

LEARNING LESS

Public School Teachers Describe a Narrowing Curriculum

A REPORT FOR COMMON CORE BY THE FARKAS DUFFETT RESEARCH GROUP



Executive Summary

This national survey of 1,001 3rd-to-12th grade public school teachers is an attempt to gather data about teacher behavior and classroom practice. The survey asked teachers to provide detailed reporting on what they see happening in their classrooms and schools: How are they spending class time? How does state testing affect what they do? Which subjects get more attention and which get less?

Now is a particularly good time to check in with teachers. For more than two decades, the nation has been implementing local, state, and federal standards and assessment policies in an attempt to make schools, districts, and states more accountable for student performance, and policymakers' interest in these types of reform has grown over time. It is important to know the impact of reform on the content of what students are taught. Considerable anecdotal evidence exists to suggest that No Child Left Behind era policies have had a dramatic impact on what does – and does not – get taught in today's classrooms. This survey attempts to put some numbers to those trends.

According to most teachers, schools are narrowing curriculum, shifting instructional time and resources toward math and language arts and away from subjects such as art, music, foreign language, and social studies.

- Two-thirds (66%) say that other subjects “get crowded out by extra attention being paid to math or language arts”
- Math (55%) and language arts (54%) are the only two subjects getting more attention, according to most teachers; in sharp contrast, about half say that art (51%) and music (48%) get less attention, 40% say the same for foreign language and 36% for social studies (for science, it is 27%)

All students appear to be affected – not just those who are struggling.

- 77% of teachers who believe math and language arts crowd out other subjects say this happens across the full student body; only 21% say it is targeted to struggling students

These findings suggest that curriculum narrowing is more prevalent in elementary schools.

- The vast majority of elementary school teachers (81%) report that other subjects are getting crowded out by extra attention being paid to math or language arts (62% middle school; 54% high school)
- About half (51%) of elementary school teachers say that when struggling students get extra help in math or language arts, they get pulled out of other classes; the most likely subjects are social studies (48%) and science (40%)
- 59% of elementary school teachers report that social studies has been getting less instructional time and resources (28% middle school; 20% high school); 46% say the same about science (20% middle school; 14% high school)

Curriculum narrowing runs counter to the sensibilities of teachers, who hold a broad definition of what a good education means.

- 83% of teachers say that “even when students are struggling, electives are necessary – they give students something to look forward to and are essential to a well-rounded education”; only 12% say that when students are struggling “electives may need to take a backseat”

Most of the teachers surveyed believe that state tests in math and language arts drive curriculum narrowing. They say that the testing regimen has penetrated school culture and caused vast changes in day-to-day teaching.

- Among those who say crowding out is taking place in their schools, virtually all (93%) believe that this is largely driven by state tests
- 60% say in recent years there’s been more class time devoted to test-taking skills
- Almost two out of three teachers (65%) say they’ve “had to skip important topics in [my] subject area in order to cover the required curriculum”
- 80% report that “more and more” of the time they should be spending on teaching students is spent on paperwork and reporting requirements to meet state standards

According to teachers, the seemingly singular focus on math and language arts at the expense of other subjects has led to other outcomes:

- 90% say that when a subject is included in the state’s system of testing, it is taken more seriously, and 61% say it’s easier to get money for technology and materials for subjects that are tested
- 80% say that their school has been offering more “extra help for struggling students in math and language arts” in recent years
- Among teachers who say other subjects are getting crowded out due to extra attention given to math or language arts, 60% say that the extra attention has resulted in increased test scores and 46% say it has resulted in improved student skills and knowledge
- Fully three in 10 teachers (31%) say this statement comes either somewhat or very close to their view: “High-stakes testing makes it too tempting for teachers and administrators to manipulate test scores – after all, their jobs are on the line”

The nonpartisan Farkas Duffett Research Group (FDR Group) conducted this research at the request of Common Core, and the FDR Group is solely responsible for the interpretation and analysis of survey findings in this report.

PART 1 **America’s teachers report** that their schools are narrowing the curriculum, shifting instructional time and resources toward math and language arts and away from subjects such as art, music, foreign language, and social studies. Science is holding its own; free-time and gym are shrinking. These trends appear to affect all students—not just struggling ones. Curriculum narrowing runs counter to the sensibilities of teachers, who hold a broad definition of what a good education means.

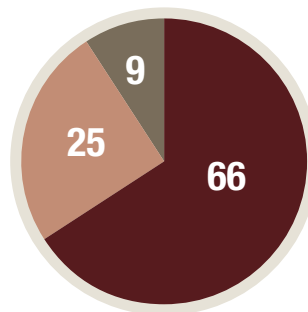
Getting crowded out

The findings from this survey of 3rd-to-12th grade public school teachers indicate that big changes have taken place at schools over the past decade, as instructional time and resources have shifted toward math and language arts and away from other subjects.¹ Two-thirds of teachers (66%) say that at their school other subjects have been getting “crowded out by extra attention being paid to math or language arts” while only 25% say other subjects generally get their appropriate share of attention. Eighty percent believe this has been going on for several years or more. And teachers say these two subjects are equal recipients of the extra attention (57%), with another 20% saying it primarily goes to math and 22% that it primarily goes to language arts.

A history teacher in a California school said, “We used to spend a whole week on the Boston Massacre, reading different accounts and eyewitness testimonies and things like that. This year I think I did one group project all year, because I needed to get through all those standards by April so I could start prepping them for the test.”

