

Over the past few years I asked educators what they thought about local computerized assessments that their districts administer.

**Every district is different, and there are many different types of local assessments described:**

STAR  
MAP  
NWEA  
AIMSweb  
Achieve3000  
i-Ready

Many APPR (evaluation) plans have changed and no longer include these assessments for evaluations, and some districts have removed these computerized assessments/learning platforms from their schools altogether. Unfortunately, sometimes these programs/assessments described below are increasingly a driving force in the classroom. Many districts use the algorithms in these programs to make crucial decisions about the needs of the students.

**Allowing your child to participate or not is up to you.**

Some districts easily allow a parent to choose whether they want to participate, however some make it very difficult and force the child to advocate for themselves. This would be difficult for very young students. Since these assessments can be administered any day at any time, it becomes much more difficult to ensure your child does not participate. Districts will make the claim that it is part of the normal classroom instruction and cannot be refused. In those cases, sometimes the only avenue for refusal is escalating with the district through legal channels, or teaching the child how to politely say “I’m sorry my parents won’t let me take this assessment.”

**Questions to ask your district before allowing your child to participate:**

1. How much time will my child spend using the chosen program/assessment on the computers? What is the maximum amount of time kids can spend taking the assessment?
2. Is this program just assessments or are there lessons attached and given throughout the day? If so, how many minutes per week will my child be “logged on”?
3. Who will have access to the data? Is it a closed system (only district personnel has access) or an open system (the company providing the service has access to data)
4. Is my child's student ID being attached to his login information? (Student ID's can link to countless personally identifiable information that you wouldn't want the companies providing the service to have access to).

5. Can you use a "fake" name (or only the first two letters of the last name) to identify him/her when my child is logged into this system (reducing the chances of data mining)

6. What decisions are being made based on these computer testing results? Are you allowing the computer program to determine student needs or are you relying on the expertise of the teacher? (You could request that the teacher determine if your child needs remedial help BEFORE these assessments are given).

## **TEACHER FEEDBACK:**

### ***Achieve:***

"***Achieve*** has been a topic I have more and more opinions on as time goes on. When it was first introduced, it was a replacement to this absolutely horrid program the district insisted be used in certain Reading and Writing class. It was putrid and the year I had to use it made my skin crawl. But you know how it goes, district buys it, you use it. Reading and Writing was the Wild Wild West of the English department. No set goals or curriculum other than that dopey program. When Achieve came along as a potential replacement I was happy because it actually had words and cohesion. Instead of me doing a NY Times article and breaking it down and analyzing vocabulary, I could have the program differentiate reading levels for a unified conversation among students with a wide variety of ability levels. Not the worst thing. Unfortunately, this was the same year that APPR started, and the geniuses decided to use Achieve Lexile data as a way to measure my ability. Coupled with it being the new shiny piece of tech in the room, using it and the minutia of scrutinizing data became the way it went. For a student to be deemed educated under my watch, their Lexile level had to go up 55 points from the beginning of the year, which created many problems. First, as I pointed out to chairpeople since day one, we are taking a computer program to be 100 percent valid and treating these numbers as absolutes. Secondly, and the part that killed me, was the more obvious tie to data - the more students used it, the better chances they had to go up and reach that goal by the end of the year.

Even though we have thankfully gotten away from APPR nonsense, that overall feeling of "you must use it" persists to some degree. Achieve runs these dopey contests that offer some prize for students who complete the most activities or get the most questions correct. Every time these run, I pray that my classes come in last - if my students are able to do this, when am I teaching? The whole concept rewards the teacher who does the least.

I very quickly came up with a way to structure my weeks with Achieve in my 7th-grade classes that to me make it the tool it can be. Discuss the article, strengthen skills like taking notes and supporting a position, etc. Kids in my 7th-grade classes do 1 article per week which gives me the time I think they need in order to be taught either full class or one-on-one conferences with their writing (this is not the amount of time Achieve recommends - they would love me to do one article per day). For 8th grade, over the summer, I came up with a way to do what I felt my students needed to do in my class and to appease the Achieve gods. First day back, we heard that APPR was off the table, and I realized I was thankfully no longer a slave to the program.

