

5 Things Every Equity Advocate Should Know About Through-Year Assessments

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Statewide summative assessments are crucial tools for advancing educational equity. As the only assessments that evaluate student growth and learning annually and make valid comparisons across students and student groups in a state, they can provide valuable insights to policymakers, advocates, education leaders and families on how well schools are meeting the needs of all students.

In [focus groups](#) conducted by EdTrust in 2023, however, students, families, educators, and administrators expressed a strong desire for more meaningful, timely, and actionable assessment data.¹ Educators and administrators (including state agency staff, school principals, and district leaders) voiced frustration over the lack of timely results, noting that while traditional state summative assessments evaluate students' knowledge and skills at the end of the academic year, the results typically come much later — often months into the next instructional year. Focus group participants noted that such delays limit their ability to leverage the data to direct resources and supports to students in a timely fashion.

For that reason, through-year assessments, which consist of several administrations during the year, have [gained traction](#)² among state leaders as an alternative to traditional end-of-year state summative assessments, especially since the through-year assessment model lets states adhere to equity provisions required under federal law.³ The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which stipulates that states must produce summative scores for every student that are aligned to grade-level standards, and that scores must be valid, reliable, and publicly reported and disaggregated by student group, for the first time also clarified that states can use multiple assessment administrations to generate a single summative score, which provides a clear indicator of a student's grade-level proficiency.⁴

What Are Through-Year Assessments?

Through-year assessments consist of shorter subtests administered several times during the year (known as "administrations"). This through-year format is an alternative to traditional summative assessments and is designed to measure what students know and can do over the course of the academic year. Through-year assessments can provide more equitable opportunities for teachers to glean instructionally useful information, allow school leaders to make more informed resource allocation decisions, and help parents to understand how their child is progressing over the course of the year. **Here are five things that every equity advocate should know about through-year assessments.**

1

Through-year assessments can help promote more equitable opportunities for students

If the fundamental goal of state summative assessments is to ensure that schools provide students with the resources they need to learn and thrive, then having more timely and relevant assessment data is crucial because it gives educators another tool in their toolbox of assessments to identify areas of strength and areas needing improvement, so they can adjust their instruction and provide additional supports accordingly. It also enables district and school leaders to be more strategic about assigning interventionists and support staff to the schools and students who need them most. And well-designed through-year assessments can give students more opportunities to demonstrate what they know and can do during the year, which, in turn, helps ensure that the supports provided to them are well-aligned to their needs.

Although many districts aim to do this by using commercial interim assessments — which are typically administered a few times per year by a school or district to determine how students are progressing in their learning — there are significant equity concerns associated with relying solely on these benchmark assessments to drive instructional improvements and resource allocation decisions. For instance, well-resourced districts are generally better able to support teachers in understanding and interpreting interim assessment data, while teachers in under-resourced schools are less likely to have access to interim assessment data and high-quality professional development to help them understand such data, which can hamper efforts to adjust instruction. Additionally, an incoherent system that includes disjointed assessments can be resource-intensive and especially burdensome for under-resourced schools. Commercial interim assessments also tend to only report students' growth relative to their peers, which can be misleading and obscure the level of support and resources that students — especially the lowest achieving students — need to achieve grade-level proficiency.



2

Popular interim assessments can inspire through-year assessment design but have many limitations

Most districts across the country administer commercial interim assessments in addition to a traditional end-of-year state summative assessment. To be clear, these interim (also called “benchmark”) assessments are not part of a through-year assessment model and exist as a separate assessment initiative, on top of the federal requirement that schools administer an annual summative assessment.

These interim assessments are popular, in large part, because they provide real-time information that traditional summative assessments do not provide in their current form. Many commercial interim assessments can also assess students on below-grade-level concepts and skills, which can provide meaningful data for educators, administrators, and families to support the lowest achieving students who require the most support to catch up to grade level. However, there are significant limitations related to the quality, access, and accessibility of this type of benchmark assessment:

