

TEACH + PLUS Teachers Critical Take on Indiana's Next Test: Recommendations for the ISTEP Panel and Legislature

The ISTEP Replacement Panel is in the process of finalizing their recommendations for the future of testing in Indiana. As Teach Plus Fellows and public school teachers, we believe that teacher voice will be critical for the new state test to succeed. In July, we issued a flash poll to our Fellow Hoosier teachers asking them to weigh in on what they wanted to see in our state's next assessment. Their answers to our questions, coupled with our collective experience as traditional public and public charter school teachers, has led us to the following recommendations:

1. We should have one summative test at the very end of the school year: According to our flash poll, nearly 66% of educators in Indiana would prefer the test be given in late May or early June to ensure maximal instructional time. Currently, the ISTEP assessment process begins four months before the end of the academic year with the second part of the test administered in the middle of April. To ensure a reliable portrait of educational equity, a summative assessment of grade level standards should be administered at the end of academic year. By administering the test any earlier, we limit the time for real learning to occur. Furthermore, test results from the middle of the year do not fairly or accurately reflect student mastery.

2. The test should be graded by Hoosier educators: We believe our in-classroom colleagues and not the vendors' hires should grade the written portions of the test. Other college-oriented assessments, like Advanced Placement (AP) or International Baccalaureate (IB) hire educators teaching the course to grade the tests. If we value our teachers as experts in their field, and want all educators to better understand the test itself, it is common sense to have Hoosier teachers grade it.

3. Our students need interim assessments benchmarked to the final test to help predict their performance: Right now, even the best teachers can only guess if their students will pass the ISTEP. This is a massive flaw with the current testing system. None of the myriad of interim assessments students are currently taking help teachers understand where their students need the most help as it relates to our state standards. Interim assessments provide educators with helpful data about student performance, and, with time to re-teach students, push them to greater academic gains. 72% of teachers we surveyed want an interim assessment aligned to our standards and the final test.

4. Schools should be able to choose whether they take the test by paper and pencil or online: In our flash poll, nearly 60% of teachers said that their lack of technology for taking standardized tests negatively impacted their instruction. Some of our schools are comfortable administering the state test online. Other schools have limited access to technology and internet bandwidth. Many have a single computer lab where they must rotate hundreds of students through at a time. Until our state makes a serious investment in upgrading our tech infrastructure, we must give school districts the option of choosing to take the test online or via paper and pencil. While we ultimately want every school to administer the test online, we cannot have this lack of technology negatively impact student instruction.

5. Create a continuous improvement system for the state testing process: For the past four years, our state testing process has been an exercise in inefficiency. We've changed directions too often, paid too much, and received too little in return. Because of this, the credibility of the ISTEP results has been called in question. We should develop a system where stakeholders can weigh-in, and experts can advise on how to make small changes with the goals of clearer results, easier administration, and a reduction in cost whenever possible. As solutions-oriented educators and implementers of the state test, we believe teacher feedback is essential in developing such systems of continuous improvement.

As the ISTEP Panel crafts recommendations for the Indiana General Assembly to take action on during the upcoming legislative session, we believe that the common sense approaches we recommend will ensure that we have an assessment that paints a clear picture of student performance without distracting educators and students from what school is for – teaching and learning.

As part of a law repealing the Indiana Statewide Testing for Educational Progress-Plus (ISTEP+) assessment, the Indiana General Assembly convened a 23-member panel of educators, legislators, business leaders and state policymakers to provide recommendations on what the next Indiana statewide assessment should look like. We wanted to gather teacher feedback on some of the main questions with which the panel has been grappling. In a poll of 130 Hoosier teachers, most¹:

- + Strongly support an assessment system with a shorter, summative assessment given once per school year
- + Say that their schools currently lack adequate technology for taking statewide assessments online, negatively impacting student instruction
- + Want to move the assessment to the end of the school year, and have it graded by Hoosier teachers

FINDING #1:

Teachers most strongly support an assessment system with a shorter, summative assessment given once per school year.

