CEA
Advocating for students and teachers

Policy Brief

Review of Education Policy Research and Action

February 2023 cea.org

Redesigning Education and Student Assessment

"High-stakes assessment is having a damaging impact on the health and well-being of students."

– Bill Lucas, Center for Strategic Education[1]

Executive Summary

Our reliance on standardized tests to measure student learning and school quality has resulted in few gains while causing harm to schools and students. Federal testing requirements resulting from No Child Left Behind (2001) and Every Student Succeeds Act (2015) have not translated into durable academic gains or narrowed achievement gaps, nor are students in the United States more globally competitive today than they were a decade ago. Instead, overemphasis on testing has resulted in stagnant academic growth, a narrowed curriculum focused primarily on reading and math, and little time left in the school day for enriching educational experiences that foster creativity, collaboration, and innovative problem solving, skills essential in our complex, rapidly changing world. The overall quality of children's educational experiences has steadily eroded over the past two decades, contributing to unprecedented levels of childhood anxiety, stress, depression, and school disengagement.

CEA's Redesigning Education and Student Assessment Policy Brief addresses

1. The influence of federal school accountability laws (No Child Left Behind and its successor, the Every Student Succeeds Act) on assessment policies and the schooling environment as a whole
2. The impact of federal laws on the appropriate scope of curricula and their narrowing of focus
3. The detrimental impact of assessment policy and the narrowing of curricula on the health and well-being of students
4. The disproportionate and negative impact of assessment policy on racial and ethnic subgroups
5. New and more effective assessment strategies pursued by districts, states, and other countries, including innovative programs under federal waiver authority underway in Louisiana, Georgia, North Carolina, Massachusetts, and New Hampshire
6. Future trends in assessment
7. Policy recommendations, including such options as the following:
    a. Federal ESSA Innovation Assessment Demonstration Authority Pilot
    b. U.S. Department of Education Competitive Grants that can promote innovation
    c. Incorporating multiple non-standardized indicators in the state's accountability system
    d. Removing the high-stakes nature of statewide standardized testing from state policies on student graduation records and educator evaluation
    e. Advocating for and pursuing more flexibility in assessment options at the federal level

Federal and state accountability laws have resulted in two decades of inflexible student assessment strategies. The rigidity and narrowing of curricular focus related to standardized testing has made graduates of our schools less prepared for life after high school.[2] Young adults, whether pursuing college, career, or newer pathways that combine both are best prepared if able to be creative, effectively communicate

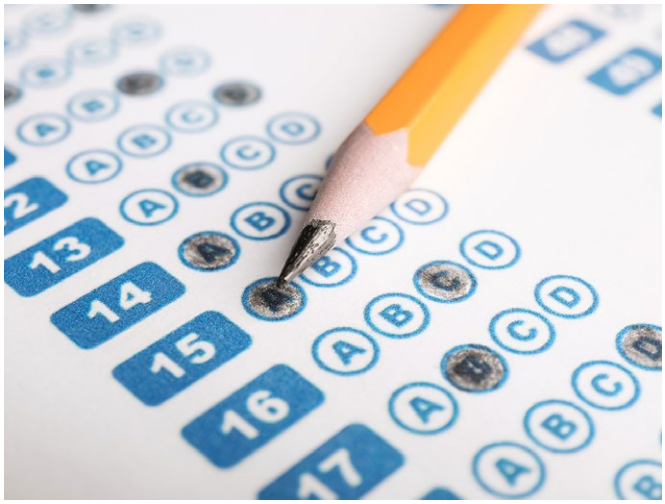
[1] Lucas, B. "Rethinking assessment in education: the case for change." Center for Strategic Education, Leading Education Series (April 15, 2021; P. 1) Accessed 12/5/2022 at https://www.researchgate.net/publication/350887830_Rethinking_assessment_in_education_The_case_for_change_CSE_LEADING_EDUCATION_SERIES

[2] Zhao, Yong (2007) *"Zhao Education in the Flat World — Implications of Globalization on Education"* Edge V.2 N4, March/April, 2007) (P. 5)

their ideas, collaborate, and understand and pursue what they need to know to grow.

Policymakers today are rethinking education in part because of the devastating impact COVID-19 has had on students' social and emotional well-being—the mental health crisis it not only uncovered but in many ways exacerbated. There is a growing acknowledgement that anxiety and stress greatly undermine learning and dampen students' motivation, and policymakers are now asking different questions: What are we doing to our students? How can our schools inspire students to pursue knowledge and develop relevant skills for the future? What are the things that students should know, understand, and be able to do, and how can we best assess for those competencies and insights in a way that engages learning?