Nearly three in four (74%) teachers believe “electives, humanities, and the arts are getting short shrift because schools are putting so much focus on the basics.” One Chicago-area

Fig. 1 **It’s Getting Mighty Crowded**



Would you say that other subjects at your school:

- **66** Get crowded out by extra attention being paid to math or language arts
- **25** Generally get their appropriate share of attention
- **9** Not sure

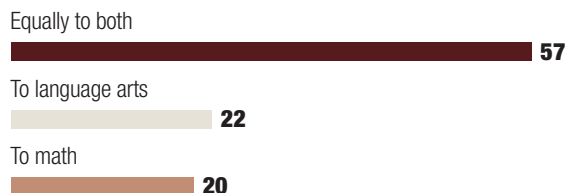
Note: Question wording in charts throughout the report may be slightly edited for space. Full Question wording is available in the Complete Survey Results. Percentages may not equal 100 percent due to rounding or the omission of some answer categories.

¹ In the survey, “language arts” was presented as “Language arts/English/reading”; throughout this report we mainly use the term “language arts” for the sake of convenience.

Fig.
2

What Happens when Math and Reading Crowd Out Other Subjects

The extra attention is primarily given:



It has been going on:



Limited Base: Teachers who say “Other subjects get crowded out by extra attention being paid to math or language arts” (n=667)

A history teacher in a California school said, “We used to spend a whole week on the Boston Massacre, reading different accounts and eyewitness testimonies and things like that. This year I think I did one group project all year, because I needed to get through all those standards by April so I could start prepping them for the test.”

teacher informed us that, “[Students] are taken out of their elective classes like music, art. They are taken out of those things so they can take an extra class in reading.”

MISSISSIPPI, THE COUNTRY?

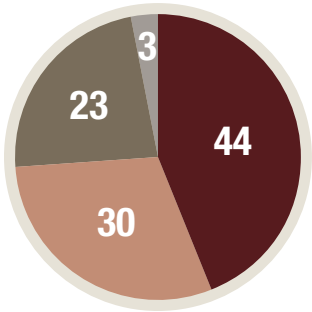
The general thrust of what teachers report is clear: there appears to be a focus on math and language arts in the public schools at the cost of other subjects. Teachers were asked to be specific about what’s going on: Which particular subjects are getting less attention? Which are getting more? Which are maintaining their fair share?

Math and language arts are the only two subjects getting increased attention, according to most teachers. Well over half (55% for math and 54% for language arts) report that both subjects have been getting more “instructional time and resources over the past ten years.” “I’m a language arts teacher,” said one 12th grade teacher in New Jersey, “So we are treated like kings. You can get anything you want.”

In sharp contrast, about half of teachers say that art (51%) and music (48%) have been getting less attention over the past decade; only handfuls say they have been getting more (5% and 4%). A band teacher in one of the focus groups voiced his frustration: “We are not even allowed to give them a grade. So [band] is already in the parents’ eyes just a thing they do. The same goes for phys. ed., all those classes that aren’t math, English, science.”

Fig. 3

Basics on Top



How close to your own view: Electives, humanities, and the arts are getting short shrift because schools are putting so much focus on the basics.

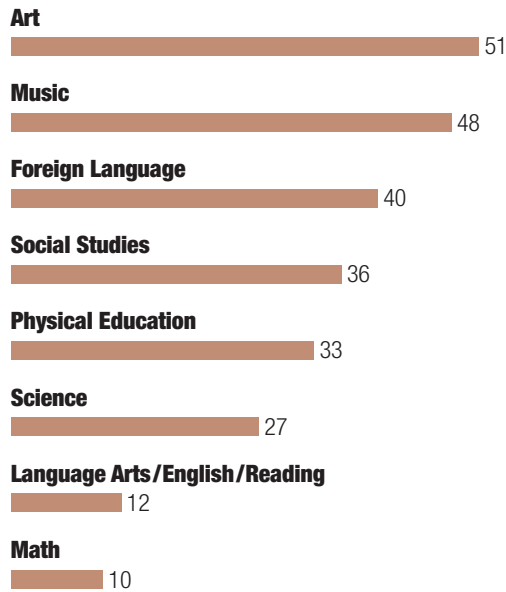
- 44 Very close
- 30 Somewhat close
- 23 Not too/Not at all
- 3 Not sure

Fig. 4

Art, Music, Social Studies—Losing Attention

Has [subject] been getting more, less, or about the same amount of instructional time and resources over the past ten years?

Percentage of teachers responding “less”



Limited base range from 713 to 918

Large numbers of teachers also say that foreign language and social studies have been scaled back (40% and 36%); relatively few say they are getting more attention (13% and 10%). A Chicago-area elementary school teacher said, “If I get to social studies that day, I get to it... It will kill me. Because I’ll tell the kids, when they are in groups, to pick a *country* for their group. And they’ll say, ‘We want Mississippi.’... They don’t know geography, states.” A sixth-grade teacher in one of our focus groups described how little cachet social studies has in her school: “Definitely in my system, math and language arts far exceed, because those are the tested areas in 6th grade. On our report card, if a child fails one of those subjects, they get retained, whereas if they fail social studies or science they would not. Our social studies program out of all the subjects probably is least important.... The kids take chorus...and they are allowed to be pulled out of social studies. They may miss an hour and a half of social studies a week just so they can be in chorus. It’s difficult to teach because half the kids aren’t there.”

Our social studies program out of all the subjects probably is least important.... The kids take chorus... and they are allowed to be pulled out of social studies. They may miss an hour and a half of social studies a week just so they can be in chorus. It’s difficult to teach because half the kids aren’t there.”

Science is the one academic subject that appears to be holding its own. The plurality of teachers (44%) says instructional time and resources devoted to science have stayed about the same. About one in four (24%) say science is getting more attention, and about one in four (27%) say less.

