



NEW JERSEY SOCIAL STUDIES SUPERVISORS ASSOCIATION

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February 20, 2015

Study Commission on the Use of Student Assessments in New Jersey
State of New Jersey Department of Education
Trenton, New Jersey 08625

Dear Commission,

The purpose of public education in a democracy is to prepare our students to be actively engaged citizens. The New Jersey Social Studies Supervisors Association works together to promote this purpose in districts throughout New Jersey. As an organization we are here to share with you our collective concerns about the impact the move toward high stakes standardized testing has had on our discipline over the last 15 years since the implementation of No Child Left Behind. Our primary concern is that testing has greatly impacted the time and resources dedicated to social studies in public education across all grades. In addition, we are concerned with the loss of resources given to social studies programs for textbooks, other resources, staffing, professional development and curriculum writing. Currently, teachers and administrators are trying to balance the time and resources needed to prepare not only for the new standardized test (PARCC), but other local assessments required by QSAC and the SGO process. Furthermore, we are concerned with the increased stress that PARCC has placed on our students as they attempt to balance their coursework preparation with familiarizing themselves with the new assessment. We are concerned about the impact of the technology needed for PARCC has had on our programs as PARCC needs have become the priority over all else. These concerns are summarized below, and includes feedback provided by our members from districts in all regions of New Jersey.

Loss of instructional time

Testing is impacting our ability to effectively provide students with a strong social studies education.

Resources, including money, time, and personnel are being redirected toward test prep, assessment creation, and administration of tests. Although the specifics vary greatly across schools and school districts, one thing is clear - social studies has been marginalized as the focus has moved almost entirely toward Language Arts and Mathematics. This is especially true in the elementary grades.

From our member survey:

While we have attempted to minimize the direct impact of testing on students, there has been a tremendous impact on PD time available to train teachers in methods of instruction and assessment that we believe will enhance student achievement. Countless department meetings, PD days, and faculty meetings have been devoted to training teachers in administration of the test, the types of questions that will be asked on the PARCC and having them design tasks that mirror PARCC

language. While some of these skills are in line with our 21st century initiative, the time devoted to this is excessive, and is taking away from our time to train teachers in other things that will have a positive impact on our student learning.

Time is a precious resource in our schools. Testing is impacting the time we have to teach social studies in the following ways:

- Time allotted in the school day specifically for social studies has decreased over the past 3 years, at all levels, but especially at the elementary and middle school levels. As more time is devoted to language arts and mathematics, time is taken away from social studies instruction.
- The expectation for explicit literacy instruction has impacted the allotted time designated for social studies instruction.
- The need for “test prep” has impacted the allotted time for social studies instruction.
- High-stakes testing, attached to evaluations, drives how instructional time is utilized. In addition to the focus on preparation for PARCC in our classes, Student Growth Objectives have impacted instructional time as teachers strive to also meet this requirement. In some districts, the implementation of SGO assessments are also a burden on teachers’ and administrators’ time and on the students’ time.
- Non-tested areas are given less instructional time, and the time in the non-tested areas is being altered to support the tested areas. For example, in one member’s middle school, social studies has been reduced to meeting only two days per week, while in other districts they meet daily. In many elementary schools, social studies is limited to less than one day per week. In fact, some elementary schools have eliminated a structured block of social studies entirely.
- The purpose of public education is to create informed citizens, which means that the social studies should be the center of public education. If students are to be prepared for a participatory democracy, they must learn skills necessary for deliberation and problem solving. Over-testing in ELA and math impacts our ability to do so.

From our member survey:

We have taken time from instruction to focus on preparing students to become familiar with the language that will be used on the PARCC RSTs, but we have tried to integrate this with content we are already teaching whenever possible.

PARCC has cut into teacher professional development time as teachers take the sample tests and are training on the administration of the test. Although I do not coordinate our testing, principals and assistant principals have devoted significant time planning and scheduling for the tests.

In other cases, the fact that the results of these local assessments are now tied to teacher evaluations through the Student Growth Objectives, means that some districts have devoted significant resources to the development and revision of those local assessments. And in most districts, time is taken from instruction to administer those assessments in class.

From our member survey:

We have convened an exam committee whose recommendations have eliminated midterm exams and reduced the amount of days needed to administer final exams. Final exams will now be cumulative and staff are engaged in the process of revising/creating new exams to conform to changing expectations. All this has consumed considerable time and energy among both faculty and administration. These changes were made in direct response to the loss of instructional time that will occur due to PARCC, including both the administration of practice tests and the actual testing cycles in March and May of 2015.

Student Stress

Members of our organization have reported that the stress of testing is negatively impacting students.

This stress is not only felt by administrators trying to prepare their staff and buildings for PARCC but also by the teachers who are working diligently to prepare their students to the best of their abilities and the students who want to perform well on all assessments.

From our member survey:

The amount of instructional time that will be lost because of PARCC. Teacher fears about the connection between testing and teacher evaluation can lead them to overload students with certain kinds of work.

The loss of instructional time and added stress to the students and teachers has negatively impacted morale. The time spent on professional development related to PARCC testing has also been significant and costly.

The main source of assessment data in the social studies comes from locally developed assessments.

Unfortunately, time to administer these assessments in some districts has been reduced in anticipation of the additional time needed to administer the PARCC.

Due to the increased amount of time required to administer the PARCC assessment, some districts are altering their local assessment calendars. In other districts, days allotted for PARCC assessments are being added to an existing assessment calendar.

Another source of assessment data for social studies comes from AP and IB testing. Some administrators are concerned that important instructional time previously dedicated to course work preparation for AP and IB testing have been lost due to the preparation and administration of the PARCC tests. Many students will be expected to spend 10 days during March and May taking the PARCC assessments and then also prepare and take the AP or IB exams in May; some of those students will also be expected to take final exams in June. For students who know that their performance on such assessments determines their options for future educational opportunities, this will create an inordinate amount of stress for them.

From our member survey:

I'm concerned about covering all that is necessary for AP and IB tests and the loss of instructional time in all classes. I am also concerned about the level of stress our students are experiencing as a result of the increased testing time.

PARCC/Technology

A concern expressed by school districts across the state regarding the impact PARCC has had on technology in individual schools is one shared by the NJSSSA. While districts have purchased a significant amount of new technology, it is largely dedicated to testing and test prep in many districts and has not necessarily supported the curricular goals in the social studies.

From our member survey:

Yes. PARCC testing has negatively impacted our availability to use technology in the building. Our major research paper project has been completely revised as we now have significantly limited time for media center research or computer lab time. PARCC testing required that the computers be locked down for almost two months. Other projects which require computer access or lab time have been eliminated or fundamentally altered.

In closing, we ask this committee to define the real goals of public education and then create an assessment program that measures its success relative to those goals. If our goal is simply to increase test scores because we fall below many countries internationally, then this system of standardized testing may be the best system. But the NJSSSA contends two things about this argument that has driven much of the educational reform policies we are discussing today. First, the data that ranks us below many

nations is flawed, and that argument has been presented by many groups who are challenging the reform movement. Other countries do not test all students. Second, social studies educators do not aspire to

simply create good test takers but to create active citizens who will promote our shared goals of democracy. Do we aspire to improve our test scores because we aspire to the economic and political realities of these other countries? Which country in the world has produced more, has the highest GDP, been the most innovative and led the world in its fight for freedom and equality? We would argue that a focus on test taking skills and discrete skills without context are limiting our ability to encourage the creativity, problem solving, and communication skills that will continue to lead the world.

Sincerely,
Noel Baxter, President NJSSA
NJSSA Board of Directors