As the sun sets on an era of overtesting, the dawn ushers in an era of student engagement and inspiration. It is up to policymakers to enable a new day. The need to rethink student assessment and how best to measure school quality is urgent.



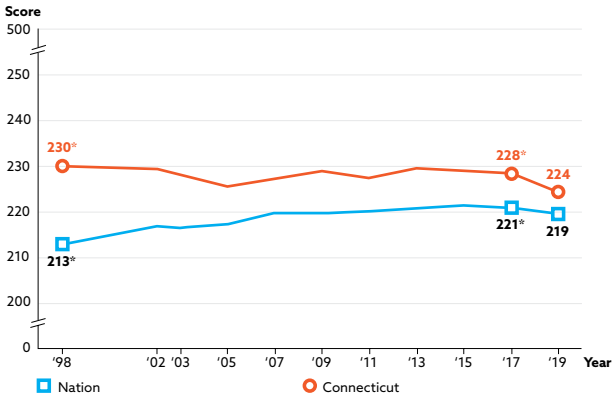
The State And Impact Of Student Assessment Trends

Two Decades of Stagnation

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) required all public school students to take an end-of-year assessment in reading and math annually in grades three through eight and once during high school. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) replaced NCLB in 2015 and allowed states some flexibility in how they would measure student progress and school quality. ESSA did not, however, eliminate provisions pertaining to federal testing requirements. As a result, the requirement to assess students at the end of the year in math and reading in grades 3-8 and once in high school remains in place.

Despite the emphasis on test-based accountability, achievement scores in both math and reading are stagnant. While there have been some improvements in scores in the lower grades, these gains evaporate by high school. Scores from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), a federally administered test, show a trend of predominantly flat scores since 2012.[3,4] Connecticut's NAEP scores during this period reflect the national trend, although they consistently remain above the national average (see figure 1).[5]

Figure 1: Average Scores on NAEP's 2019 4th Grade Reading Test for Connecticut and Nation[6]



*Significantly different ($p < .05$) from 2019. Significance tests were performed using unrounded numbers.

Student achievement trends are flat on other standardized assessments administered between 2012 and 2019 as well. The Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) is an exam measuring student achievement around the world. PISA scores for American students are, on average, largely static over the past ten years, but close examination of disaggregated scores shows a widening gap between our nation's highest-performing and lowest-performing students.

[3]National Assessment of Educational Progress. *The Nation's Report Card,* https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/ltt/?age=9 accessed on 6 July 2022.

[4]Cobb, Casey and Glass, Gene *Public and Private Education in America – Examining the Facts*, Santa Barbara, CA. ABC-CLIO, 2021. (P. 131)

[5]The Nation's Report Card State Profiles. https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/profiles/stateprofile/overview/CT?cti=PgTab_OT&chort=1&sub=MAT&sj=CT&fs=Grade&st=MN&year=2019R3&sg=Gender%3A%20Male%20vs.%20Female&sgv=Difference&ts=Single%20Year&tss=2019R3&sfj=NP, accessed 6 July 2022.

[6]Ibid.

Persistent Achievement Gaps

NCLB was created with the best of motives, to reduce the glaring inequities in American education and to narrow the large and persistent achievement gaps between rich and poor, minority and non-minority, and students with special needs and those without. This was the rationale, for example, for setting a single performance target for all students and for requiring score reporting by subgroups, as well as for holding schools accountable for the performance of each subgroup. The underlying premise was that test-based accountability would highlight gaps, direct resources where they are most needed, and help low-achieving students catch up. While the goals were laudable, the lack of progress toward achieving them demonstrates the methods are simply not working. Score gaps across race, language, special needs, and income levels persist despite intense pressure to close them. The current high-stakes testing approach to measuring student achievement and school quality has not resulted in greater educational equity, but rather, disproportionately harmed the disadvantaged groups that were supposed to have been helped.[7]

Persistent achievement gaps are also evident in Connecticut's NAEP scores. For example, in 2019, the year prior to pandemic-related learning disruptions, Black students in Connecticut scored, on average, 29 points lower than White students on the grade 4 reading test. On the same test, Hispanic students scored 26 points lower than White students, and students who qualified for free and reduced-price lunch scored 26 points lower.[8] These gaps remain nearly as wide as those on the 1998 test.[9] Additionally, urban districts serving disproportionately more children of color spend significantly more time administering tests to students than their suburban counterparts.[10] Little has changed despite billions of dollars and countless hours of instruction invested in test preparation.

