

TESTING ACTION PLAN: STATE AND DISTRICT PROFILES

“I’ve heard from parents who worry that too much testing is keeping their kids from learning some of life’s most important lessons. I’ve heard from teachers who feel so much pressure to teach to a test that it takes the joy out of teaching and learning, both for them and for the students. I want to fix that.”

- President Obama, October 2016

INTRODUCTION

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 whether they are developing the critical thinking and problem solving skills they need to succeed in life. And they help ensure equity of opportunity for all students by identifying achievement gaps. Done poorly, in excess, or without clear purpose, however, assessments take valuable time away from teaching and learning, draining creativity from our classrooms. There has to be a balance. But despite good intentions, there are too many places around the country where the balance is off. In too many schools today, there is unnecessary testing, low quality tests, and not enough clarity of purpose applied to the task of assessing students.

In October 2015, President Obama announced a set of principles promoting a smarter approach to student assessment, aimed at reducing the amount of time spent on standardized testing and providing support for states and school districts to develop and use better, less burdensome assessments (read more about the President’s [Testing Action Plan here](#)). Earlier this year, Secretary King released guidance to States on how they can use federal funds under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) to reduce the burden of testing and improve the use of high-quality assessments so that educators and families can better understand student learning needs and help them make progress (read the [letter to States](#)).

In addition, the Department plans to publish proposed regulations to guide states’ and districts’ practices as they implement the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which the President signed into law last December. The proposed rules will ensure that states’ annual statewide assessments will continue to provide valid, reliable, and comparable measures of student progress for all students. And in the summer, the Department will invite applications for this Administration’s final competition for the Enhanced Assessment Grants (EAG) program, a competitive grant program for states and consortia of states to improve state academic assessments. Through a notice published in the Federal Register, the Department is proposing three additional priorities for applicants: developing innovative assessment item types and design approaches, improving assessment scoring and score reporting, and conducting an inventory of state and local assessment systems to eliminate unnecessary, redundant or low-quality tests.

States and districts are taking important steps to reduce unnecessary testing and to ensure that tests are high quality and fulfill their essential role of providing parents and educators with the information they need to help students succeed. The following case studies are highlights of that work across the country, and are places that we hope others will look to as models, aligned with the President’s Testing Action plan, as they embark on making testing as fair, effective, and streamlined as possible.

Six months since the President announced his testing action plan, a part of our continued efforts to lift up promising practices and provide information to states and districts about thoughtful ways to reduce and improve testing, below the Department is releasing a compilation of case studies that highlight work happening in states and districts.

DELAWARE: COMMITTED TO FINDING A BALANCE

In a visit to Wilmington, Delaware, earlier this year, Secretary of Education John King spoke with State leaders, superintendents, and educators about testing, the role it plays in teaching and learning, and how quality assessments can be used to improve academic achievement. “It’s important for us to know where we have achievement gaps. It is important for us to know where our students are making progress,” King said. “But there are places around the country where there is too much assessment and the assessments are not the quality we want.”

During his visit, Secretary King praised Delaware for recognizing the critical importance of high-quality assessments in providing information to educators, parents, and students, and for understanding their value in ensuring equity for all students. He also noted that, too often, there are unnecessary or overly burdensome assessments that don’t provide the information that educators need to support students. In Delaware, districts are working together to reduce the testing burden and improve the quality of necessary tests that provide information on students’ learning growth.

Delaware is taking important steps to reduce the burden of unnecessary testing and to improve the quality of assessments in their state, including:

- Requiring all schools in the state to complete an inventory of their assessments and submit their findings for a formal review by a state-designated Committee of teachers, administrators, and parents to evaluate the assessment inventories, recommendations, and impact information.
- Dedicating over \$325,000 to help schools conduct the assessment inventories, across the 11 districts that requested financial assistance. Individual grants ranged from \$10,000 to \$60,000 based on their student populations.

“Our educators, our students, and their parents all deserve the benefits of effective assessments that show when students are excelling and when they need extra support,” said Governor Jack Markell. “At the same time, tests that don’t add meaningfully to the learning process mean less time for students to receive the instruction and support they need. We are committed to finding the right balance, and this initiative is an important part of that process.”

