A Vision for the Future of Testing

In the future, we expect that all 50 states will have systems of next-generation assessments that are built around student-centered learning. These systems will be adaptive, available to students whenever they are ready and will provide multiple, real-time measures of student progress toward mastery. These systems will better support new forms of teaching and learning, such as competency-based education and personalized learning, without sacrificing our ability to hold schools and districts accountable for the success of every single student.

But, we’re not there yet. In fact, no state has the technological, financial and psychometric capacity to adopt this vision of testing. In large part, this is because many of the strategies required for this vision remain untested and unproven. For example, states may want to break end-of-year summative assessments into smaller tests given throughout the year, but that has never been done before and would need to be done in a way that produces valid, reliable and comparable results and without increasing the classroom time devoted to testing.

Today’s Opportunities to Move Toward Fewer, Better Tests

Although most states are not yet ready to adopt this completely new vision of testing, every state has the opportunity to make significant improvements to their assessment systems as they implement the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). These improvements can not only begin building the foundation for a next generation system of assessments, but also address some of the pushback against assessments that many states have been experiencing.

The following policy recommendations provide a menu of options for states seeking to improve the quality of their assessment systems, ensure the results are used to improve instruction, provide better information to parents and lay the groundwork for a new vision of assessments. But given the vast differences in state assessment systems across the county and the clear need for stability, every recommendation should be viewed through a state’s unique context - including its assessment history and current capacity for change. For example, if a state has just implemented major revisions or recently signed a new assessment contract, certain recommendations would not be appropriate, or should be delayed to a later date. However, we do encourage every state to look for ways to improve both their state and local assessments.
Each recommendation is directed at advancing the following characteristics of a high-quality assessment system:

- **High Quality:** Assessments are high quality and produce meaningful, timely, and accurate data.
- **Aligned:** State assessments are aligned to the state’s college- and career-ready standards, measure higher order thinking skills, and provide results that are comparable with other states.
- **Transparent:** Assessments are transparent to students, teachers, and parents. States and districts should ensure parents know the purpose of an assessment, when the results will be provided, and how the results will be used to help their child.
- **Limited:** States and districts strive to provide the best possible information using the fewest possible assessments and the least possible amount of total testing time.
- **Focused on Improved Student Outcomes:** Assessment outcomes are used to strengthen instruction and better target resources, support and interventions to students who need additional help.

### Key Definitions

**Summative assessment:** Assessments administered after a defined instructional period to evaluate student learning by comparing it against a standard or benchmark. Examples include a statewide standardized assessment (typically administered at the end of the year) or a test administered at the end of a textbook unit.

**Interim assessment:** Assessments that blur the lines between formative and summative assessments by testing a small set of academic goals; they can be used to evaluate if students are on- or off-track in meeting expectations.

**Formative assessment:** Assessments used by teachers during the learning process in order to modify teaching and learning activities to improve student attainment.

### Policy Options for States to Consider
Provide More Time for Instruction

Move statewide summative testing dates closer to the end of the school year.

- Moving assessments closer to the end of the year gives teachers the full year to provide instruction, eliminates cramming that occurs to make sure material is covered prior to the test, and reduces the “dead time” after tests are administered.
  - States may need to have an earlier window in limited grades (e.g., grade 3 reading tests that are used for promotion decisions or senior year retakes of high school exit exams).
  - National survey results indicate that a majority of teachers (77 percent) prefer more teaching time, even if it means getting results back over the summer, but each state will have to strike the right balance given circumstances unique to that state. States should also invest in the technological infrastructure, hardware and bandwidth required to transition to online assessment systems that may allow richer test items and faster results.

- States should also procure their statewide summative assessments to allow for the piloting of flexible administration, so that students can demonstrate mastery when they are ready. This may mean allowing districts or schools to administer the state summative assessment once per quarter or when students are ready.

Streamline and Improve State and District Assessment Systems

Eliminate duplicative, low-quality or unnecessary tests.

- Require the State Chief to evaluate the quality of all state tests and remove/replace any state tests deemed duplicative, unnecessary, or low-quality. In your state, schools may be using multiple tests that produce similar information rather than using one test for multiple purposes.

- Provide a grant opportunity for districts to put together an assessment reduction strategy using an assessment inventory tool such as Achieve’s Student Assessment Inventory for School Districts or Education First’s Fewer and Better Local Assessments: A Toolkit for Educators.

- Use federal funds to audit state and district assessment systems and identify and eliminate repetitive, unnecessary, or low-quality assessments. Under the new Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), additional funding will be available to states and districts to conduct audits. Such audits must, at a minimum, report on: the schedule for the assessments; the purpose for which the assessment was designed and the purpose for
which the assessment is used; the legal authority for the administration of the assessment; how teachers, principals, other school leaders, and administrators use assessment data to improve and differentiate instruction; the amount of time teachers spend on assessment preparation and administration; and a plan for using this information to streamline the assessment system.

**Provide technical assistance for interim assessments.**

- Use the purchasing power of the state to procure optional-interim assessments that are aligned to the state’s standards.

- Ensure districts and schools can access interim assessments as needed.