A Narrowed Curriculum

While standardized tests can, when they are reliable, valid, fair, and unbiased, provide useful data to determine aggregate trends, the best test can reveal only a partial picture of what students know and are able to do. When the partial picture provided by test scores is overemphasized for accountability purposes, schools zoom in on the skills and content that will be needed on the next test rather than focus more holistically on the skills needed for a productive, happy life.

The Center on Education Policy reported that 44 percent of districts cut time from activities such as social studies, science, art, music, physical education, lunch, and recess after NCLB.[11] A number of studies also noted that overemphasis on standardized testing preparation resulted in a decrease in higher-order learning and engagement "in more complex problem-solving skills."[12]

Tests can't cover everything students need to know about a domain of knowledge but rather focus on a smaller subset—like polling.[13]

Mental Health

There is a dire mental health crisis afflicting children in Connecticut and across the country. The state of our children's mental and behavioral health is a growing public health crisis, as one in four children suffer from depression, and one in five children suffer from anxiety symptoms.[14] Rates of anxiety, depression, and suicide are rising rapidly among adolescents, regardless of their race, ethnicity, or family income.

---

[7]Koretz, Daniel. *The Testing Charade: Pretending to Make Schools Better. University of Chicago Press,* 2017.

[8]The Nation's Report Card State Profiles.

[9]Ibid.

[10]Cobb and Glass, Op Cit. P. 125.

[11]Kamenetz, Anya. *The Test: Why are Schools are Obsessed with Standardized Testing—But You Don't Have to Be."* New York: Public Affairs, 2015.

[12]Cobb and Glass (2021). Op Cit. P. 133

[13]Koretz, Daniel. *Measuring Up: What Educational Testing Really Tells Us.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008.

[14]Nicole Racine, P. D. (2021). Global prevalence of depressive and anxiety symptoms in children and adolescents during COVID-19. JAMA Pediatrics.

Thirty-five percent of 14- to 18-year-old adolescents have a mental health crisis each year, which includes self-injury, suicide ideation, or attempted suicide. One in every 5 children has a diagnosable mental health disorder. There is a shortage of beds for children requiring hospitalization for a mental health crisis. The percentage of teens experiencing a depressive episode increased 37% from 2005 to 2014.[15] Anxiety among adolescents nearly doubled between 2008 and 2018, from 7.97% to 14.66%; during the same period, the increase was much smaller among adults, from 5.12% to 6.68%.[16]

Student Engagement and Learning

Almost half of students (47%) responding to a 2021 Gallup survey reported feeling engaged at school, with nearly a third (29%) reporting feeling "not engaged" and nearly a quarter (24%) "actively disengaged."

Engaged students are 2.5 times more likely to say that they get excellent grades and do well in school, and they are 4.5 times more likely to be hopeful about the future than their actively disengaged peers.[17]

The science is clear. Students' motivation to learn is considered greater when higher-order thinking skills are involved and creativity is engaged. Unfortunately, standardized tests rely on lower-order thinking skills. This dampens engagement for most learners. As educators know, this is the basis of Bloom's taxonomy, which is a continuum of the following learning objectives: remember, understand, apply, analyze, evaluate, and create.[18]

Science on the complexity of learning can be viewed as a pyramid, with the most basic cognitive skills being to remember, understand concepts, and apply information. These are the basic skills measured in standardized testing.

Standardized testing does not promote nor assess higher-order skills such as connecting ideas (analyzing), justifying a decision (evaluating), or producing new or original work (creativity). Consequently, much that is valued in college, career, and life is not a focus of the assessment system and is therefore neglected in a district's allocation of attention, focus, and resources.

Assessment that inspires students to be engaged and learn promotes learning for all. Standardized testing simply doesn't meet this goal.

Effective Alternatives To Standardized Assessment

Across the education community it is recognized that standardized testing cannot reliably assess what students know and are able to do. Increasingly, teachers, schools, communities, and employers are using innovative assessment strategies to enhance student engagement and better assess student growth in critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and communication as well as students' ability to self-assess their learning and seek out what they need to know (i.e., metacognition).[19]

The examples that follow reinforce the idea that schools can engage students on their interests and assess for real-world learning without narrowly focusing the curriculum and resource allocation. They further reinforce that alternatives to standardized assessment can enhance equity by being more broadly relevant to all students and ensure accountability that all students have opportunities and resources to enable learning.

These examples are also notable for appropriate use of districtwide and statewide standardized testing for more general assessment of inequity and districts' needs. The statistically reliable and valid uses of federally required standardized testing are limited to broad assessment of systems and schools. They are not meaningful or useful for individual student

[15] https://www.edweek.org/leadership/schools-are-the-main-source-of-student-mental-health-care-are-they-ready/2020/02 accessed 26 February 2021.