Case Study: Performance Tasks and Formative Assessment in Brandywine Public Schools

Brandywine school district (located near Wilmington, DE) conducted its assessment inventory supported by a grant from the state in summer and fall of 2015. At the time, there were very few common assessments mandated by the district. Instead, many schools created assessments on their own without district involvement. Brandywine’s assessment inventory found that many of these assessments were not aligned to the State’s standards, did not measure the depth of knowledge required by these new standards, nor included a variety of item types. In particular, there was limited use of performance tasks that measure students’ critical thinking skills. The district is working with its teachers and school administrators to review, revise, and in some cases, eliminate these assessments. In their place will be high-quality formative assessments, tests used throughout the year by educators to assess whether



Congressman John Carney, Dr. Mark Phelps (Head of School at Academia Antonia Alonso), Secretary King, and Governor Markell (listed left to right) pose for a photo with students at Academia Antonia Alonso in Wilmington, DE.

students are learning content, aligned to the State’s standards that will be given throughout the district. For example, the district will require a common writing test as part of the secondary English language assessment.

“We recognized the need to increase the use of formative assessments to improve student learning and to involve students in monitoring their achievement,” said Julie Schmidt, Supervisor of Assessment and Accountability in the Brandywine School District. “Our focus is on *quality*, and not just on reducing the number of assessments. We want high-quality, instructionally-relevant assessments that provide information to teachers, parents, and students in a timely manner,” said Cary Riches, Director of Curriculum and Instruction.

During this school year, teachers are working together to identify and pilot at least one performance task per grade level in all the core content areas. “Bringing teachers together to review and score work samples from our classrooms has been very helpful,” said Riches. “It has helped us take ownership of the assessments and given us time to discuss how to improve instruction to meet the needs of our students.”

The district chose to use some of its grant funds to hire an outside assessment expert to review district assessments. “It was very helpful to have an outside person who could help us look at our assessments objectively; it expanded our thinking about assessments and pushed us to think creatively,” said Schmidt. Based on the results from the assessment inventory, the district developed a five-year plan to develop a balanced assessment system, which includes a clear vision and guiding principles to follow during implementation of the plan.

“In addition to increasing assessment literacy amongst our teachers and administrators, it has also helped us improve and expand our learning management system so that teachers have timely access to information about student performance and resources, such as test item banks,” noted Riches. “The assessment inventory process has been a catalyst for a number of changes in our district.”

ILLINOIS: RECLAIMING TESTING TIME TO HELP STUDENTS LEARN

The Illinois State Board of Education completed a pilot study in August 2015 to determine which local assessments were providing valuable information to educators in order to increase student achievement, and which assessments could be eliminated. Three districts (Urbana School District 116, West Aurora School District 129, and Bensenville School District 2) collected data from administrators, teachers, and parents about local assessment use and quality using an adaption of the [“The Student Assessment Inventory for School Districts”](#) developed by Achieve. As a result of this work, the districts made changes to their assessment systems. For example:

- In Bensenville, Illinois, this review resulted in the recommendation to eliminate off-the-shelf assessments in reading and math to students in grades 2 through 8, enabling teachers to reclaim approximately 12 hours of instructional time per year to help students learn.
- In Urbana, Illinois, the district eliminated benchmark tests in reading and math (provided by an outside vendor) that were not aligned to the districts’ current standards, and that were not being effectively used by teachers to improve classroom instruction. Eliminating these assessments allowed the district to reclaim 270 minutes of instructional time per year.

In addition to obtaining valuable information about local standardized assessments given each month, broken down by grade level and student subgroup, the inventory process provided information about professional development needs and engaged educators in thinking critically about assessments and the

use of assessment information. The Illinois State Board of Education has made training on the assessment inventory process available statewide through their Statewide System of Supports, which offers professional learning/development opportunities to all schools in Illinois at little to no cost.

In Bensenville, the district improved assessment literacy among teachers and administrators, which led to the district's current efforts to develop a "standards-based report card." The district formed a team of teachers, school board members, and parents to revamp the existing report card with the goal of implementing the new report card in the 2015-16 school year. "The focus on developing a standards-based report card would not have happened without our involvement in the assessment inventory. Completing the assessment inventory increased our assessment literacy and changed the conversation about assessments; it helped us develop a common vocabulary and come to agreement on what we mean by terms such as "mastery" and "proficiency," which aligns with our work around teacher evaluation and student-growth metrics."

"The involvement of school board members and parents in this process was essential," said Kay Dugan, Assistant Superintendent for Learning in Bensenville School District 2. "They provided valuable perspectives and kept us focused on one essential question — Does the assessment provide accurate and valuable information to positively impact student achievement?"

