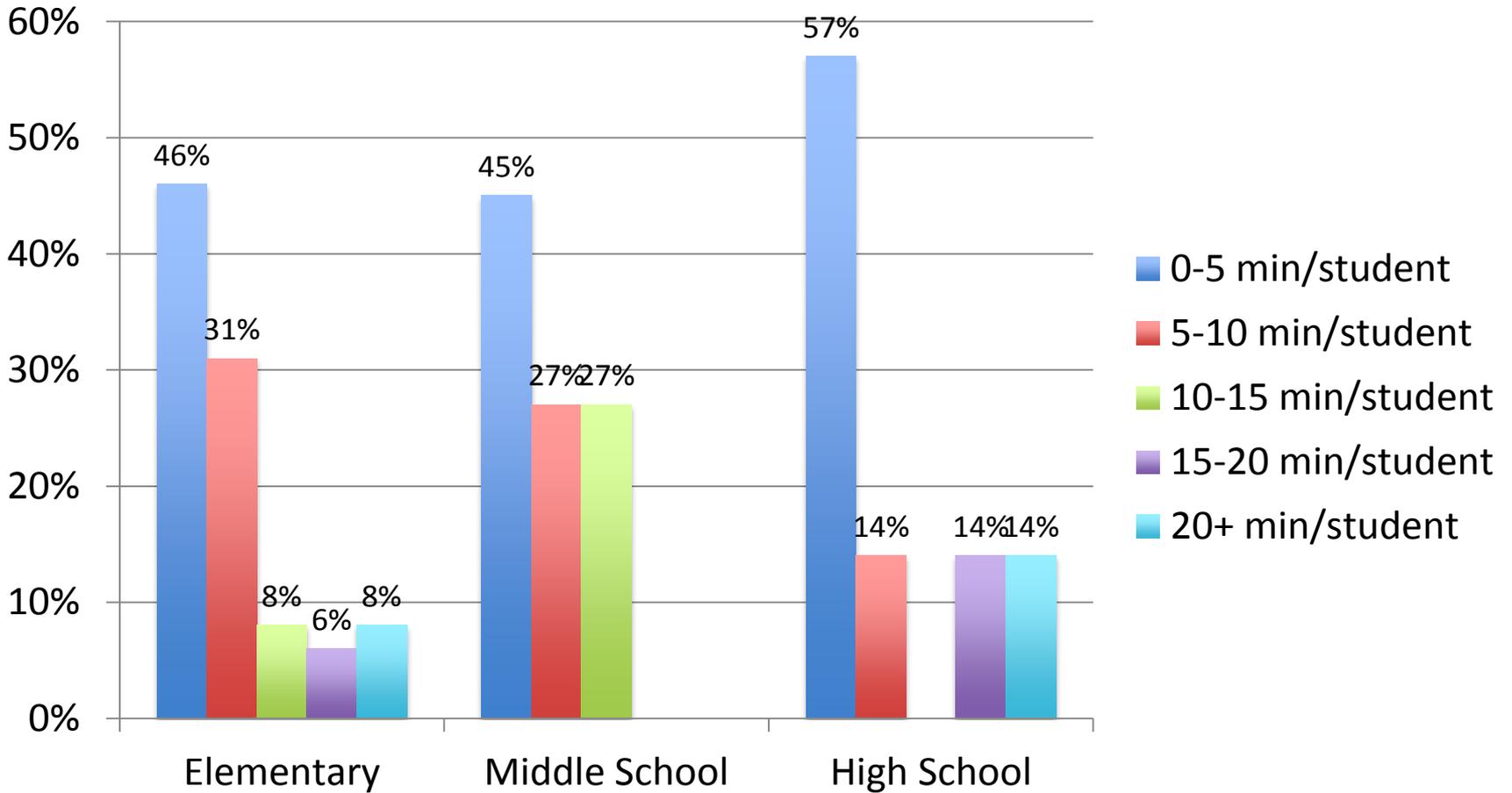
# of Hours High Stakes Impact	79 (7.3%)	38 (3.5%)
Total Combined Hours for All Types of Testing	169 (15.6%)	74 (6.9%)