[16] National Institutes of Health, https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7441973/, accessed 27 April 2021.

[17] https://www.gallup.com/education/243224/superintendents-say-engagement-hope-best-measures-success.aspx, accessed 27 April 2021.

[18] See Armstrong, P. Vanderbilt University, Center for Teaching at https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/blooms-taxonomy/

[19] See McDiarmid and Zhao (2022) Rethinking Education in a Technology Transformed World.

assessment; nor are they useful for promoting learning. Coincidentally, by limiting the focus on standardized testing and the misuse of data, these systems better promote student learning, ultimately promoting growth in standardized test performance.

Massachusetts Consortium for Innovative Education Assessment (MCIEA):

MCIEA is a partnership of eight school districts redesigning the way they assess student learning and school quality. Using a vision of student learning that relies on a deeper mastery of content and skills, MCIEA's system focuses on performance assessments in the classroom and a school quality framework that includes multiple measures of student engagement, student achievement, and the school environment.

The MCIEA system promotes student learning through a multi-step assignment process that assesses for students' application of knowledge, complex skills, and demonstration of proficiencies valued in college, career, and life. This approach focuses on outcomes—a portrait of a graduate–valued by communities. It is an approach that focuses on students' interests and strengths and thereby promotes better learning and engagement.[20]

The system also promotes better school climate and quality by engaging students, parents, and educators in focus groups identifying what is most important in their schools. MCIEA then uses a research-based framework to incorporate the feedback into school quality measures across five categories: 1. Teachers and Leadership, 2. School Culture, 3. Resources, 4. Academic Learning, and 5. Citizenship and Well-being.[21]

NY Performance Standards Consortium:

The Consortium is a partnership of schools implementing a system of practitioner-developed, student-focused, externally reviewed assessments. Over the 25 years of its existence, the Consortium has built a valid, reliable system of performance assessment for a student body that has grown to 38,000 across 38 schools in New York City, Rochester, and Ithaca.

The core framework of the Consortium's system is the completion of written tasks incorporating multiple disciplines, and intensive review, reflection, and feedback. The work culminates in an oral presentation and external evaluation. Graduation requirements include analytic essays, a science experiment, higher-level problem-solving in math, and other "Performance Based Assessment Tasks," including ones related to arts, foreign language, and other disciplines.

Professional development in the system is a key focus. Extensive review of teacher assessment tools (rubrics) builds consistency across the system. This attention to system design ensures that the curriculum meets state standards, and further studies of college outcomes ensure the validity of the system as a whole. Additionally, the use of external evaluators for student projects, and external research studies of the system as a whole, ensure continual review and feedback for the system to improve and respond to shifts in the global community.

Although Consortium partners were granted an exemption from the NY Regents exams, they are not exempt from federally required statewide standardized testing. Nevertheless, this redirection of focus away from standardized tests has shown strong results, including double-digit increases in graduation rates and a 20-percent increase in college enrollment.[22] The success of the Consortium's model has led to other districts refocusing their attention away from standardized assessment to innovative alternatives.

---

[20]See MCIEA Fact Sheet: https://www.mciea.org/uploads/1/2/0/7/120788330/mciea_fact_sheet_2019.pdf

[21]Ibid.

[22]Young, E. (2018). Metropolitan Business Academy: A Case Study in Performance-based Assessment (Unpublished Education Studies capstone). Yale University, New Haven, CT.

Metropolitan Business Academy (MBA), New Haven Public Schools:

MBA is a public magnet school operated by the New Haven Board of Education. Following the performance assessment model developed by the New York Performance Standards Consortium, MBA implemented its model relying on project-based learning, project demonstration, and external evaluators.[23]

Similar to the successes experienced by NY Performance Consortium schools, MBA's program successfully challenged the narrative of "underperforming, unmotivated inner-city students."[24] This is consistent with research linking student engagement and motivation to opportunities for authentic learning that enables their creativity. Articles documenting MBA's effect on students note the connection between flexibility for students to pursue their interests and the pursuit of deeper and more relevant learning.

