

# **Intermediate Grades Assessment Evaluation Focus Group Summary**

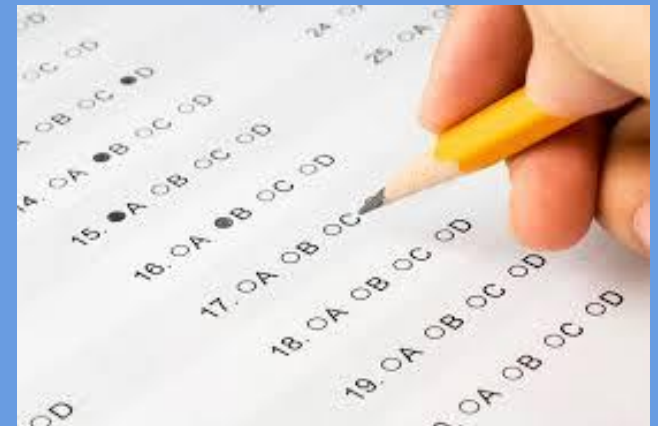
By: Kelli Lane and Selena Lawrence

# Assessment Memories

- We began by asking our focus group members to share out a memory they had of assessment from their own school experiences.
- A few of our participants recounted bad memories they had of assessment.
- However, several people stated that they enjoyed testing because they usually got a reward or free time afterward.
- Some reported that they were not always motivated to do well on formal assessments unless there was some aspect of competition involved.
- The overall consensus was that although most of them did not feel worried or stressed about assessments back then, the climate of testing today is very different.

# What do you consider to be an assessment?

- Anything that determines progress or mastery
- A tool to help decide how/when to proceed with that particular student or class
- It can be formal or informal
- Examples: quick checks, TCAP, weekly reading test, STAR test, social studies field test, writing assessment, math topic test, teacher-made test





aimsWeb  
(CBM)

1

Teacher - Made  
Tests

Least Stressful

Tripod  
Survey

Tripod  
Survey

aimsWeb  
(CBM)

WIDA

Tripod  
Survey

S.S. Field  
Test

aimsWeb  
(CBM)

aimsWeb  
(CBM)

Tripod  
Survey

Tripod  
Survey

Tripod  
Survey

aimsWeb  
(CBM)

TCAP

10

Most Stressful

WIDA

Writing Assessment

TCAP

TCAP

TCAP

WIDA

S.S. Field Test

Writing Assessment

Writing Assessment

TCAP

S.S. Field Test

# Results

- The least stressful tests were:  
AIMSWeb (CBM), Tripod survey,  
weekly reading tests, and  
teacher-made tests.
  - The most stressful tests were:  
TCAP, the writing assessment,  
& the social studies field test.
- According to those on our panel, students would probably rank stress levels similarly.



# Why are some assessments more stressful than others?

## Content:

- Lots of content because tests are cumulative
- Whole year's work comes down to an hour and a half of testing
- Sometimes assesses reading skill rather than the content area
- Standards too high for the majority of our kids
- Lacking background knowledge and life experience
- Kids struggle to put together cohesive written work; difficulty organizing thoughts or even finishing test on time
- Writing – fear of the unknown; don't know what the prompt will be about





# Why are some assessments more stressful than others?

## Technology:

- Insufficient technology at many schools
- Even kids familiar with tech aren't good at typing; small fingers
- Even if technology is available for every student, there may be issues with the number of people using the platform at one time.



# Why are some assessments more stressful than others?

## Environment:

- Some finish tests quickly and struggle with sitting there quietly until time is up; get fidgety; even difficult for adults
- Kids can shut down if they don't understand part of question/prompt
- Students can get stress from the teachers; we make sure they know how important it is and that there are high stakes tied to it; otherwise, they might just randomly bubble in answers
- Unfamiliar adults in classroom
- Disruption in schedule, even for those in younger grades



# Why are some assessments more stressful than others?

## Results:

- Assesses the teacher as much as the students; can be punitive if students do not perform well
- Kids are stressed & afraid they will not move on to the next grade or that the teacher will be fired.
- When kids come in well below grade level, even 2 years' worth of growth will not show up on TCAP, because it's still not at their level.
- Seeing how far we have to go is discouraging



# How useful are these assessments?

- Teacher-made tests were thought to be most useful.
  - These are frequently used to group students for skill-specific instruction and to plan whether to re-teach or move on to a new skill.
- Both focus groups found STAR testing to be very helpful as well because it gives information about a particular student at that moment in time and how best to meet his/her needs.
  - However, some did express concern about not being able to see actual test questions so we cannot see exactly what they are missing. Also, kids that score very high initially are being set up for failure because they being questioned on material that is significantly beyond their current grade level.
- TCAPs were determined to be the least useful measure because they do not give specific results and are not individualized to meet students at their own instructional level.
  - Additionally, results often don't reflect what teachers see in the classroom setting, so most teachers do not view this test as an effective tool for instructional grouping or planning.

# What is your opinion of accommodations for special populations of students?

## Special Education Students:

- Worry that the testing accommodations students currently have will be taken away in the future
- Special ed students most likely aren't going to be successful because the test is not on their instructional level; they tend to get frustrated and exhibit troublesome behaviors
- No point in testing children who are working significantly below grade level; not enough accommodation for them
- TCAP portfolio assessment is better for CDC students, if they qualify
- Read-aloud is not always helpful, if the child is too low to comprehend the language and content
- Some special ed students did have appropriate accommodations written into the IEP, such as reading aloud to self to stay on task.