It was awesome. I've treated it like an in-class workshop and have been happy with it. The kids are too - they are burnt out by it.

I did quickly take a look at the mid-year assessments that my 8th graders took despite me not using Achieve at all since September. Some kids went up, some stayed the same (hilariously, the program gives scores that say that a student's Lexile level went down which is logically impossible). The interesting thing is that Achieve is pretty upfront with saying that a student's growth in terms of Lexile does have to do with activities completed. They say they have to consistently get questions right to demonstrate mastery to then move up, but without seeing their exact logarithm for determining this growth who knows. They could very well use the number of activities a student completes, regardless of success, to demonstrate growth as a way to encourage students to use it more (like those contests...use it more and the more your Lexile goes up, thus validating the program)."

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## **STAR**

I teach AIS. I'm ELA 7-12 certified, and I work with a reading teacher. Last year we used **STAR** and found it totally useless. The data is unreliable, difficult to understand, and the reading comprehension questions are definitely not developmentally appropriate. The poor kids had to decipher layers of semantics just to attempt to answer these questions. Keep in mind, these kids come to us with 3rd and 4th-grade reading levels. Besides being totally bewildered by the data, we felt like we couldn't share this unreliable data with parents, there was no way to go back and use the results to drive instruction, and the lessons were a joke- pretty much non-existent.

I teach HS math and computer science. I think they are a waste of time. Students do not take them seriously and they have provided me no instructional value in my classes. SLOs for the purpose of APPR are a complete game. At the HS level, it is completely unfair because a teacher who has lab classes will never get the same scores as someone with honors classes.

I am a first-grade teacher for 20 years. Our district uses **STAR**. A couple of years ago I had 26 students in my class ~ the results stated 96% were on grade level or above and yet I was at risk of being an ineffective teacher because the district uses the Growth Percentage Average in our evaluations. None of this makes sense.

My district uses **STAR** assessments as our local measures. Here are some things that concern many of us:

1. STAR assessments are computer-based and require the use of headphones for our students to take the tests simultaneously. In my personal experience, my students have had issues with volume not working on the computer or with the headphones (parent provided, btw, not district-provided). If the students are young or English language learners, then they don't often tell the teachers that there is no volume until after the test is over.
2. STAR assessments are only 50% accurate in their predictions on where a child is and where they are projected to be at the end of the school year and yet we are to use them to make our SLO projections.
3. The Early Literacy tests (K-1) are read to the students (makes no difference if the student is an ELL) but the math (which is written above grade level) are not.
4. The math test is quite wordy. In first grade, the test contains arrays, multiplication, time to the minute and money that is not part of the Common Core curriculum. The kids wildly guess at answers or cry. Teachers at other grade levels have found the same thing with the math.
5. Students often guess at answers just to complete the test and get it over with. This impacts the accuracy. Some students have finished in under a minute and we know they are just clicking through it. This impacts 20% of our APPR

My K-2 Spec Ed class for kids on the autism spectrum is required to take **STAR** on the computer...ridiculous I know...but furthermore many kindergarteners have never even seen a mouse before (most children are used to touch screen devices), yet they have to use it to click on the correct answers.

## ***AimsWeb***

I teach first grade. We have been giving ***AimsWeb*** since APPR started. It is a waste of 3 instructional periods per year and actually 6 because we have to do our own assessments to really know the kids. AimsWeb is timed and some kids do not get an accurate score. Also, my district started using a program called iReady last year. It's a scholastic program. I think it may be one of the programs being talked about - computer-based - teach then test. We are "encouraged" to do it 60 minutes a week and to advise kids to sit at the same computer each time. That also is a waste of instructional time for some students. My students who can't focus well do very poorly and score very low...when, in reality, they are very good readers and score well on an assessment that I give.