Logistical Preparation Time

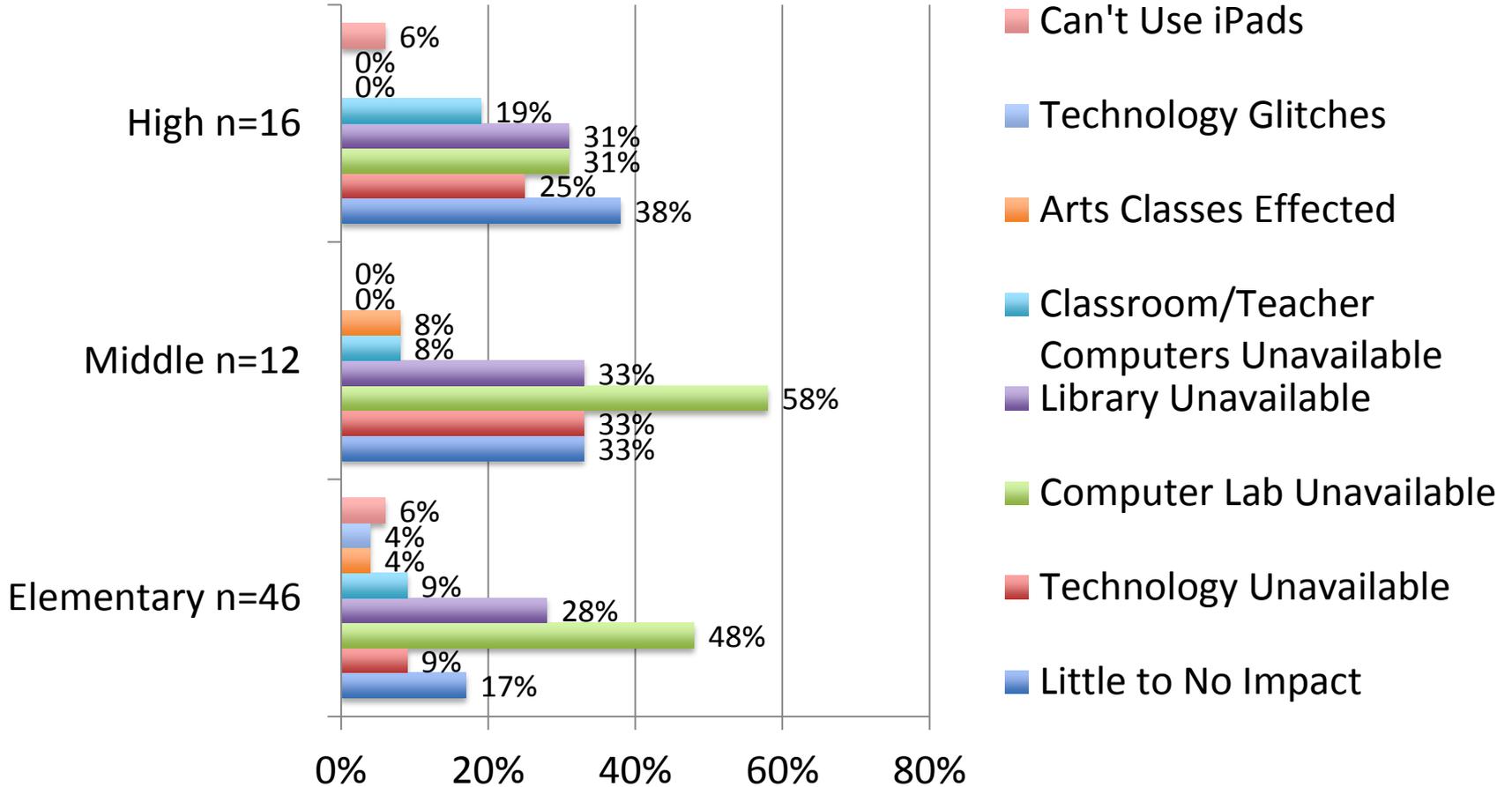
Assessment	Minimum	Maximum	Average
TCAP Achievement – Elementary	10 hours	300 hours	67 hours
TCAP Achievement & EOC – Middle	10 hours	300 hours	103 hours
TCAP EOC – High	3 hours	800 hours	166 hours
District EOC – High	14 hours	200 hours	74 hours
TCAP Writing Assessment – Elementary	0 hours	50 hours	12 hours
TCAP Writing Assessment – Middle	4 hours	80 hours	43 hours
TCAP Writing Assessment – High	8 hours	150 hours	57 hours

Logistical preparations includes scheduling, training proctors, completing test security protocols, sorting, grouping and bubbling.

