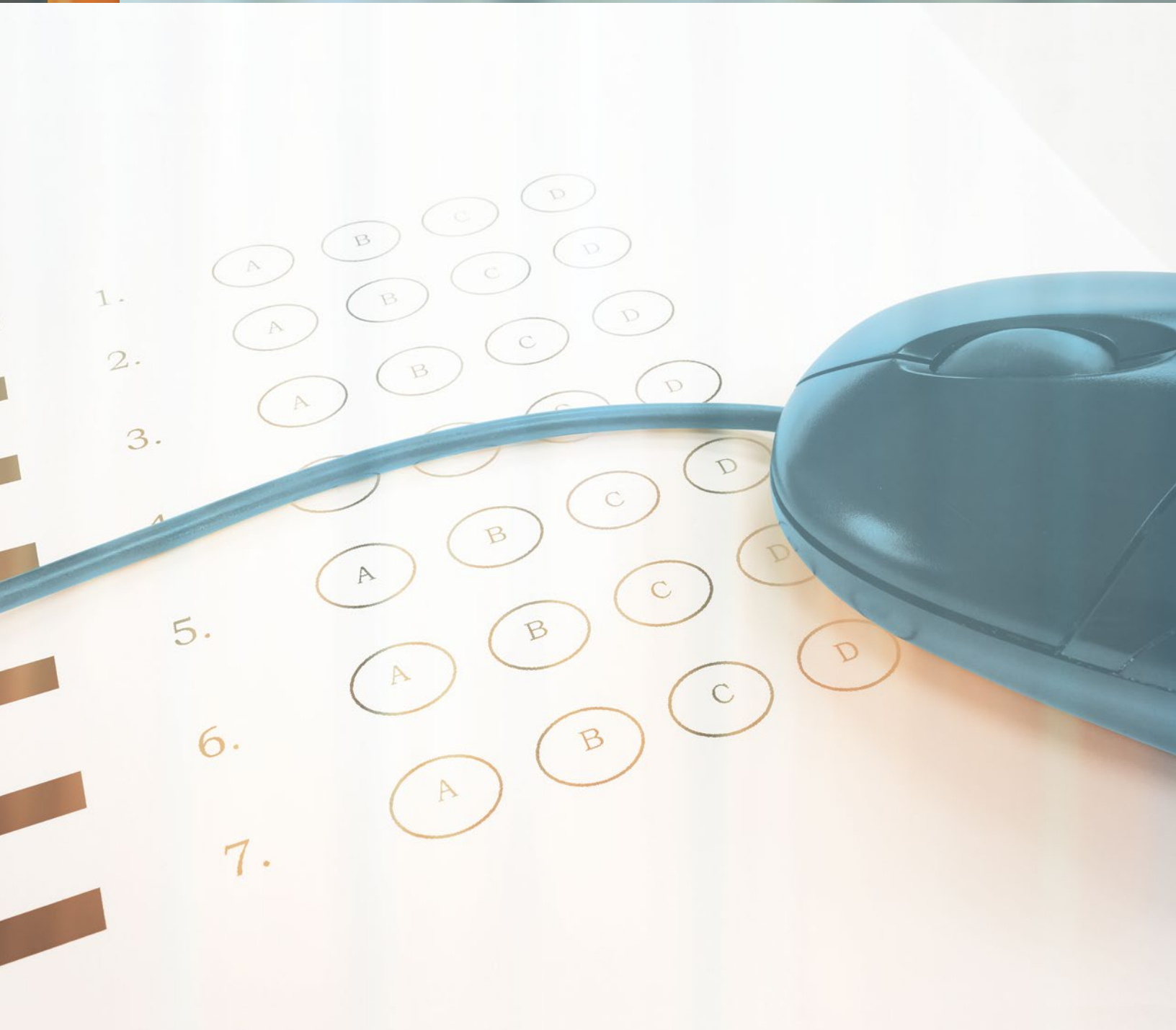


# District Leadership in the New Era of Assessment



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# District Leadership in the New Era of Assessment

## Introduction

In the spring of 2015, many states began administering new state assessments designed to measure students' mastery of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in mathematics and English language arts (ELA). This was the first wide-scale assessment of student mastery of the Common Core. For some states, it was also the first time that state math and ELA tests were administered on computers. Several states gave Common Core tests developed by one of the two state testing consortia, Smarter Balanced and the Partnership for the Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC), while other states administered their own state-specific exam.

To learn more about districts' experiences in preparing for, administering, and using data from the spring 2015 Common Core-aligned assessments, the Center on Education Policy (CEP) administered a survey from January to April of 2016 to a nationally representative sample of 418 superintendents or their designees in states that were implementing the CCSS. The survey also included questions about testing in general and other aspects of Common Core implementation, such as stakeholder support for the standards.

A total of 276 district leaders responded to our request. Responses were weighted to be representative of districts in CCSS states. More information about methodology and sampling procedures can be found in the online appendix to this report at [www.cep-dc.org](http://www.cep-dc.org).

This report describes the findings of our survey of district leaders and includes tables with the response data. In the discussion of the data in the tables, we have highlighted those differences that are statistically significant or noteworthy for other reasons. Many respondents took advantage of opportunities in the survey to explain "other" responses to particular questions or respond to an open-ended final question inviting additional comments on their experiences with the Common Core standards and assessments. Selected quotations from their written comments are interspersed throughout the report. All percentages, standard errors, and confidence intervals for the data in this report, along with a complete list of responses to open-ended questions, can be found in the online appendix.

## Summary of Survey Findings

### ***District leaders' views about Common Core assessments***

**Greater proportions of district leaders agreed than disagreed with positive statements about new state CCSS assessments, but many leaders thought it was too soon to tell.**

- Between 40% and 51% of district leaders agreed that the new CCSS tests do a better job than their previous state tests of measuring higher-order analytical and performance skills, are an improvement over the previous tests, and will inform instruction and drive instruction in positive ways. Smaller proportions (8%–15%) of officials disagreed with these viewpoints.
- For all of these statements, however, substantial percentages of leaders (40%–46%) said it was too soon to make judgments or were not sure.

**District leaders gave mixed responses about the usefulness of data from new CCSS tests.**

- A minority of district leaders (28% for math, 32% for ELA) agreed that the new state assessments meet their district's needs for student achievement information. A comparable proportion of leaders (22%) disagreed, and 46%–50% said it was too soon to tell.
- District leaders were similarly divided about whether data from new state assessments is easily understood by and useful to teachers.
- Smaller shares of district leaders (11% math, 13% ELA) agreed that assessment information is understood by and useful to parents and students. Roughly one-third disagreed, and 55% said it was too soon to tell.