**Ensure statewide summative tests provide results that are comparable with other states.**

Encourage states to share content from their tests with other states so parents, teachers and policymakers know how students performed not only within their own state but also in comparison to students in other states. Allowing for comparability can also help ensure that the rigor of the statewide summative assessment remains high and that all students are equally prepared for success in college or a career. According to a national survey, 72 percent of parents support having test results that can be compared to other states to ensure the quality of their state’s test remains high.

**Independently evaluate the alignment of nationally recognized college entrance tests (e.g., SAT, ACT) to state standards in high school.**

Require the State Chief to independently evaluate the alignment of national tests to state standards. If these tests meet all the requirements of federal law, including that they are sufficiently aligned to a state’s standards and accessible to all students, and if the companies support use of their tests in school, teacher and student accountability, then policymakers can consider use of the test(s) in high school.

**Work with institutions of higher education in the state to identify a performance level or score on the state test that those institutions can use for admissions and/or for placement into non-remedial postsecondary coursework.**

For states that are using consortia or state-specific tests in high school, make the assessment as relevant as possible for college admissions and/or placement. States should work with institutions of higher education within state so those institutions gain confidence in the test’s ability to identify students ready for non-remedial postsecondary coursework. This could eliminate the need for students to take additional tests in high school simply to demonstrate readiness for college or additional placement tests when they first register/apply.
Require student score reports to be provided to the current year and incoming teacher of record. *(This means providing a 4th grade teacher all the score reports of her current 4th grade students and providing a 5th grade teacher all the 4th grade score reports of her incoming 5th grade students.)*

- Ensure each student’s annual statewide summative assessment score report is provided to the student’s incoming teacher of record the following school year by the start of the school year. This requirement, which was supported by 86 percent of teachers in a national survey, will allow the incoming teacher to better prepare differentiated instruction at the start of the year and inform his/her initial conversation with parents.

- Ensure each student’s annual statewide summative assessment score report is provided to the student’s current year teacher of record as close to the end of the school year as possible. This requirement, which was also supported by 86 percent of teachers, will allow the current year teacher to use the information from her entire class of students as a professional development tool prior to the start of the following school year.

**Require all results from any tests to be provided to teachers within a useful format and timeframe to inform instruction.**

- Require statewide assessment results to be returned to districts, schools and teachers in a timely manner, so that they can be used to inform planning decisions, including teacher placement, professional development, etc.

- Require that districts and schools return test results to teachers within 2 weeks so teachers can make important and responsive instructional decisions that will help ensure students meet expectations. In a national survey, teachers overwhelmingly favored getting tests results back within one week (38 percent) or two weeks (36 percent).

### Provide Better Information to Parents

Ensure parents understand the student expectations for each grade level, how teachers will help students reach them, and how the summative assessments measure their proficiency on those expectations.

- Require that districts and schools provide parents materials at the beginning of year, such as those by GreatSchools, that define student expectations throughout the year, how the curriculum is designed to meet these expectations, and how the end-of-year tests will reflect these expectations.

- Require that your test vendor release sample test items that students will see on a typical summative test, including, but not limited to, the various types of items as well as potential responses (multiple choice, open-ended, etc.). Two examples are Tennessee and Louisiana.
• Require all districts to publish a grade-by-grade testing schedule that clearly labels: when each test will be given; whether the test is required by the state, the district or the school; who it is administered to; the reason it is given; and when parents can expect to receive the results.

Require the state and districts to provide clear, transparent information to parents about their child’s performance and opportunities for improvement.

• Provide parents with easy-to-understand score reports from the state summative tests that should include, at a minimum:
  o Actionable steps a parent can take to help their child improve mastery over a specific subject or skill;
  o Contextual data showing a child’s grade-level performance;
  o Longitudinal data showing a child’s progress over time (results need to be presented as part of an education continuum, not as episodic).

• When developing score reports, states should look to case studies on how other states have created effective, easy-to-understand and actionable score reports. Achieve provides several focused-grouped examples as has UnderstandTheScore.

Require all results from state and district tests to be provided to parents within a useful timeframe.

• Require statewide assessment results to be returned to parents in a timely manner, so that important educational decisions can be made (e.g., school choice determinations or promotion decisions) to benefit the child.

• Require that districts and schools return test results to parents in a timely manner. This provides another opportunity for the teacher to discuss the student’s immediate educational needs with the parents.

Innovate

Transition to innovative new assessment models.

• Utilize online assessments to accelerate both delivery and scoring of assessments as well as the use of innovative item-types to measure higher order skills that paper and pencil tests may not be able to assess. Digital Learning Now (DLN) recommends that state-mandated assessments in core subjects, including annual assessments, end-of-course exams, and high school exit exams, be administered digitally, either online or offline but on a computer. DLN’s Getting Ready for Online Assessments provides states with recommendations and action steps they can take to make this shift. But states should ensure that paper-and-pencil tests are available as an accommodation for those students who need that option.
• Explore a transition to computer adaptive testing that includes out-of-grade-level items while still reporting grade-level proficiency.

• Explore the administration of a set of interim tests that can be rolled up into a single annual result for each student. States should determine the cost effectiveness of this approach and whether it would reduce duplicative testing and potentially decrease overall student assessment time.

• Determine if the state’s vision for a new state assessment system will warrant application for the ESSA Innovative Assessment and Accountability Demonstration Authority.