

Fact Sheet: Testing Action Plan

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One essential part of educating students successfully is assessing their progress in learning to high standards. Done well and thoughtfully, assessments are tools for learning and promoting equity. They provide necessary information for educators, families, the public, and students themselves to measure progress and improve outcomes for all learners. Done poorly, in excess, or without clear purpose, they take valuable time away from teaching and learning, draining creative approaches from our classrooms. In the vital effort to ensure that all students in America are achieving at high levels, it is essential to ensure that tests are fair, are of high quality, take up the minimum necessary time, and reflect the expectation that students will be prepared for success in college and careers.

In too many schools, there is unnecessary testing and not enough clarity of purpose applied to the task of assessing students, consuming too much instructional time and creating undue stress for educators and students. The Administration bears some of the responsibility for this, and we are committed to being part of the solution.

No one set out to create situations where students spend too much time taking standardized tests or where tests are redundant or fail to provide useful information. Nevertheless, these problems are occurring in many places—unintended effects of policies that have aimed to provide more useful information to educators, families, students, and policymakers and to ensure attention to the learning progress of low-income and minority students, English learners, students with disabilities, and members of other groups that have been traditionally underserved. These aims are right, but support in implementing them well has been inadequate, including from this Administration. We have focused on encouraging states to take on these challenges and to provide them with flexibility. One of the results of this approach is that we have not provided clear enough assistance for how to thoughtfully approach testing and assessment.

What follows is a set of principles and steps to correct the balance, protecting the vital role that good assessment plays in guiding progress for students and evaluating schools and educators, while providing help in unwinding practices that have burdened classroom time or not served students or educators well. In addition, a [report from the Council of the Great City Schools](#) released today will help deepen the nation's understanding of these issues.

Principles for Fewer and Smarter Assessments

Assessments must be:

1. **Worth Taking:** Testing should be a part of good instruction, not a departure from it. A good assessment is aligned to the content and skills a student is learning, and it requires

the same kind of complex work students do in an effective classroom – or in the real world. Assessments should present useful information and questions that push students’ critical thinking skills, so that students gain valuable experience even while taking them. And assessments should provide timely, actionable feedback to students, parents, and educators that can be used to guide instruction and additional supports for students. They should also aid leaders’ decisions to target resources and supports. Assessment should happen only when necessary to accomplish those goals. No standardized test should ever be given solely for educator evaluation.

2. **High Quality:** High-quality assessment results in actionable, objective information about student knowledge and skills. Assessment systems should measure student knowledge and skills against state-developed college- and career-ready standards in a way that, as appropriate:
 - **Covers the full range of the relevant state standards** to ensure a full picture of what students know and can do;
 - **Elicits complex student demonstrations or applications of knowledge** and skills so that teachers and parents know that students are prepared for the real world;
 - **Provides an accurate measure of student achievement** for all students, including for high- and low-achieving students, so that all educators have the information they need to provide differentiated supports to students; and
 - **Provides an accurate measure of student growth** over time to recognize the progress that schools and educators are making to help students succeed.
3. **Time-limited:** While it is up to states and districts how to balance instructional time and the need for high-quality assessments, we recommend that states place a cap on the percentage of instructional time students spend taking required statewide standardized assessments to ensure that no child spends more than 2 percent of her classroom time taking these tests. Parents should receive formal notification if their child’s school exceeds this cap and an action plan should be publicly posted to describe the steps the state will take to review and eliminate unnecessary assessments, and come into compliance. States and school districts should carefully consider whether each assessment serves a unique, essential role in ensuring that students are learning.

Moreover, low-quality test preparation strategies must be eliminated. States, districts, and educators should eliminate “drill-and-kill” test prep that is a poor use of students’ and educators’ classroom time. Students do best on high-quality assessments that actually measure critical thinking and complex skills when they have been exposed to strong instruction, which should be the focus. Districts should take concrete steps to discourage and limit the amount of test preparation activities.

4. **Fair – and Supportive of Fairness – in Equity in Educational Opportunity:** Assessments should be fair, including providing fair measures of student learning for students with disabilities and English learners. Accessibility features and accommodations must level the playing field so tests accurately reflect what students really know and can do. The same assessments of subjects like reading, writing, science, and math should be given consistently statewide, so that teachers and leaders have a clear

picture of which students are meeting expectations and which students need additional supports and interventions to succeed. Likewise, policymakers and educators need to know which schools are seeing success with all groups of students, and which schools are struggling and in need of different and greater supports. States and districts should also ensure that assessments are only used for the purposes for which they were intended and designed. Annual statewide tests are an essential part of guiding that support.

