

What Are Teachers' and School Leaders' Major Concerns About New K–12 State Tests?

Findings from the American Teacher and American School Leader Panels

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Key findings

- Most teachers expressed moderate or major concerns about test difficulty, low student performance on the tests, and test score accuracy for special needs students.
- Teachers with students taking Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) tests were more likely to be concerned about testing issues than teachers with students taking other state tests.
- Teachers at low-income schools were more likely to be concerned about testing issues than teachers in other schools.

SUMMARY ■ Many states have recently made major changes to their K–12 student testing programs. The media have reported growing dissatisfaction with the amount of testing happening in schools and the use of tests for high-stakes decisionmaking about schools, principals, and teachers.¹ However, there is little systematically gathered information on the perspectives of U.S. educators who have firsthand knowledge about testing and its effects on teaching and learning. In this report, we share U.S. principals' and teachers' main concerns about testing, drawing upon new survey tools for understanding educators' perspectives on the implementation of major education policies: RAND's American Teacher Panel (ATP) and American School Leader Panel (ASLP). The ATP and ASLP take the pulse of the nation's educators on key issues of educational policy and practice through periodic surveys of a representative sample of teachers and principals across the United States.² This report focuses

on educator perspectives about state testing programs; upcoming reports will also address teacher capacity and the supports provided to teachers to implement standards and assessments.

BACKGROUND

The federal Race to the Top (RTT) program and Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) waivers spurred 43 states plus the District of Columbia to adopt Common Core State Standards, and many of those states joined one or both of the multistate consortia awarded federal funds to develop assessments aligned to the new standards: the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) and the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (Smarter Balanced).³ The full-scale versions of PARCC and Smarter Balanced tests were administered to all students within participating states for the first time in 2014–2015;⁴ students in nine states and the District of Columbia took PARCC tests, while students in 17 states took Smarter Balanced tests.⁵ A number of states that had adopted new standards have opted to develop their own standards-aligned assessments instead, including some states that had originally been members of the PARCC or Smarter Balanced consortia and later decided not to administer the tests.

States' decisions to pull out of the multistate testing consortia—as well as testing concerns in states both within and outside the testing consortia—are partly driven by political pressures, including concerns about new standards and assessments constituting federal overreach and a “national curriculum.”⁶ However, educators and families have also expressed concerns about the high stakes that states are attaching to the new assessments, particularly given that student performance may decline on new tests relative to performance on existing ones.⁷ Concerns have also arisen over the length of the new assessments and the technical glitches that have accompanied the computerized administration of those assessments.⁸ Negative reactions to PARCC have been especially strong, and a particularly high number of states have dropped out of the PARCC consortium over the past year.⁹

In this report, we describe teacher and school leader concerns about the implementation of state assessments aligned to the new standards. These educators are on the front lines of state test administration and have a firsthand perspective on new tests and their potential impact. Our findings are drawn from the ATP and ASLP surveys fielded in February 2015, before the full administration of most state-mandated exams.¹⁰ The information we share about U.S. educators' concerns will serve as a baseline for tracking changes in attitudes over time. ATP and ASLP data and methods for sampling and weighting are described in more detail at the end of this report.

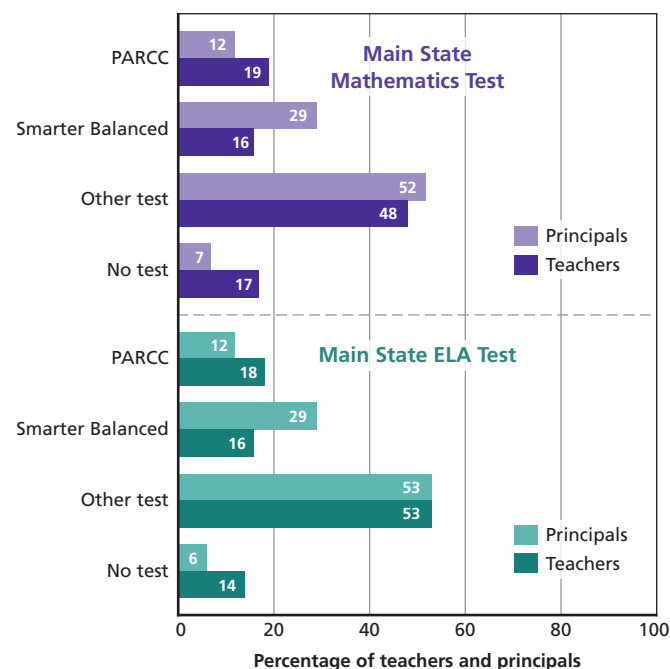
RESULTS

In our analysis, we focus on “the main state-mandated test” for mathematics and “the main state-mandated test for English language arts” (ELA) that teachers and principals reported their students taking. Beyond those with students taking PARCC and Smarter Balanced, we report on those with students taking “other” tests (see Figure 1), which would include those that were recently developed or revised to align with a state's new standards. Our analysis excludes teachers and principals who reported their students took “no test”; almost all indicated their students were not in a tested grade or grades.