- **The quality of interim assessments and their alignment to standards are mixed.** Commercial interim assessments are independently created and managed. However, unlike summative assessments, they are not subject to the same federal review and approval processes and, therefore, are not held to the same standards or rigor as traditional annual state assessments. As a result, the quality of content in benchmark assessments varies widely.⁵ What’s more, public transparency remains limited: In 2023, [most publishers of assessments](#)⁶ [refused to hand over](#)⁷ their technical documentation to EdReports, a third-party evaluation nonprofit that brought national attention to the lack of standards alignment in many popular curricular materials. This is concerning, since a lack of alignment between assessments and standards and/or poor technical quality can produce incoherence within assessment systems and can obscure what students know and can do.
- **Educators lack equitable access to training and support in understanding how to use assessment data.** Districts with ample resources are better equipped to support their educators in understanding and analyzing interim assessment data, while under-resourced districts are often unable to afford the same level of support for their teachers and administrators.
- **Accessibility features are not guaranteed.** Accommodations and accessibility features — such as braille or speech-to-text — are not available for many interim commercial assessments.⁸ Without these accommodations, many students with disabilities cannot fully participate. Additionally, test developers have not generally created interim alternative assessments for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities, thereby excluding them as well.⁹
- **Many interim assessments predominantly focus on measures of growth at the expense of including student proficiency.** Interim assessment reporting tends to highlight the growth students make throughout the year, an important measure worth including on assessment reports. However, many commercial interim assessment reports do so at the expense of including information about student proficiency, obscuring the level of support that students still need to achieve grade-level expectations.

3

Through-year assessments offer several opportunities to address the concerns of families, educators, and administrators about traditional statewide summative assessments

Opportunity A. Through-year assessments return much more timely results, which provide meaningful and actionable data that educators, parents, and administrators can use to better support students' learning.

For example, states that are currently developing or piloting a through-year assessment model can get results as quickly as the same day (e.g., Indiana, North Carolina) or as slowly as the following Monday after the test was administered (e.g., Texas).¹⁰ This gives educators, administrators, and families more real-time data, rather than a retrospective (and possibly outdated) snapshot of what students knew and could do the previous year.¹¹

Delays in receiving summative assessment results can undermine the ability of teachers, administrators, and families to use results to better meet student needs and address inequities.¹² For example, teachers in focus groups voiced frustration over the months-long gap between when students take the statewide summative assessment and when results are returned, noting that the delay makes it impossible to provide timely targeted interventions for students, since, by the time the results are in, those students have started the next school year and have moved on to the next grade. Instead, they can only use results from traditional summative assessments to help plan for the *next school year*. Many educators also said they feel significant pressure to ensure that students perform well on summative assessments but are not afforded meaningful and timely opportunities to use the data that results from their time and effort.¹³

Administrators likewise said that having timelier summative assessment data would help them monitor programs or initiatives *that same year*, and target supplemental resources (e.g., funding, staffing, coaching) based on students' real-time test results.¹⁴ This could be transformative, since school and district leaders make important budget decisions in late winter or early spring — long before students take traditional summative assessments.

Lastly, summative assessment data is often the only piece of information that families receive regarding their child's progress against grade-level expectations.¹⁵ Yet, families typically receive this information at the conclusion of the school year (often in the summer months), when it's too late to intervene or seek additional support on behalf of their child.

Opportunity B. The multiple results of a through-year assessment can be combined to produce a student's final summative score. In contrast, a traditional end-of-year summative assessment only gives students "one shot" at demonstrating proficiency, which can be a source of great anxiety for students and teachers.

Traditional summative assessments provide a single snapshot of what a student knows and can do against grade-level standards. In focus groups, teachers said this can induce anxiety in them and their students.¹⁶ Moreover, teachers said they worry that this anxiety negatively impacts student performance. In Louisiana, for example, 77% of teachers identified their innovative assessment program as a better measure of student performance than the traditional Louisiana Educational Assessment Program (LEAP).¹⁷

Further, providing multiple opportunities for students to demonstrate proficiency recognizes that often — and disproportionately in low-income communities — there are outside-of-school factors (such as caregiving responsibilities, food and housing insecurity, etc.) that can fundamentally affect a student's performance on a given day. The use of through-year assessments tries, to the extent possible, to acknowledge and account for this reality in many students' lives.

Opportunity C: Through-year assessments can streamline a state’s assessment system, eliminating the need for district-level assessment systems altogether. This would create more cost-effective opportunities to support student learning and reduce the overall footprint of assessments.