5. **Fully Transparent to Students and Parents:** States and districts should ensure that every parent gets understandable information about the assessments their students are taking, by providing information to parents on any tests students are required to take, including (1) the purpose, (2) the source of the requirement, (3) when the information about student performance is provided to parents and teachers, (4) how teachers, principals, and district officials use the information about student performance, and (5) how parents can use that information to help their child. Parents, educators and, as appropriate, students should also get the results of assessments in a timely and understandable manner, to have a shared understanding of how students are doing, and how educators and parents can help them succeed.
6. **Just One of Multiple Measures:** Assessments provide critical information about student learning, but no single assessment should ever be the sole factor in making an educational decision about a student, an educator, or a school. Information from sources such as school assignments, portfolios, and projects can help measure a student's academic performance. In addition, factors including chronic absenteeism, student surveys, and indicators of discipline and school climate can help create a comprehensive understanding of students' needs and how schools are doing. For educators, observations of practice, student surveys, and contributions to the school community can provide highly valuable information to ensure a comprehensive evaluation of performance, and to help educators strengthen their skills for the benefit of their students.
7. **Tied to Improved Learning:** While some tests are for accountability purposes only, the vast majority of assessments should be tools in a broader strategy to improve teaching and learning. In a well-designed testing strategy, assessment outcomes are not only used to identify what students know, but also inform and guide additional teaching, supports, or interventions that will help students master challenging material.

Administration Actions to Reduce Over-Testing

President Obama has directed the Department of Education (the Department) to review its policies to address any places where the Administration may have contributed to the problem of overemphasis on testing burdening classroom time. As a result, the Administration is undertaking the following:

- **Financial support for states to develop and use better, less burdensome assessments:**

- **Resources to focus on reviewing and eliminating unnecessary tests and developing innovative assessments:** In the Administration's 2015 Enhanced Assessment Grants competition, the Department added a focus on tools for reviewing existing assessments to ensure that each test is of high quality, maximizes instructional goals, has a clear purpose and utility, and is designed to help students demonstrate mastery of state standards. This augmented the existing goals of improving the quality, validity, and reliability of assessments, and developing innovative new assessment instruments, such as performance and technology-based academic assessments.

- **Seeking additional funding to help states conduct assessment reviews and develop innovative assessments:** In his FY16 budget proposal, President Obama called on Congress to provide support to continue and grow this work. The President's budget included \$403 million for state assessments to provide additional resources to states to support the effective implementation of assessments that are aligned to college- and career-ready standards that will help ensure that all students graduate from high school with the knowledge and skills they need to be successful in college and the workplace. In addition to administering statewide assessments, the Department encourages states to use these funds to review existing assessments to eliminate redundancy and ensure the assessments are high-quality, maximize instructional goals, and are designed to help students achieve state standards. A set-aside of \$25 million would support competitive projects to help states develop innovative, new assessment models and address pressing needs they have identified for developing and implementing their assessments. This could include competency-based assessments, innovative item types, evaluations of existing state and local assessments to reduce time spent on testing, tools and resources to ensure greater accessibility for students with disabilities and English learners, using technology to administer and score assessments to improve the utility of the information about student performance, or improving student reports to provide more diagnostic information to parents and teachers. In his FY17 budget proposal, President Obama will once again prioritize these goals.

- **Expertise to states and school districts looking to reduce time spent on testing:**
 - **Guidance on reducing assessments:** By January 2016, the Department will provide clear guidance to all states and districts regarding what existing federal funds may be used for assessment audits and to support high-quality teaching and learning, and best practices for using testing as a learning tool.

- **Dedicated technical assistance:** The Department will establish “office hours” for any state or district that wishes to consult on how it can best reduce testing but still meet its policy objectives and requirements under the law; will engage in proactive outreach to states and districts on this topic; and will bring in experts to advise the Department, states, and districts on this work. The Department will also share tools already available to do this work, including The Council of Chief State School Officers’ [Comprehensive Statewide Assessment Systems: A Framework for the Role of the State Education Agency in Improving Quality and Reducing Burden](#) and Achieve’s [Student Assessment Inventory for School Districts](#).

