

State Policy Guide to Improve Equity in State Summative Assessments

Annual statewide assessments provide valuable insight into how schools are supporting all students. Comparable data produced by these assessments:

- Enable educators to adjust curricula and instructional plans.
- Provide a roadmap for administrators to strategically allocate resources in a way that supports underserved students and schools and identify bright spots across districts to learn from.
- Allow families to see how their child is performing in comparison to grade-level standards.
- Enable state leaders and policymakers to compare results across schools and districts to inform state policy.

But statewide assessments [must be modified](#) to better empower all students, especially students of color and students from low-income backgrounds, to demonstrate what they truly know and can do — improving data that drives decision-making and better meet the needs of families, educators, and administrators.

The three innovations outlined below build on EdTrust’s 2023 [Future of Assessments](#) report, which establishes four equity pillars based on focus groups of students, families, and educators, and are discussed in more detail in [a series of reports](#) released in 2024. **To maximize impact and address the intersecting concerns heard from stakeholders, policymakers should work to implement all three improvements below:**

1. Improve assessments to better reflect students’ identities and interests.

Statewide assessments must be made more [racially and culturally inclusive](#) to ensure all students can accurately demonstrate their learning. Currently, nearly all state assessments exclude content that intentionally represents specific cultural topics or themes. While the aim may be to provide an “objective” assessment, this approach limits representation by defaulting to a “neutral” whiteness. Instead, assessments must intentionally represent diverse identities and interests. **Advocates must call for change from their state leaders — without outside pressure, most states and assessment developers will not initiate improvements on their own.**

2. *Adjust the timing of state assessments to assess student progress throughout the year.*

The current end-of-year structure of statewide summative assessments prevents educators from using assessment data to provide current students with the supports they need, restricts administrators from using results to inform resource allocation decisions during the year, limits parents' ability to track their child's grade-level progress, and creates anxiety for students, educators, and families. [Through-year assessment models](#) offer a promising alternative approach: students demonstrate their learning throughout the year, offering multiple opportunities to demonstrate proficiency, while eliminating the need for costly district interim assessments, which vary in quality and pose equity concerns. **Advocates must play an influential role in communicating their interest in this innovation and ensuring their state [designs a through-year model](#) effectively and equitably.**

3. *Improve individual score reporting to be more meaningful for students and their families.*

No matter the structure, [assessment reporting](#) must assist every family to better understand how their school is meeting their child's needs. Individual assessment reports provide essential information by summarizing students' grade-level performance to identify if a student may need additional support. However, the design of score reports are often confusing, not asset-based, delayed in their release, and rarely integrated within broader conversations about students' academic progress. States must improve these reports to communicate results more effectively and why they matter, while also providing guidance to ensure results are accessible to families. States can also work to improve their "report card" platform, which helps students and families contextualize their individual assessment results across the school, district, and state levels. **Advocates must communicate the value of timely and meaningful assessment reporting, including individual score reports, and insist on family involvement in any effort to improve both their design and delivery.**

<i>IF</i>	<i>THEN</i>
Assessments are racially and culturally inclusive by connecting with students' identities and interests...	...Students feel more engaged and will be better able to show what they know and can do.
Through-year assessments provide more meaningful, timely assessment data to educators and administrators...	...Educators and administrators can better identify students' strengths and additional supports needed.
Assessment results are clearly communicated to students and families through improved reports and meaningful conversations...	...Students and their families are empowered to ensure their school is meeting their needs.

Recommendations for State-Level Advocates

1. *Build an advocacy campaign to articulate a compelling theory of action for pursuing assessment innovations.*

- Inclusive and timely assessments should connect with students' identities and provide clear, actionable data. When students, families, administrators, and policymakers understand student progress and ongoing needs, they are better able to ensure all students receive the supports they need to thrive and allocate additional resources to the schools and interventions needed most. Advocates can champion this vision for change, build momentum among the advocacy community, and compel state policymakers and administrators to take action.

2. *Urge state leaders and administrators to leverage their “consumer power” to incentivize vendors to improve their assessments and reporting.*

- By updating their contract renewal process or Request for Proposals (RFPs) states can communicate an expectation for their assessment developer to engage in practices that will result in more inclusive assessments including a commitment, established in their contract, to develop and use more inclusive and engaging test items.
- Improve the operational and technical processes that influence an assessment's design, such as bias and sensitivity guidelines that are currently limiting representation of culture and interests.
- Explore and test approaches to produce timelier individual score results for students and their families.
- Conduct focus groups and cognitive lab interviews to garner the perspectives of students and families of color and from low-income backgrounds on improving individual score reporting and gathering feedback on inclusive and authentic assessment items.

3. *Act as a watchdog for stakeholder engagement.*

- While pursuing any combination of these improvements to assessments, advocates must ensure that the state prioritizes engagement with diverse groups in a meaningful, culturally relevant manner. States must also explicitly solicit the perspectives of teachers, families, and administrators who predominantly serve students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, students with disabilities, and multilingual students.
- Encourage state leaders to develop task forces or teacher advisory councils and engage community organizations to ensure the needs of community members are centered in the development of assessment innovations.

4. *Advocate for additional state funding for assessments.*

- This funding from the state can be allocated to ensure your state’s assessment vendor has the additional resources required to develop and refine new inclusive content and improve the processes that create the enabling conditions to develop more engaging and authentic content and reporting.
- Hire designated staff to effectively manage changes to assessments including building stronger coherence between the assessment and teaching/learning departments within the state education agency (SEA).
- Build the capacity of state administrators to develop a range of resources to build understanding and support the implementation of assessment innovations. Guidance and support from the state should include:
 - Professional development opportunities for teachers and other school staff to effectively communicate individual assessment results in asset-based and culturally affirming ways and learn how to use through-year assessment data to drive instructional improvement and targeted supports.
 - Incentives and guidance to support districts to ramp-down use of their (often profuse) use of commercial interim assessments, which will likely become duplicative with a through-year assessment.

5. *Encourage the state to pursue federal funding and support for innovations.*

- State leaders can pursue assessment innovation funding via the [Competitive Grants for State Assessments](#), a grant program under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) that provides financial support for states to “enhance the quality of assessment instruments and assessment systems.”
- Advocates can also encourage participation in the IADA (Innovative Assessment Demonstration Authority), designed to assist states to “establish, operate, and evaluate an innovative assessment system, including for use in the statewide accountability system.” States can also participate in the newly formed IADA planning phase, which enables states to get feedback on their plans for their assessments from the U.S. Department of Education, without committing to joining the program.