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- Kay Dugan, Assistant Superintendent for Learning, Bensenville School District 2

Jean Korder, Urbana School District 116 director of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment said, "We chose to participate in the pilot to address our ongoing need to increase assessment literacy and the use of high-quality assessments to make informed instructional decisions to better meet the needs of all students."

The West Aurora School district 129 Leadership Team stated, "As a district, we wanted to ensure that our system of assessment made sense to our students, staff, and parents. Our goal for this process was to have quality assessments that provide us with the information needed to accurately assess the needs of our students and our programs."

For additional information, please visit:

www.isbe.net/assessment/pdfs/bal-asmt/news/inventory-pilot-concludes-150825.pdf

www.isbe.net/assessment/pdfs/bal-asmt/student-assessment-inventory.pdf

LOUISIANA: A STATE-DISTRICT PARTNERSHIP TO IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF ASSESSMENTS

The state of Louisiana reviewed the use of local assessments in school districts and identified the need to reduce unnecessary testing, finding on average that third grade students were spending 25 to 34 school days a year taking local assessments. The Louisiana Department of Education (LDOE) has taken a number of steps to support districts reduce unnecessary testing and improve the quality of their assessments.

The assessment review process in Louisiana included a high bar for quality, and a clearly defined process to seek input from educators and the public. LDOE established criteria that assessments and instructional materials must meet, referred to as "non-negotiables" (e.g., materials present a progression of complex texts), as well as indicators of "superior quality" (e.g., materials provide texts

that are appropriately complex for the identified grade level). Assessments and instructional materials are evaluated by a committee of educators from across the state. The committee receives intensive training on the rubric used to evaluate materials. Louisiana residents have an opportunity to provide public comments through an online portal for a three-week period. Ratings are given to assessments and instructional materials based on their quality and alignment to state academic standards.

Louisiana has achieved promising results through their efforts to improve assessment in the state. The number of districts using high-quality assessments and instructional materials significantly increased with the implementation of LDOE’s review process. Three years ago, fewer than 20% of districts were using high-quality assessments and instructional materials for English/language arts (ELA) and math; now 75% of districts are using Tier I materials, those materials receive the best possible scores on all indicators of superior quality according to the state’s rubric, in ELA and math. “As we focus on conducting more reviews of benchmark assessments this year and next, we will review any changes in district assessment policies and practices, and the effect these changes have on student performance,” said Rebecca Kockler, LDOE’s Assistant Superintendent of Academic Content. “We want our process to continually improve. The goal is to identify materials that best help students meet high standards. We hope to keep learning from what is and is not leading to positive student outcomes, and adapting our processes accordingly.”

Today, LDOE is working with five pilot districts to create model assessment systems, and is providing all districts with guidance on reducing unnecessary assessments, along with direct and individualized coaching. These efforts have reduced unnecessary testing in many districts; the State plans to conduct a second review of testing time and practices with school districts in the coming months to identify additional areas for improvement and support. The state is also leading an online review of local assessments to provide districts with information on the extent to which their tests are aligned with state content standards, in order to help districts improve the quality of these locally administered assessments. Each local school system can then use this information to determine if an assessment is appropriate to meet the needs of their students.

For more information about the review process, see: <https://www.louisianabelieves.com/academics/ONLINE-INSTRUCTIONAL-MATERIALS-REVIEWS/curricular-resources-annotated-reviews>

Effective State-District Collaboration to Improve Assessments

Stephen Zafirau of St. John Public Schools, said, “Our collaboration with the LDOE on our district assessment system has been invaluable. Through this project, we have gained insight by conducting focus groups and surveys with administrators, teachers, and students to learn how we can strengthen assessments and provide effective feedback in St. John the Baptist Parish. Many of our efforts leading into the next school year will focus on revising our assessment framework and effectively communicating to school administrators and classroom teachers the purpose and value of formative and summative assessments. We are currently planning to focus district professional development efforts on how our assessments can be used to set goals, plan instruction, and address student instructional needs.”

Jeannie Cormier, Supervisor of Middle Schools / Accountability Contact in Vermilion Parish, believes that assessments should be used as tools to track student growth and provide information that can be used to modify instruction and improve student learning. She stated, “The focus on state, district, and school assessments helped clarify the purpose and goals of assessments for our district. I now envision a system in which all stakeholders have their eyes on the same-goals. Teacher evaluation targets for student growth, principal targets for school success, and student goals must be aligned. In addition, the

assessment process and products will have more use and be more effective if they are transparent to all stakeholders.”