 - **Technical assistance centers:** The Department will ensure that its regional and content centers and labs, including the Center for Standards and Assessments Implementation (CSAI), provide targeted assessment audit support to states and districts that are looking to reduce redundant and unnecessary assessments. Furthermore, the Department will work with its centers and labs to provide webinars and materials on the research concerning best practice in assessment practices and the use of information on student performance.

 - **Engage local educator expertise:** The Department will work with local teachers and principals to develop and provide guidance to states and districts on how to engage educators to review the quality and quantity of local assessments.
- **Flexibility from federal mandates and greater support to innovate and reduce testing:**
 - **Providing flexibility and support in non-tested grades and subjects:** The Department will work with states that wish to amend their ESEA flexibility waiver plans to reduce testing in grades and subjects that are not subject to federal testing requirements and/or find alternative ways to utilize evidence of student outcomes in the evaluation of teachers, especially in non-tested grades and subjects, while still maintaining teacher and leader evaluation and support systems that include growth in student learning. A later section of this document includes some examples, and the Department will work with states and districts to implement and share other ideas. Through the Department’s Office of State Support (OSS), it will proactively reach out to states to identify potential

flexibilities that they could take advantage of to reduce or eliminate unnecessary testing.

- **Providing flexibility for innovative assessment practices:** The Administration will invite states that wish to request waivers of federal rules that stand in the way of innovative approaches to testing to work with the Department to promote high-quality, comparable, statewide measures. For example, the Department granted a temporary waiver to New Hampshire to pilot a competency-based assessment system in four districts. This flexibility allowed the state to give students locally developed tests – in lieu of the statewide standardized test – that will assess students’ progress based on their ability to apply what they know through a series of complex, multi-part tasks. This flexibility was accompanied by a commitment to continue to report results to parents for every student in the state and to transition back to a single statewide measure of student learning against academic standards once the pilot is complete.

- **Strengthening the peer review process:** The Department will work with external assessment experts to implement a more transparent assessment peer review process of state assessments to better support states and educators. The revised peer review process will support high-quality state assessment systems and include a focus on examining the alignment and validity of the tests, test security, and the tests’ ability to measure higher-order thinking skills, such as analytic thinking and reasoning, to better measure whether students are leaving high school with the knowledge and skills they need to be ready for college or the workforce.

- **Avoiding double-testing:** To avoid double-testing of students, the Department will offer states flexibility from No Child Left Behind’s requirement that all 8th graders be tested on the same, statewide 8th grade math and reading tests, when such students are taking advanced high-school level coursework in 8th grade (as long as those students take the aligned advanced assessment and take additional, advanced, high-school level coursework and aligned assessments while enrolled in high school). Approximately 20 states are already taking advantage of this flexibility.

- **Investing in new models:** The Department will be part of the community of researchers, technologists, and innovators within the assessment community who are piloting new models, by providing federal funding and incentives for these next-generation assessments and by, where feasible, removing policy barriers to advance this goal. [i]

- **Reducing the reliance on student test scores through our rules and executive actions:**
 - **Rulemaking on teacher preparation programs:** Last December, the Department of Education released a notice of proposed rulemaking to improve the quality of teacher preparation programs by asking states to perform more rigorous evaluations of the quality of these programs based on more useful measures. In the proposed rule, the Department had suggested moving to a system that would measure the quality of a program by looking at certain discrete categories, including: success in placing teachers within a reasonable period of time after graduation, especially in high-need schools, surveys of teachers about the quality of their preparation, retention rates, employer surveys, and teachers' impact on student learning. The proposal required that states place a significant weight on growth in student learning, including growth on statewide standardized tests in evaluating these programs. In the coming weeks, we will release a final rule that maintains a focus on student learning, but provides states flexibility on how to weigh the results of statewide standardized tests and measures of student learning more broadly in any teacher preparation accountability system that it develops. As in other areas, we believe that student learning as measured by assessment results should be a part, not the sole determinant, of determining the quality of a particular program.
 - **Educator evaluation requirements:** The Administration has adjusted its policies to provide greater flexibility to states in determining how much weight to ascribe to statewide standardized test results in educator evaluation systems required under the Administration's ESEA flexibility policy. The Administration will continue to work with states and districts to ensure this flexibility is understood and employed, and to ensure states and districts are focusing on improving their own capacity around the other critical components of high-quality educator evaluations, such as student and parent surveys, and observation and feedback systems.

