

ASSESSMENT OF AND FOR LEARNING

How States Are Rethinking Accountability and Assessment Policies in the COVID-19 Era

In April 2020, KnowledgeWorks published policy guidance in response to the school closures brought on by COVID-19, [Restoring Hope and Seizing Opportunity in the Face of Crisis](#). The report highlighted both short- and long-term strategies for states to consider as they grappled with the challenges of the pandemic. A year later, we are revisiting the guidance to highlight areas where the U.S. has begun building the momentum needed to both respond to the challenges of the pandemic and chart a path towards creating a more personalized K-12 education system.

RETHINKING ASSESSMENTS

Prior to the pandemic, states had already begun rethinking traditional statewide assessment systems, both those required yearly under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESSA) reauthorization as well as in non-required subjects. While ESSA requires states to implement annual assessments to inform state accountability determinations, the law also [included](#) a number of provisions that states could use to [build innovative assessments systems](#) that better support student-centered, personalized learning. One notable example is the Innovative Assessment Demonstration Authority ([IADA](#)), which gives states the flexibility to pilot and scale the next generation of assessments. Five states have applied and been approved for IADA authority, and an additional state is leveraging federal funding from the Competitive State Assessment Grants program ([CSAG](#)) to plan for an application.

ASSESSMENTS AND PERSONALIZED LEARNING

Assessment and accountability systems play a key role in providing educators, students, parents and other stakeholders with valuable information for meeting the needs of each learner. In a personalized learning system, assessment and accountability systems give timely and holistic information to help communities provide targeted supports to ensure each student is on track to succeed. This differs from traditional systems that rely heavily on end-of-year assessments, which come too late to inform instruction and provide a narrow picture of school quality. Effective personalized learning depends on balanced systems of formative and summative assessments at the state and district levels that:

- » Empower educators to use these data to meet the needs of their students
- » Deepen student learning by giving them frequent and useful feedback
- » Validate student mastery of complex knowledge, skills and social-emotional competencies

These systems empower educators to focus instruction where it is needed most while providing important information to help states and districts better target resources to improve student success. Aligned accountability and reporting tools provide an even more holistic picture of school performance, empowering stakeholders to design strategies that ensure continuous and sufficient progress around student academic and social-emotional success.

The pandemic caused massive disruptions to the nation's education system, leaving countless students disconnected from learning and [in some cases](#) widened already dramatic gaps in opportunity. These impacts will not be mitigated in a single year. As states resume the administration of assessments and accountability systems that were paused over the past two years, it is more important than ever to reconsider how these system components can play a role in helping educators respond effectively to the individual needs of students. Going forward, states have an opportunity to cast a new vision and, thanks to federal government funding, dedicate resources toward rethinking what state assessments systems can and should look like.

STATE HIGHLIGHTS

LOUISIANA: Continuing assessment redesign momentum

In 2018, the State Department of Education in Louisiana received approval from the U.S. Department of Education under ESSA's [IADA authority](#) to create an innovative through-year assessment program in English Language Arts. This assessment program is meant to bring state standards, curriculum and assessments in English-language arts into full alignment with each other by creating a set of unit-based tests with an accompanying end-of-year writing task. These unit-based tests will be given throughout the year and correspond to units in an open access, teacher developed curriculum, [ELA Guidebooks 2.0](#). The state hopes that seeding these assessments throughout the year will empower students and educators by supporting their [engagement with text](#) that they have studied previously and will provide teachers with more actionable feedback on student learning as they progress from one unit to the next.

Louisiana had begun the process of administering the first innovative assessments during the 2019-2020 school year operationally, but the pandemic forced the state to pause its efforts. However, the state has continued to advance its work in three crucial areas. First, the state has developed a Teacher Guide document to help educators better use the score reports that will come with these new assessments. These reports will also support the ongoing coaching provided by the State Department of Education. Second, the state has developed and refined a vision for creating state assessments for multiple different [high-quality curriculums](#) being widely used across the state beyond ELA Guidebooks. Third, the state has modified its assessment model, developed for middle school, to work in the elementary grades and started the building of assessments for elementary school, starting in fifth grade.

KENTUCKY: Empowering locally driven assessment systems

Under the leadership of Commissioner of Education Jason Glass, Kentucky is undertaking a new initiative to provide communities with opportunities to explore innovations in the creation of local assessments. Through a partnership with the Center for Innovation in Education begun earlier this year, the Kentucky Department of Education is [giving districts](#) an opportunity to engage in inclusive assessment co-design. The goal of this process, titled the Kentucky Reciprocal Learning Partnerships, is the creation of a more equitable system of assessments and accountability that serves the self-identified needs of the community.