Administer the state assessment once a year for accountability purposes, with the choice of using paper and pencil or computer. Provide schools and districts with interim assessments that are aligned to state standards that will help teachers measure student growth, but will not be used for accountability purposes.

72%
support or strongly support

Administer parts of the state assessment at multiple times throughout the school year for accountability purposes, using only computers for computer adaptive testing.

21%
support or strongly support

¹ In this sample of 130 public school teachers, 66.2 percent teach in traditional public schools and 33.8 teach in public charter schools; 31.5 percent have 5 or fewer years of full-time teaching experience, 26.2 percent have 6 to 10 years, 19.2 percent have 11 to 20 years, 14.6 percent have 21 to 30 years, and 8.5 percent have 31 or more years; 31.3 percent teach in schools with 1-24% free or reduced lunch (FRL), 12.5 percent teach in schools with 25-49% FRL, 27.3 percent teach in schools with 50-74% FRL, 46.1 percent teach in schools with 75-99% FRL, 8.6 percent teach in schools with 100% FRL, and 2.3 percent were unsure.

FINDING #2:

Surveyed teachers say that their schools currently lack adequate technology for taking statewide assessments online, negatively impacting student instruction.

QUESTION

Please indicate the degree to which you agree or disagree with this statement: "My school has adequate technology for students to take ISTEP online, without negatively impacting student instruction."

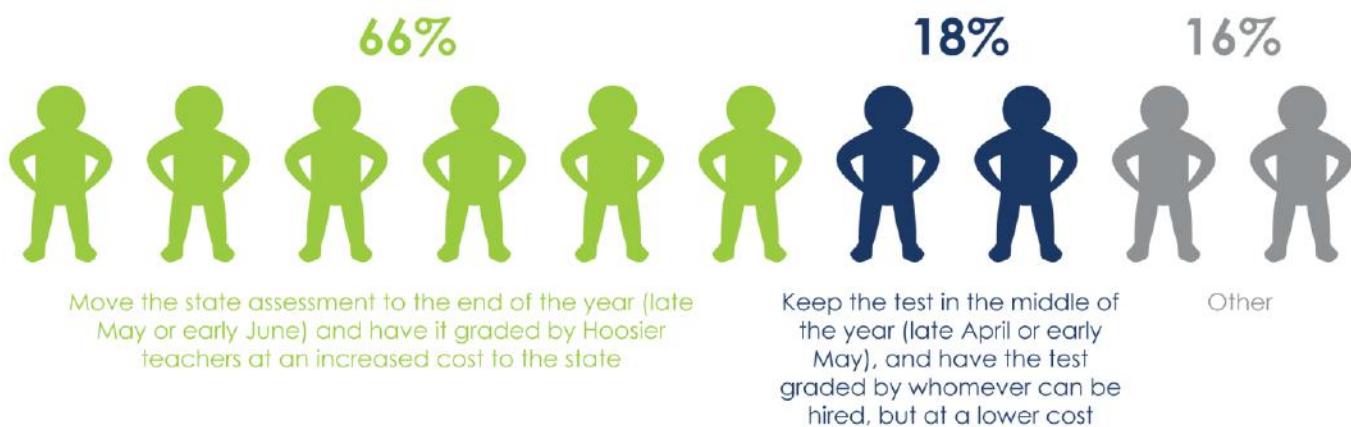


FINDING #3:

Teachers want the assessment given at the end of the school year, and they want it graded by Hoosier teachers.

QUESTION

If the assessment is given once per year, which system would you prefer?



Other Responses

"As a teacher, if the assessment were given once a year, I would like to see it at the end of the school year. It should be graded by professional individuals; not necessarily teachers."

"Give local control over the best time for the exam to be administered."

"Let each school determine their own needs, administer their own assessments, evaluated by their own educators who know these children."