LESS FREE TIME

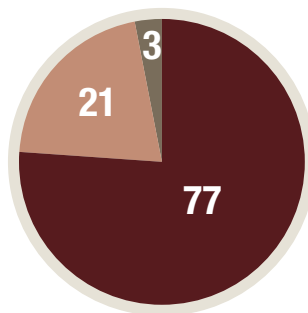
Play-time appears to be in decline in the nation's schools: 60% of teachers say the trend at their school has been to have less "free time for students during the school day, such as recess or study hall," with only 5% saying the trend has been toward more. Elementary and middle school teachers are more likely to report this trend than their high school counterparts (65%, 65%, and 52%, respectively). And in an era with so much focus on childhood obesity and health, even physical education appears to have ceded ground. One in three teachers (33%) says it has been getting less time and resources, only 8% say more, and 52% about the same. In California, one teacher said, "Talking about the kids being frustrated, they're only getting play-time once a week.... They need to get out there and play, not just 10 minutes at recess.... So they're bottled up.... And they have P.E. once a week?"

NOT JUST STRUGGLING STUDENTS, NOT JUST STRUGGLING SCHOOLS

In the policy arena, helping struggling students catch up is often the rationale for prioritizing basic skills. But teachers indicate that something very different is happening in their schools. They say that the curriculum narrowing they witness is widespread and affects virtually all students, not just those who have fallen behind. More than three in four teachers who believe math and language arts crowd out other subjects say this happens across the full student body (77%); only 21% say it is targeted to struggling students.

And what about struggling schools – is the impact on curriculum even more pronounced – in a school as a whole? In this survey, teachers who work in schools that did not meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) in the 2009-2010 school year – 29% of the sample – are only slightly more likely to indicate that their schools have shifted curriculum to focus on the basics. Teachers in these schools are only nine percentage points likelier to say there's more focus on language arts in their building compared with their colleagues who teach in schools that reached AYP (61% versus 52%). And, statistically speaking, there is virtually no difference in the percentages saying there's more focus on math (59% to 54%) or that the full student body in their schools is affected by the crowding out of other subjects (79% and 76%). If failure to achieve AYP would drive schools to engage in curricular triage and redouble their emphasis on the basics, one could imagine

Fig. 5 Across the Full Student Body



The crowding out mainly takes place:

- 77 Across the full student body
- 21 With struggling students
- 3 Not sure/something else

Limited Base: Teachers who say "Other subjects get crowded out by extra attention being paid to math or language arts" (n=667)

"I'm a language arts teacher," said one 12th grade teacher in New Jersey, "So we are treated like kings. You can get anything you want."

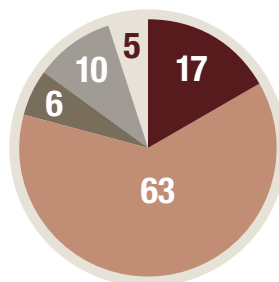
that these differences would be far greater. On the other hand, 57% of all teachers say, “Making AYP often means low income or minority students get shortchanged in music, art, and literature”; 65% of teachers in schools that did not make AYP feel this way, compared with 53% in schools that did.

THE BASICS ARE NOT ENOUGH

Curriculum narrowing does not accord with teachers’ values – a majority of teachers believe that merely ensuring mastery of basic math and reading skills among youngsters is not enough. Sixty-three percent say that “when students graduate without a solid foundation in science, social studies, and the arts,” the system has failed. Only 17% of teachers chose the alternative option – that “so long as students graduate with good skills in math, reading, and writing, the school system has done its job.” What’s more, the vast majority of teachers believe that electives are important even for youngsters who have fallen behind. Fully 83% say that “even when students are struggling, electives are necessary – they give students something to look forward to and are essential to a well-rounded education”; only 12% say that when students are struggling “electives may need to take a backseat.”

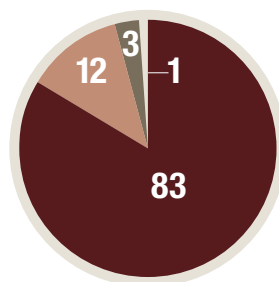
The importance of electives generated a great deal of discussion in the focus groups. Teachers talked about the role electives play in motivating students, building self-esteem, and tapping into their different learning styles. “You can connect to that student through the art or the music,” a Chicago-area teacher explained. “We had a kid this last year – we were doing the Constitution. We just made her illustrate the whole entire Preamble. She couldn’t learn it any other way...she needed to get involved in it.” A New Jersey teacher talked about how “loss of imagination and creativity plays a pivotal role in a student’s motivation.” This teacher went on to say, “Most of my students have not had an opportunity to get out of [this city], to experience something different. It is those experiences that actually invigorate a person or make you think of things differently.” Another told us,

Fig. 6 **Teachers: School Is about More than the Basics**



Which comes closer to your view?

- 17 So long as students graduate with good skills in math, reading, and writing, the school system has done its job
- 63 When students graduate without a solid foundation in science, social studies, and the arts, the school system has failed to do its job
- 6 Both
- 10 Something else
- 5 Not sure



When it comes to electives (music, art, sports), which comes closer to your view?

- 83 Even when students are struggling, electives are necessary — they give students something to look forward to and are essential to a well-rounded education
- 12 When students are struggling, the focus needs to be on basic skills — electives may need to take a back seat
- 3 Something else
- 1 Not sure

“You have your lower-achieving child that’s talented in art or music – how do you take that away from a kid that’s gifted?”

