

BUILDING TOWARD ESEA REAUTHORIZATION

A LEARNING AGENDA FOR FEDERAL ASSESSMENT AND ACCOUNTABILITY REFORM

Assessment and accountability systems can be powerful tools for improving the quality of education systems. When designed well, they increase transparency, inform improvements to teaching and learning and help stakeholders mobilize to address disparities in outcomes. Unfortunately, today's assessment and accountability systems have not lived up to these benefits despite initial hope for improvements in student outcomes.

A decade of data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress exams reveals stagnant academic progress and persistent disparities between students of color and their peers – disparities that only worsened under the impacts of the global COVID-19 pandemic.¹ At the same time, local stakeholders increasingly question the value of these systems, protesting their use and asking for solutions that center on more meaningful information to help them meet the needs of their students. The nation is at a crossroads with the absence of effective models and the need for an integrated federal strategy to accelerate assessment and accountability innovation.

The sense of restlessness to overcome the impacts of the pandemic combined with a growing awareness that we need to prepare students for an increasingly uncertain future has fueled interest in new and innovative ways of educating students. While many of these ideas hold promise, they also confront policy barriers that shape what children learn, how they are assessed and how school quality is determined.

State and local leaders cannot overcome these barriers without an equally committed partner in the federal government. The nation needs concrete and tested strategies to shape the next reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) so local leaders can design learning environments that are more responsive to student needs. Some states are trying to advance new ideas through the federal Innovative Assessment Demonstration Authority (IADA), despite the constraints that come from tying its requirements to traditional systems and structures. Others have sought ways to innovate within existing federal law. While important insights are emerging from their leadership, the nation would learn far more if the federal government worked to remove the barriers existing under current authority and build state and local capacity to test and study these innovations.

DRIVING QUESTIONS FOR ASSESSMENT AND ACCOUNTABILITY INNOVATION

- » How could today’s assessment and accountability systems evolve to better measure school quality and ensure stakeholders have valuable information to improve student outcomes?
- » What current opportunities or barriers exist in federal and state law that advance or hinder assessment and accountability improvements? How can policymakers remove barriers and expand these opportunities to accelerate promising ideas?
- » What additional capacities do state and local leaders need to leverage these opportunities such as resources, technical advisors and learning networks?
- » How can the nation harness valuable lessons and insights by convening innovative states to inform the design of future assessment and accountability systems through reauthorization of ESEA?

The following set of recommendations will help federal and state leaders partner to advance a new strategy for assessment and accountability innovation that will lay the groundwork for the next ESEA reauthorization. Federal policymakers must advance these agendas simultaneously to ensure states can design holistic and aligned strategies for educational transformation. Federal leadership on these issues will send a powerful signal that the nation is moving forward with its commitment to centering the needs of parents, educators and, most importantly, the children that our public education systems serve.

IMPROVE AND EXPAND INNOVATIVE ASSESSMENT APPROACHES

Federal law requires states to assess students annually in grades three to eight; once in high school in reading and math; and once at the elementary, middle and high school levels for science. While the goal of this policy is to provide a transparent picture of student achievement against the state’s academic standards, stakeholders increasingly question the value and overreliance on these summative assessments.

Common Stakeholder Concerns About State Summative Assessments

- » Standardized test items do not capture deeper levels of knowledge and skills
- » Assessment results do not provide a full picture of student mastery or school quality
- » Curriculum has narrowed toward rigid test preparation
- » Data is not actionable for instruction and data from the classroom is not valued
- » Instructional time is lost to test preparation and test administration
- » Assessments are not culturally or linguistically inclusive²
- » Students experience testing stress

Changes are needed to modernize assessments to ensure they play a meaningful role in the education system. While nearly twenty states are exploring changes to their assessment systems, most are innovating within the constraints of existing federal law and are in the early phases of assessment design.³ Acceleration of these efforts will require policy and resource shifts as well as a robust learning agenda. Fortunately, the federal government took a step in the right direction in 2015 when it created the Innovative Assessment Demonstration Authority (IADA). This program is helping some states explore new ideas, yet some of its requirements have become a deterrent for other states interested in applying – particularly states seeking more innovative designs such as performance-based and curriculum-embedded assessments. These deterrents include the requirements to scale the new assessment system statewide within five years and to meet comparability expectations that were designed for the era of large-scale standardized assessments. Interested states have also struggled with the absence of planning time, technical expertise and financial resources to build and test their new ideas.