More than half of all teachers expressed moderate or major concerns about test difficulty, low student performance on tests, and the accuracy of test scores for students with special learning needs.¹¹

Teachers' main concerns about testing were similar, regardless of the test their students would take (PARCC, Smarter Balanced, or another test) and regardless of the subject (mathematics or ELA). However, a higher percentage of teachers with students taking PARCC expressed concerns about every assessment issue in our survey compared with teachers of students taking Smarter Balanced or other tests (Figure 2). For example,

Figure 1. Percentage of Principals and Teachers Reporting PARCC or Smarter Balanced as the Main State Test Their Students Would Be Taking in 2014–2015



Our findings indicate considerable concern among teachers and school leaders about their state-mandated assessments.

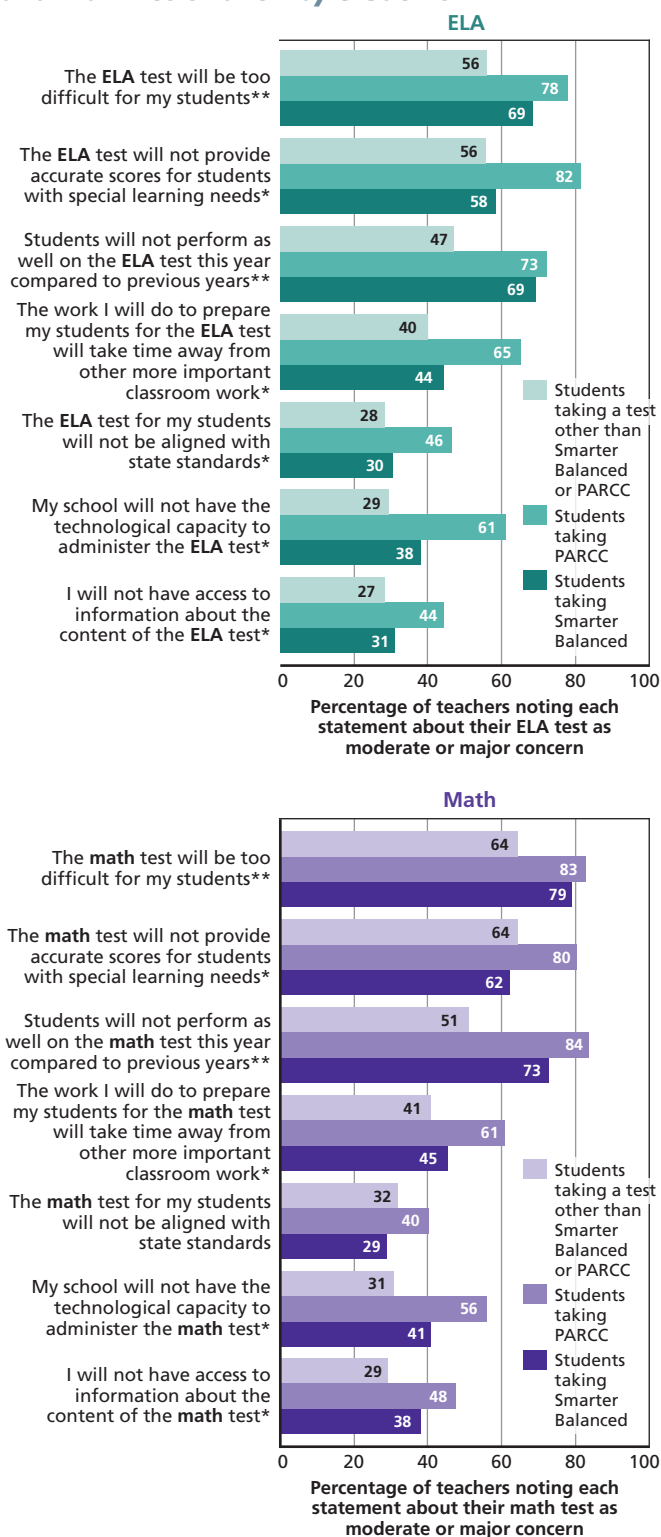
teachers with students taking the PARCC test for ELA were more than twice as likely as teachers with students taking other tests to be concerned about their school’s technological capacity to administer the test, as well as more likely to report that the work they do to prepare students for the PARCC test will take time away from other important work. Teachers were less likely to be concerned about the alignment of the test with state standards, access to information about the content of tests, and technological capacity to administer tests, particularly when their students were taking Smarter Balanced or “other” tests.