I am a 5th-grade teacher and former 6th grade ELA teacher. I have administered both ***NWEA and AIMSWeb*** and find neither serves any purpose in guiding my instruction. Both take away valuable classroom time. They don't tell me anything I don't already know about my students through daily instruction.

We use ***SRI***, younger grades used ***AimsWeb***. SRI, is individualized, close like passages, where students need to identify words (vocabulary) to fit the paragraph. There's no assessment of fluency, decoding, or comprehension. Passages are supposed to progressively become more challenging as the students are working if the student is doing well. Scores and ranges are very broad, and often do not line up with their guided reading level.

***AIMSWeb*** is given 3x a year in grades k-2. Measures reading fluency. It does not test comprehension. I hate it because some children are slower readers, but have excellent comprehension. So if they miss the target, it makes them, and us look terrible.

Plainview uses ***AIMSweb***. In grade two it is the RCBM subtest, which has kids read 3 different stories for one or two minutes each, 3 times a year to mark progress in # or word read correctly. As an SLO goes, it's relatively painless and fast, takes very little away from instructional time, and generally, kids are able to show some growth, leading to a positive outcome for the teacher. In first grade, they use a different subtest, also equally relatively quick and painless for students and teachers. If an SLO is a necessary evil, then the way these are designed to have my vote. They don't give much information in terms of instructional value, but they don't cause much harm either, IMO.

## ***NWEA***

In a perfect world, the ***NWEA*** can be used to assess comprehension skills and reading level, as it adjusts the difficulty as the student tests. In the real world, students learn early on that the test will get easier if you just keep clicking the wrong answer - so that's what they do so they can finish faster. In a perfect world, students want to do their very best and care about their results. In the real world, the students know that the test has absolutely no meaning for them, and does

not affect them in any way - so they slog through it, without really paying much attention, not caring about the results. They recognize that the test bears no resemblance, nor does it connect in any meaningful way to what they are learning in the classroom.

**NWEA** is used in my school and from fellow teachers directly involved, they aren't fans. It certainly can't be used to drive the curriculum as many admins often claim.

### ***iReady***

In my public NYC middle school, we have used a program called ***iReady***. It is adaptive so that it gets easier or harder depending on whether students get answers right or wrong. Well, students have already figured out that if you get a few answers wrong in the beginning it makes the test much easier so they do it on purpose.

Another irony is that students will try to open up different windows to listen to music or play games, so they need more, not less supervision when using these laptops.

### ***Other***

I'm an art teacher. I now have to give a test to many of my students because of APPR. This year it is 2nd and 3rd grades (about 185 students). According to our APPR agreement I have to choose my 2 largest groups of students and test at least 50% of my students. I have to give a pretest in September. That is the worst part. We know they are going to fail that test. They haven't been taught that material yet. We the art teachers wrote the tests and the goals and we feel awful about it, but this is what we are FORCED to do. The students have to have a baseline assessment so that at the end of the year when they take the final test we can show they have learned the material and improved. We only have art class once every 6 days in elementary school. That means that the maximum amount of times I have a class per year is 30. In reality that amount is more like 26 when you factor in field trips and other school activities that would cause kids to miss their art day. Now I have to subtract 2 more classes for testing. It kills me. All of the "specials" teachers are upset. Then we have to devote hours and hours to grading these tests that we could spend on planning for teaching or other activities beneficial to the students. We have to test prep in art, music, phys ed, library, & foreign language. We have to tailor lessons to the test and review for the test too. If we don't and the kids don't score higher on the final test, our jobs could be at risk. According to Common Core, I am supposed to contribute to teaching math and English to my students in those few classes that I actually see them each year. Now they lose even more time that they could be actually making art because I have to have reading and math activities incorporated into my ART lessons. I have always incorporated interdisciplinary lessons into the curriculum whenever possible. I didn't need Common Core to tell me how to be a good teacher. I love kids. I love teaching. I hate APPR and testing as it is now. This is not good for kids.