The effects were striking. In just a handful of years, the graduation rate rose from 82% to 90%, and the number of students who enrolled in college increased from under half to 70%.[25] By 2015, 95% of seniors applied and were accepted to college or a post-secondary program.[26]

Additionally, practically all seniors (97%) reported feeling "well prepared" for their portfolio presentation, and 92% valued the experience of defending their senior project in the external review process.[27] From 2013 to 2017, ninth-graders showed a steady increase in graded classes. In 2013, 73% received a grade higher than a D; the rate steadily increased to 91.1% in 2017.[28] As the school shifted its focus to individualized portfolios, it also instituted trauma-informed practices. As a result of these shifts, the number of fights in schools plummeted to one-eighth of the number they once were, and the suspension rate dropped by two-thirds, to just 3%.[29,30]

Madison Public Schools (Connecticut):

At a time when school districts were being asked to reform their system of evaluating teachers and administrators, Madison Public Schools embarked on a project to engage the community in the process. The result was a focusing of resources and aligning of the curriculum to key objectives of student learning sought by parents, educators, and the community. While the resulting innovative approach to assessing key objectives did not exempt Madison from standardized testing, it did diminish the overreliance on it in a way that promoted learning and shared vision across the school community.

The five key outcomes or objectives sought by the community were critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, self-direction, and global thinking. Through this initial work with the community, and intensive work to redesign the assessment system to align with key objectives, Madison produced an innovative set of student competencies and means for demonstrating them for the purpose of assessment.

The detailed framework, which can be found here,[31] assessed students on 20 competencies within the five key objectives.

---

[23]See Young (2018), "Metropolitan Business Academy: A Case Study in Performance-based Assessment" https://educationstudies.yale.edu/sites/default/files/files/ethanyoungethan_26010_2024054_MBA%20Case%20Study_Young_Final.pdf

[24]Ibid., P. 36

[25]Hechinger Report (April 2, 2015) "How schools can lower suspension rates and raise graduation rates." accessed Sept. 30, 2022 via https://hechingerreport.org/how-schools-can-lower-suspension-rates-and-raise-graduation-rates/

[26]Pugliese, J. (9-29-22). Email with former principal, Judy Pugliese, based on unpublished school data and survey results.

[27]Ibid.

[28]Ibid. (note: Data were unavailable for years past 2017 due to the principal's retirement)

[29]Hechinger Report (2015) Op. Cit.

[30]MBA leadership changed after its innovative principal retired. Shifts during the pandemic and with students cycling out, MBA is not the groundbreaking school today it was just 3 years ago.

[31]https://cea.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Madison-Evaluation-Plan-2014.pdf

U.S. Department of Education – Innovative Assessment Demonstration Authority Pilots:[32]

In December 2015, Congress passed the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which loosened some parameters that had previously dictated to states' certain provisions of their accountability systems. ESSA replaced the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), in place since 2002, and eliminated the federal requirement that states demonstrate "Adequate Yearly Progress" (AYP). While ESSA provided greater flexibility to the states than its predecessor, it also preserved aspects of NCLB, such as the requirement states disaggregate performance data by race, income, and learning needs. In addition, like NCLB, ESSA requires states to test all students in math and reading in grades 3-8 and once again in high school, as well in science in elementary, middle, and high school grade spans.

Unlike NCLB, ESSA included an opportunity for up to seven states to pilot alternative ways of assessing students in the required grades. The program, called the Innovative Assessment Demonstration Authority (IADA), was designed to encourage local involvement in the development of new and innovative assessments in designated school districts, avoid over-testing students, and develop strategies for scaling up such innovative assessments statewide over time. Participation in the IADA requires states to demonstrate how their innovative assessments were developed in collaboration with local stakeholders, aligned to challenging state academic standards, and accessible to all students, among other requirements.

Five states were approved to implement innovative assessment pilots as part of IADA under ESSA. Louisiana and New Hampshire were the first to be approved for initial implementation in 2018-2019, with North Carolina and Georgia following in the 2019-2020 school year, and Massachusetts in 2020-21. IADA does not include any funding; each state must assume the costs associated with their pilot. The innovative assessments utilized must also meet federal law and peer review requirements, include all students in the accountability model, and involve stakeholder input throughout all aspects of the process.

Louisiana:

Louisiana's proposal to pilot an innovative English language arts (ELA) assessment was the first to be approved by the U.S. Department of Education, in 2018.

Louisiana partnered with national experts and school systems to build and pilot a joint ELA and social studies assessment. During the 2018-2019 school year, Louisiana partnered with NWEA, Odell Education, Johns Hopkins University, The Center for Assessment, MZ Development, and Strategic Measurement and Evaluation to develop and pilot several joint English language arts (ELA) and social studies assessments designed to measure improvement in reading comprehension over time in both subject areas. Pilot school systems in Louisiana included Ouachita, Lincoln, Assumption, St. John the Baptist parishes, and Redesign Schools Louisiana.

Louisiana is entering the final year of the five-year pilot.