PREVALENCE OF TRACKING

It appears that tracking students by ability is still a prevalent, if sometimes unstated, policy in the public schools. In this survey 39% of teachers overall say their school has a formal system of tracking students by ability; another 41% say it is informal but understood. Only 11% say it's nonexistent altogether. Perhaps not surprisingly, the younger the grades, the more likely that tracking is perceived to be formalized: 51% of elementary school teachers think so, compared with 36% of middle and just 30% of high school teachers.

“You have your lower-achieving child that’s talented in art or music – how do you take that away from a kid that’s gifted?”

Still, despite these sentiments, teachers are not unaware of the importance of the basics, especially for students who have a hard time academically. But their equivocal response to a straightforward survey question may betray a reluctance to cede the point: 51% agree that “when students are struggling with the basics, it makes sense to focus on math and language arts even if other subjects are neglected” – but 46% reject this view. A science teacher acknowledged that, “These kids need the basics to do the work, just to read the text book or to do simple problems at the end of each section.”

GENERATION GAP AMONG TEACHERS?

In general, these findings portray a teaching corps that describes a narrowing curriculum. But those who have been teaching for less than five years are less likely than their experienced colleagues to notice any shift in educational priorities. The data show that well over half of newcomers (57%) say art has been getting “about the same amount” of instructional time and resources since they’ve been teaching; 54% say the same for music; 59% say the same for social studies. But looking at the next cohort of teachers – those who have been in the profession for 6-to-10 years – the data portray teachers alert to changes. Only 29% of these slightly more seasoned teachers say art has been getting about the same amount of instructional time and resources; only 39% say the same for music; and only 46% say the same for social studies. One explanation for these differences is that by the time the newcomers had entered the system, a different reality had set in, and their experience was shaped by the world they inherited. It also could be that by definition it takes more than several years to note a trend.

NO MYSTERY

These teachers describe the nation’s schools as having shifted their priorities such that language arts and math are getting more emphasis at the expense of other subjects, e.g., art, music, social studies. They also say their schools are implementing this shift broadly, rather than simply targeting students who are struggling academically. The distinctions they make among subjects are also important – not all subjects are losing ground or losing to the same extent.

Even when pitted against budget cutbacks, teachers say that tests are as important, and sometimes more important, drivers of curriculum narrowing.

Fig.
7

Generation Gap Among Teachers

Percent saying each subject has been getting “about the same amount” of instructional time and resources over the past ten years (if less than ten years, in the years you’ve been teaching)

SUBJECT	< 5 YEARS	6-10 YEARS
Art	57	29
Foreign Language	46	28
Music	54	39
Science	61	42
Social Studies	59	46

(n=135)

(n=180)

The natural question is: Why is this happening? In focus groups, teachers were quick to provide their explanations – state standards, testing, and the pressure to make AYP. The next section discusses the full array of survey questions dealing with these issues. It may be interesting to note again that the only other academic subject holding its own – science – is also the only subject, other than math and language arts, which is required by federal law to test students in elementary, middle, and high school.

MORE PREVALENT IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Looked at as a whole, these findings suggest that curriculum narrowing is more prevalent in elementary schools. Elementary school teachers are more likely to report changes in how and what they teach. They point to language arts as the subject getting the most attention and to social studies and science as the ones more likely to get short shrift. They are about equally likely as teachers in the higher grades to report rising test scores at their schools but even more likely to say skills and knowledge have improved. See Figure 8 for a comparison by grade level on each of the bulleted items below.

Elementary school teachers are more likely than teachers in the higher grades to indicate there has been an impact on day-to-day instruction. Specifically, elementary school teachers are more likely to say:

- Other subjects are getting crowded out by extra attention paid to math or language arts
- There's a trend toward more lesson plans that are tightly scripted and uniformly paced
- There's a trend toward less use of project-based learning
- They have skipped important topics in their subject area to cover the required curriculum
- That “more and more” of the time that they want to spend teaching is actually spent on paperwork and reporting requirements to meet state standards

Elementary school teachers are more likely to report that language arts—even more so than math—is the main beneficiary of extra resources. For example:

- They are more likely than teachers in the higher grades to say language arts is getting more instructional time and resources at their school; the same is true for math
- Among those who say other subjects are getting crowded out, elementary school teachers are more likely to say it's due to extra attention going toward language arts; they are less likely to say it's because the extra attention is going toward math
- Elementary school teachers are more likely to say both social studies and science have been getting less instructional time and resources

Elementary school teachers are more likely than middle and high school teachers to indicate that they rely on test data to improve instruction:

- They say their school “often holds staff meetings explicitly devoted to students’ scores on state tests”
- They report that teachers in their school “do a lot” with data from students’ state test scores

When it comes to witnessing genuine improvement in learning and test scores as a result of extra attention being paid to math or language arts:

- Elementary school teachers are more likely to say they see improvement in student skills and knowledge, but equally likely to say they see improvement in student test scores

Fig.
8

Curriculum Narrowing More Prevalent in Elementary Grades

Percent of teachers who say each of the following, by grade level

TEACHER STATEMENT	GRADE LEVEL			
	Elem	Middle	High	Total
More impact on day-to-day instruction				
Other subjects get crowded out by extra attention being paid to math or language arts	81	62	54	66
Trend in recent years toward more requiring of lesson plans that are tightly scripted and uniformly paced	54	44	43	46
Trend in recent years toward less use of project-based learning	41	23	14	25
Has skipped important topics in subject in order to cover required curriculum	72	65	61	65
More and more of teaching time is taken up with paperwork and reporting requirements to meet state standards	87	79	76	80
Language arts—even more so than math—is main beneficiary of extra resources				
Language arts/English/reading has been getting more instructional time and resources over past 10 years	68	53	39	54
Math has been getting more instructional time and resources over past 10 years	59	55	51	55
Extra attention is primarily given to language arts	32	17	14	22
Extra attention is primarily given to math	11	22	29	20
Social studies has been getting less instructional time and resources over past 10 years	59	28	20	36
Science has been getting less instructional time and resources over past 10 years	46	20	14	27
More explicit reliance on test data to improve instruction				
School often holds staff meetings explicitly devoted to students' scores on state tests	80	76	69	75
Teachers typically do a lot with data from students' state test scores	69	62	44	57
Genuine improvement in student skills and knowledge				
Extra attention has led to improved student skills and knowledge in math or language arts	55	44	38	46
Extra attention has led to higher student test scores in math or language arts	62	62	57	60