Through these partnerships, communities will engage local stakeholders in labs of learning to discuss local needs. This information will then be used to develop locally designed assessments. Kentucky hopes to begin rolling out prototype pilot assessments in the next few years and using the momentum developed through this local process to inform new ways of thinking about state accountability. The initial cohort of participating districts also overlaps closely with the state's [Innovative Learning Network](#), which provides local districts a space to explore new models of learning to prepare all students for success.

MASSACHUSETTS: Innovate science performative tasks

In 2020, Massachusetts [applied for and was awarded](#) a Competitive Grant for State Assessments ([CGSA](#)) from the U.S. Department of Education to develop an innovative science test using performance tasks. The grant will enable the state to provide professional development tools to educators and support participating schools in developing deeper learning, high-quality science instruction and assessment literacy. The CGSA grant is grounded in Massachusetts' desire to address persistent achievement gaps in the state despite a long history of strong performance on the National Assessment of Education Progress. This grant builds on the state's approval in that same year for the federal IADA authority under ESSA. In its [CGSA application](#), Massachusetts proposed creating a new assessment for Science and Technology/Engineering, noting the broad coalition of stakeholders that it had built to support the assessment, as well as its intention to create "culturally relevant materials and instructional practices with equitable access, so that [they] can make an impact for the students who need this change the most."

NEBRASKA: Instructionally embed science assessment tasks

In 2020, a cohort of eight states led by Nebraska were [awarded](#) a CGSA grant to build [stackable, instructionally-embedded, portable science assessment tasks](#). This project will support the need for large-scale state science assessment as well as the need of students and stakeholders for "resources that support science learning throughout the school year." The proposed assessment tasks will include a bank of instructionally embedded science tasks, which will build state and local educators' capacity to deliver high-quality instruction. The assessments as proposed would be modular and could be

administered throughout the school year on a flexible schedule during instruction. In their application, the group of states specifically highlighted the need to continue the transition from traditional assessments that don't directly connect to instruction to a new system of high-quality tests that are embedded in instruction and prioritize student learning.

NEW MEXICO: Shaping alternatives to traditional assessments

New Mexico's Department of Education, in partnership with the non-profit [Future Focused Education](#), is currently facilitating the [New Mexico Innovative Assessment Community of Practice](#) (CoP). This work, which began in early 2020, brings together a community of 14 founding districts and schools to create a new project-based graduation pathway which will culminate in a senior capstone. This capstone will serve as an alternative to graduation options that require traditional testing. At the heart of this initiative is an effort to address institutional racism present in standardized testing.

A [key objective](#) of this capstone is the creation of “a more expansive learning and assessment system that honors [students'] cultural and linguistic strengths” and provides an alternative to existing systems that contain biases against minority communities. Since its inception, CoP has added more schools to its initial cohort and plans to make this alternative option available statewide starting in the 2022 school year.

Independent of this work, the New Mexico Legislature introduced, but did not pass, [HB 83](#) in 2021. This bill would, among other changes to state education law, allow students in 12th grade to substitute a capstone course like that being created by the CoP for any core subject requirement provided that the course meets certain requirements.

TENNESSEE: Innovative benchmark assessment pilot

In February 2020, the Tennessee State Department of Education released its [Best for All](#) plan, which included innovative assessments as a strategy to help all students have access to a high-quality education. The document called for the state to develop and deploy “a suite of free, curriculum-aligned interim and formative assessments and resources” to help educators meet the needs of students. In June of that same year, the state [released](#) a suite of assessment tools, which include a start of the year check point to help educators understand where students are beginning their yearly academic journey, an online formative assessment platform that allows educators to create their own assessments as well as an accompanying item bank and a mock interim assessment available to students as a mid-year or spring checkpoint. Each item on the interim assessment comes with full item analysis to help educators identify student misconceptions.

Related, in spring 2021, Tennessee's legislature passed [HB.7004](#), which, among other activities, directed the State Department of Education to establish, fund and implement an innovative benchmark assessment program to “allow teachers to more frequently measure student learning and address student learning loss.” This legislation is directly tied to the need to measure the benefits of various learning acceleration interventions and leverages the previously created suite of assessment screening tools. These screeners will help identify students in need of additional learning opportunities such as after school camps or summer learning. Items can be either teacher- or machine-scored and data are made immediately available to teachers. A [rule](#) enacted after the bill's passage would establish these screeners as the state-adopted benchmark assessment for students in grades K-3.