### ***Leaders' views about stakeholder support for Common Core standards and assessments***

**Half or more of district officials see support for the Common Core standards and aligned assessments among a majority of local administrators, but fewer officials see this level of support among other stakeholders.**

- About 60% of officials surveyed said that a majority of district leaders and a majority of principals support the *standards*, while 50% of the leaders surveyed saw majority support for CCSS *assessments* among these two groups.
- Lower percentages of district leaders said the CCSS and aligned assessments were supported by a majority of teachers, school board members, parents, the business community, or elected officials.

## ***District test-preparation activities for Common Core assessments***

**A majority of district leaders said their school systems are engaged in activities to prepare students for the 2015 Common Core tests.**

These test-prep activities included the following:

- Reviewing released assessment items (78% of district leaders)
- Administering practice tests in a computer-based format (77%)
- Reviewing released scoring rubrics for open-ended questions (63%)
- Administering formative assessments based on the CCSS summative exams (60%)
- Instructing students in keyboarding skills (60%)

**A majority (58%) of district leaders estimated that the amount of time spent on direct test-preparation activities for the spring 2015 Common Core assessments was one week or less, on average.**

- Conversely, about 10% of district officials said the average student in their district spent more than a month on test preparation.

## ***Administration of the spring 2015 Common Core assessments***

**Two-thirds of districts administered the spring 2015 state CCSS assessments in math and ELA by computer. A relatively small share of these districts experienced frequent technology problems during test administration.**

- In districts that administered at least a portion of the spring 2015 Common Core tests on computers, 56%–74% of leaders said their school system never or seldom experienced specific technology problems in administering computer-based exams.
- About 9%–30% of these leaders, depending on the problem, said their schools sometimes encountered technology problems during test administration, such as difficulties with students logging in, unexpected internet log-offs, computers or servers freezing, and testing sessions timing out. About 10% or fewer reported that their schools frequently or almost always experienced specific technology problems.

## ***District actions to improve learning based on assessment results***

**Most districts reported that they used the results of state CCSS assessments to guide revisions to instruction, remediation, and curriculum in math and ELA.**

- A majority of district officials reported that their school systems used the results of the 2015 CCSS assessments to revise instructional strategies (67%), tailor remediation services for students who did not achieve a proficient score (60%), revise curriculum materials (56%), and revise teacher professional development (52%).
- A majority of district officials indicated that because of the 2015 state assessments results, their districts were providing or planning professional development to help teachers implement new instructional strategies (82% math, 79% ELA) or were increasing cross-disciplinary practices (59%, 65%).

- About half of district leaders (51% math, 47% ELA) said their districts had adopted or were planning to adopt new textbooks or curricular materials in response to these test results.

### ***General views about testing and opting out***

**The majority of district leaders in CCSS-adopting states said that students spend too much time taking all types of school tests.**

- When state-mandated, district-mandated, and teacher-developed tests are taken into account, sizable majorities of district leaders agreed that students are tested too much in elementary (72% of respondents), middle/junior high (66%), and high school (63%).

**To cut down on testing, many district leaders suggested that state-mandated tests should be given less frequently.**

- Among district leaders who said students were tested too much, most would keep teacher-developed quizzes (83%) and tests (87%). About half would keep district-mandated exams, while 42% would reduce the frequency of district-required tests.
- Nearly two-thirds of these district officials (63%) would reduce the frequency of state-mandated tests, while 22% would eliminate them.
- Among district leaders who said students were tested too much, 61% reported that their school system is currently reviewing its mandated exams to decide which to keep and which to eliminate. About 10% said their district has already done this.

**A large majority of survey respondents said that no students or very low proportions of students in their district opted out of the 2015 CCSS state exams.**

- About 35% of district leaders in Common Core states said that no students in their district opted out of the 2015 state math and/or ELA exams, while 43% indicated that the opt-out rate was greater than 0 but 5% or less of students.
- About 13% reported an opt-out rate of greater than 5%.

### ***District leaders' perceptions of their influence on education policy decisions***

**Most district leaders do not believe their opinions are considered in decisions about state and federal education policy.**

- A majority of district leaders do not feel that their opinions are factored into the decision-making process at least most of the time at the state (69%) or federal (83%) level.

The sections of the report that follow provide a more detailed discussion of the survey results and data tables for each of these topics.

# District Leaders' Views about Common Core Assessments

## *New assessments compared with previous state math and ELA exams*

About half of district leaders in Common Core states believe that their state's new CCSS tests in math (49% of responding leaders) and ELA (51%) do a better job of measuring higher-order analytical skills and performance skills than did their state's previous tests. Substantial proportions of district leaders (45% math, 42% ELA) agreed that the new tests are an improvement over their state's previous tests, while a smaller share disagreed (15% for both math and ELA). For both of these statements, however, roughly 40% of district leaders said it was too soon to tell or they were not sure.

**Table 1.** District leaders' views on new CCSS assessments compared with previous state assessments

Assessment feature	Agree		Disagree		Too soon to tell/ not sure	
	Math	ELA	Math	ELA	Math	ELA
Does a better job of measuring higher-order analytical skills and performance skills than state assessments aligned to previous state standards	49%	51%	9%	8%	42%	41%
Is an improvement over state assessments aligned to previous state standards	45%	42%	15%	15%	40%	42%

**Table reads:** An estimated 49% of district leaders agreed that their state's CCSS assessment in math does a better job of measuring higher-order analytical skills and performance skills than did their state's assessment aligned to previous math standards.

**Note:** Percentages do not total 100% due to rounding.

In the open-ended portions of the survey, a few district leaders made positive comments about the CCSS assessments:

*Now we have an assessment that truly assesses student learning.*

*The idea that the test is too difficult for students is mollycoddling. The test is challenging, and that is good. Difficult tasks are good for children, but only if the adults teach such things as perseverance. Testing is a vital part of any educational program.*

*We welcome rigor and managed to glean some useful information from [the test] data, especially in math. However, it required a lot of explaining on our part...Results were very late...results were not at all transparent, and the tests were far too long.*

## Impact of CCSS assessments on instruction

The percentages of district leaders who agreed (42% math, 44% ELA) that new state CCSS tests are yielding information to guide instruction were higher than the proportions that disagreed (15%, 14%). Views were similarly divided about whether new assessments are driving instruction in positive ways. For both statements, a sizable minority of district leaders (42%–46%) said it was too soon to tell or they were not sure about the impact of new state assessments on instruction.

