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The Real Costs of NCLB

How much are your district and state spending on No Child Left Behind and do the testing results justify the expense?

Samuel B. Hardy III

How much is No Child Left Behind costing your district? Your state? And are those costs worth it?

These are some of the questions I tried to answer for my home state of Georgia, and for two districts in the eastern part of the state. Testing falls under one of the four bulwarks of NCLB -- accountability. Student performance is assessed through testing and, as we all know, failure to show improvement in scores can lead to schools being placed on the dreaded "needs improvement" list.

I took a morning recently to discuss NCLB's testing requirements with two of the larger school districts in my area. Each houses testing under its respective guidance departments. I was somewhat surprised at what I heard about the costs of NCLB given the din of the national debate. You may be surprised too

Before NCLB, neither county tested *all* children in grades 1-8 under any mandate, state or federal. One county tested only grades three, five, and eight, which the state required; the other did test grades 1-8, but the state was only interested in data from the grades for which testing was mandated, so the county had to pay for all testing services for the other grades. Both counties used a norm referenced test.

For one of the counties, the cost had been \$10 per student for testing the grades not covered by the state.

Today, each district uses a criterion referenced test known as the Criterion-Referenced Competency Test (CRCT). The test is established by a national company and purchased for each district in Georgia by the state department of education. It is administered to all grades 1-8 in the spring of each year. The test is purchased, packaged, shipped, and graded, and the scores are processed without any cost to the district -- the state bears all the related costs.

The only expense the districts bore for testing was the mileage paid to employees to travel to the test training site. To ease this expense, the state offers training at various sites throughout Georgia, including one recently offered at one of the counties I visited.

What's being done with the data? After being processed by the state, the data is made available to county officials, principals, and teachers through a level of access method: certain levels of student data are only available to certain persons. Each person depending upon their position can retrieve what information they need from the state's data base per school, per grade, per test, per subject, per demographic subgroup, per child, and even per the domain tested within the subject. The state provides a complete and comprehensive disaggregation of scores from each test.

None of this information was available in the first through eighth grades before NCLB. Now, school official say, it's being used a great deal. For example, one person I spoke with was a

principal before being transferred to the central office. When she was a principal, she and her staff felt that despite their school's overall success on tests, they were not as successful as they hoped to be with young black males. But without proper data, it was just their opinion.

When they analyzed their school's disaggregated data for this subgroup, the report not only substantiated their *feelings*, it also listed each domain within each subject per test, per child, that they, as faculty members, should target. The faculty worked together on a remediation plan, and the scores for this student subgroup improved the next year.

Examples from the other county on how test data are driving instruction and program development were just as encouraging, and successful. The data analyses are now very telling and all this information is supplied by the state with no cost to the county. But what about the state? Where's the money coming from?

According to the U.S. Department of Education, total appropriations for NCLB programs have been relatively constant since 2004 and are estimated to be \$22.5 billion in 2007. The total for NCLB state assessments (that is, funding for testing) is \$407.5 million for 2007. For Georgia, total NCLB-specific funding is estimated to be \$656.8 million for 2007, and the state assessment number is \$10.3 million.

So, how does this funding compare to Georgia's actual testing cost? State Testing Director Chris Domaleski says NCLB-required tests for general education and special education students costs the state approximately \$17 million, but, as we saw, Georgia only receives about \$10 million in earmarked federal funding for testing under the law.

So the testing required by NCLB *is* costing Georgia money. In fact, more than 41 percent of the required testing cost is borne by the state taxpayers. Is it worth it? I don't know enough from this analysis to render an opinion for the entire state. But consider this: Remember what I said earlier about the principal who targeted the young black male students in her school specifically as a result of the NCLB test data? This same test data was *not* required before NCLB.

So, you can speculate that -- since extensive testing was not required before -- no extra effort would have been made toward helping these kids, and they all would have been...*left behind*. Perhaps that's the *real* cost we should consider: the cost of actually leaving children behind.

Samuel B. Hardy III (shardy5@aug.edu) is a certified public accountant and an associate professor of educational leadership at Augusta State University in Augusta, Ga.