# What is your opinion of accommodations for special populations of students?

## English Language Learners:

- Extended time could cause some students to miss lunch because the testing time was so long.
- Bi-lingual dictionary is not that helpful; they aren't going to look up every word
- Not enough accommodations for students who have just entered the country; TCAPs have to be taken even if they have very limited English
- Read-aloud does not give much time for students to process answers if students struggle to understand the language; they have to work at the pace of the reader
- Different levels of students may get frustrated if they finish early and don't need extended time, while others may need even more time; peer pressure could convince slow finishers not to take extra time they are allotted.

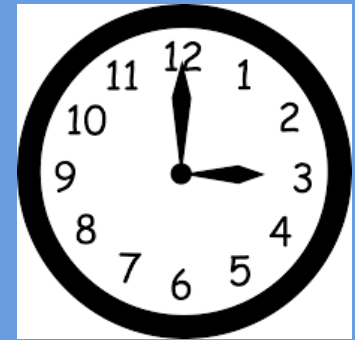
# What does “test prep” mean?

- Getting them exposed to and ready for the format/vocab of the test
- Teaching strategies for success (eliminate answers, tricky wording, which is NOT, etc.)
- Practice with pacing and test endurance; practice bubbling



# How much instructional time is spent on test prep?

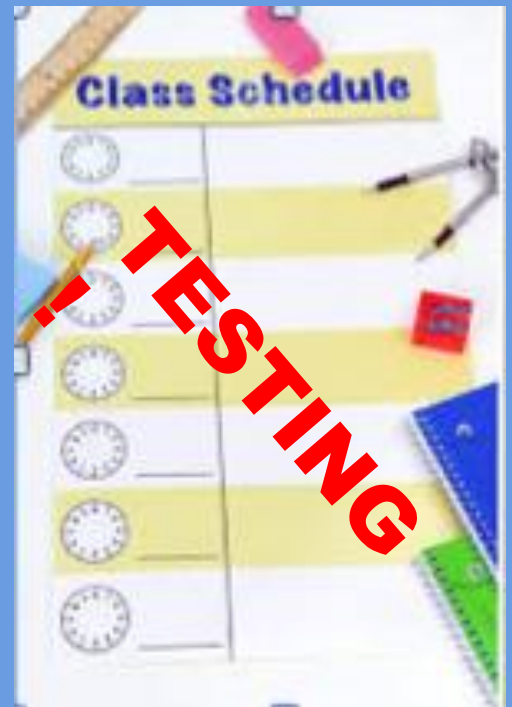
- The amount of time spent on test prep varied greatly among the members of our focus group. It ranged from 1-4 weeks of prep time prior to TCAP assessments, with many different methods being used.
- Teachers have to spend time finding or creating resources for test prep because textbooks do not cover all tested skills.
- Types of test prep: specific skill review and re-teaching, administering TCAP practice tests, whole group practice with accountable talk





# What impact does testing have on the teaching schedule?

- Most assessments aren't a problem but TCAP can be complicated with scheduling changes.
- No real instruction for the rest of the day because of the toll of TCAP testing
- Test administration time is stressful for teachers because extended time caused some students to miss out on activities and/or lunch.
- Significant loss of teaching time due to the amount of school-wide testing.
- Pre-test and post-test data collection for PLC meetings also takes up a good amount of instructional time.



# Testing Conversations

- Conversations about test results can be difficult to have but can have good benefits.
- WIDA and TCAP results come back too slowly to have real meaningful conversations.
- STAR graphs are a good visual to quickly and easily share growth with students and parents.
- Hard to discuss which areas students are struggling with when we are unable to see test questions or which skills are really being tested; makes it difficult to tell parents how to help their child at home
- Parents don't understand how their child can pass 3<sup>rd</sup> grade if only at a 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> grade level.
- It is important for all grade levels to communicate frequently and openly with parents so that they aren't blindsided by the info that their child is not proficient/working below grade level.



# Suggestions for Improvement

- Tests & textbooks need to align with content standards that will be tested.
- Give an identical pre-test and post-test of all standardized tests in order to see the actual progress that is made in that given year. This would be a more accurate measure of that teacher's effect on the student. As it is now, student deficits which may need remediation are not taken into consideration.
- Should field test TNReady test like they are with the social studies assessment; could possibly do a pre-test like they did with SAT-10
- Take out superfluous written parts. Why have a longer document when you can assess what they know with a shorter passage? Take out redundant questions.

# More Suggestions

- Shorter, more appropriate assessments for special education students
- ESL newcomers should be exempt from ALL testing in their first year, not just the reading segment.
- STAR testing should not ask questions more than two grade levels above the student's current grade level.
- Give teachers more information about the questions that are being asked on STAR assessments so they can see what their students are missing.
- Don't fire teachers based on test scores.
- Send students home to relax after testing.
- Policy makers need to give new things time to work before changing them again.

# Final Thought

“Much assessment and data collection is done because it is mandatory, not because it would be chosen by teachers to do so or to affect their instruction in a beneficial way.”