Georgia:

Georgia was approved to participate in IADA in 2019. The districts selected to participate in the state's pilot are free from federal requirements that the same summative assessments be administered in math and English language arts in grades 3-8.

There are two main goals of Georgia's IADA pilot: to reduce student testing time and to implement an assessment system that educators can use to inform instruction throughout the year. Three districts/consortiums were selected by the Georgia Department of Education to participate

[32]United States Department of Education, Innovative Assessment Demonstration Authority. Accessed at https://www2.ed.gov/admins/lead/account/iada/index.html on 28 September 2022.

in the pilot: Cobb County School District, Georgia MAP Assessment Partnership, and the Putnam Consortium.

Georgia is piloting two different innovative assessments: one based on the use of adaptive interim assessments, and the other based on the use of on-demand assessments designed to provide real-time data on student performance. Both assessments utilize technology to provide educators with immediate performance data that can be used to target support during the school year.

North Carolina:

In June 2019, North Carolina received approval to participate in IADA. North Carolina's innovative assessment, called the North Carolina Personalized Assessment Tool, involves a customized, end-of-year assessment for each student, developed in response to a student's performance on two formative assessments taken during the school year. The interim formative assessments are designed to provide educators, students, and stakeholders with immediate and detailed feedback on student performance on grade-level specific content standards, making them useful progress indicators on student performance in relation to grade-level performance expectations. The interim assessments also help teachers tailor instruction to meet individual student needs and provide an estimate to inform a student's summative assessment experience.

Massachusetts:

In 2020, Massachusetts became the fifth state approved to participate in IADA. Massachusetts is piloting an innovative science test for fifth and eighth grade students in designated districts. The new science assessment combines a modified version of the existing statewide assessment with adaptive technology-enhanced performance tasks aligned with state standards.[33]

New Hampshire (currently paused due to COVID-19):

New Hampshire was approved to participate in IADA in 2018. Districts participating in New Hampshire's Performance Assessment for Competency Education (PACE) are free of federal requirements that summative assessments be administered in math and ELA in grades 3-8 and that all students in the state participate in the same statewide assessment.

New Hampshire's innovative Performance Assessment for Competency Education (PACE) includes performance tasks in ELA, math, and science intended to assess the full depth and breadth of the state's academic standards. The assessment system for the 11 districts participating determines student proficiency by combining scores from the following:

- Locally administered performance tasks developed by participating districts
- Common performance tasks reviewed by trained and calibrated scorers, intended to provide some degree of comparability across districts
- New Hampshire's statewide assessment scores in a single subject (either ELA, math, or science) in grades 3-8 each year.
- SAT taken by all high school juniors

New Hampshire's innovative assessment model is the most complex and radical of the five approved states. The pilot is currently paused due to COVID-19 related disruptions.

Policy Recommendations

Exemption from statewide standardized testing in Connecticut cannot occur without changing federal law or ESSA waiver policies. Moreover, appropriate use of statewide standardized testing can provide snapshots of data to inform policymakers of overall trends in student performance in math, English language arts, and science. Results can also shine a light on inequities across schools, districts, and communities, albeit within the narrow disciplines (math, English language arts, and science) that are

[33]Blad, E. (2020). "Massachusetts Gets Green Light to Pilot Innovative Science Assessment." *Education Week*, accessed at https://www.edweek.org/policy-politics/massachusetts-gets-green-light-to-pilot-innovative-science-assessment/2020/04 on 28 September 2022.

tested. Nevertheless, Connecticut does have options for instituting alternative assessment strategies to reduce the overreliance and misapplication of standardized testing. Such options include

1. Implementing State Option to Conduct Assessment System Audit
2. Federal ESSA Innovation Assessment Demonstration Authority Pilot
3. U.S. Department of Education Competitive Grants that can promote innovation
4. Incorporating multiple non-standardized indicators in the state's accountability system
5. Removing the high-stakes nature of statewide standardized testing from state policies on student graduation records and educator evaluation
6. Advocating for and pursuing more flexibility in assessment options at the federal level

ESSA State Assessment Audits

Section 1202 of ESSA provides guidance and funding to states to implement assessment audits, including local school district audits. Such audits would include the amount of time teachers spend on assessment preparation and administration as well as findings of what "administrators, teachers, principals, other school leaders, parents, and students, if appropriate, do and do not find useful."[34]

Additionally, such audits could help save state and local boards of education money that could be relocated to student needs. Assessment audits require a plan to improve and streamline the state assessment system by "eliminating any unnecessary assessments" and learning from the best practices of other states and local school districts.[35,36]

ESSA Innovative Assessment Demonstration Authority Pilots

As shown in the previous section, ESSA provides for flexibility in assessments through a pilot program.[37] Title I, Part B, of ESSA includes a new demonstration authority under which the State Department of Education, individually or in a consortium of states, can implement an "innovative assessment system." Although ESSA limits the number of pilots that can be underway, slots remain for new pilots to be approved.

