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Opinion: Why standardized STAAR testing at home and start of school year matters during pandemic

By Anne Wicks

The COVID-19 pandemic makes clear that policy without data is a disaster or, at best, a recipe for the occasionally effective. One-size-fits-all policies satisfy few, rob us of the ability to tailor support by subgroups of people and bring a host of unintended consequences. People across the political spectrum agree that we need robust access to high quality testing — for both the active virus and the antibodies — so that we can determine and prioritize the right interventions and guidelines.

The very same logic applies to testing students to measure academic progress as we move through and beyond the pandemic. Testing kids schooling at home as well as when they return to school buildings is needed while we navigate this disruption. Kids simply can't afford to lose learning because school is delivered differently.

Experts agree that the academic slide due to COVID-19 is real and significant. Parents agree that the abrupt shift to virtual learning was clunky and uneven. Teachers know that it was challenging to engage all kids meaningfully and consistently. It is also very difficult to know exactly what kids learned over the final two months of this school year — and what they will retain as we head into the next one.

Our nation's most vulnerable kids — children of color and children living in poverty — are likely to be the farthest behind given the reports of sporadic access to three critical elements: high-quality instruction, an adult at home to help students navigate distance learning and wireless internet and devices. Students need our best thinking on how to catch them up and keep them on track as we move through an unpredictable school year.

What is a key part of the solution? Test kids to figure out where they are academically as they reenter school. Use that data to figure out what they need to get on track and act accordingly.

It was right for states to suspend spring annual assessments and accountability ratings given the massive and holistic disruption of public education. But state annual exams provide a key tool to support recovery of learning that should not be ignored.

Testing is an instrumental part of state education accountability policy, but that is not its only purpose. Testing is a critical element of teaching and learning, an inconvenient truth for those seeking to abandon the notion all together. When the 2020 to 2021

school year begins, parents, districts and policymakers need diagnostic data to build the right interventions. Then, later in the year, interim and summative assessments will be needed to understand what is working.

Texas is one such state demonstrating what is possible. In late April, the Texas Education Association (TEA) released an optional end-of-year version of the state's annual assessment, the STAAR, which is aligned to the state standards. It is available to districts and, importantly, directly to parents, through early June for students to take online or on paper. Another version will be available at the beginning of the school year to measure what students have learned and retained since they left school buildings in mid-March.

The tests are voluntary, and the results do not count against schools or districts. Their purpose is twofold: first, the scores will help inform parents and districts about their students' academic progress during the 2019 to 2020 school year and serve as a diagnostic to understand where students are when they begin the coming school year in August. That information will help both parents and educators make decisions about the right student supports. Second, TEA will use the full scope of test results to help understand the statewide impact of the COVID-19 shutdown on student learning, important data that will help inform future allocations of public funding.

While some schools are acting nimbly and adapting to serve their students, there is no quick one-size-fits-all fix. But a learning recovery plan without student academic progress as the centerpiece is just nice sounding education-jargon noise. And it is a disservice to our children.

Knowledge is power. That is true for the kids growing up in these unprecedented times and for their uncertain futures. That is true for districts and state agencies determining how to invest their resources of public money, time, and people to best serve students. And it is true for parents who want their children to be prepared for prosperous, self-determined lives.

State accountability will likely change in reaction to the pandemic, but it won't go away, nor should it. States should use the high-quality comparable annual assessments they have in hand, right now, to support educators, parents, and their students as the Nation recovers and the next school year approaches.

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