**NYC** - In my school we do:

**Scantron (online testing)** - ELA & Math (takes anywhere from 1-3 periods to complete. In ELA, the higher the reading level, the longer it takes. Administered twice a year (but I've heard up to 3 times a year) - September-October, then anywhere from Feb-end of May. PROBLEMS: Once you're done, you have to sit around and wait for others. It tests a student's reading up to 9.9 (9th-grade reader in the 9th month of school). So how is it that kids are testing at 9.9, but are getting 2's on the ELA?...A kid could test at 9.9 in September and then in February, test at 7.2. They didn't have 2 years and 7 months of reading loss in 5 months. So if this becomes our "local" measure, it's another inaccurate system. DRP (new to our school this year, bubbles). It stands for Degrees of Reading Power. They were given the test in September and we haven't gotten results yet...We were supposed to get them a week later. PROBLEMS: It's pointless. Takes anywhere from 1-3 periods to complete. Basically, tests were administered and taken so someone could get a contract. Waste of time, waste of \$. 3 months later, no results still.

Here is how this all influences me as someone who does NOT teach a regents class. Let me set the stage. I created a program in my district. It is a 4-year program. I get kids in the 9th grade and they stay w/ me until they are in 12th grade. It is an amazing program where I teach them how to do research, present, write a paper, etc. Because the 9th-grade program is the largest number of kids that is where my accountability group is. So, I start the year w/ them giving them a baseline test that I designed and that was approved by my admin. The kids all get 30's and 40's on it. As much as I tell them don't worry this will not go in the grade book, they worry (two years ago I had a kid w/ an anxiety disorder and he was pulling his hair out as he was taking this baseline test the 2nd day of school, I finally took the test from him as he stayed after class 10 minutes to finish it. I exempted him from the final exam because he had just gotten out of the hospital, so I got a zero for him on my score - no biggie I could have cared less).

Does the test give me diagnostic info? No, because I ALREADY KNOW THEY have NO knowledge base in the research process (I know they have basic knowledge - scientific method etc). For me, the way that I see "growth" in my kids is as they move up in grade level they are able to work independently on their own. I set the foundation for the house in 9th grade and by 10-12th grade, I don't even have to teach them anymore. I can tell them to conduct a statistical test and they do it, they can conduct all parts of a research study, start to finish by grade 10 (where they begin to work on a 3-year INTEL research project)

Yes, I do test prep because their test grades mean my job! So, with 2 weeks left in the year, instead of moving them on in the research process, I have to stop, give them review for the final (which is where my growth is evaluated). In my district, we negotiated a 20 point growth from the pre-test to the post-test (this is the 20% local for me). Luckily most do, but yes I test prep them w/ a review sheet and class review for the final. It sucks and I always have a knot in my stomach when they are taking the final.

SLOs are a waste of my time. I see the kids only once a week for a lesson. I would rather not give up a week for pre and another week for post-assessment.

Our 5th grade ELA back up SLO is **Ready NY** assessment- awful, just as bad if not worse than the NYS ELA exam.

SLOs are very appropriate in the middle school where I teach. Maybe because teachers write them and know the curriculum and therefore test the kids on the content they taught. But we don't do a pretest. What's the point? We just "predict" students' scores based on in-class assessments and performance and hope they perform the same or better on an SLO.

I teach 10-12th grade English. Our local SLOs are writing assignments that we created on an SLO committee. In general, we like this form of assessment as a staff and used to do something similar before APPR existed as a way to judge a student's writing ability from September and track their progress through June.

That being said, most SLOs are a waste of time. Students are given multiple-choice tests on things they have yet to learn and most obtain a very low score as a result. The attitude students have towards SLOs is such that they don't even try because it is obvious, even to them, that they are a waste of time.

The only computerized assessment that I appreciate as a classroom teacher is SRI testing. This gives me a student's Lexile level. This type of data helps drive my instruction, helps me differentiate, place students correctly, and helps me monitor growth. I actually find the SRI's essential as a teacher.