The system a state agency implements under this authority can stand in place of the statewide accountability system with the goal of using the new system after the demonstration ends. As noted in the law, the benefits of pursuing a pilot outweigh the costs:

> *"These benefits include the administration of assessments that more effectively measure student mastery of challenging State academic standards and better inform classroom instruction and student supports, ultimately leading to improved academic outcomes for all students."*[38]

Key components of a pilot would include, among other provisions[39]

1. Production of an annual summative determination of each student's mastery of grade-level content on state standards
2. Determinations of the validity, reliability, and comparability of assessments for all students and subsets of students
3. Provisions permitting the pilot to be administered to a subset of school districts
4. Alignment with state academic content standards

---

[34]See ESSA Sec. 1202 https://www.congress.gov/114/plaws/publ95/PLAW-114publ95.pdf

[35]Funding to states under ESSA includes reimbursement for "costs associated with terminating procurement contracts." See ESSA Sec. 1202 Op Cit.

[36]The Nevada Legislature enacted SB 303 in 2017 requiring the State Education Agency to carry out an assessment audit under ESSA. The bill can be viewed here: https://www.leg.state.nv.us/Session/79th2017/Bills/SB/SB303.pdf

[37]For more information see IADA Website: https://www2.ed.gov/admins/lead/account/iada/index.html

[38]Ibid. (P. 88941)

[39]Federal Register Vol. 81, No. 236. (December 8, 2016) *"Rules and Regulations"* https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2016-12-08/pdf/2016-29126.pdf

5. Compliance with special education alternative assessment provisions
6. Support for educators, including training and enhanced professional development
7. Supports for parents and students to become familiar with the innovative assessments
8. Strategies and safeguards to ensure objective and unbiased scoring of assessments

Competitive Grants for State Assessments (CGSA – ESSA)

The purpose of the CGSA program is to enhance the quality of assessment instruments and assessment systems used by states for measuring the academic achievement of elementary and secondary school students. This program is authorized by the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) as amended by ESSA. This program replaces a similar program, the Enhanced Assessment Grants (EAG) program authorized by the ESEA as amended by the NCLB.[40]

1. Developing or improving assessments for English learners, including assessments of English language proficiency as required under ESEA section 1111(b)(2)(G) and academic assessments in languages other than English to meet the state's obligations under ESEA section 1111(b)(2)(F)
2. Developing or improving models to measure and assess student progress or student growth on state assessments under ESEA section 1111(b)(2) and other assessments not required under ESEA section 1111(b)(2)
3. Developing or improving assessments for children with disabilities, including alternate assessments aligned to alternate academic achievement standards for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities described in ESEA section 1111(b)(2)(D), and using the principles of universal design for learning
4. Allowing for collaboration with institutions of higher education, other research institutions, or other organizations to improve the quality, validity, and reliability of State academic assessments beyond the requirements for such assessments described in ESEA section 1111(b)(2)
5. Measuring student academic achievement using multiple measures of student academic achievement from multiple sources
6. Evaluating student academic achievement through the development of comprehensive academic assessment instruments (such as performance and technology-based academic assessments, computer adaptive assessments, projects, or extended performance task assessments) that emphasize the mastery of standards and aligned competencies in a competency-based education model

Other Strategies for Diminishing the Reliance on Standardized Testing

Even within the constraints of federal law, educators have options for diminishing the negative impacts of standardized testing. The simplest approach is to **incorporate multiple non-standardized indicators.**

[40]For more details on federal competitive grants visit: https://oese.ed.gov/offices/office-of-formula-grants/school-support-and-accountability/competitive-grants-for-state-assessments/applicant-information/

Incorporating non-standardized indicators reduces reliance on standardized tests, whether to assess school and district accountability or individual student progress. At the individual student level, this could mean adding performance tasks and indicators of competency on discrete skills and knowledge.