UTAH: Leveraging federal funds to transform assessments

Utah has taken several steps to reorient its assessment systems toward personalized, competency-based learning. In April 2020, the state convened an Assessment Strategic Plan Work Group to evaluate the state assessment system and make recommendations for its future. Their [recommendations](#) are split into three phases and are broadly aligned to the state’s long-term vision for student learning as articulated in the state’s [portrait of a graduate](#), as well as the state’s commitment to [personalized, competency-based learning](#) approaches. The recommendations were also rolled into a request for proposal for organizations to support the state in developing a new accountability system aligned to these two priorities.

To support this work, Utah’s approved American Rescue Plan (ARP) Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund [application](#) included a proposal to use \$300,000 to transform accountability to support personalized, competency-based learning, as well as \$250,000 for a demonstrated competency assessment. This spring, Utah also passed [HB 181](#), which updated terms and definitions to support the state’s vision for personalized, competency-based education, most notably by replacing the term “competency-based education” with “personalized, competency-based learning.”

Additional State Assessment Examples

Colorado – Standards-based Performance Assessments

<https://www.cde.state.co.us/postsecondary/perfassessment#moreinfo>

Vermont – Quality Criteria for Performance Assessments

<https://education.vermont.gov/documents/edu-quality-criteria-for-performance-assessments>

Virginia – Performance & Local Alternative Assessments Resources

https://www.doe.virginia.gov/testing/local_assessments/index.shtml

Additional State Accountability Examples

Indiana – HB 1514 (2021) requiring a study on learning loss and that the state board of education establish a school performance dashboard

<https://legiscan.com/IN/text/HB1514/id/2379027>

North Dakota – State report card with information about school COVID responses

<https://insights.nd.gov/Education/School/COVID/0800109703>

Ohio – A dashboard with information on how the pandemic impacted schools

<http://education.ohio.gov/Topics/Reset-and-Restart/Data-Insights-on-the-2020-2021-School-Year>

Additional Resources



Aurora Institute – Strengthening Local Assessment Systems for Personalized, Proficiency-Based Education: Strategies and Tools for Professional Learning

This report from the Aurora Institute is designed as a resource for schools, districts and states working toward improving their assessment systems, examining the rationale and essential components, formative and summative performance assessments and student-designed performance assessments.

<https://aurora-institute.org/resource/strengthening-local-assessment-systems-for-personalized-proficiency-based-education-strategies-and-tools-for-professional-learning/>



KnowledgeWorks – ESSA Innovative Assessment Toolkit

This page from KnowledgeWorks serves as a clearinghouse to support states and other stakeholders as they explore these opportunities and build innovative student-centered assessment systems that produce meaningful and timely information on student performance.

<https://knowledgeworks.org/resources/essa-policy-visioning-toolkit-assessments/>



The Center for Assessment – COVID-19 Response Resources

The Center for Assessment's resource roundup includes guidance in anticipated assessment and accountability issues facing state and district leaders.

<https://www.nciea.org/current-initiatives/covid-19-response-resources>



Aurora Institute – How Systems of Assessments Aligned with Competency-Based Education Can Support Equity

This report from the Aurora Institute explores designing sustainable and balanced systems of assessments that support competency-based education over the short- and long-term.

<https://aurora-institute.org/resource/how-systems-of-assessments-aligned-with-competency-based-education-can-support-equity/>



The Center for American Progress – The Education Data That Matter Most to Parents and School Stakeholders

Based on qualitative research with caregivers, educators, school administrators and other school stakeholders, the Center for American Progress explores the need for schools to provide timely and useful data for stakeholders to improve the quality of education each child receives.

<https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/education-k-12/reports/2021/05/05/499118/education-data-matter-parents-school-stakeholders/>

Get more resources to help make personalized learning a reality at [KnowledgeWorks.org](https://knowledgeworks.org).



KnowledgeWorks is a national nonprofit organization advancing a future of learning that ensures each student graduates ready for what's next. For more than 20 years, we've been partnering with states, communities and leaders across the country to imagine, build and sustain vibrant learning communities. Through evidence-based practices and a commitment to equitable outcomes, we're creating the future of learning, together.