

**U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION'S  
RACE TO THE TOP ASSESSMENT COMPETITION**

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The Race to the Top Assessment Competition is designed to fill an urgent need for valid, richer, and instructionally useful assessments. A new generation of assessments must provide both an accurate and fuller picture of what students know and can do – and be anchored in standards that enable every student to gain the knowledge and skills needed to succeed in college or the workplace by the time they graduate from high school.

During the past decade, assessments used for accountability purposes have shined light on achievement gaps between groups of students and highlighted instructional needs for individual students. But a new generation of assessments can ultimately serve the twin purposes of supporting accountability and instructional improvement only when states have access to better assessments and more coherent sets of assessment tools. It is no secret that existing state assessments in mathematics and English language arts often fail to capture the full spectrum of what students know and can do. They focus on concepts that are easy to measure; rely mainly on multiple choice items with fill-in-the-bubble answers; and provide time-sensitive data and results months later, when their instructional usefulness is largely past.

Many states report that they need *systems of assessments* that more broadly and validly measure student achievement and that ask students to *demonstrate* what they know and can do. At the same time, educators need assessments that inspire and even model good instruction, rather than discourage it. In short, both states and educators say that they need a new generation of assessments to foster a classroom culture of continuous

instructional improvement, one that provides information to guide instruction, target professional development, and inform determinations of effectiveness.

As states take the lead in developing rigorous, career- and college-ready K-12 standards, they will have a pressing need for new assessments aligned to their standards. States that choose to adopt common standards can benefit from collaborating to develop assessments tied to those standards. The Race to the Top Assessment Competition will support consortia of states to create these new, high quality assessments against a set of common, college- and career-ready standards.

The Department hosted a series of meetings to learn from experts, practitioners, and members of the public that helped identify two critical categories of grants for which state consortia may compete:

- *Category A: Comprehensive Assessment Systems*
- *Category B: High School Course Assessment Programs*

Consortia of states are invited to apply to one or both categories, with proposals specific to each. The requirements, priorities, and selection criteria differ for each competition, though they are aligned and consistent where appropriate.

### **Theory of Action**

The President has set an ambitious goal for the nation: to regain the position of world leader in college graduation rates by the year 2020. Students today will soon be competing for jobs, not just against graduates from

across town but from across the country and the ocean. To meet the President's 2020 goal, the nation must significantly increase, for all subgroups, the number of students graduating from high school ready to succeed in college and the workplace.

Progress toward this goal begins with a strong foundation designed to support continuous improvement. Educators who guide and support teaching and learning must have access to high-quality standards, curricula, assessments, professional development, and other building blocks of effective instruction. Schools must be led and staffed by principals and teachers who have been well-prepared, effectively recruited and placed, and who have ongoing opportunities to hone and share effective practices. And every school must provide an environment in which students and adults are safe, well supported, and held to high expectations.

A robust continuous improvement system is a prerequisite to attaining this ambitious vision, and it is self-evident that student achievement will play a central role in such a system. Some key definitions: *student achievement* data are measures of students' mastery of standards. They tell teachers and students whether students have learned what teachers intended to teach, and thus inform classroom instruction. Student achievement data elucidate whether a student has mastered the standards required for his or her grade level, indicating if a student is *on track* toward being college and career ready. Finally, the change in student achievement between two or more points in time provides a measure of *student growth* or student progress. Measuring student growth helps establish whether a student is on track, catching up, or falling behind.

Taken together, these indicators support the development and implementation of credible "effectiveness" measures. So, the extent to which students in a classroom are *growing*, should inform determinations of *teacher and*

*principal effectiveness*. The extent to which students, across every subgroup, are making *adequate growth*, should inform determinations of *school effectiveness*. An *effective curriculum program* is one correlated with high levels of *student achievement*. And an *effective intervention* is one that helps students *grow at accelerated rates* compared to other interventions.

#### *Category A: Comprehensive Assessment Systems*

To effectively support continuous improvement, comprehensive assessments systems must have certain characteristics. They should:

- Serve as valid, reliable, and fair measures of student capabilities. High-quality assessments measure performance against the full range of standards, including elements of student learning that have traditionally been difficult to measure. To be on track for college and careers, students need to show that they can analyze and solve complex problems, communicate clearly, synthesize information, apply knowledge, and generalize learning appropriately to other settings. To evaluate these and other higher-order skills, assessments must elicit complex student demonstrations and applications of knowledge – "bubble tests" alone, no matter how well-designed, are not adequate to the task.
- Accurately measure achievement for the widest possible range of students, including English learners, students with disabilities, low-performing students, and gifted students. To support the academic growth and development of all students, educators and parents need accurate information for each one.
- Support good instructional practice, inspire teachers, engage students, and provide intrinsic learning opportunities.
- Function not in isolation, but as core components of a larger, aligned education

system – one that also includes standards, curriculum, instruction, and professional development. Better assessments are no more a “silver bullet” than other pedagogical components.