PART 2 Pressure to show progress on state tests in math or language arts drives much of the curriculum narrowing that teachers observe in their schools. Teachers say the standards and testing regimen—awareness, classroom preparation, and reliance on test data—has penetrated school culture and caused vast changes in their day-to-day teaching.

Testing ‘naturally’ leads to narrowing

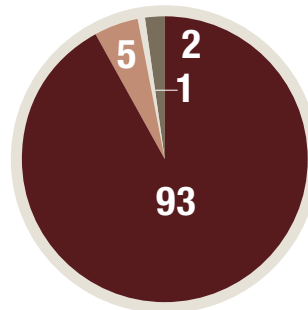
Teachers believe that state tests are the most important reason curriculum narrowing is happening. Among those who say crowding out is taking place in their schools, virtually all (93%) believe that “to a large extent” it is driven by state tests.

Even when pitted against budget cutbacks, teachers say that tests are as important, and sometimes more important, drivers of curriculum narrowing. Asked if they thought this narrowing is mainly due to “budget cuts and belt tightening” or mainly due to “pressure to show progress on state tests in math and language arts,” a plurality of teachers (36%) comes down on the side of pressure to show progress on state tests. Another 28% say it is mainly budget cuts and 29% point to both equally. A California teacher described what the trajectory of a school with dropping state test scores would look like: “If their test scores have declined for X amount of years, eventually there’s a whole series of punishments.... You lose your sports, you lose your electives, everything does get narrowed. It’s actually part of the state’s plan to narrow the curriculum in certain situations. And if all emphasis is on testing, that is the natural path that it will lead to.”

TEACHING TO THE TEST

Pressure to improve their schools’ test results has caused significant changes in the ways many teachers spend their actual teaching time. A majority of teachers (60%) say that at their school the trend in recent years has been toward “requiring teachers to devote class time to test-taking skills”; 30% say this has stayed about the same, and just 4% say it has declined.

Fig. 9 State Tests Main Cause of Curriculum Narrowing



This crowding out of other subjects is driven by state tests:

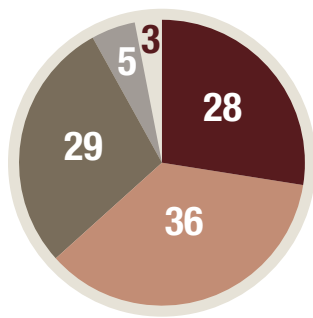
- 93 To a large extent
- 5 To a small extent
- 1 Not at all
- 2 Not sure

Limited Base: Teachers who say “Other subjects get crowded out by extra attention being paid to math or language arts” (n=667)

“All they care about from September until the test comes is test prep. It’s more about the scores than actual learning. Right from September, the first faculty conference is about test prep.”

Fig. 10

Budgets Are Not the Only Thing Driving Curriculum Narrowing



Think about the subjects that you indicated have been getting less instructional time and resources. Do you think this is MAINLY due to:

- 28 Budget cuts and belt tightening
- 36 Pressure to show progress on state tests in math or language arts
- 29 Both equally
- 5 Some other reason
- 3 Not sure

Limited Base: Teachers who say other subjects are getting less instructional time and resources (n=741)

In past studies conducted by the FDR Group, teachers in focus groups would warn that a likely outcome of high-stakes testing would be “teaching to the test.” Today, it seems, this is the reality in many schools. A middle school teacher from New Jersey described it as, “Three or four times a year they set aside a Friday to just do test prep, one day math, one day language arts, and nothing else. The entire school for the first two periods of the day will take a practice math test or a practice language arts test. And the following day they will go over it.” A New York City public school teacher said that, “All they care about from September until the test comes is test prep. It’s more about the scores than actual learning. Right from September, the first faculty conference is about test prep.”

MEETINGS ABOUT TEST SCORES

Moreover, state tests are influencing school culture at the building level, with administrators explicitly signaling to teachers that the results matter. Most teachers say their own school “often holds staff meetings explicitly devoted to students’ scores on state tests” (75%). This is true for majorities of teachers regardless of the subject they teach (e.g., science 76%; social studies 69%; math 76%; language arts 71%). “When we go in on August the twenty-sixth, we’re going to go over the scores from last year, and we’re going to start talking about raising these scores. And teaching to these tests,” one teacher from California informed us.

SKIPPING IMPORTANT CONTENT

According to most teachers, classroom instruction is increasingly driven by state standards and testing, thus leaving them with less autonomy over what to teach and sometimes forcing them to pass over what they contend is essential content. Almost two out of three teachers (65%) say they’ve had to skip important topics in their subject area to cover the required curriculum, an experience shared by teachers across subjects (e.g., science 68%; social studies 67%; math 65%; language arts 60%).

Even math teachers feel the strain: “I teach math, and I notice that a lot of times it is really difficult to get all of the content in as much as I would like to and in as much depth as I’d

Fig.
11

Consequences of State Standards and Tests

Here is a list of statements about possible effects of state standards and tests on teachers, students, and classrooms. For each, please indicate how close it comes to your own view.

