



SPRING 2021 EXAM RESULTS ARE IN. NOW WHAT?



As the scores from spring 2021 statewide student assessments roll in, educators are wondering what to make of the results.

According to the experts, not too much.

“We’ve just got to avoid a naïve analysis” NEPC Fellow Derek Briggs of the University of Colorado told *Education Week* recently. “The danger here is that we report 2021 scores as observed in 2021, without doing any other analysis.” He warned that “People want to compare them to 2019, and they’re going to interpret the difference as the effect of COVID.” That would be a mistake.

This is because any differences may be due to differences in the pool of students taking the exams in 2019 versus 2021. (Due to the pandemic, the federal government permitted states to skip testing in the spring of 2020.) Participation rates varied widely in 2021. For instance, just 10 percent of New Mexico students participated and 30 percent of students in Oregon.

With such low rates of test-taking, we are likely to see selection bias. If students who had previously earned high scores were more likely to skip the 2021 tests, the scores could appear to be artificially low. And vice versa.

2021 results may also have been impacted by differences in test administration. Although states were required to administer tests in 2021, they were given flexibility. Some states used this leeway to shorten existing exams or offer entirely different tests. This makes it difficult to discern whether any increases or decreases in scores are due to real differences in student learning or differences in the tests themselves. States also permitted at least some students to take the tests remotely, making direct comparisons very problematic.

These factors combined raise serious questions about the usefulness of 2021 testing data. So why did the US Department of Education require states to administer tests in 2021 rather than waiving the requirement as was done in 2020? In the months leading up to the spring 2021 testing season, NEPC Fellow Lorrie Shepard of the University of Colorado argued that they shouldn't have.

“Testing this year is counterproductive because it potentially demoralizes students and teachers without addressing the grave problems exacerbated by the pandemic,” she wrote in a December 2020 [commentary for *Education Week*](#).

However, pro-testing groups, including some that advocate for marginalized populations, [argued that](#) testing was critical in 2021 because “it is imperative that we have accurate information about how our students are performing so that resources can be directed to schools and students in need.” In fact, this equity-related argument was prominent in the Biden administration’s [announcement](#) that testing would be required this past spring, which stated: “State assessment and accountability systems play an important role in advancing educational equity.”

The announcement also noted that “it is urgent to understand the impact of COVID-19 on learning.” Yet educators now find themselves in a position in which they have diverted resources into assessments, the results of which are of limited use for determining the impact of COVID or highlighting equity-related concerns.

The good news is that districts likely have alternative ways to assess COVID’s inequitable impacts on opportunities to learn.

While opportunity-to-learn usually refers to high-quality indicators such as challenging curriculum, well prepared teachers, and the like, in Covid-19 circumstances, students with the gravest learning needs are those who lacked device and Internet access, who experienced the greatest proportion of remote-learning time, or who suffered extensive absences due to family circumstances,

Shepard and Center for Assessment director Scott Marion [wrote in EdNext](#) earlier this year. “Districts already have data on most of these factors.”

They also note that:

End-of-year state tests have never provided instructionally useful information for individual students. Knowing that a student is performing below proficiency does not provide any substantive information about what a student does or does not understand. Assessments embedded in a school’s current high-quality curriculum are the best tools for teachers in planning instruction and sharing information with parents.

So, while this past spring’s assessment results may have limited value, better sources of information are available. The challenge now is to encourage educators to rely on these sources rather than to draw erroneous conclusions from faulty data.

The stakes are high. As the National Academy of Education concludes in [Educational As-](#)

assessments in the COVID-19 Era and Beyond: “If used improperly, assessments may waste precious instructional time and resources, worsen inequities, reinforce misperceptions as to sources of inequity, and impede sound education policy.”

NEPC Resources on Assessment

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