**Table 2.** District leaders' views about the impact of their state's CCSS assessments on instruction

Assessment feature	Agree		Disagree		Too soon to tell/ not sure	
	Math	ELA	Math	ELA	Math	ELA
Yields information that will inform instruction	42%	44%	15%	14%	43%	42%
Is driving instruction in positive ways	40%	40%	14%	14%	46%	46%

**Table reads:** An estimated 42% of district leaders agreed that their state's CCSS assessment in math yields information that will inform instruction.

## Helpfulness of the information provided by the exams

Sizable shares of district leaders (50% math, 46% ELA) said it was too soon to tell or they were unsure whether information from state CCSS assessments is meeting their district's needs for student achievement information — significantly greater than the percentages who agreed (28%, 32%) or disagreed (22%) with this statement.<sup>1</sup> The pattern of responses was similar about whether the results of state CCSS assessments are understood and used by teachers — half of district leaders (54% math, 50% ELA) thought it was too soon to tell or were not sure, which exceeded the percentages that agreed or disagreed.

A majority of district leaders (55%) also said it was too soon to tell or they were unsure whether the results of CCSS assessments are understood and used by parents and students. About one-third of district leaders (35%, 33%) disagreed with this statement, significantly different from the 11%–13% that agreed.

<sup>1</sup> There was one exception to this statement about statistical significance: the 32% of district leaders who agreed that their state's CCSS assessment in ELA met their needs for student achievement information was not significantly different from 46% who said it was too soon to tell or they did not know.



**Table 3.** District leaders' views of the helpfulness of information from their state's CCSS assessments

Assessment feature	Agree		Disagree		Too soon to tell/ not sure	
	Math	ELA	Math	ELA	Math	ELA
Meets your district's needs for student achievement information	28%	32%	22%	22%	50%	46%
Is producing results that are understood and used by teachers	25%	27%	21%	22%	54%	50%
Is producing results that are understood and used by parents and students	11%	13%	35%	33%	55%	55%

**Table reads:** An estimated 28% of district leaders agreed that their state's assessment to measure students' mastery of the CCSS in math meets their district's needs for student achievement information.

**Note:** Percentages do not total 100% due to rounding.

### Additional comments about usefulness of CCSS assessment results

In the open-ended portions of the 2016 survey, several district officials commented on problems with the timeliness and reporting of results from the spring 2015 CCSS tests and limitations in their usefulness for improving teaching and learning. Here are a few of their comments:

*Our community includes a military base and they love [having] the CCSS. The only problem is our state doesn't give the results soon enough for them to take with them to new states to help guide placement in new schools. Late fall is when we have been getting results.*

*Due to the late release of scores, we have been delayed in our ability to make instructional decisions using these scores...There were also concerns with the initial administration of the assessment that reduced confidence in these scores.*

*We have tried to respond to the state CCSS assessments but we do not receive any item analysis or breakdown on how our students perform on multiple-choice versus constructed responses. It is very difficult to glean useful information from the results.*

*The exams provide little useful information beyond what teachers already know about student abilities...The best social science research from the past 50 years demonstrates that the correlation between test scores and instructional quality is less powerful than the correlation with out-of-school factors like poverty, parental education, school integration, etc... Such insistence [on drawing conclusions about instruction based solely on test scores] is counterproductive to our instructional practices and deflects attention from the real issues that we are facing in society that are reflected in our schools.*

# Leaders' Views about Stakeholder Support for Common Core Standards and Assessments

## Support for the standards

District leaders perceived more widespread support for the Common Core State Standards among local educational administrators than among parents and other stakeholders. Specifically, more than 60% of district leaders said that a majority of principals and district leaders *support* the standards. This is significantly greater than the share of district leaders who reported majority support for the standards among teachers (43% of the leaders surveyed), school board members (43%), parents (27%), the business community (19%), or local elected officials (15%).

More than half (57%) of district leaders perceived support for the Common Core standards to be *mixed* among parents, and sizable proportions of leaders said support was mixed among teachers (47%) and school board members (44%). Only 6%–10% of district leaders said that a majority of any stakeholder group was *opposed* to the standards.

**Table 4.** District leaders' views on stakeholder support for the Common Core State Standards

Stakeholder	A majority supports the CCSS	Support is mixed	A majority opposes the CCSS	Not sure
School district leaders	62%	29%	7%	2%
Principals	61%	31%	6%	2%
Teachers	43%	47%	9%	1%
School board members	43%	44%	8%	5%
Parents	27%	57%	10%	7%
The business community	19%	37%	8%	37%
Local elected officials	15%	37%	10%	38%

**Table reads:** An estimated 61% of district leaders said that a majority of principals support the CCSS.

**Note:** Percentages do not total 100% due to rounding.

## Support for CCSS assessments

The responses of district officials about the support of various stakeholder groups for Common Core assessments were similar to their views about the standards. About 50% of district officials perceived support for state CCSS assessments among a majority of principals and of district leaders — greater than the proportions who saw support for the assessments among a majority of school board members (35% of the leaders surveyed), teachers (30%), parents (20%), the business community (14%), or local elected officials (11%). Half or more of district leaders reported support for the Common Core assessments to be mixed among parents (56%) and teachers (52%), and almost half of district leaders perceived mixed support among school board members (48%).

Notably, about 40% of district leaders were unsure about support for Common Core assessments among the business community and local elected officials. Relatively small proportions of district leaders (10%–17%) said that a majority of any stakeholder group opposed the tests.

**Table 5.** District leaders’ views on stakeholder support for their state’s CCSS assessments

Stakeholder	A majority supports CCSS-aligned assessments	Support is mixed	A majority opposes CCSS-aligned assessments	Not sure
School district leaders	50%	34%	12%	4%
Principals	50%	38%	10%	2%
School board members	35%	48%	12%	5%
Teachers	30%	52%	17%	2%
Parents	20%	56%	17%	7%
The business community	14%	36%	12%	38%
Local elected officials	11%	35%	14%	40%

**Table reads:** An estimated 50% of district leaders said that a majority of principals support their state’s Common Core assessments.