Percent of teachers saying "very close" or "somewhat close" by subject

TEACHER STATEMENT	SUBJECT TAUGHT				
	Science (119)	Social Studies (112)	Math (126)	ELA (191)	Total (962)
More and more of my teaching time is taken up with paperwork and reporting requirements to meet state standards	73	78	78	80	80
At my school we often hold staff meetings explicitly devoted to students' scores on state tests	76	69	76	71	75
I've had to skip important topics in my subject in order to cover the required curriculum	68	67	65	60	65
In spite of curriculum standards and requirements, once the classroom door closes, I can still teach what I think I should	44	46	32	39	38
High-stakes testing makes it too tempting for teachers and administrators to manipulate test scores – after all, their jobs are on the line	31	37	31	27	31

like to before the [state test].... Sometimes the kids don't pick up on a topic as quick as I'd like, but I don't have a choice, I have to move on."

It's difficult to isolate the specific topics that may be getting lost, but the survey results provide hints. High school teachers, by numbers that are upwards of 80%, say that, by the time they graduate, their students will have read a play by Shakespeare (90%), studied the structure of DNA (82%), or learned who fought whom in WWII (92%). But they're less certain about whether students will have read the constitution (71%). Although 81% of middle school teachers feel confident that the typical student will have studied the causes of the Civil War, far fewer are confident they will have learned Newton's laws of motion (66%) or Greek mythology (56%). And while the majority of elementary school teachers (79%) are assured that students will have learned to read maps and name the seven continents, they are less sure about whether they will have read such classics as *Charlotte's Web* (63%) or studied the causes of the American Revolution (60%).

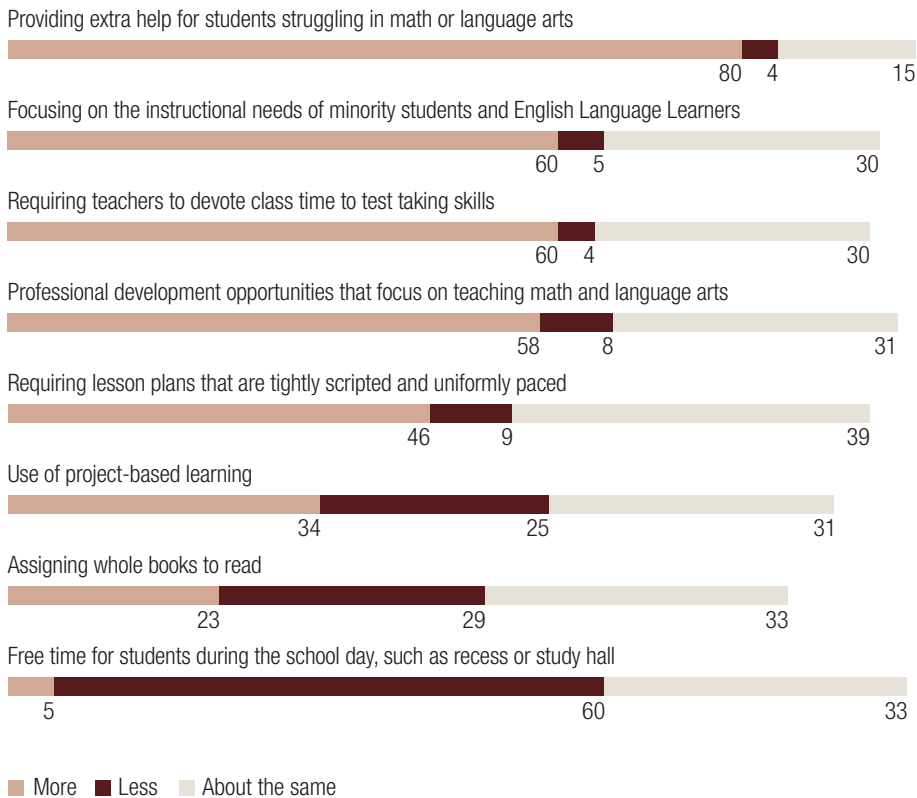
READING WHOLE BOOKS OR JUST PASSAGES

Some observers have worried that testing would lead schools to de-emphasize reading whole books in favor of the type of short reading passages found on exams. But only 29% of teachers say the trend at their school has been to assign fewer whole books to read, while

Fig. 12

Recent Classroom Trends

Trend at your school in recent years—has it been for more, less, or about the same for each?



“There’s all this paperwork I have to do,” a Chicago teacher said. “All these tracking reports with the reading and math tests and extended responses, that I have a hard time getting all of my units for science and social science in.... It’s always reading and math, because you need both to meet AYP.”

23% say this is more likely to be happening and 33% say it’s about the same. Elementary school teachers are more likely than high school teachers to say the trend has been to assign fewer whole books (38%, compared with 27% of middle and 25% of high school teachers).

What’s more, very few teachers (only 5%) say “our school doesn’t require students to read whole books.” About one in three (32%) say they let students choose the books they want to read because “the important thing is to get them reading.” And others (39%) say that their schools require some books to be read because “otherwise too many students would pick whatever is easy.”

AUTONOMY, PACE, AND PAPERWORK

Many teachers reflect on a time when they had more control over what and how they teach. Just 38% of teachers now agree that “once the classroom door closes” they can still teach what they think they should “in spite of curriculum standards and requirements.” “It used

to be, I shut my door, and I'm in charge. I don't think teachers feel that way at all now," was a typical comment.