- Be designed to present accurate and relevant data to each intended audience – students, parents, teachers, principals, administrators, and policymakers – in formats that are clear, user-friendly, timely, and actionable.

No single assessment can accomplish all of these ends. But a comprehensive and coherent *system of assessments* that substantially meets these requirements will put local school systems on a much firmer educational footing. It will be up to state consortia to determine the specifics of what a comprehensive assessment system should look like – what the components should be and how they should interact – in order to accomplish these goals. The Department expects that participating states will use the new comprehensive assessments in place of existing statewide standardized tests for accountability purposes, and states may also choose to replace other tests with higher quality assessments.

*Category B: High School Course Assessment Programs*

The Department’s high school-specific theory of action builds on the fundamentals outlined above in several important ways. The high school years are essential for students to gain the skills and content needed for college or a career. However, high school courses today are often uneven, and in many cases not rigorous enough to prepare students for success. This lack of readiness is evident across all disciplines, in both academic and career and technical programs. Many states are working to improve students’ access to a rigorous high school education in a diverse set of subjects, yet much remains to be accomplished.

The Department’s high school course-assessment competition supports states that seek to boost student access to demanding, well-rounded curricula by inviting consortia of states to develop rigorous high school course assessments and a process for certifying that assessments of courses covering similar content have common and high expectations for rigor. Assessments developed under this grant would provide states with powerful tools to promote consistency and rigor across a broad and diverse swatch of courses – especially important in high school, when students explore and identify the interests that may shape their post-secondary education and careers. Moreover, rigorous high school course assessments should improve equity of access to high-quality instruction and learning opportunities for all students. Finally, a system of high school course assessments could also play an important role in providing teachers, principals, students, and parents with the information they need to regularly monitor student progress, adjust instruction, and improve student outcomes.

This grant is intended to support states that are seeking to implement system-wide high school improvement. States will have the flexibility to create course assessment programs that meet the needs of their students and schools, enlist high schools in their reform efforts, and use assessment data in ways that they believe will maximize effectiveness. Assessments in these programs would *not* be required to be used for federal accountability purposes. Instead, states and high schools would use these assessments, together with aligned curricula, instruction, and professional development, as part of coherent high school instructional improvement efforts. The Department, and states around the country, will learn invaluable lessons from the winning consortia about reforming the nation’s high schools.

## **Coordinated Assessment Needs and Solutions**

The Department recognizes that a number of assessment needs are not directly addressed in the Race to the Top Assessment Competition, but it has plans to address unmet needs in other ways. Remaining assessment needs include:

- *Students with the Most Significant Cognitive Disabilities.* Alternate assessments, based on alternate achievement standards, are critical components of a complete, high-quality assessment system. Assessments for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities should be fully aligned with the standards adopted and the assessments developed by winning consortia in Category A of this competition. However, developing such assessments requires specialized expertise. It is the Department's intent to run such a competition in coordination with this Race to the Top Assessment Competition. The alternate assessments competition will be managed by the Department's Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, which intends to issue a notice inviting applications later this year.
- *English Language Proficiency.* As English language arts standards evolve to more accurately capture college and career readiness, states will need to adjust the standards they use to gauge English language proficiency. The Department intends to set aside funds in its fiscal year 2011 budget to support the development of assessments of English language proficiency, and it urges educators to make progress in developing common English language proficiency standards as a prerequisite to its hosting such a competition.
- *Assessments of Science.* It is the Department's firm belief that science

education is critical for all students. However, until a set of common college- and career-ready science standards exists, the Department believes it would be premature to fund the development of comprehensive science assessments. That said, the Department expects that assessments developed with Category A funds will lay the groundwork for future efforts by states to collaborate on high-quality assessments in other core subjects, including science. And we expect that high school assessments developed under Category B will target the sciences as well.

## **Consortia**

States have already shown an unprecedented commitment to increasing education quality through their groundbreaking collaboration on common standards. The Department believes the Race to the Top Assessment Competition should support state consortia and collaborations. Challenges to states working in consortia remain, but the benefits of state collaboration are many. Cooperating states can share expertise – and are more likely to produce high-quality assessments in an efficient and cost-effective manner – than any one state working on its own. Cooperating states can collaborate to support improved instructional materials, professional development, and teacher preparation programs aligned to their standards and assessments.