**Note:** Percentages do not total 100% due to rounding.

## Additional comments about stakeholder views of Common Core standards and assessments

In the open-response parts of the survey, some district leaders explicitly mentioned how the Common Core State Standards and the aligned assessments need to work together to drive and inform instruction. Here is a sampling of their comments:

*The CCSS is a far better set of standards for many reasons, one of which is the alignment to college readiness. They are also vertically aligned which makes it possible to plot growth, which was never possible before. The downside is that the data is not granular enough to truly inform instruction and intervention... We need assessments that are formative and built directly into instruction, not another summative assessment that is primarily used as an accountability instrument...The CCSS is great; we need tools to help us help all kids achieve a continuous cycle of improvement.*

*We are highly supportive of CCSS. We are cautious about our state assessment. The assessment is unproven and not meaningful for students, or teachers. The assessment is not recognized for college admissions, nor does it inform instruction.*

*Our math teachers had a bit more of a buy-in to the [Common Core standards] than they have in the past, but not a big buy-in to the assessment. Their concern has been that valuable instructional time is wasted when the focus is on testing — and the testing platform is SOOO cumbersome. We have great tech support, great administrative support, etc., but we all really dislike [our state’s] laborious testing platform.*

Several district leaders made clear in their comments that they need more time to implement the standards and assessments before their impact will be known:

*Now that we have implemented our state standards that are aligned with Common Core, we hope that our state legislature does not make any changes to our participation in it for the next five years so that we can have hard data.*

*Next year will be a critical year in either (1) helping to restore confidence in assessments or accountability or (2) continuing a trend of decreasing confidence. Though most people are in favor of the new standards, the continued problems with assessment and accountability issues have caused many concerns. Often, the community does not differentiate the CCSS and the ways in which states and district[s] assess and report the results.*

## District Test-Preparation Activities for Common Core Assessments

### Types of test preparation

The survey asked district officials whether their schools had engaged in certain types of activities in school year 2014-15 to prepare students for the spring 2015 CCSS exams. More than three-fourths of the officials said their schools reviewed released assessment items (78%) and/or administered practice tests in a computer-based format (77%). Well over half of the officials said their schools had reviewed released scoring rubrics for open-ended questions (63%), administered formative assessments based on the CCSS summative exams (60%), and instructed students in keyboarding (60%).

**Table 6.** Activities in school year 2014-15 to prepare students for spring 2015 CCSS assessments

Activity	Undertook this activity	Did not undertake activity	Not sure	N/A
Review of released assessment items	78%	12%	8%	3%
Administration of practice tests in a computer-based format to familiarize students with their features	77%	13%	2%	8%
Review of released scoring rubrics for open-ended questions	63%	17%	15%	5%
Administration of formative assessments based on the CCSS summative assessment	60%	24%	14%	2%
Instruction in keyboarding	60%	26%	4%	11%
Administration of practice tests in a paper-based format to familiarize students with their features	40%	45%	5%	10%

**Table reads:** An estimated 78% of district leaders reported that schools in their district reviewed released assessment items during school year 2014-15 as a way to prepare students for the spring 2015 administration of state CCSS assessments.

**Note:** Percentages do not total 100% due to rounding.

The survey also asked district leaders whether their district, due to their experience with the spring 2015 CCSS assessments, had changed its level of focus on various test-prep activities in school year 2015-16. Roughly half of district leaders (46%–54%) reported that their district had maintained the same level of focus, and an additional one-fourth or more (23%–34%) reported increasing the focus on the following activities: administering formative assessments and practice tests, reviewing released test items, reviewing scoring rubrics, and teaching keyboarding skills. An exception was the administration of paper-format practice tests — just 6% of district leaders reported an increased focus on paper formats, while 16% reported decreasing the focus, and 46% said it remained the same.

**Table 7.** Change in test-preparation activities in school year 2015-16 compared with 2014-15

Activity	Increased focus	Same level of focus	Decreased focus	Not sure	N/A: Was not a focus in 2015
Administration of formative assessments based on the CCSS summative assessment	34%	46%	2%	10%	8%
Review of released test items	33%	53%	2%	6%	7%
Administration of practice tests in a computer-based format to familiarize students with their features	32%	49%	3%	2%	14%
Review of released scoring rubrics for open-ended questions	25%	53%	3%	10%	9%
Instruction in keyboarding	23%	54%	1%	3%	19%
Administration of practice tests in a paper-based format to familiarize students with their features	6%	46%	16%	3%	30%

**Table reads:** Based on their districts' experience with the spring 2015 CCSS summative assessments in math and ELA, an estimated 34% of district leaders reported that their district increased its focus on administering formative assessments during school year 2015-16 to prepare students for the spring 2016 exams.

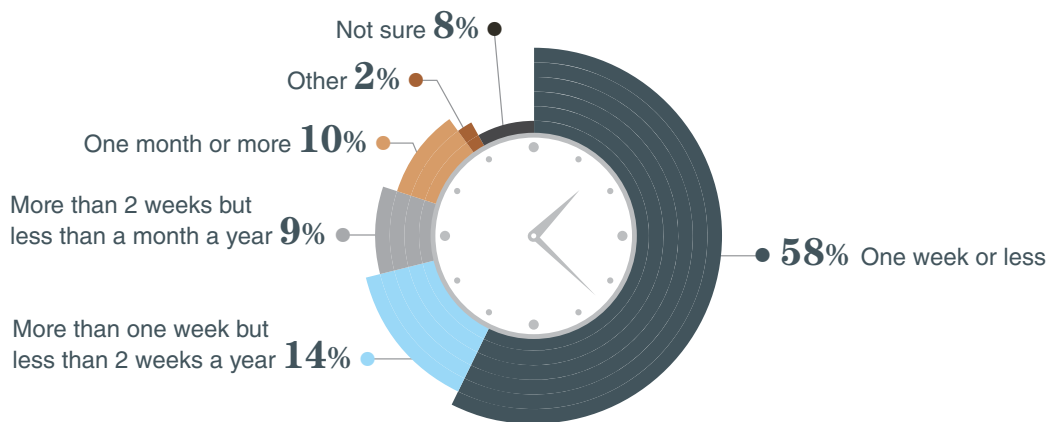
**Note:** Percentages do not total 100% due to rounding

### **Amount of time spent on test preparation for CCSS state exams**

District officials estimated that the average student in their district spent 6.5 days<sup>2</sup> on direct test-preparation activities for the spring 2015 state math and ELA assessments. Specifically, most district officials (58%) estimated that an average student spent one week or less during school year 2014-15 to prepare for these state tests. A much smaller proportion of district leaders (14%) said the average student spent more than a week but less than two weeks. About 9% of district officials estimated that the average student spent more than 2 weeks but less than a month preparing for the 2015 CCSS state exams, and 10% said their students spent more than a month on direct test preparation.