As school systems increasingly try to standardize content, reporting requirements are also on the rise. The vast majority of teachers (80%) report that "more and more" of the time they should be spending on teaching students is spent on paperwork and reporting requirements to meet state standards. "There's all this paperwork I have to do," a Chicago teacher said. "All these tracking reports with the reading and math tests and extended responses, that I have a hard time getting all of my units for science and social science in... It's always reading and math, because you need both to meet AYP."

There's also a sense that depth is sacrificed, and that lingering on a difficult topic is no longer possible – because teachers must keep pace. A sizeable number of teachers overall (46%) reports an increase in "requiring lesson plans that are tightly scripted and uniformly paced"; 39% say this has stayed about the same, and 9% say it has declined. "Less and less are we given any autonomy in our own classroom to do what we see fit for our particular students," a Chicago public school teacher said. Another teacher in the same group described what she called "walk-throughs" ...where [administrators] come in with 'the checklist.' If you have the schedule on the board and you are not doing exactly what [it says], they are writing it down, and then there's a note in my mailbox that I wasn't on task the time I was supposed to be. What the heck?"

WILL TEACHERS CHEAT?

One feared consequence of high-stakes testing has been the possibility that schools will be tempted to manipulate test scores – to cheat – when so much is riding on test results. Intermittent press reports to that effect are, though rare, hardly reassuring.² In this survey, almost a third of teachers (31%) – a figure that is probably higher than one would want – agree with the statement, "High-stakes testing makes it too tempting for teachers and administrators to manipulate test scores – after all, their jobs are on the line." As a teacher from Chicago said, "Merit pay could be great. But...I think you would see a lot of honest teachers acting very dishonestly, because now you are evaluating me and telling me, you are going to get paid more or not get paid more based on how your kid is responding."

STANDARDS HAVE PENETRATED

The conviction of teachers that state tests are driving curricular changes may hardly be perceived as earth shattering. But the pervasiveness of the impact – the changes in the classroom instruction, the increasing oversight of what teachers are doing and how quickly they are doing it – is eye opening. Standards and testing have penetrated the culture of schools. Teachers are feeling it and classroom practices have changed. What about other outcomes?

Teachers have little doubt about one consequence of the testing regimen: When a subject is included in the state's system of testing, it is taken more seriously, say 90%.

² "Under Pressure, Teachers Tamper With Tests" *New York Times*, June 10, 2010; "Systematic Cheating Is Found In Atlanta's School System" *New York Times*, July 6, 2011.

PART 3 According to teachers, the seemingly singular focus on math and language arts at the expense of other subjects has led to other outcomes: they say that struggling students are receiving more attention, that teachers are using test results effectively to inform instruction, and that tested subjects are taken more seriously. Majorities of teachers also report that test scores in math and language arts—and to a lesser extent, students’ skills and knowledge in those subjects—have improved as a result.

Taking it seriously: one consequence of testing

Teachers have little doubt about one consequence of the testing regimen: When a subject is included in the state’s system of testing, it is taken more seriously, say 90%. This may explain why a majority of teachers (58%) report a trend toward more professional development opportunities in recent years focusing on teaching math and language arts. This trend is especially noteworthy among elementary school teachers (66%, compared with 57% of middle and 48% of high school teachers).

More than six in 10 (61%) also say it’s easier to get money for technology and materials for subjects that are tested. One New Jersey teacher said, “Last year I got a Smart Board in my room which makes it a little easier for me to move a little quicker and to explain things, it’s more visual. Math got it first, then language arts teachers, then everyone else.”

HELP FOR STRUGGLING STUDENTS

Because of the emphasis on state tests, additional instructional resources are deployed to help students who need it in the tested subjects, according to teachers. Eight in 10 (80%) say that their school has been offering more “extra help for struggling students in math and language arts” in recent years. A comfortable majority (60%) also reports that there has been more focus on the instructional needs of minority students and English Language Learners as it relates to test scores in reading and math. One teacher in California provides the extra help on her own time, saying, “If a child is having a problem I will stay after and help him.... I’ll stay and tutor those kids who aren’t getting it.”

Fig. 13 More Consequences of Testing

Here is a list of statements about possible effects of state standards and tests on teachers, students, and classrooms. For each, please indicate how close it comes to your own view.

Percent of teachers saying “very close” or “somewhat close”

When a subject is included in the state’s system of testing, it is taken more seriously



It’s easier to get money for technology and materials for subjects that are included in the state’s system of testing



The indication from teachers that students’ test scores and knowledge are rising, and rising in precisely those subjects that have been targeted for more attention, is at once commonsensical and provocative.

Greater attention may come at the instructional cost of other subjects, particularly in the earlier grades. About half (51%) of elementary school teachers say that when struggling students get extra help in math or language arts, they get pulled out of other classes, and 46% say the school finds other ways to help them. When these elementary school teachers are asked to name the subjects from which students get pulled, they most often point to social studies (48%) and to science (40%). Things are somewhat different in middle school. When students get extra help in math or language arts, according to middle school teachers, it is most typical that they will lose an elective (45%). Another 17% say that they lose their free period or study hall, 13% that they get pulled out of other classes, and 9% that they get after- or before-school tutoring.

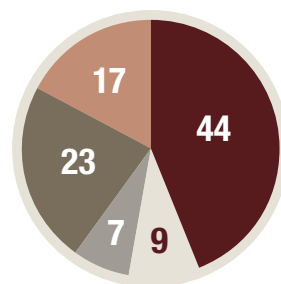
TESTING AS DIAGNOSIS

While education experts extol the virtue of teachers who analyze their students' test data and tailor instruction accordingly,³ teachers in past focus groups conducted by the FDR Group often complained that state test results arrive too late in the year to be useful. But these findings suggest that a change has taken place; most teachers report that test scores are routinely analyzed and instruction is targeted accordingly. Fifty-seven percent say that at their school teachers use test data effectively to help individual students; only 29% say teachers do very little with the test data they get.

