

What role should statewide annual assessments play in education? The following essays present two differing views.

Testing provides crucial information

Statewide annual assessments offer insights into whether students are receiving an equitable and excellent education.

By Marc H. Morial

For more than century, the National Urban League has empowered parents and students in underserved and urban communities to achieve equality in education, jobs, and justice. As a legacy civil rights organization, we recognize the power and necessity of data in the attainment of equity and excellence at scale. Throughout our history, the civil rights movement has relied upon data to identify and address disparities that affect African-Americans and other underserved communities. From striking down school segregation in *Brown v. Board of Education* to shining a light on the school-to-prison pipeline — data have been used to advocate for civil rights in education.

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Internally, data drive the development of the National Urban League's targeted programming in communities and the ways in which we advocate with and for the communities we serve. Our movement comprises 95 affiliates across 35 states and the District of Columbia that represent 300 communities, including parents, teachers, and students. In addition to providing a robust array of supports and services, Urban League affiliates serve as a conduit for the voices of African-American families and underserved communities through advocacy. This advocacy is critical because we continue to see our communities left out of decision making in education policy and co-opted by well-meaning, but misinformed individuals.

Each year, the National Urban League publishes the *State of Black America*[®], a research publication that provides insights into the nation's inequities, the progress achieved in closing disparities, and our recommendations to reach equity and economic empowerment. This year, we included a State Education Equality Index (National Urban League, 2015), a ranking of America's student achievement based on data from National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). These data revealed that the largest achievement gaps were in states with large populations of color and in segregated neighborhoods with excessive rates of concentrated high poverty. Higher graduation rates for African-American and Latino students were found in states where these groups are a smaller portion of the population.

While the nation has a clear and agreed-upon way to measure high school graduation rates, NAEP is a snapshot of student achievement created using a sample of students in grades 4, 8, and 12. While NAEP helps highlight national trends, *(Continued on page 36)*

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(Continued from page 34) we still need statewide annual assessments to capture student and school progress year-by-year.

Statewide annual assessments became a requirement in federal law in order to protect students and families and to better ensure transparency. Before the federal law required statewide assessments, some schools would too often opt-out vulnerable students from taking assessments to hide achievement gaps and associated resource inequities — despite receiving public money to serve all students well. The

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quality of today's assessments has improved greatly from the multiple-choice tests of the past, and these assessments are better indicators of student success and learning because they must be aligned to college- and career-ready standards, and they measure student skills using a variety of methods. With data from these assessments, educators, principals, districts, and states can provide students with the personalized supports and necessary interventions to achieve academic success. These data also empower parents, providing them with a roadmap to knowing if their child is on track to enter college or a professional field of their choosing.

However, understanding how to support and accelerate individual student learning is only a part of how data should be used to advance educational quality. A rigorous analysis of data will allow education stakeholders and advocates to understand how to support students as they make good progress or to improve systems and institutions when they shirk their responsibility to students and families. As such, assessments are an equity issue.

All parents want their children to succeed in school, and they have the right to know how well and in what ways their children are excelling or struggling. Edu-

cation stakeholders, including parents, also have a right to know where education systems are making progress and where they need intervention. While there are other ways to evaluate learning, statewide annual assessments are the only objective, consistent, and comparable measure of student success. Assessments are part of life, and, while they are not comfortable, they are necessary.

We wouldn't ask a parent not to take their child to the doctor for an annual checkup. Similarly, we should not encourage parents to skip their child's annual academic checkup.

At the same time, we acknowledge the frustrations of students, parents, families, and educators regarding the amount of time testing takes in classrooms. We firmly believe that districts and schools must audit their assessments and have meaningful conversations with parents and other community stakeholders about the quality, efficacy, and frequency of the tests given to vulnerable students. These conversations should address cultural bias in testing and the misuse of assessment data to marginalize students. However, we also believe that actively encouraging the widespread opt-out of federally required assessments puts our most vulnerable students, schools, and education systems at risk.

Efforts to encourage parents to opt out of assessments are a distraction in the fight for educational equity and excellence. Statewide annual assessments required by the federal government are an important civil rights tool to closing achievement and opportunity gaps to ensure that every child has access to a high-quality education.

Sixty years have passed since *Brown v. Board of Education*, and education remains the most pressing civil rights issue of our time. Separate and unequal is a reality faced by our most vulnerable students. Today, I charge parents, teachers, districts, states, and education advocates to opt in to focus on closing the academic achievement and opportunity gaps by providing equitable education opportunities to our most vulnerable students instead of simply leaving them behind. **K**

Reference

National Urban League. (2015). 2015 state education equality index. In National Urban League (Ed.), *2015 State of Black America: Save Our Cities: Education, Jobs, & Justice*, pp. 68-107. Washington, DC: Author. <http://soba.iamempowered.com/content/state-education-rankings>