“We believe that the state can and should play a role in providing unbiased, rigorous reviews that put relationships aside and simply identify quality,” said Louisiana Superintendent of Education John White. Recognizing that reviews alone are not sufficient, the state also supports local leaders to use the reviews to inform their decision-making. In addition to selecting materials reviewed by the LDOE review process, districts can also use their own local review process or adopt a combination of state-reviewed materials and locally-reviewed materials.

Integrating high-quality professional development with strategies to improve assessments

“The choices districts make about what curriculum to use, what assessments to give, and the professional development opportunities provided to teachers directly affect the day-to-day education of our students. We have found that helping districts integrate professional development with high-quality curricula and assessments is critical to helping students achieve high standards,” said Kockler. Therefore, LDOE works with vendors to put together professional development packages for Tier 1 materials to meet districts’ unique needs. For example, LDOE will work with vendors to put together a professional development package to meet the training needs of a small rural district or for a district that wants to focus on assessing a particular aspect of instruction (e.g., reading fluency).

Additional Resources

Louisiana’s District Planning Guide available at: <http://www.louisianabelieves.com/docs/teacher-toolbox-resources/district-planning-guide-for-2014.pdf>

Louisiana’s Regional Network Structure Map is available at: <http://www.louisianabelieves.com/docs/default-source/teacher-toolbox-resources/final-network-structure-map.pdf>

TENNESSEE: CREATING CLARITY, TRANSPARENCY, AND TRUST

The *Tennessee Task Force on Student Testing and Assessment* was established in Spring 2015 to study and identify best practices in student assessment, ensure local school districts and the state are appropriately using assessments to improve student achievement, and better inform stakeholders about the state assessment program.

The *Task Force’s* final report was released in September 2015 and contains 16 tangible recommendations with specific actions to be taken to address concerns about too much testing and to ensure the meaningful use of assessments across the state. The Tennessee Department of Education is currently working to implement the Task Force recommendations, including:

- Eliminating the kindergarten and first-grade annual standardized test option (currently paid for by the state and supported by the Tennessee Department of Education)
- Eliminating unnecessary 8th grade and 10th grade tests.
- Providing more flexibility to districts in scheduling assessments and convening an advisory group to provide guidance and support in minimizing disruptions to school and classroom schedules.
- Creating a parent advisory group that will give feedback on concerns related to over-testing and test preparation practices, as well as on information desired for annual student test reports.
- Recommending that districts reduce the number of formative assessments that do not guide decision making and next steps in instruction. Tennessee students spend only 11-12 hours or one percent of the school year taking state-required assessments each year, but the Task Force

concluded that many districts are utilizing and requiring a variety of additional benchmarks or formative assessments throughout the year to measure student progress.

Initially, the Task force conducted an environmental scan of assessment usage and practices across the state; established principles addressing the purposes and goals of state assessments relative to locally chosen/designed assessments (i.e., formative assessments); and defined appropriate practices associated with these principles that best support decision making at the state, district, school, and teacher levels. In addition, The Task Force gained insight on ways to best communicate with stakeholders about TNReady, the state's new Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program (TCAP) test for English language arts and math in grades 3-11, starting in the 2015-16 school year.

Commissioner Candice McQueen said. "Proper assessment tools are vital in making sure we are supporting our schools, teachers, parents, and students with clear information about what students are learning and mastering."

The principles developed by the Task Force to inform assessment decisions at the state, district, and local levels, focused specifically on summative (annual) standardized assessments, formative (interim, benchmark) assessments, and test preparation and logistics. Consistent with the principles established in the [President's Testing Action Plan](#), Tennessee's principles address the benefits of assessments and maintain that assessments must, for example, be properly aligned with state standards, provide disaggregated test information that helps educators know if they are serving all students and maintaining universally high expectations, and have associated reports that are clear and readily understood by parents, students, and educators.

Based on the Task Force recommendations to improve communication around testing and accountability to create clarity, transparency and trust, Tennessee has:

- Released standardized test blueprints, test specifications, and the methodology for calculating all score reports, and beginning with the 2016-17 school year, will annually release as many summative test items as possible without compromising test security and development;
- Clearly communicated to the public the purpose of large-scale assessments by posting information on state annual assessments on their website (including a Parent Guide, and an Educator & School Guide); and
- Released analyses of test items for the 2013-14 and 2014-15 school years that allow educators to compare school, district, and state performance on specific test items.

(See: <https://www.tn.gov/education/topic/tnready>)

The *Task Force* was comprised of 18 educators and education leaders from across the state, including a parent and a student representative. Virginia Babb, Chair of the Knoxville Parent Teacher Student Organization said, "I have appreciated learning that the state seriously considers all the different stakeholders and is trying to make statewide mandated assessments a better experience for everyone."