At the school and district level, this could mean incorporating indicators of what the community deems important. Examples could include

1. School climate survey results
2. Class size
3. Performance assessments
4. Access to a broad array of subjects
5. Indicators of student engagement
6. Indicators of social and emotional regulation and executive function
7. Other school quality indicators beyond standardized test scores

Additionally, given that scores on statewide assessments are reported the following school year, months after a student takes the exam, results have no instructional value to educators. It is now common knowledge that the psychometric and statistical validity of such tests is limited to taking a snapshot in time of a school or district. Uses beyond this limited purpose are invalid and fraught with unintended impact. State policies that tether scores on statewide assessments to other purposes—such as graduation requirements, grade promotion, educator evaluation, and so on—are misguided. Policymakers in many states have begun to address this misuse of testing by **removing the high-stakes nature of statewide standardized testing from state policies.**

Lastly, short of federal legislation, there is discretion within the United States Department of Education to permit state plans to incorporate more assessment flexibility. **Advocating for and pursuing more flexibility in assessment options at the federal level** remains a viable path toward implementing more reasonable and effective statewide assessment strategies.

The Future Of Standardized Testing

As we look to the future, there are some changes that could be incorporated into ESSA to enable more flexibility for states and local school districts (local education agencies, or LEAs). Policymakers could permit states to use strategies like sampling or grade-span testing.

ESSA Pilot Waivers would permit consortia of districts, on a small scale, to pursue innovations that also release participating districts from having to conduct comparable standardized assessments. Current innovation authority under ESSA still requires a degree of standardized assessment that can complicate and interfere with the innovative alternative to assessment districts are piloting. Additional flexibility in ESSA to waive comparable testing would improve the effectiveness of pilot programs to find a better path forward on assessment.

Sampling, which is the collection of test results from a representative sample of students, could vastly reduce the impact of testing on the vast majority of students in the state while still collecting valid and reliable data. This statistically valid technique has been used for decades in state (National Assessment of Educational Progress, or NAEP) and international (PISA, TIMMS) comparisons.

Grade-Span Testing relies on testing every student once in elementary school, middle school, and high school. This drastically reduces the time spent on testing while still collecting data that lets parents and policymakers know how students in their schools are performing on tested subjects.

Together, sampling and grade-span testing enable policymakers to collect data on district and statewide performance as well as indicators of equity, such as subgroup performance.

Embedded Assessment and other testing innovations from testing companies are on the horizon. Increasingly, curricular support software is able to register student answers to questions continuously and in real-time rather than in a timed testing environment. This newer *embedded assessment* (which also goes by terms such as *invisible, integrated,* or *stealth assessment*) is technology-enabled, and some believe it could replace stand-alone standardized testing.[41] Game-based assessment designed to test higher-order thinking skills are also on the horizon.[42] It is too early to determine the costs and benefits of such alternatives, but their influence is likely to appear in schools in the near future.

Conclusion

The sun may be setting on a quarter-century of standardized testing. Meanwhile, state and federal policymakers are looking toward alternatives to testing that better assess what it is that parents, educators, employers, and communities seek from their schools. They are considering assessment strategies that recognize students' individuality and interests, promote student engagement and creativity, and inspire students to become lifelong learners.

Additionally, policymakers are considering rolling back high-stakes provisions that have resulted in unintended incentives and consequences, including worsening of inequities and student well-being. Policymakers in states across the country are seeking to eliminate high school exit exams,[43] decouple test scores from educator evaluation, and reduce the reliance on scores in classifying schools as "failing" or other similar determinations that trigger disruptive "corrective action," which can include school closures.

The impact of standardized testing and resulting curricular rigidity have not served students well. Educators have long observed the negative impact standardized assessment has had on students, noting a related rise in dysregulated behaviors and disengagement among even the youngest children in early grades. Such traumas had gone insufficiently addressed prior to the pandemic.

Similarly, the rigidity and narrowing of curricular focus related to standardized testing has made graduates of our schools less prepared for life after high school.[44] Whether pursuing college, career, or newer pathways that combine both, young adults are best prepared if able to be creative, effectively communicate their ideas, collaborate, and understand and pursue what they need to know to grow.

As a spotlight is shone on the impact COVID-19 has inflicted upon students, the time is ripe for policymakers to redesign education and how our schools can inspire students to pursue knowledge and the development of skills for their future. Critical to creating an environment that focuses on individual student needs is a significant shift in how we determine and assess what it is that students should know and be able to do. It's critical to fix assessment for students today.

---

[41]Kamenetz, Anya (Jan. 6, 2015) "What Schools Could Use Instead of Standardized Tests," NPR https://www.npr.org/sections/ed/2015/01/06/371659141/what-schools-could-use-instead-of-standardized-tests

[42]Ibid.

[43]Note: Connecticut law requires students' high school transcripts to indicate whether a student has met the state-level mastery exam goal; See CGS 10-14n

[44]Zhao, Yong (2007) *Op Cit*.