Across focus groups, many students, parents, and educators said that state assessments (including preparation for them and their delivery) loom large in students’ school experiences, diminishing time for actual instruction.¹⁸ While state summative exams do take some time to prepare for and deliver, these end-of-year state exams are only one of several assessments that students take. According to a 2022 nationally representative survey, 99% of K-8 schools administered at least one benchmark assessment for English language arts (ELA) and/or mathematics, and most schools (75%) administered more than one assessment. On average, K-8 schools administered three distinct benchmark assessments per subject, the survey found.¹⁹

This means students, families, educators, and administrators must navigate several assessments throughout the year. State summative and commercial interim assessments often provide different, sometimes conflicting, information about student learning and progress, and have distinct features, including separate delivery platforms, terminology, reporting structures, and administration protocols. Administering both takes a lot of capacity and effort on the part of educators and administrators, who must learn, use, and manage these various assessment platforms and systems. This can also be [a barrier](#) for students and families, who may struggle to understand the differing results of each assessment.²⁰

Meaningful through-year assessments, however, can provide both interim benchmarks on learning progress *and* produce an annual summative designation, thereby eliminating the need for district interim assessments altogether. This may reduce the total assessment time for students, while also building an aligned, coherent assessment system that affords greater insights to educators, administrators, and families.



Coherent Assessment Systems and Equity

Coherence can be thought of as “the unifying glue” that binds together all assessments in an assessment system.²¹ Coherent assessment systems use multiple assessments to provide a comprehensive view of student learning, ensure alignment to grade-level standards and learning goals, and importantly, produce consistent, meaningful assessment data that paints a clear picture of student learning.

But when assessment systems rely on conflicting or redundant assessments that produce fragmented data, they lack coherence, and underserved students, including students of color and students from low-income backgrounds, are disproportionately and negatively impacted.

This is because incoherent assessment systems fail to paint a comprehensive picture of what students know and can do. As a result, teachers and administrators are unable to provide the additional support students need to reach proficiency, despite their best efforts. For example, some commercial interim assessments produce misleading and counterproductive assessment data because they are not aligned to instructional or grade-level standards.²²

Implementing an incoherent assessment system can also be labor intensive. For instance, it takes a significant amount of time, resources, and capacity to train educators, test-site coordinators, and administrators on each assessment’s distinct terminology and delivery platform, not to mention how to administer different assessments and accurately interpret and use the results. This has an outsized impact on students of color and students from low-income backgrounds, who are more likely to attend schools with high teacher and leader turnover and less access to functioning equipment like laptops, which may be needed to complete computer-based assessments. Already under-resourced districts may be forced to continuously dedicate limited resources to training and re-training staff or forgo training altogether.



Opportunity D. Through-year assessments measure what students know and can do throughout the year, creating opportunities to more closely connect student learning in the classroom with assessment systems.

Traditional summative assessments provide a retrospective view of how schools are supporting their students each year. To be clear, this is an incredibly valuable check on the system. However, this check against the full breadth of grade-level standards is often disconnected from everyday learning experiences, including instruction and the curriculum. For example, students taking the ELA summative assessment are exposed to passages that they have never seen before and have no connection to the books they read in class.²³

While this may be an intentional choice — designed to maintain a traditional summative assessment’s “impartiality” and ensure that no student is more familiar with assessment questions than another — it’s also a misguided one.²⁴ Bridging the gap between teaching, learning, and assessments can build coherence and, if done equitably, better allows all students to demonstrate what they know and can do, which, in turn produces more meaningful data for educators and administrators. This is because every student uses prior knowledge — both what they know about the world and what they’ve explicitly learned about in school — to situate their learning.²⁵

Because through-year assessments occur at various times during the year, the timing of administrations can be scheduled at strategic intervals to match up with the sequence of the curriculum, thereby assessing students on the knowledge and skills they were recently taught. There’s also a possibility for state leaders to align a through-year assessment even more directly to the content, topics, themes, and/or curriculum students are interacting with in the classroom. Although significantly more complicated to design, if done well, this choice could help minimize the impact of background knowledge on students’ assessment performance, producing fairer and more accurate assessment data. In both instances, a through-year design can provide more specific, accurate, and meaningful data that educators, administrators, and families can use to support all students, though the latter is an arduous undertaking.



4

Research suggests that certain components of a through-year assessment can promote student learning, but further study is needed to evaluate the model's effectiveness

Since no through-year model has undergone federal peer review (the process by which the U.S. Department of Education evaluates evidence to ensure that an assessment model meets the technical requirements necessary to uphold federal law, including all-important equity provisions), no state has been able to substantiate specific claims about the effectiveness of their through-year assessment model.