Jasmine Carlisle, a high school senior said, "I enjoyed working with so many leaders in education with so many varying perspectives and sharing students' perspectives and needs in regard to assessment."

Cathy Kolb, a 30-year veteran special educator said, "Meeting and collaborating with other colleagues is always the most important work we do as educators as it gives us the opportunity to fine tune our craft by listening and talking to teachers in order to make the assessment piece more efficient and meaningful."

The complete Task Force report is available at:

http://www.tennessee.gov/assets/entities/education/attachments/tst_assessment_task_force_report.pdf#page=2&zoom=auto,-141,47

TULSA, OKLAHOMA: ENGAGING TEACHERS TO IMPROVE ASSESSMENTS

In Tulsa, Oklahoma, the district cut the overall time spent on district-mandated testing by half by reducing the frequency of some tests, eliminating one test entirely, and removing district requirements to implement others, beginning in the 2015-2016 school year. The reductions varied for each grade, but some of the biggest reductions were in third grade and fifth grade:

- Previously, third graders spent 1,240 minutes on district-required tests and now will spend only 660 minutes on such tests, thereby reclaiming 580 minutes of instructional time.
- Fifth graders were spending 1,270 minutes on district-level tests and now will spend 690 minutes, reclaiming 580 minutes of instructional time and cutting the amount of time used for testing by 40 percent.

The changes in district testing were based on recommendations by teachers who participated in the district's Assessment Study Group, which was established to review the use of assessments in the district and make recommendations for how district-mandated testing should be used moving forward.

Secretary King visited Tulsa in April to learn from the work of the district and the Assessment Study Group. The Secretary praised educators' efforts in Tulsa, "Done well, assessments are tools for learning and promoting equity. Done poorly, in excess or without clear purpose, they take valuable time away from teaching and learning, draining creative approaches from our classrooms. Here in Tulsa, and across the country, educators are leading the way on innovative ideas to strike the right balance on testing. We're committed to supporting that work."

The Assessment Study Group was organized following a small number of teacher concerns regarding overtesting that were brought to the teachers' union. Based on conversations with the union and the district superintendent, it was recommended that a committee be formed, representing teachers from across the district and all grade levels. Teacher representatives were selected to serve on the study group based on recommendations by the Tulsa Classroom Teachers Association and principals.

"Assessments are an extremely important tool for teaching and learning, yet we must make sure that the way in which we monitor progress through assessments is as focused and streamlined as possible," said Tulsa Superintendent, Dr. Deborah Gist. "We need to have our teachers, along with their school leaders, actively involved in these decisions." Dr. Gist added that "parents and teachers have been clear in their feedback that our district overstepped in the number of tests that were required by the district."

In addition, using Title I and Title II funds, the district is making professional development opportunities available to teachers on the meaning, use, and availability of assessment data. "We need to do a better job of supporting our teachers and principals on the use of assessment data to guide their decision-making," said Dr. Gist. "We will continue to offer literacy and numeracy summits each summer, as well as professional learning opportunities throughout the year. We'll be sure these include a focus on using reading and math assessment data to inform instruction." The district also provides instructional coaches to help teachers and principals use data effectively and is currently developing a plan to coordinate efforts across the district and focus on using data as a strategic asset.

For additional information, visit:

http://www.tulaschools.org/2_News/01_PUBLIC_INFO/news_item.asp?ID=15238

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

In March 2016 the Center for American Progress, in partnership with other organizations, released a "[Testing Bill of Rights](#)," with the goal of helping to move toward better, fairer, and fewer tests, and to make testing more useful and less burdensome for students, parents and educators. Information on the Testing Bill of Rights can be found at www.TestBetter.org.

In October 2015 the Council of Great City Schools released a report, [Student Testing in America's Great City Schools: An Inventory and Preliminary Analysis](#). The report presents findings from a survey of urban school districts on what assessments were being used, who mandated those assessments, what schools were learning by administering those assessments, and why they were using them. It also offered an initial set of observations about testing in our school systems and how it might be improved.

In June 2015 the Council of Chief State School Officers released a framework to ensure high-quality assessments in states. The [Comprehensive Statewide Assessment Systems: A Framework for the Role of the State Education Agency in Improving Quality and Reducing Burden](#) guides state and district leaders in making sure assessments are high quality, and reduce unnecessary tests.