Another indication that a reliance on standardized testing has taken hold in the nation's public schools is that fully 74% of teachers report that they are "always clear" where the tests they are required to give originate – whether it is the state, the district, or someplace else. Still, a not so insignificant 22% say there is "sometimes confusion."

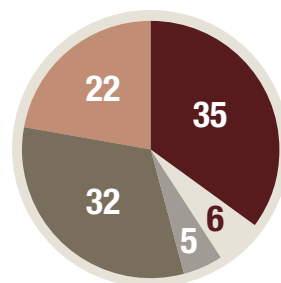
³ "Teacher Leaders At Work: Analyzing Standardized Achievement Data to Improve Instruction," by John E. Henning, University of Northern Iowa. tccl.rit.albany.edu/knilt/images/0/07/Henning.pdf

Fig. 14 **Teachers See Impact on Learning, Knowledge**



The extra attention given to math or language arts leads to higher student test scores:

- 44 For both math and language arts
- 9 Only for language arts
- 7 Only for math
- 23 There has been no change in student test scores
- 17 Not sure



The extra attention given to math or language arts leads to improved student skills and knowledge:

- 35 For both math and language arts
- 6 Only for math
- 5 Only for language arts
- 32 There has been no improvement
- 22 Not sure

Limited Base: Teachers who say "Other subjects get crowded out by extra attention being paid to math or language arts" (n=667)

DO TEACHERS SEE AN IMPACT ON STUDENT LEARNING?

Increased attention and resources have apparently borne fruit: Teachers working in schools where curriculum narrowing has taken place report improved test scores and improved student skills and knowledge in math and language arts. For example, among those teachers who say that other subjects are getting crowded out by math or language arts, fully 60% report that student test scores have gone up in these subjects at their schools. Almost one in four (23%) say there has been no improvement; 17% are not sure.

Educators often distinguish gains in actual learning from gains on tests, so the survey posed a follow-up question on whether teachers believe genuine knowledge has also improved. A sizeable number of teachers (46%) say there has been improvement in student skills and knowledge – an arguably higher threshold than mere test scores – as a result of the extra attention being paid to math and language arts. Still, about one in three (32%) see no improvement of this sort, and about one in five (22%) are not sure.

The indication from teachers that students' test scores and knowledge are rising, and rising in precisely those subjects that have been targeted for more attention, is at once commonsensical and provocative. Commonsensical because when resources, time, and emphasis shift in a certain direction, it's logical that improvement will follow. Provocative because it signals that public schools are neither immobile nor incapable of moving in response to public policy.

Methodology

Learning Less: Public School Teachers Describe a Narrowing Curriculum is based on a nationally representative random sample of 1,001 3rd-to-12th grade public school teachers. It was conducted in November and December 2010. The margin of error is plus or minus three percentage points; it is larger when comparing sub-groups within the sample. The survey was preceded by three focus groups that took place in California, Illinois, and New Jersey. The research was conducted by the Farkas Duffett Research Group (FDR Group) for Common Core.

Potential respondents were randomly drawn from a comprehensive database of 3rd-to-12th grade public school teachers. Teachers were invited to participate in one of two ways:

- 1) Teachers with e-mail addresses were sent invitations explaining the research and asked to complete the survey online. An original e-mail invitation was sent on November 4, 2010, and a follow-up to non-respondents was sent on November 8. A total of 14,000 e-mail invitations were sent; 13,012 were delivered; 808 links were clicked; and 688 surveys were completed online.
- 2) Teachers with mailing addresses only (no available e-mail address) were sent letters via U.S. Priority Mail explaining the research and asked to complete a paper version of the questionnaire and return it in an enclosed postage-paid envelope. They also received a

telephone call alerting them to expect the Priority Mail letter. The letter was posted November 15-17, 2010, and the last completed questionnaire to be accepted arrived on December 23. Priority Mail is more expensive than First Class, but it has the advantage of a special envelope – large, thick stock paper, and colored red, white, and blue – so it is more likely to be noticed by its recipient. Also, it is guaranteed to arrive at its destination within two to three business days. A total of 1,500 Priority Mail letters were sent and 313 completed paper surveys were received and data entered.

The list of teachers’ names was purchased from Agile Education Marketing of Broomfield, CO. The survey was programmed, fielded, and tabulated by Robinson and Muenster Associates, Inc., of Sioux Falls, SD. The questionnaire was designed by the FDR Group, and the FDR Group is solely responsible for the interpretation and analysis of survey findings in this report.

To help develop the questionnaire, three focus groups with public school teachers were conducted, one each in Walnut Creek, CA; Chicago, IL; and Hackensack, NJ. The purpose of the focus groups was to gain firsthand understanding of the views of public school teachers, to develop new hypotheses based on their input, and to design the survey items using language and terms that teachers are comfortable with.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SAMPLE¹

Number of Years Teaching

▪ Less than 5	14%
▪ 6-10	18%
▪ 11-15	20%
▪ 16-20	15%
▪ 21 or more	34%

Grade Level

▪ 3 rd -5 th	31%
▪ 6 th -8 th	27%
▪ 9 th -12 th	31%
▪ Mixed	11%

Sex

▪ Female	72%
▪ Male	28%

Race/Ethnicity

▪ Asian/Pacific Islander	1%
▪ African American/Black	4%
▪ Hispanic	4%
▪ White	89%
▪ Something else	2%

Urbanicity

▪ Urban	28%
▪ Suburban	30%
▪ Town	11%
▪ Rural	31%

¹ May not total to 100 percent due to rounding



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