

3 Reasons Democrats Shouldn't Support Rolling Back NCLB Testing



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In 2001, the *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB) established the use of annual testing in math and reading for all students in grades 3 through 8, and once for students in high school. Now, political forces on both sides of the aisle are pushing to roll back those requirements, and the accountability that goes with them, and Senate HELP Chairman Lamar Alexander (R-TN) has included “options” to do so in his draft reauthorization bill. Some blame the annual testing requirement as creating an environment of “over-testing” in our schools. Others object to their use in teacher evaluations and other accountability measures. Still others simply believe the issue should be left to the states. While some Democrats may be tempted to line up against testing out of frustration with problems around NCLB, there are three reasons why doing so would be to abandon progressive principles.

- 1. Rolling back annual testing, and the data it provides, would be taking a step to actively conceal achievement gaps —making it virtually impossible to address them.** Before we had annual testing, we had no way to measure the achievement gaps our system was creating and allowing to persist among low-income students, students of color, English Language Learners, and students with special needs. Instead, we allowed them to be invisible within our system, blindly passing children along without knowing if or how their educational needs were being met. The information we have gathered over the past decade has brought systematic gaps to light and allowed the federal government to hold states and districts accountable for allocating resources in a more equitable way—ensuring that our schools are serving, not ignoring, the communities and students that need them most. Saying we no longer want to collect that data, or hold schools accountable for it, would be an indication that we'd

prefer to be kept in the dark, sticking our heads in the sand and allowing these gaps to continue unabated.

2. Rolling back annual testing would allow kids to slip through the cracks, making it harder to intervene before it's too late. If you don't know that a child can't read until they reach eighth grade, it becomes a Herculean task to catch them up to their peers and prepare them for high school—not to mention college. Annual testing ensures that teachers know which kids are falling behind before it is too late for a course correction. And it allows school leaders like principals and superintendents to make changes if children's educational needs aren't being met. "Grade span testing" (testing only once in elementary, once in middle, and once in high school) would be a mammoth step backward on this front, allowing years of a child's education to be wasted without intervention to address their true needs. That would set up too many children to fail.

3. Rolling back annual testing would punish both kids and teachers who demonstrate significant growth and improvement. Annual testing is the only tool we have to monitor the progress kids make from year to year. If we roll back annual tests and replace them with grade span testing, or base accountability only on grade span tests, we will no longer be able to capture improvement—only whether or not a child is up to a certain proficiency level. That means an eighth grader who has gone from a second grade reading level to a sixth grade reading level would be given failing marks, with no recognition of the huge steps they've taken to catch up. And that child's teacher would be punished for falling short in the eyes of a static proficiency bar instead of rewarded for a job well done achieving dramatic growth. In essence, we would be punishing those teachers who are willing and able to make enormous gains with the highest-need student populations, by completely obscuring the progress they've made and simply labeling them with a failing grade as compared to other students their age.

Annual testing has a crucial role to play in ensuring that all students have equal access to a quality education in the United States. Proposals to roll back the current requirements are an overcorrection that would have serious consequences. A recent study from Teach Plus found that the bulk of testing fatigue, as well as most of the time spent preparing for tests in the classroom, come not from the federal requirement of one test a year from grades 3 to 8 but from additional state- and district-level assessments given throughout the year (a problem that's arguably worse in high poverty schools).¹ While there is a legitimate debate to be had about the quality of the tests used in our schools, and how we can improve them to better measure the skills needed to succeed in a modern economy, the purpose of annual testing is to simply make sure states are providing a high-quality education to every student. Removing that requirement and the accountability that goes with it would erase the gains we've made acknowledging and addressing achievement gaps that still exist, punish students who have greatly improved as well as their teachers, and invite states, districts, and schools to turn their backs on the neediest students without consequence.

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END NOTES

1. Mark Teoh, Celine Coggins, Christine Guan, and Tamara Hiler, "The Student and the Stopwatch: How much time do American students spend on testing?" Teach Plus, February 5, 2014. Accessed January 14, 2015. Available at: <http://www.teachplus.org/news-events/publications/student-and-stopwatch-how-much-time-do-american-students-spend-testing>.