<sup>2</sup> To estimate the mean number of days spent on test preparation, each day range was ascribed a number that best fit the range description. For example, one week equaled 5 days, more than one week but less than two weeks equaled 7.5 days, about a month was considered to be 19 days, and more than a month was calculated as 24 days. These substitute values were totaled and then divided by the number of respondents for that question.

**Figure 1.** Estimated time spent by the average student in school year 2014-15 on test preparation for spring 2015 CCSS assessments



**Figure reads:** An estimated 58% of district leaders reported that the average student in their district spent one week or less during the 2014-15 school year on activities to prepare for the 2015 state CCSS math and ELA assessments.

**Note:** Percentages do not total 100% due to rounding.

## Administration of the Spring 2015 Common Core Assessments

Most Common Core states formally assessed students' knowledge of the standards for the first time in 2015, and the majority of these state exams were administered on computers. The previous spring, the Smarter Balanced and PARCC consortia had administered pilot tests in several states. In publicly released reports on the pilots,<sup>3</sup> both consortia found some problems with the online administration of assessments, including interruptions of internet connectivity, freezing computers or servers, and timing out of log-ins when the computer was idle, as occurs when students are reading long passages. We wanted to learn from district leaders in Common Core states if there were any widespread problems with large-scale administration of these new exams on computers in 2015.

### *How tests were administered*

Most district leaders (67%) reported that in the spring of 2015, their CCSS state assessments in math and ELA were administered primarily on a computer. Twenty percent of those surveyed said these tests were primarily paper-based, while the remainder reported a combination of computer and paper formats.

Most district leaders expected the state CCSS assessments to be administered using the same format in 2016 as in 2015. Where officials reported a shift, it was mostly toward computer-based assessments.

<sup>3</sup> Partnership for the Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (2014), PARCC Field Tests: Lessons Learned, retrieved from <http://www.parcconline.org/assessments/test-design/test-development/field-te>; Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (2014), "Test of the Tests" Successful: Field Test Provides Clear Path Forward, retrieved from [https://www.smarterbalanced.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/FieldTest\\_Report.pdf](https://www.smarterbalanced.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/FieldTest_Report.pdf).

## Technological problems with computer-based assessments in 2015

The majority of officials (56%–74%) in districts that used computers, or a combination of computer and paper formats, for the 2015 state CCSS tests said their school system seldom or never experienced problems with technology in the process. However, a notable minority of these district leaders (27%–30%) said their schools sometimes experienced difficulties with students logging in, unexpected log-offs from the internet, computers or servers freezing, or testing sessions timing out. Very few district officials (6%–10%) reported experiencing these kinds of problems frequently or almost always.

**Table 8.** Frequency of technological problems in administering spring 2015 CCSS assessments on computers

Problem	Never/ seldom		Sometimes		Frequently/ almost always		Not sure/ not available	
	Math	ELA	Math	ELA	Math	ELA	Math	ELA
Batteries of mobile devices (e.g. laptops, tablets) losing charge	74%	74%	9%	10%	1%	0%	17%	17%
Mobile devices (e.g. laptops, tablets) needing to be reset	65%	62%	16%	16%	3%	4%	17%	18%
Tests not formatting properly on laptops or tablets	63%	64%	17%	15%	4%	4%	16%	17%
Testing sessions timing out (e.g., during long reading sessions)	60%	61%	27%	28%	7%	6%	6%	5%
Computers or servers freezing	58%	58%	29%	28%	8%	9%	5%	5%
Unexpected log-off from internet	57%	58%	29%	29%	10%	10%	4%	4%
Student difficulty logging into the test	56%	57%	30%	30%	9%	8%	5%	5%

**Table reads:** Of the district leaders whose district relied primarily on computers or a combination of computer and paper formats to administer the 2015 CCSS assessment in math, an estimated 74% reported that mobile devices “seldom or never” lost their charge during the test administration.

**Note:** Percentages do not total 100% due to rounding.

In open-ended comments, a few district leaders mentioned other technology-related issues their students faced during the 2015 administration of CCSS state assessments. A few questioned the validity of tests administered by computer. Here are examples of these comments:

*Younger students can't type — much less “write” to any great extent on the keyboard.*

*Manipulation of math objects was a bit complicated for younger students.*

*Students had a difficult time navigating the tests online. They had to read, scroll, then scroll back up to reread. Many students found it to be frustrating.*

*I question if we are assessing the subject or computer literacy.*

## District Actions to Improve Learning Based on Assessment Results

### Overall changes in response to 2015 CCSS test results

A majority of district officials reported that their school systems used the results of the 2015 CCSS math and ELA assessments to take the following actions:

- Revise instructional strategies aimed at improving student achievement (67%)
- Tailor remediation services for students who did not achieve a proficient score (60%)
- Revise curriculum materials (56%)
- Revise teacher professional development (52%)

In addition, 36% of district leaders said that their districts had revised principal professional development using the 2015 CCSS test results.

Notable proportions of district officials (21%–31%) said their school systems were working on plans to make these changes at the time of our survey.

**Table 9.** District actions to improve student learning due to spring 2015 CCSS assessment results

Action	Yes, we have done this	No, but we are planning to do this	No, we do not intend to do this	Don't know
Revise instructional strategies aimed at improving student achievement	67%	21%	9%	2%
Tailor remediation services for students who did not score at the proficient level on the 2015 CCSS assessment	60%	23%	13%	4%
Revise curriculum materials	56%	26%	16%	3%
Revise teacher professional development	52%	29%	15%	4%
Revise principal professional development	36%	31%	29%	4%

**Table reads:** An estimated 67% of district leaders reported that their district used the results of the spring 2015 CCSS assessments to revise instructional strategies aimed at improving student achievement.

