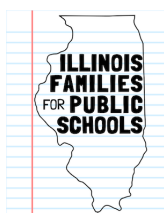


## Interim tests: What you need to know

The Illinois State Superintendent of Education is proposing to replace the annual end-of-year accountability test for 3-8th grades with interim tests given three times/year.

Illinois Families for Public Schools  
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### What's an "interim" test?

Since the No Child Left Behind Act passed in 2001, public schools must give standardized tests of math and reading every year. Students' scores are used for high-stakes ratings of school performance.

In the last decade many schools and districts have purchased additional *interim tests* (also called *benchmarks*) to provide additional data to predict how students will score on the state test and guide preparation for it. Some examples of this type of test are NWEA MAP, Renaissance Star 360, Fast Bridge and ACT Aspire.

Currently, about 70% of Illinois school districts administer interim testing, spending about \$50 million annually from local revenues.

### What can end-of-year tests tell us about what students know and can do?

Standardized tests that are valid for one purpose are generally not valid for other purposes they were not designed for.

Large-scale, summative standardized tests, like the ones used for federally mandated testing, can provide some useful information about growth and achievement over time, especially for groups of students—although much of the variation across groups is highly correlated with non-academic factors, like socio-economic status.

But assessment professionals are clear that these same tests cannot provide valid information to inform day-to-day classroom instruction or to evaluate whether individual students have mastered specific skills.

### What can interim tests tell us about student learning?

Commercial interim assessments have never been able to overcome the same issue that bedevils end-of-year tests. They can tell you about performance of groups of students or about individual students (e.g. for screening for academically at-risk students) but they cannot provide valid diagnoses of skills

mastery for individual students,

In fact, many interim tests produce results that are less valid than state standardized tests because i testing conditions are less uniform and test items are more generic

### **Do interim tests improve learning outcomes?**

No. There is now abundant research evidence that commercial interim assessments do not result in improved student achievement as measured by higher test scores.

Recent research on growth and achievement in Illinois districts (Chicago, Elgin, Rockford) even shows negative associations between high-stakes interim testing and student achievement. In June 2021 Chicago Public Schools opted to stop using NWEA MAP altogether.

### **Why aren't interim tests improving outcomes?**

The report output from interim tests is typically formatted as scale scores and percentiles showing where a student's performance ranks relative to other test-takers. NWEA and other vendors then pair this information with long lists of discrete skills.

Teachers rarely know the questions students answer or what a student's responses were. In fact, most test vendors treat questions as proprietary information.

Teachers also rarely get information that helps diagnose why students did not perform well on specific topics. That type of information is essential for helping teachers better understand students' thinking in order to improve instruction.

### **How might interim tests hurt outcomes?**

When test vendors publish test results as long lists of discrete skills, it encourages instructional practices that emphasize drilling students on one skill at a time. This is the opposite of what research shows about how children learn to apply skills and concepts to real-world tasks, tasks

that typically require collaboration, discussion, critical thinking and creative problem-solving that draw on students' intrinsic motivation and help students make meaningful connections to their own life experiences, cultures and communities.[1]

A major source of equity gaps is the systematic limitation of students' opportunities to engage in deep learning about complex subject matter instead of prepping them on discrete skills and academic content. Ironically, high-stakes accountability policies are driving the very gaps they intend to measure.

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