

Testing Times and Stresses for Teachers and Students

NMSBA statewide data regarding testing times and stresses for teachers and students, collected by Margaret Bohlin, an elementary teacher in Roswell, who has an MA in Elementary Education with a Gifted Endorsement and 24 years' teaching experience in elementary and middle schools in Roswell. (Contact information is P. O. Box 685, Roswell, NM 88202; home phone 575-625-2118, cell phone 575-420-9955, work phone 575-637-3600.)

I spoke with over 100 educators, parents, and students from Albuquerque, Santa Fe, Las Cruces, Grants, Alamogordo, Gallup, Roswell, and other towns and districts in New Mexico. Everyone with whom I spoke showed concern for my job. Ninety-nine percent of the teachers want to remain anonymous since they are worried about speaking up against the NMSBA and losing their jobs. Information regarding testing times, teachers' and students' stresses, and general comments about the negative effects of the NMSBA was collected, and much research has gone into studying about the ill-effects of the test.

Times that students spent on the NMSBA sessions were extensive. Regular education classrooms have shown that the time difference between the first and last students testing has been as long as 2 hours and 55 minutes. Tests administered without breaks and snacks have been as long as 4 hours and 45 minutes. When students finish earlier than others, they can only sit and read or sleep until everyone else is finished. Students have missed lunch due to the length of the test. The NMSBA ends up being too long since it is untimed. Child psychologists state that a child's attention span is three to five times his or her age. Therefore, a third grader who is eight years old would be able to stay focused on a given task for 40 minutes at most. With sessions lasting almost as long as five hours, it is improbable that these children would be able to succeed on the NMSBA.

The stress students experience is overwhelming. Students have "breakdowns"; they get very antsy, super restless, and fidgety. Some students whine, cry, experience headaches, have upset stomachs, and vomit. Others become very frustrated. They start to bang their feet and hands, beat pencils against their heads, make excessive noises, get overly nervous, start shutting down, and completely giving up. Some just sit for long periods of time doing nothing, become distracted, and get overly tired. Due to the high anxiety for making AYP, the students are pressured to come to school every day. This results in students coming to school physically sick and emotionally distressed.

Middle school students do not take the test seriously. Since they know they will not be allowed to leave the classroom during the test, students will talk, text, throw books, push each other, make prank phone calls, and walk around. They are rebellious due to too much stress in preparing for the test and taking the actual test.

Eleventh-grade high school students are also being overly tested and put under unnecessary stress when having to take the NMSBA. The SBA graduation exam is administered to students who have already been accepted to college and/or received high scores from the ACT or SAT exams. If students have taken the ACT or SAT exams beforehand, which are nationally-recognized tests and are used to determine students' college and scholarship opportunities, why do these students have to take a test that decides if they can graduate from high school? This test is conducted for four straight days. Students cannot leave the testing center, which can have as many as 400 students, until everyone has completed the test. This test appears to be a waste of time and takes away from classroom instruction.

Teachers are also feeling the stress of the test. Teachers have had so much stress due to the test that they have ended up in hospitals or doctors' offices. Teachers know their evaluations are based on the test. The NMSBA is considered so important that teachers are handed Ziploc bags to save any test vomited on by a student for accountability. Some teachers do not focus on transfer students since these children are not counted toward making AYP. During testing sessions, teachers are mandated to monitor the students by always walking around the room without a chance to sit down and relax. Anyone who proctors the test can only sit down and watch the teacher. Neither adult can break from the monotony of these activities even when the test lasts for hours at a time. There is excessive pressure put on teachers to have their students perform well, which breaks down the cohesiveness among staff members and has caused teachers to view each other as potential cheaters or slackers.

The NMSBA is an abusive, cruel, and inappropriate test given to children starting in third grade, which is as young as eight years old. Very few adults or professionals are ever expected to sit through seven straight days of testing and up to four-hour sessions without adequate breaks. They would not be expected to sit on hard chairs and have to

wait for everyone in the room to finish testing in order for them to leave. Adults would also not tolerate having to wait as long as 2:00 pm to be served lunch and in some cases never getting one. Why are students whose attention span is much less than adults and who are physically and mentally unable to focus be forced to test in such a rigid environment?

Which child will take the longest time? Can't teachers provide individualized testing for this student? It could be the gifted student, who is a perfectionist; the student who did not get enough sleep the night before due to his or her parents arguing; or the ADHD student who cannot focus well. It is impossible to identify which student will take the longest on a given test or on a given day.

What has excessive reviewing and testing done to education? It has taken the fun out of teaching and learning. Teaching has become very prescribed. It provides little time for fun learning opportunities, teachable moments, projects, and higher-order instruction. Teaching is very contrived and based on reviewing for the test starting at the beginning of the school year. Schools are focusing only on those subjects that are on the NMSBA; therefore, history, science, health, the arts, and other subjects are either being completely ignored or taught very little.

The news reported 86.6 percent of New Mexico schools failed to meet AYP this past year. What does that say about the validity of the test, teaching profession, or student intelligence in New Mexico? New Mexico students rank 46th for K-12 Achievement based largely on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). K-12 Achievement for New Mexico is placed at D-, yet New Mexico's Standards, Assessments, and Accountability is ranked at B+. If the test does not produce quality student results for K-12 Achievement, does the grade for Standards, Assessments, and Accountability really matter?

The NMSBA might be considered valid and reliable by the US Department of Education, but we are not manufacturing a product. We are talking about children. It is true that New Mexico spent years and millions of dollars in development of the NMSBA with our standards defined by our New Mexican teachers, but this time and money means nothing when it is negatively affecting children and teachers. A drug would be pulled from the market if it proved to be harmful to humans. Therefore, since the NMSBA has shown harmful effects on the school community, should it not be changed in some way?

New Mexico children and teachers are constantly under a great deal of stress regarding the reviewing and testing of the NMSBA. The time students are expected to test has proven to be unreasonable and inappropriate. It appears that the NMSBA needs to be improved. Therefore, solutions to improve this test need to be considered.

Recommended Solutions to the problems caused by the NMSBA

1. The tests need to be more secure. Each session should be sealed.
2. Test sessions should not be included in the test if the students are not going to be evaluated by it.
3. Condense the test by having one question per concept instead of repeating them.
4. Reduce the number of concepts covered by the test.
5. There should be only one test session per subject area instead of two or three.
6. Have the students take each subject-area's tests with a couple of weeks in between each one.
7. Create test questions with only one part.
8. The test format should be aligned to the textbooks or vice versa.
9. Each grade level's tests should be at appropriate levels.
10. Provide a pre-test at the beginning and a post-test at the end of the school year to show true student growth.
11. Standardized tests should be timed which would eliminate impetus, which is a valid part of assessment.
12. Students should use a national test which is given in a much shorter time frame.
13. Slow-working students should go to another room to finish if most of the class has completed the test.
14. During each session, students should be allowed (supervised) adequate breaks.
15. Children should not be pressured to come to school each day if they are sick, hurt, etc.
16. There should be a maximum amount of time for completing each section of the NMSBA.
17. High school students who take the SAT or ACT should be exempt from taking the high school SBA.

I highly recommend reading [The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education](#) by Diane Ravitch to everyone who makes educational decisions that affect students, teachers, schools, and districts.