**Note:** Percentages do not total 100% due to rounding.



## Changes in curriculum and instruction in math and ELA

The survey also asked district officials whether the 2015 state CCSS test results had prompted their district to make, or plan to make, specific curriculum and instructional changes in math and ELA. A majority of district officials indicated that their district has provided or plans to provide professional development to teachers to implement new instructional strategies (82% for math, 79% for ELA) and to increase cross-disciplinary practices (59% math, 65% ELA). About half of district leaders indicated that in response to CCSS test results, their district had adopted or was planning to adopt new textbooks or curricular materials (51% math, 47% ELA).

Conversely, a large majority of district leaders said their district had not or was not planning the following actions in response to CCSS test results: contracting with a new or different math or ELA coach, increasing the number of math or ELA teaching staff, or hiring a math or ELA coach (see percentages in the table below). Nor were a majority of districts taking actions to change their daily or weekly schedules to give students longer math or ELA periods or give teachers more time to collaborate.

**Table 10.** District changes in math and ELA curriculum and instruction due to 2015 CCSS assessment results

Action	Yes, have made or are planning to make change		No, we have not and do not plan to make this change		Not sure	
	Math	ELA	Math	ELA	Math	ELA
Provide professional development for teachers to implement new instructional strategies	82%	79%	15%	17%	3%	4%
Increase focus on cross-disciplinary practices*	59%	65%	34%	30%	7%	5%
Adopt new textbooks/curriculum materials	51%	47%	44%	50%	5%	3%
Change the daily or weekly class schedule to give teachers more planning/collaboration time	40%	38%	55%	54%	5%	7%
Change the daily or weekly class schedule to give students longer periods in tested subjects	36%	33%	58%	60%	6%	7%
Hire an instructional coach	21%	21%	74%	73%	5%	6%
Increase the number of staff teaching the subject	14%	8%	81%	84%	6%	8%
Contract with a new/different instructional coach	6%	4%	88%	91%	6%	5%

**Table reads:** In response to results of the 2015 CCSS state assessment in math, an estimated 82% of district leaders reported that their district has provided or was planning to provide professional development for teachers to help them implement new instructional strategies.

**Note:** Percentages do not total 100% due to rounding.

\*An example of this activity is English teachers aligning some or all of their curricula with that of social studies teachers.

## **Additional comments about curriculum and instructional changes in response to CCSS tests**

Several district leaders made open-ended comments to the survey about curriculum and instructional changes in response to the results of CCSS assessments. While a few leaders mentioned positive changes that are underway, several pointed out that their district's ability to make curricular and instructional changes was affected by a lack of funding, instability in state standards and testing, teachers' attitudes, and teacher preparation. Here are some illustrative comments:

*We have over the past few years made some of the changes listed above (textbooks, materials, cross-disciplinary practices, planning time), and we are presently sustaining these efforts that began 3-5 years ago.*

*There has been a positive impact on our math practices districtwide. It is too early to determine the long-term effects based on the ELA CCSS both at the state and local level.*

*We need funding to implement the communication and instruction of these new standards — plain and simple!*

*Our state standards are in “flux” at this time, so all instructional decisions are on hold until the new standards are adopted by the state board of education.*

*Until the state consistently uses the same test, we are not making dramatic changes in our common core curriculum and district created/mandated assessments.*

*A universal website that houses lesson plans for each of the competencies would be beneficial.*

*With the teacher shortage, finding enough fully-qualified teachers and training them has become a significant challenge. Colleges and universities need to do their part to familiarize aspiring teachers with CCSS and the assessment process.*

## **General Views about Testing and Opting Out**

### **Length of 2015 state math and ELA exams**

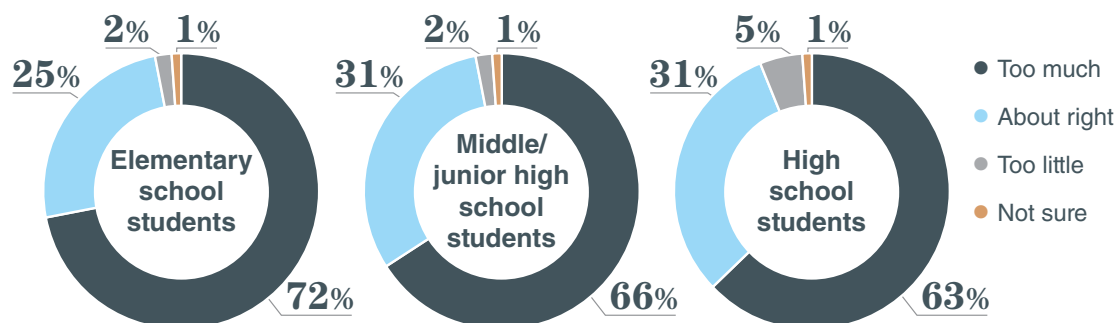
District officials were divided about whether they thought the 2015 state CCSS tests in math and ELA were too long or about the right length. Only two findings were statistically significant:

- In *grade 3* math and ELA, about 56% of the officials thought the tests were too long, significantly more than the percentage (38% math, 37% ELA) who thought the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade tests were about the right length. (A small percentage of respondents were not sure or gave “other” responses.)
- In *high school* (grades 9-12), 54% of district leaders said their state ELA test was about the right length, a significantly greater share than the 38% who said this test was too long. Moreover, the percentage of district officials who thought their state math or ELA tests were about the right length were significantly higher for the high school grades than for grade 3.

## Amount of time students are tested

When all types of education tests are taken into account — including district- and state-mandated assessments, teacher-developed quizzes and tests, and other exams — a sizable majority of district officials agreed that students are tested too much. Specifically, the percentages of district officials who said students are tested too much were 72% regarding tests at the elementary level, 66% at the middle school/junior high level, and 63% at the high school level.

**Figure 2.** District leaders' views about the total amount of testing



**Figure reads:** An estimated 72% of district leaders said that elementary school students were tested too much.

## Exams to keep, reduce, or eliminate

District leaders who said students spend too much time taking exams were asked which exams they would keep, reduce, or eliminate. Most responded that they would keep teacher-developed tests (87%) and quizzes (83%). About half (56%) said they would keep district-mandated exams, while 42% said they would reduce the frequency of these tests. Nearly two-thirds (63%) of district officials said that state-mandated exams should be reduced in frequency, while 22% would eliminate them, and 11% would keep them as is. In addition, 56% of district leaders said that they would keep other exams, such as language proficiency tests or college entrance exams.

