The NWEA MAP: What you need to know

What is NWEA? What is MAP? The Northwest Evaluation Association develops and sells the Measures of Academic Progress test. The MAP is given twice a year in most CPS elementary schools in 2nd through 8th grades, in winter (Dec/Jan) and spring (May). This year, instead of ISAT scores, CPS will use spring MAP scores to determine:
- students going to summer school or promotion to the next grade in 3rd, 6th and 8th grades;
- student eligibility or admission to selective enrollment programs in 5th and 7th grades; and
- teacher or principal evaluation as well as school quality rating (formerly known as level rating).

What are MAP tests like? MAP tests are multiple-choice reading and math tests taken on a computer. MAP is "adaptive," which means that the questions get harder when students choose the right answers, and easier when students choose the wrong answers. The test is not timed and ends when a student can no longer answer questions correctly. Unlike the ISAT, where all students in a grade answered the same set of questions, for the MAP test, “every student receives a different assessment.” (NWEA publication “Myths and Truths”)

Why is More Than A Score concerned about the MAP?
- CPS misuses MAP test scores. NWEA strongly asserts that MAP tests are interim tests, not end-of-year or summative, but CPS is using the MAP as a summative test. CPS is also using the MAP to rank students, teachers and schools, something it was not designed to do. NWEA itself warns against this: “Many policymakers have equated assessments with school accountability and student success or failure. Educators in the classroom, however, have long realized that no one test has ever been an effective measure of school or student performance” (NWEA “Talking with Policymakers”).
- According to NWEA, “In an optimal [MAP] test, a student answers approximately half the items correctly and half incorrectly” (NWEA “Parent Toolkit”), resulting in a potentially discouraging process for many students.
- Technical problems can interrupt testing. MAP tests are taken online, and students may have to start over or resume later if the internet connection is lost or the computer crashes. Where computer lab space is limited, students taking longer than their classmates have had to stop testing and resume later.
- NWEA is yet another unhealthy high-stakes test. Students are pressured to “score,” rather than encouraged to learn. Some teachers are directed to give students individual MAP score goals to meet, but there is no way to know how close a student is to the goal until the test. Often student scores are illegally posted on classroom “data walls.” Prizes are offered to students with high scores. This creates anxiety among students and distorts authentic learning. Schools have a strong incentive to focus mostly on subjects that will be tested and drill students in test-like exercises. Teachers cannot instill a love for learning, which is key for life-long achievement, under these conditions. See MTAS’s alternative to high-stakes testing here: tinyurl.com/og3znbt.

What could happen if my child doesn’t take the MAP? CPS has stated that students without NWEA spring scores in the 3rd, 6th and 8th grades must go to summer school—even if they have good report card grades—and will be held back if they do not pass summer school. Without spring MAP scores, 5th or 7th graders will not be able to apply to selective enrollment schools. Please contact More Than A Score for more information and ideas about alternative ways to assess student progress (e.g., learning portfolios, goal-based grading, and performance tasks).

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