As with teachers, principals’ greatest concerns about the tests included the difficulty of the test and test-score accuracy for special needs students (Figure 3). Compared with teachers, high percentages of principals indicated concern about having access to the content of their state-mandated tests, which may reflect teachers’ greater access to test content for specific grade levels and subjects relative to principals.

Teachers at schools with higher percentages of free/reduced lunch students reported concerns about the tests at higher rates than teachers at schools with lower percentages of FRL students.

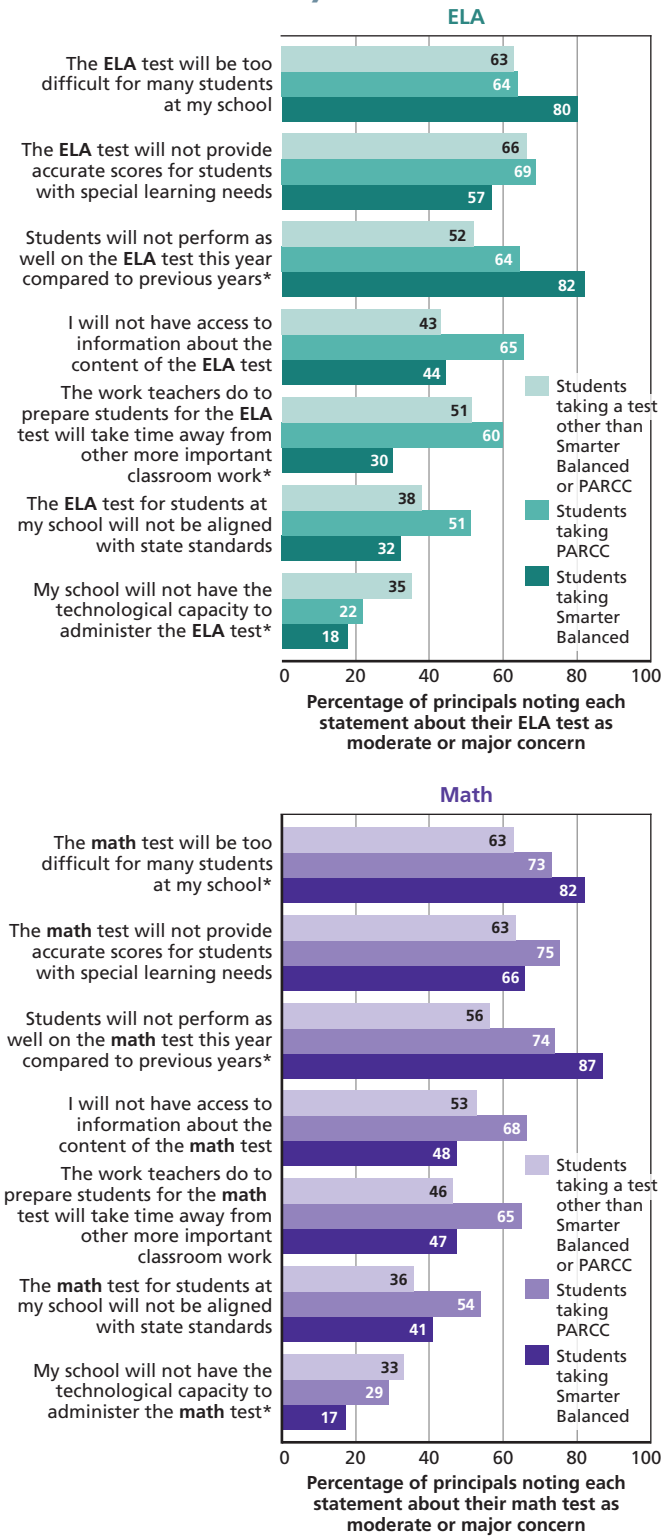
Significantly more teachers at high-FRL schools reported concerns about the difficulty of math and ELA tests, as well as access to information about the content of those tests, compared to teachers at lower-FRL schools.