**Table 11.** District leaders' views on which tests to keep, reduce in frequency, or eliminate

Type of test	Keep	Reduce in frequency	Eliminate	Not sure
Teacher-created tests	87%	10%	1%	2%
Teacher-created quizzes	83%	14%	1%	2%
District-mandated assessments	56%	42%	1%	2%
Other exams, such as language proficiency or college entrance exams	56%	32%	7%	6%
State-mandated assessments	11%	63%	22%	4%

**Table reads:** Among district leaders who said that students are tested too much, an estimated 87% reported that, among all the tests that are currently administered in their district, they would keep the teacher-created tests.

**Note:** Percentages do not total 100% due to rounding.

## District actions to reduce testing

Among district officials who responded that district-mandated tests should be reduced or eliminated, 61% said their school system is currently reviewing its mandated exams to decide which to keep and which to eliminate. About 10% said their district has already done this.

**Table 12.** District actions to reduce or eliminate district-mandated assessments

Action	Percentage of respondents
Yes, my district is reviewing our mandated assessments to decide which ones to keep and which ones to eliminate	61%
Yes, my district has reduced or eliminated some of our district-mandated assessments	10%
No, my district has not discussed reducing or eliminating district-mandated assessments	28%
Other	2%

**Table reads:** Among district leaders who said students are tested too much and indicated that they would eliminate or reduce the frequency of district-mandated assessments, an estimated 61% reported that their district is reviewing their mandated assessments to decide which ones to keep and which ones to eliminate.

**Note:** Percentages do not total 100% due to rounding.

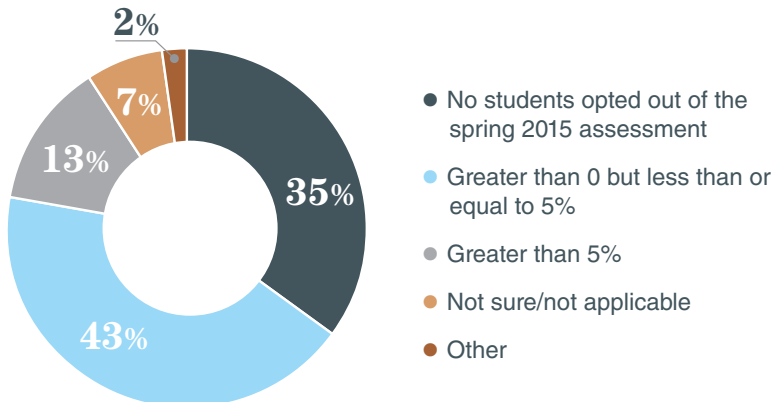
## Students opting out of state CCSS assessments

In 2015, several media outlets reported that some parents have kept their children out of taking state-mandated assessments. A recent ETS report suggested that this “opt-out” movement is small, except in a few states, and is driven by many factors including parent concerns about the amount of instructional time taken up by test-preparation activities, the rigor of the Common Core standards, high school students’ opposition to tests they feel are less important to their future than other tests, and the links between the state assessments and school and teacher accountability.<sup>4</sup>

Our survey asked district leaders about the extent to which students opted out of the 2015 state CCSS assessments. About 35% of district leaders reported that no students in their district had opted out of these exams, while about 43% estimated the student opt-out rate to be 5% or less. Approximately 13% of district leaders estimated that more than 5% of their students opted out of the state test. About 7% of district officials were not sure how many students opted out.

4 Randy Bennett, Opt Out: An Examination of Issues (2016), ETS Research Report, <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/ets2.12101/abstract>.

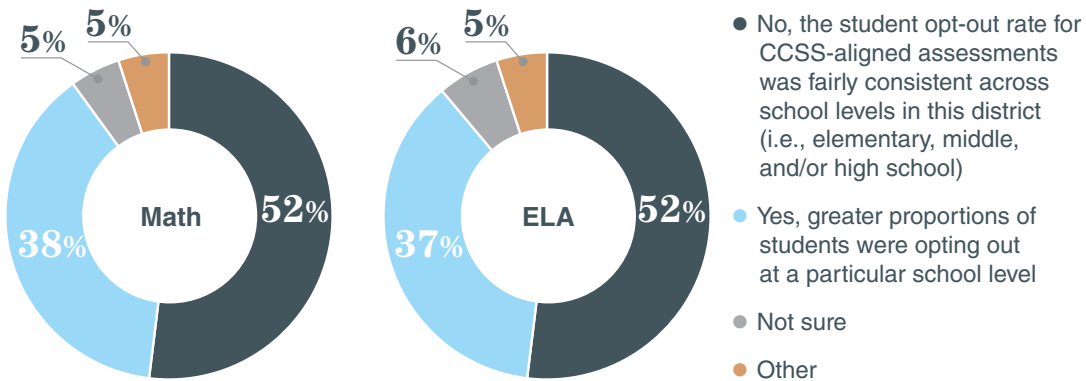
**Figure 3.** District leaders' estimates of the share of students opting out of spring 2015 CCSS assessments



**Figure reads:** An estimated 35% of district leaders reported that no students opted out of the spring 2015 state CCSS assessments.  
**Note:** Percentages do not total 100% due to rounding.

Among the district officials who reported that students had opted out of the 2015 state math or ELA exam *and* who worked in school districts serving students in grades K-12, more than half estimated that the opt-out rate was consistent across school levels. About one-third of these officials indicated that greater proportions of students were opting out at a particular school level.<sup>5</sup>

**Figure 4.** District leaders' estimates of whether opt-out rates are concentrated in certain grade levels



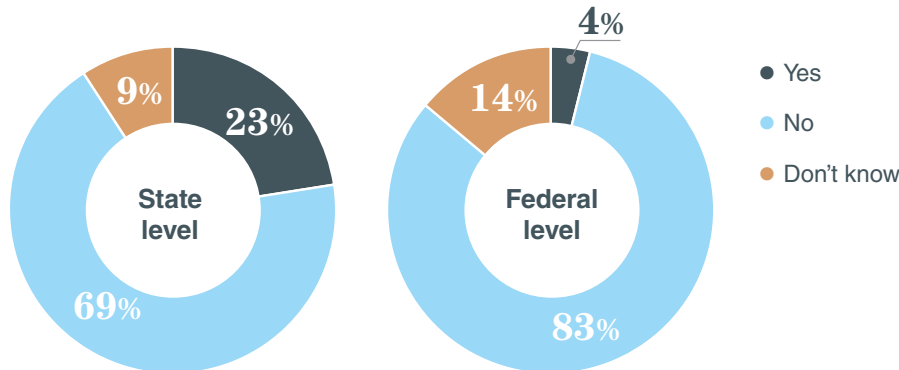
**Figure reads:** Of the leaders of K-12 districts who indicated that some of their students had opted out of the state's 2015 math CCSS assessment, an estimated 52% reported that the rate at which students opted out was fairly consistent across the school levels (i.e., elementary, middle, and/or high school) in their district.