States that develop common assessments can produce data that is both comparable and robust, enabling parents, policymakers, and teachers to more easily compare educational outcomes across state lines. At the same time, productive collaborations should assist practitioners and researchers to better identify which instructional practices and strategies are effective, for what students, and under what conditions. Such collaboration and research could allow education to enjoy the rapid advances in practice that have been evident in

other fields in recent decades, yet have been generally lacking in K-12 schooling.

The Department seeks to mitigate the risks and challenges presented by cross-state efforts by learning from the lessons of other thriving, large-scale collaborations. In particular, the selection criteria in our notice place a high, front-end premium on establishing clarity and specificity in program goals, areas of commonality, roles and responsibilities, and decision-making processes.

### **Technology and the Role of the Market**

The Department recognizes that the nation's vibrant assessment and technology marketplaces are invaluable assets. The competition design reflects the Department's commitment to conduct a competition that does not undermine the continued health of these markets but also uses grant funds to advance the public good.

Technology offers a host of benefits for the new generation of assessments. For reasonable costs, diverse item types can assess a wide spectrum of student knowledge and skills. Assessment questions can incorporate audio and video; they can be situated in real-world environments where students perform tasks; they can include multi-stage scenarios or extended essays. And in most cases, scoring and feedback can be computer-based and immediate, allowing real-time data to be used when it is "freshest" and most relevant. Adaptive algorithms can even create tests that are individualized to efficiently and accurately measure each student's achievement.

Finally, the smart use of technology can assure that assessments incorporate a wide range of accommodations from the outset, addressing the diverse needs of students and more accurately measuring their achievement and growth. These accommodations – even complex sets of accommodations – can be managed, through technology, in standardized

and efficient ways. In light of these benefits – and because these assessments will not be in wide-scale use for three to four years – we have chosen to require that these assessments take maximum advantage of technology, offering paper-and-pencil version as accommodations, where needed, rather than making them the norm.

The Department has issued several corollary requirements to promote technological innovation and market competition. First, all assessment content (such as assessment items and tasks) developed under this program must use standard data interfaces that promote digital exchange and interoperability. Second, the content – the assessments and items developed under this grant – must be made freely available to any state, technology platform provider, or others that request it for purposes of administering assessments, provided they comply with consortium or state requirements for test and item security. This provision ensures that content developed with public funds is widely available – including to states that are not part of grantee consortia. Third, not only the assessment content, but also the data generated from the assessments developed under this grant, must also conform to standard data interfaces, with the privacy of any personally identifiable information appropriately safeguarded. The cumulative impact of these requirements is that states will have the flexibility to switch from one technology platform to another, allowing multiple providers to compete for states' business and for states to be to be smarter and more cost-effective purchasers.

These requirements should stimulate solutions and services from an array of commercial and open sources responsive to individual states' needs. Assessment technology companies will benefit from access to free, high-quality content and a large, multi-state market. States will benefit by having their content usable on multiple platforms and selecting the option that best meets their needs. And taxpayers

will benefit from having their dollars used in highly leveraged ways to support goals that would not otherwise be achieved without an infusion of federal funding.

### **The Process for Developing this Competition**

The complex technical requirements for high-quality assessment programs prompted the Department to solicit input through public and expert meetings and written submissions in lieu of formal notice-and-comment rulemaking. From early November 2009 through late January 2010, the Department convened a series of 10 meetings across the country to gather public and expert input, and it received just over 200 written submissions. These meetings covered general and technical assessment issues, consortium and project management, technology and innovation, high school assessment, assessing English learners, assessing students with disabilities, and procurement. In all, the Department heard from 42 experts and 90 members of the public over the course of more than 50 hours, with nearly 900 people attending the 10 meetings.

In addition, all 50 states were invited to attend these meetings to get valuable technical assistance and ideas to inform their potential applications. State officials from 37 states and the District of Columbia attended.

At these meetings, invited experts and members of the public provided input on specific questions published by the Department. Experts offered their advice through prepared presentations, followed by extended round-table discussions with one another and with Department officials. Every session also included presentations from members of the public. All expert presentations, public presentations, full meeting transcriptions, and other written submissions are posted on the Department's website.

The Department benefited greatly from the input and advice of experts, state representatives, and members of the public in designing this competition. We thank them for their generosity in sharing their wisdom with us.

For America to have a public school system second to none, each state needs a first-rate assessment system to measure progress and performance. In an era of global competition, educators need high-quality assessments to help guide instruction and boost student preparation for college and careers. Parents and students need to know where they stand to make informed decisions about the quality of their education. The Race to the Top Assessment Competition is a crucial step in empowering states to achieve this ambitious yet widely-shared vision for educational excellence in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.