Figure 2. Teachers’ Concerns About the Main ELA and Math Tests Taken by Students



* Percentage of teachers reporting concerns about PARCC significantly higher (p < 0.05) than for teachers reporting on other assessments.
 ** Percentage of teachers reporting concerns about PARCC and Smarter Balanced significantly higher (p < 0.05) than for teachers reporting on other assessments.

Figure 3. Principals' Concerns About the Main ELA and Math Tests Taken by Students



IMPLICATIONS FOR STATE AND DISTRICT POLICYMAKERS

High-stakes tests administered to U.S. students over the past several decades have provided an unprecedented opportunity to compare student achievement—and gaps in achievement for particular ethnic and income subgroups—among schools and districts. At the same time, high-stakes tests are an ongoing source of stress and concern for the school leaders and teachers who must prepare students for the tests, administer them, and be evaluated based on their results.¹² Over the past year, educator concerns and public outcry over testing have become more intense and politicized with the move toward new college-and-career-ready academic standards and aligned assessments in many states.¹³

Our findings indicate considerable concern among teachers and school leaders about their state-mandated assessments, many of which were fully administered for the first time in 2014–2015. The majority of teachers and school leaders expressed particular concern regarding student performance on assessments, with concerns about the PARCC assessment being more prevalent than concerns about other state assessments. There are a number of factors that might explain higher rates of concern about PARCC in comparison to Smarter Balanced and other tests, including differential perceptions of test quality, public outcry and campaigns from political and advocacy groups critical of tests, and overall attitudes about standardized testing in particular states.

These educator concerns about student performance on state assessments underscore a need for states and districts to communicate clearly and thoughtfully as the test results are

Concerns about the PARCC assessment were more prevalent than concerns about other state tests.

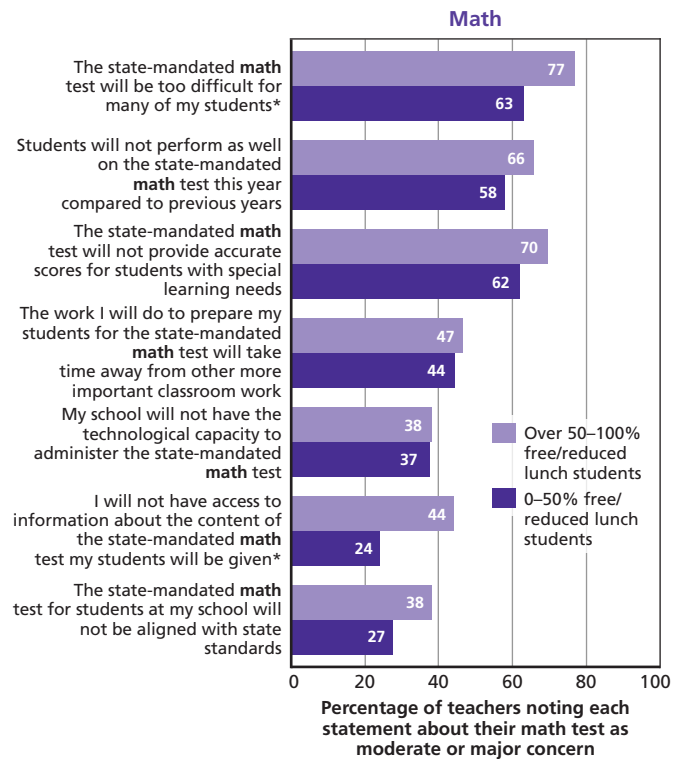
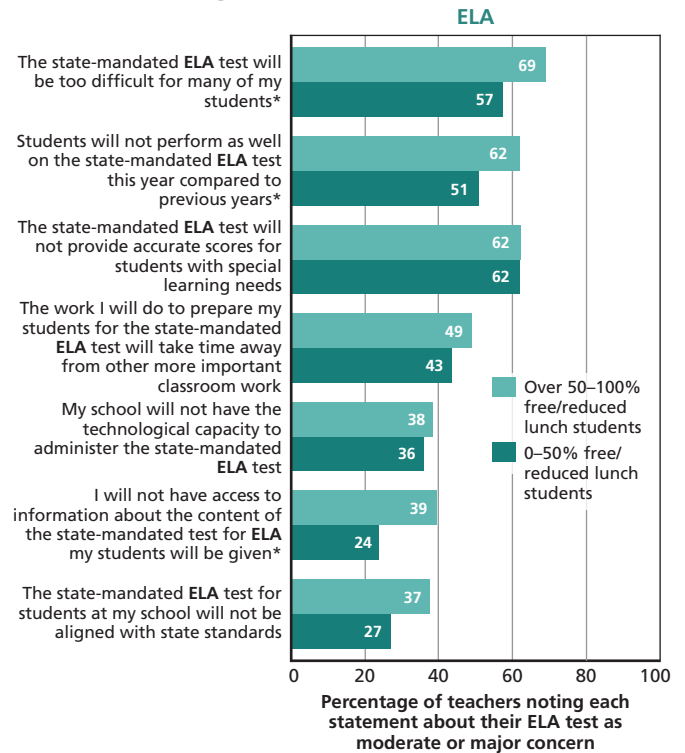
reported. Teachers and principals should understand how to interpret forthcoming test results and share those results with students and families. States and districts should also clearly communicate how—if at all—test results will be used to make teacher- and school-performance decisions.