<sup>5</sup> CEP's analysis only included leaders of K-12 school districts because those district officials are likely to be better positioned to compare across grade spans than leaders of single grade-span districts.

## District Leaders' Perceptions of Their Influence on Education Policy Decisions

A majority of district leaders do *not* believe their opinions are factored into the decision-making process at least most of the time at the state (69% of leaders) or federal (83%) levels.

**Figure 5.** District leaders' view about whether their opinions are factored into state and federal education decisions at least most of the time



**Figure reads:** An estimated 23% of district leaders said their opinion is factored at least most of the time into the decision-making process at the state level.

**Note:** Percentages do not total 100% due to rounding.

## Recommendations and Conclusion

The implementation of the Common Core State Standards and new assessments has impacted students and educators in school districts across the country. As this report shows, the leaders of those districts are also managing an array of issues as their schools implement the more rigorous CCSS and administer new computer-based assessments.

Several of the survey findings indicate support for the standards among a majority of district and school leaders, as well as progress in implementing standards and assessments. The majority of district leaders in states using computer-based assessments said their schools did not experience or rarely experienced frequent technology problems during the first year of testing. And despite the media attention given to the “opt out” movement, a large majority of district leaders said that few or no students in their district opted out of the 2015 CCSS assessments. Substantial percentages of district leaders said new assessments are an improvement over previous state tests and will drive instruction in positive ways, although many said it was too soon to make these judgments. Still, a majority of district leaders said the 2015 assessment results were being used to revise instructional strategies and curriculum, tailor remediation, and revise professional development.

Other survey findings point to issues that require action or improvement. In this spirit, CEP offers five main recommendations to state education officials and district leaders.

### **1) Engage in ongoing outreach to educate parents and other stakeholders about the CCSS and aligned assessments.**

Support for Common Core standards and assessments varies among stakeholder groups, according to district leaders. Past research conducted by CEP indicated that many states and districts conducted outreach about the standards during the early years of adoption. State and district leaders need to recognize the ongoing importance of engaging stakeholders in discussions about the purpose of the standards and aligned state assessments and their value in improving public education.

### **2) Listen to district leaders about how state math and ELA assessments could be made more useful to educators, parents, and students.**

District leaders appear to be withholding judgment about various features of the new state math and ELA exams. Between 40% and 55% of district officials said that it was “too soon to tell” or that they were “not sure” about how the new exams compared to the state’s previous exams, their impact on instruction, and usefulness of the student achievement information provided. State leaders should take note of this ambivalence, and should engage with district leaders to learn more about their concerns, particularly how the results from the state exams can be better understood and used by teachers, parents, and students.

### **3) Review mandated tests to determine which can be eliminated or reduced.**

A majority of district leaders believe that students are tested too much. Nearly two-thirds of district leaders would like to see the frequency or length of state-mandated tests reduced, while 22% would like them eliminated altogether. State leaders should review their mandated tests to determine which should be kept, reduced, or eliminated. To support these efforts, state leaders could seek funding under Title I, part B of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which authorizes the Secretary to award grants to states to audit their assessment systems and carry out plans that emerge from the audit. States receiving these funds must make subgrants to school districts for the purpose of auditing local assessment systems. In addition, ESSA allows state leaders to establish limits on the aggregate amount of time devoted to testing at each grade level.

Taking steps to reduce the amount of time students spend taking tests may lead to fewer students opting out of exams, and thereby enable states to more easily meet ESSA’s requirement that 95% of students participate in state math and ELA exams. Although 78% of district leaders reported that 5% or fewer of their students opted out of the 2015 exams, any steps that can be taken to reduce testing time could help quell concerns about over-testing and/or the value of testing.

### **4) Address technology issues associated with computer-based assessments.**

State and district officials should correct any lingering technology-related problems associated with administering state math and ELA assessments on computers. Although only small proportions of district leaders reported frequent technological problems with administering the 2015 state assessments on computers, states should make it a priority to address any technology issues that arise occasionally, such as student difficulties with logging in, unexpected log-offs, and computers/servers freezing. Failure to address these problems, especially when the goal is to test nearly all students by computer, may result in diminished support for the assessments among principals, teachers, parents, and students.

## **5) Listen to district leaders' opinions when considering education policies and programs.**

A majority of district leaders do not believe their opinions are considered at least some of the time in decisions about state and federal education policies. This echoes a finding from CEP's 2015 teacher survey, in which a majority of teachers said their opinions were not considered in decision-making at the district, state, or national levels.

District officials have deep expertise and can make valuable contributions to debates on K-12 policies and programs. State leaders, including state legislators and state school board members, should convene regular regional meetings of school superintendents to solicit their feedback on pending policies and programs and the implementation of existing policies and programs. At the federal level, senators and congressional representatives should meet regularly with the school superintendents in their state or district to obtain feedback on pending legislation, implementation of federal programs, and the impact of federal policies.

District leaders will continue to play an essential role in the administration of the CCSS-aligned assessments. As this survey and CEP's national teacher survey indicates, the administration and use of the CCSS-aligned assessments continue to be a work in progress for many schools and districts. As states adjust to the more flexible federal requirements of ESSA, district leaders will have even more ownership over school improvement strategies. How they incorporate the CCSS and aligned assessments into those strategies will be important to watch in the months ahead.



## Credits and Acknowledgments

This report was researched and written by Diane Stark Rentner, CEP's deputy director; Matthew Frizzell, CEP's senior research associate; Nancy Kober, CEP's editorial consultant; and Maria Ferguson, CEP's executive director. Matthew Braun, CEP's research assistant, tabulated the survey data. Leslie Anderson of Policy Studies Associates led a team of PSA staff who worked with CEP to develop and administer the district survey. Others at PSA who worked on the project include Alisha Butler, Natalie Orozco, and Yvonne Woods. We are tremendously grateful to the district leaders who took time from their busy schedules to participate in our survey.

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