There is, however, substantial research suggesting that through-year assessments can create the conditions to improve student learning. More specifically, research shows that learning improves when students are given timely and relevant feedback²⁶ and teachers are able to adjust their instruction based on students' particular needs.²⁷ Students also learn more when there is greater alignment between the curriculum, instruction, and assessments,²⁸ and assessments that more closely connect with classroom instruction can potentially mitigate bias by reducing the influence of certain types of prior knowledge.²⁹ Lastly, student learning and the ability to retain skills and concepts increases when students have more opportunities to reference and use skills and concepts,³⁰ suggesting that assessing students more frequently over the course of a year can boost academic learning and retention — especially since learning increasingly complex concepts and skills requires a strong grasp of prior concepts and skills.³¹ States should conduct an impact evaluation, as discussed in [“Designing Equitable Through-Year Assessments.”](#)

5

Not all through-year assessments are created equal

Through-year assessments can — and must be — designed with the goal of helping education leaders advance equitable student opportunities. Because of their distinct design features, through-year assessments can provide more meaningful and timely assessment data than traditional state summative annual assessments, which, in turn, can allow education leaders to make more frequent, well-informed resource allocation decisions and programmatic adjustments.

However, through-year assessments require more customization, and, based on how they are designed, some models are much better positioned to produce meaningful assessment data than others. [“Designing Equitable Through-Year Assessments”](#) details some key considerations and provides EdTrust's recommendations and rationale on three crucial design questions.

Additionally, some assessments, such as the Florida Assessment of Student Thinking (FAST) model, purport to use a through-year assessment model but barely eschew the traditional summative assessment format by adding state-developed “progress monitoring” checkpoints. A student's final score is still solely determined by the last administration of the assessment.³² This approach overlooks the potential benefits of providing students with multiple opportunities to “get credit” for demonstrating proficiency or adjusting the assessment's blueprint and may perpetuate the limitations associated with one-time assessments. In fact, it's a misnomer to even call Florida's model a through-year assessment.

Recommendations for Advocates

Advocates should push for equitable through-year assessments, so that educators, administrators, and families can have access to more meaningful, actionable data to better provide the supports students need. Several of the following recommendations are discussed in greater detail in the accompanying report, "[Designing Equitable Through-Year Assessments](#)."

1. Establish a vision for a through-year assessment model

Advocates must present a compelling theory of action for through-year assessments and clearly establish the connection between through-year assessments and educational equity. Advocates can highlight the advantages of through-year assessments, including the need for more meaningful, timely assessment data for educators, administrators, and families to ensure that students — especially students of color and students from low-income backgrounds — are afforded the immediate academic supports they need and deserve to thrive.

2. Communicate how various design choices differ in meeting student needs

Through-year assessment models hold tremendous promise, but advocates must stress that not all through-year assessments are created equal. Advocates must urge state policymakers and administrators to prioritize equity in the design, development, implementation, and evaluation of new or existing through-year initiatives. The accompanying report, "[Designing Equitable Through-Year Assessments](#)," highlights the design conditions needed to build an equitable through-year assessment model, so educators can use statewide assessment data to gain instructional insights and administrators can make strategic, equitable decisions about resource allocation.

3. Leverage enabling conditions

Advocates can leverage existing conditions — and work to create new ones — that support a successful through-year assessment initiative. By doing so, advocates can build coherence and coordination among the processes, systems, and actors who are integral to developing a through-year assessment model.



Advocates should directly leverage or build upon enabling conditions within the state education agency (SEA). **Specifically, advocates can:**

- **Build buy-in from state leaders, especially at the outset of their term, to establish through-year assessment as a priority.** Advocates can do this by communicating the need for more meaningful assessment data and then building a compelling case for developing a through-year assessment pilot. When all types of stakeholders are vocal about their desire for improvement, state leaders are aware of advocates' priorities and are more likely to dedicate resources and investment toward it, since they know the undertaking has support.
- **Communicate the importance of having additional capacity and resources.** The success of a through-year assessment pilot requires significant additional capacity, including designated staff who can do the work, have deep knowledge of their state and its assessment systems, and experience in designing, testing, and managing a new assessment initiative to achieve desired outcomes. As such, the state agency should create additional position(s) that are solely responsible for the development, engagement, and roll out of the pilot. The role(s) should also prioritize building coherence between the assessments and teaching/learning departments in the state agency, as discussed below.