Indeed, widespread educator concern about student performance reflects uncertainty about the validity and usefulness of new assessments for making high-stakes decisions. Given this uncertainty, states and districts may wish to defer making high-stakes decisions on the basis of state assessment results until much more is known about the outcomes of tests for a large population of students. While state assessments have potential to inform and support teaching and learning, that potential can be realized only through their thoughtful and informed use in ways that best support school leaders' and teachers' work in schools.

High educator concerns about student test performance and test difficulty also imply another underlying concern among teachers: that they are not prepared to help students meet more rigorous standards addressed by new standards-aligned assessments. Higher expectations for what students should be able to know and do also increase expectations for what teachers must know and be able to do. Unsurprisingly, school leaders and teachers themselves have expressed concerns that they are unprepared to help students meet new standards.¹⁴ Our next two reports will draw on data from the ATP and ASLP to better understand teachers' capacity to implement new standards for mathematics and English language arts and literacy, the professional development they have received for standards implementation, and the professional development they still need.

The RAND American Teacher and School Leader Panels offer a credible, reliable way to track and monitor educators' perspectives on major education policies and changes in those perspectives over time. We might, for example, expect educator concerns and anxiety about testing to be highest when new assessments are introduced but then decline as educators become more familiar with those assessments. Our goal through the ATP and ASLP is to measure such educator perspectives and concerns over time in order to gain a deeper understanding of the implementation of major education policies.

Figure 4. Teachers' Concerns About the Main ELA and Math Tests Taken at Schools with Higher or Lower Percentages of FRL Students



* Percentage of teachers in school with > 50–100% FRL students with concerns is significantly higher (p < 0.05) than for teachers in schools with 0–50% FRL students.

Endnotes

¹ Kamenetz, A., “Testing: How Much Is Too Much?” NPR, November 17, 2014. As of September 3, 2015: <http://www.npr.org/sections/ed/2014/11/17/362339421/testing-how-much-is-too-much/>;

Strauss, V., “Revolt Against High-Stakes Standardized Testing Growing—and So Does Its Impact,” *Washington Post*, March 19, 2015. As of September 3, 2015: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/wp/2015/03/19/revolt-against-high-stakes-standardized-testing-growing-and-so-does-its-impact/>; and

Harris, E., “As Common Core Testing Is Ushered in, Parents and Students Opt out,” *New York Times*, March 1, 2015. As of September 3, 2015: http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/02/nyregion/as-common-core-testing-is-ushered-in-parents-and-students-opt-out.html?_r=0

² “The American Teacher Panel and the American School Leader Panel,” RAND Corporation, undated web page. As of September 3, 2015: <http://www.rand.org/education/projects/atp-aslp.html>

³ For more information: U.S. Department of Education, “Programs: Race to the Top Assessment Program,” April 2015: As of September 3, 2015: <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop-assessment/awards.html>.

⁴ PARCC and Smarter Balanced were also field tested in a number of states in spring 2014 to investigate the quality of test questions, evaluate administration procedures, and assess computer-based delivery of tests. For more information on these field tests, see Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers, “Field Test: Testing the Test,” undated web page. As of September 3, 2015: <http://www.parcconline.org/assessments/test-design/test-development/field-test>

Also see Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium, “Field Test,” undated web page. As of September 3, 2015: <http://www.smarterbalanced.org/field-test/>.