Examples of State and Local Leadership in Reducing Over-Testing

The nation's chief state school officers and local superintendents have provided strong leadership in this area and their work deserves close attention. For example:

- **New York** has worked to limit the amount of time students spend on required state- and district-level standardized tests – no more than 1 percent of instructional time for state-required standardized tests, and 1 percent for locally required standardized tests. To support this work, New York also established a “Teaching is the Core” competitive grant which supported teams of administrators and teachers in reviewing all assessments given, eliminating unnecessary ones, and improving the quality of assessments by making them more performance-based.[\[ii\]](#)
- **North Carolina** worked with a team of external researchers to conduct an analysis and produce a comprehensive report of its federal, state, and local required assessments.[\[iii\]](#) This report describes both the assessment requirements and strategies for alleviating testing burden from districts across North Carolina, from other states, and from its K-3 Formative Assessment Process. Additionally, the North Carolina State Board of Education has convened a Task Force to focus on reduction of testing time and burden.
- The **Rhode Island** Department of Education (RIDE) and the local superintendents have joined forces to develop guidance on improving state and local assessment decisions and practices. The goal of the project is to streamline testing, eliminate tests that do not advance teaching and learning, and ensure tests inform instruction.
- **In Delaware**, the Governor launched a review of all tests administered by the state, districts, and individual schools with the goal of decreasing the testing burden on students and teachers and increasing the time available for teaching. Delaware is providing financial resources through the [Assessment Inventory Project Grants](#) so that every district and school can conduct an in-depth inventory and review of all assessments and develop local-level recommendations and action plans. These plans will incorporate a communication component; and stakeholder groups will be involved to ensure input and transparency.
- Since 2010, **New Mexico** has successfully decreased overall state-mandated testing time across all grades by an average of 30 minutes per year with some grades seeing reductions of more than three hours. The state accomplished this while moving to implement assessments aligned with more rigorous standards; and, today, less than 2 percent of the school year is dedicated to state-mandated testing. The state is also partnering with districts to examine local practices and to reduce duplicative testing.[\[iv\]](#)

- The **District of Columbia Public Schools** established the Assessment Task Force, which includes teachers and principals, to review the district's assessments.
- In February 2015, **Florida** announced a series of steps to reduce testing, including enacting legislation to eliminate local final exams in courses/subjects where there is also a statewide standardized end-of-course exam; giving no more than one school-wide or district-wide interim assessment per course/subject per grading period; and not testing students for the sole purpose of evaluating teachers. According to the [Council of the Great City Schools](#) (CGCS), **Duval County** has reduced the number of its district required elementary-level tests from 23 to 10 and district required secondary level tests from 29 to 12. And **Miami-Dade** eliminated 24 district-developed benchmark assessments and 300 district developed End Of Course (EOC) tests, according to CGCS.
- States are working to eliminate low-quality tests taken solely for the purpose of evaluating teachers by (1) using good tests that are or would be administered for another purpose to measure student growth for this purpose and (2) using non-test based indicators of student growth, such as essays and portfolios, especially when evaluating teachers of grades and subjects for which statewide assessments are not required by federal law. In **Tennessee**, arts educators in Memphis developed a blind peer review evaluation to assess portfolios of student learning in music and fine arts that has caught on in other districts across the state. This reduces student assessment burden by preventing teachers from being required to administer pre-tests for the purpose of having a baseline student score from which to calculate student growth.
- States can include indicators of student learning, including student growth as measured by factors other than state standardized assessments, in their teacher evaluation policies. For example, as part of its ESEA waiver policy, **Minnesota** is approved to allow its districts to include state assessment based growth at any percent (even less than 1 percent), which is sufficient because Minnesota is including, as a significant factor, student learning growth measured by factors other than the state assessment.
- States may delay inclusion of growth on student learning based on statewide assessments into their systems beyond school year 2015-16 as they continue to implement and continuously improve their other measure, such as student surveys and observations of professional practice. The **District of Columbia** has temporarily removed its value-added measures from its teacher and leader evaluation systems and continues to focus on providing quality feedback on its Teaching and Learning Framework/Leadership Framework as a key element of the improvement process, according to CGCS.