Advocates can ask lawmakers to dedicate sufficient funding to staff the state education agency via legislation and state budget support. Advocates can also encourage state leaders to apply and use additional funds via the Competitive Grants for State Assessments (CGSA), a grant program under ESSA that provides financial support for states to “enhance the quality of assessment instruments and assessment systems.”³³

- **Broker connections and establish the expectation of coordination within the SEA.** Through-year assessment initiatives will benefit immensely from strong coordination between multiple departments within the state agency. This is because, while the assessment team remains responsible for coordinating the technical aspects of the development and implementation of a large-scale assessment, the teaching and learning team likely has important insights on how to leverage through-year assessment design to build coherence with curriculum and instruction and the ways in which the assessment data can inform instructional insights for educators and administrators. Unfortunately, close collaboration between these two teams isn't always guaranteed (especially in more populous states). If advocates have relationships with staff in the agency, they can connect state administrators to their peers and broker the connection between departments.
- **Build upon ongoing priorities within the state to garner additional support.** There are often additional, state-specific conditions that advocates can leverage to help make the case for undertaking a through-year assessment initiative. Connecting through-year assessment efforts to successful investments that have already been made in the state can help advocates broaden and deepen support and make the issue more relevant. For example, social studies educators in Delaware built coherence, desire, and a path to develop a through-year assessment pilot when they came together in partnership with the state to revise the state's academic standards. Additionally, in Louisiana, long-standing statewide investments in standards-aligned, high-quality instructional materials (HQIM) eventually extended to conversations about building coherence between teaching and learning and assessment systems.

- **Encourage a “just-right” pace.** Advocates must ensure that their state agency is thoughtful about the timeline for developing and testing a through-year assessment, since time itself is an enabling condition: While it’s clear that rushing a through-year assessment initiative will jeopardize the ability to conduct important community engagement and impact evaluation activities, letting the initiative languish for years may slow momentum, which must persist over the course of several leadership administrations that may have vastly different priorities. If there is pressure from a state’s legislature to deliver outputs at an unreasonably quick pace, advocates are well-positioned to help provide cover for their state agency and to ensure that a rushed timeline is not at the expense of students, families, and communities who seek to benefit from an equitable, thoughtful pilot.
- **Prompt states to get feedback from the U.S. Department of Education (ED).** If the goal is to replace the current summative assessment with a through-year assessment model for use at scale, then the latter must meet ED’s technical requirements. States can seek early feedback from ED to ensure that their plans are compliant with federal law by submitting information via the Innovative Assessment Demonstration Authority planning phase, or IADA, regardless of whether they plan to eventually participate in IADA (as opposed to another regulatory pathway to “approve” the use of through-year assessments).

3. Act as a watchdog for stakeholder engagement

Advocates must ensure that their state is meaningfully engaging with those who will be most impacted by potential changes in the state summative assessment. For states to be able to improve their summative assessment, they must first understand the perspectives and needs of families, educators, and administrators across a range of contexts. Advocates have a role to play in ensuring that their state prioritizes engagement with diverse groups in a meaningful, culturally relevant manner and explicitly seeks the perspectives of teachers, families, and administrators who predominantly serve students of color and students from low-income backgrounds, students with disabilities, and multilingual students.

Advocates can push their state leaders to publish feedback from their engagement efforts and, importantly, information about how the vendor and state leaders acted upon it. Advocates can also push state leaders to convene a diverse teacher advisory council and test coordinator advisory council to establish a standing, ongoing feedback loop with select educators and test site coordinators.

4. Urge state leaders to hold vendors accountable for their promises

Advocates can work with state administrators to demand evidence from the assessment developer that the assessment produced is logistically and operationally viable at the outset of the pilot. After all, states are customers of assessment vendors and should have “quality control” over the product they purchased.

5. Ensure that the state allocates funds to develop resources that build stakeholders' understanding of assessment data

It's not enough for states to build a strong through-year assessment. They must ensure that educators and administrators know how to administer the assessment and analyze and use the data (both on its own and in combination with strong formative assessment practices), while ensuring that students and families understand what the information represents and how to use it.

Moreover, advocates must ensure that states are developing high-quality, accessible resources that are aligned to stakeholders' needs. For instance, states can develop protocols for facilitating learning communities or other professional development sessions focused on using through-year assessment data to drive instructional improvement. These sessions can give educators opportunities to collaborate, share best practices, and develop strategies for maximizing the impact of the assessment data on student learning outcomes. Advocates must also encourage their state leaders to heavily incentivize — and develop guidance to help — districts to reduce the prolific use of commercial interim assessments, which will likely become duplicative.

6. Require state leaders to conduct an equity-centered impact evaluation of the pilot efforts

Advocates must ensure that their state evaluates pilot programs in a way that explicitly considers the impact of the pilot on the educational experiences of students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, students with disabilities, and multilingual learners, as well as the educators, administrators, and family members who serve them. At minimum, this means that states must develop a pilot initiative that includes a representative and diverse population of students. If the theory of action laid out above holds, then a state's through-year assessment pilot should create the conditions for more efficient, coherent, and equitable opportunities to promote academic learning and growth. To that end, advocates can make sure their state collects and monitors the data required to test this claim.

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