TCAP Achievement & EOC Logistical Preparation: Minutes/Student

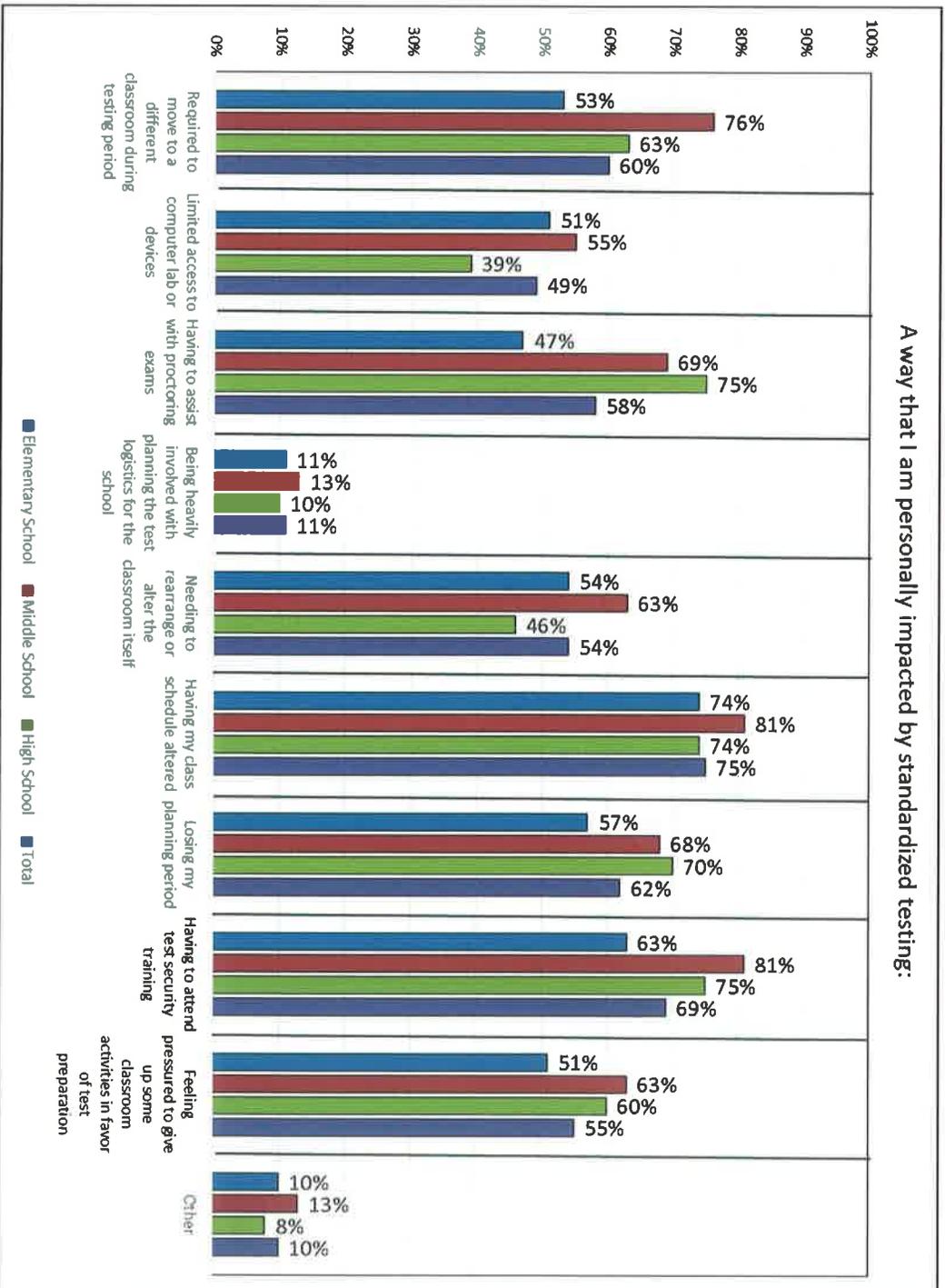


TCAP Writing Assessment



In what ways are you personally impacted by standardized testing?

A way that I am personally impacted by standardized testing:



What degree of stress do you personally feel due to high stakes testing? (NAs removed)