- States can include growth on student learning in their educator evaluation systems through a variety of approaches other than a specific percentage weight, including “matrix” models. For example, **Massachusetts** uses a matrix, with educator “performance ratings” (e.g., professional culture, parent engagement, planning) on one axis and “student impact ratings” on the other, to ensure that growth in student learning is included in a meaningful way, balanced with other factors.

Calling on Congress to Reduce Over-Testing in ESEA

As Congress works to reauthorize ESEA, it should ensure that the legislation provides the tools that parents, teachers, districts, and states need to assess the progress that all students are making each year, including measuring progress by each subgroup. It is also important that we make these investments in a way that supports smart, effective assessments and reduces over-testing, including language requiring states to limit classroom time spent on statewide standardized testing. Further, legislation should require that information from tests be shared in a timely, user-friendly, and actionable way with parents, teachers, leaders, and students, where appropriate.

- **Cap testing time:** Congress should ensure that states place a cap on the percentage of instructional time students spend taking required state standardized assessments. Parents should receive formal notification if their child’s school exceeds this cap and an action plan should be publicly posted to describe the steps the district will take to come into compliance.
- **Better information to parents:** Congress should require each district to provide information to parents on the required tests the states and district give, including for each assessment, (1) the purpose, (2) the source of the requirement, (3) when the information about student performance is provided to teachers and parents, (4) how teachers, principals, and district officials use the information about student performance, and (5) how parents can use that information to help their child succeed.
- **Use multiple measures:** Congress should ensure that states and districts use indicators of student success beyond just standardized tests for the purposes of holding schools and educators accountable for student progress, provided that, for schools, such measures cannot outweigh any individual measure of academic outcomes (achievement and graduation rates).
- **Invest in innovative assessments:** Congress should provide dedicated competitive funding for states with new ideas to develop innovative ways to measure student learning.

- **Support state and local assessment audits:** Congress should provide funds for state and district assessment audits in an effort to eliminate redundancy and to ensure that assessments are of high-quality, maximize instructional goals, and are designed to help students achieve state standards. These funds should support teams of teachers and administrators working together to improve the quality of assessments used (e.g., incorporating more writing, real-world application, and critical thinking).
- **Ensure assessment quality:** Congress should continue to require the Department to work with external assessment experts to ensure states are using high-quality assessments that are aligned with state-developed standards and valid for the purposes for which they are used. This review process must respond to changes in the field, such as accounting for the increased prevalence of the use of technology-based assessments as well as techniques for demonstrating their technical quality.
- **Maintain meaningful accountability for vulnerable students:** Congress should ensure that a new ESEA maintains its civil rights purpose and a focus on the most vulnerable students. The law must require annual assessments of all students against state-developed college- and career-ready expectations, and must require that states and districts take action in schools that are failing students and communities – including the lowest-performing 5 percent of schools, schools where subgroups of students are continually falling behind, and high schools with low graduation rates. The law also must ensure accountability for states, districts, and schools that do not assess at least 95 percent of students, including in each subgroup. And, Congress must ensure the Department has the authority to implement the law.

[i] For example, a consortium of states - through the Innovation Lab Network supported by the Council of Chief State School Officers - are working to develop and implement new formative and summative performance-based assessments that more effectively capture evidence of student mastery of the knowledge, skills, and dispositions students need to succeed. And a new funder collaborative comprised of national philanthropies and foundations is investing in developing and testing new, smarter models of student assessment.

http://www.ccsso.org/What_We_Do/Innovation_Lab_Network.html

[ii] <http://usny.nysed.gov/rttt/rfp/sa-17/home.html>

[iii] <http://www.dpi.state.nc.us/docs/intern-research/reports/testing2014.pdf>

[iv]

[http://ped.state.nm.us/ped/NMTeachDocs/Toolbox/Testing%20in%20New%20Mexico%20Eblast%20\(March%207%202014\).pdf](http://ped.state.nm.us/ped/NMTeachDocs/Toolbox/Testing%20in%20New%20Mexico%20Eblast%20(March%207%202014).pdf)