⁵ For more information on the states that have administered PARCC or Smarter Balanced, see Gewertz, C., and A. Ujifusa, “National Landscape Fragments as States Plan Common-Core Testing,” *Education Week*, May 2014. As of September 3, 2015: http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2014/05/21/32assessment_ep.h33.html

⁶ See, for example, Brown, E., “As States Drop out of PARCC’s Common Core Test, Faithful Carry on,” *Washington Post*, July 22, 2015. As of September 3, 2015: http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/as-states-drop-out-of-parccs-common-core-test-faithful-carry-on/2015/07/22/f31ceb48-2f1c-11e5-8353-1215475949f4_story.html and Ujifusa, A., “Missouri Drops Smarter Balanced Common-Core Exam,” *Education Week, State EdWatch*, June 3, 2015. As of September 3, 2015: http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/state_edwatch/2015/06/missouri-drops-smarter-balanced-common-core_exam.html

⁷ Clark, A., “PARCC’s Tie to Teacher Evaluations Drives Controversy,” NJ.com, March 15, 2015. As of September 3, 2015: http://www.nj.com/education/2015/03/opt_outs_could_delay_parccs_impact_on_teacher_eval.html

⁸ Russo, A., “Common Problems with Common Core Reporting,” *Columbia Journalism Review*, March 18, 2015. As of September 3, 2015: http://www.cjr.org/analysis/common_core_shell.php; Strauss, 2015.

⁹ Brown, E., “What Happens When the Common Core Becomes Less . . . Common?” *Washington Post*, January 25, 2015. As of September 3, 2015: http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/what-happens-when-the-common-core-becomes-less--common/2015/01/25/33b8eb58-a2bf-11e4-b146-577832eafcb4_story.html; Ujifusa, A., “As PARCC Sheds States, Is the Common Core Test Toast or Tougher Than It Looks?” *Education Week*, July 22, 2015. As of September 3, 2015: http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/state_edwatch/2015/07/parcc-common_core_testing_shifting_strategy_and_landscape.html?r=506611653

¹⁰ Maximum margin of error is +/- 4.7 percentage points for teachers’ responses on the ATP and +/- 8.3 percentage points for school leaders’ responses on the ASLP.

¹¹ Teachers were asked to indicate the extent of their concern about each issue on a four-point scale (Not a concern/Minor concern/Moderate concern/Major concern). Teacher survey items about the state-mandated test for mathematics were only provided to mathematics teachers and teachers who reported that they address mathematics standards in their instruction. Likewise, survey items about the English language arts test were provided only to ELA teachers and teachers who reported that they address ELA standards in their instruction.

¹² Hamilton, L. S., B. M. Stecher, and S. P. Klein, *Making Sense of Test-Based Accountability in Education*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MR-1554, 2002; and Jones, G. M., B. D. Jones, and T. Hargrove, *The Unintended Consequences of High-Stakes Testing*, Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003.

¹³ Kamenetz, 2014; Strauss, 2015; and Harris, 2015.

¹⁴ Kober, N., and D. S. Rentner, “Year Two of Implementing the Common Core State Standards: States’ Progress and Challenges,” Center on Education Policy, January 25, 2012; McLaughlin, M., L. Glaab, and I. H. Carrasco, “Implementing Common Core State Standards in California: A Report from the Field,” Stanford, Calif.: *Policy Analysis for California Education*, 2014; Sawchuk, S., “Many Teachers Not Ready for the Common Core,” *Education Digest: Essential Readings Condensed for Quick Review*, Vol. 78, No. 2, pp. 16–22, October 2012.

About This Report

This short report presents summary data from web-based surveys administered by RAND Education to the American Teacher Panel (ATP) and American School Leader Panel (ASLP) in February 2015. At the time of the administration of the surveys featured in this current report, the ATP was composed of approximately 1,129 teachers, and the ASLP was composed of approximately 557 school leaders. Respondents were paid an incentive of \$25 for every 30 minutes of survey time. Data for this paper were collected in one survey wave fielded in February 2015. To ensure representativeness, panel members were sampled randomly from across the nation. The teacher sample included full-time public school teachers in grades K–12 in all subjects, including teachers of special education students and English language learners. The survey data were weighted to account for differential sampling and for nonresponse. Weights were based on a model for nonresponse that incorporates characteristics such as teacher subject and school level, region, size, and rate of free/reduced lunch eligibility. This report was updated in October 2016. The current version provides estimates based on updated weights for a small percentage of the respondents. Weights were updated to account for infrequent misclassification in the assignment of school-level characteristics. The data collection and analysis for the February survey were funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the National Education Association. If you are interested in learning more about the ATP and ASLP, and how you could take advantage of this resource, please contact us at atp-aslp@rand.org.

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