Federal policymakers can make the IADA program a viable pathway for broader assessment innovation by adopting the following recommendations:

Policy Recommendations for Strengthening IADA

- » Include a planning phase to create an onramp for states exploring new assessment ideas and permit networks of districts to also engage and create a proof of concept toward state buy-in
- » Replace the timeline to scale the new assessment system statewide within five years with language permitting states to propose the timeline that best aligns to their design
- » Include a research and development focus to study how new assessment approaches helped stakeholders improve student learning outcomes
- » Convene state and district learning networks to replicate effective assessment designs and practices
- » Modernize comparability requirements to allow innovative assessment designs that emphasize alignment to the learning standards and comparable data across schools, districts, states and subgroups
- » Remove the seven-state cap on participation

While these improvements will go a long way to encourage the design of more responsive and useful assessment systems, policy change alone is insufficient. Assessment design requires significant resources to develop, test and scale new systems statewide. Unfortunately, existing federal formula funds for state assessments support the ongoing administration of current assessment systems which states must continue to operate unless they have completed the full IADA process and earned federal approval to transition their system. States interested in advancing significant change will need additional resources to undertake the design of these systems.

Federal policymakers should consider the following strategies to invest in state capacity for assessment innovation.

Funding Recommendations for Accelerating Assessment Innovation

- » Increase formula funding for state assessment systems and triple funding for the Competitive Grants for State Assessment (CGSA) program with a priority on state assessment designs that support student-centered teaching and learning approaches, such as personalized and competency-based learning
- » Amend CGSA to create a separate funding opportunity to help networks of districts test innovative assessment designs
- » Fund a new research and development initiative to seed assessment innovation and explore alignment of other federal investments such as the Education Innovation and Research (EIR) and Small Business Innovation Research (SBIR) programs

Adoption of these strategies will fuel assessment innovation and help states develop better approaches to assessment that stakeholders find meaningful. A range of new assessment approaches will enrich perspectives on the value of assessments and ensure federal and state policymakers have deeper knowledge on how to align future policies to support valuable assessment use.

PROVIDE STATES THE OPPORTUNITY TO EXPLORE NEW APPROACHES TO SCHOOL ACCOUNTABILITY

The federal government requires states to design accountability systems that collect and report annual school performance data on academic proficiency, academic growth, graduation rates and progress toward English language proficiency. States must also select a measure for elementary schools and at least one measure of school quality and student success. Collectively, states use this information to identify schools performing in the bottom 5% as well as those with the largest and most persistent disparities between subgroups of students. This framework was designed to equip stakeholders with valuable information to drive resources and supports to the students who need them the most. Unfortunately, these policies have not led to the equitable outcomes policymakers had hoped and stakeholders are raising important concerns about their impact.

Common Stakeholder Concerns About School Accountability Systems

- » Required indicators rely heavily on standardized assessment data and do not represent a comprehensive picture of school quality
- » The heavy emphasis on student outcomes masks important inputs that play a significant role in student opportunity to learn
- » Communities do not have the ability to incorporate measures that align to their visions and local values
- » Districts are not held accountable for performance despite the significant role they play in managing school quality
- » Access to data and supports is not timely and often comes too late to help students when challenges emerge
- » School identification strategies can stigmatize communities and encourage families with the economic means to seek other options

These concerns indicate a need to explore new approaches to school accountability, yet federal law does not provide states with a pathway to test and evaluate new approaches. This is a significant barrier for states seeking to advance new visions for education – particularly those ready to think boldly as they address the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Without federal action, the only path forward is to run concurrent state and federal accountability systems – one that aligns with the state’s vision for educational transformation, and one that complies with federal requirements. This outcome is far from ideal as it upsets system coherence and has historically led to stakeholder confusion when some states developed parallel systems prior to enactment of the Every Student Succeeds Act in 2015.

Federal action is needed to chart a new path for school accountability that begins with a focused opportunity for states to pilot new approaches. The following recommendations provide a framework for how federal policymakers should structure this opportunity.

Recommendations for Seeding New Approaches to School Accountability

- » Permit states to pilot new accountability systems based on promising strategies for closing disparities in educational outcomes. These pilots should address shortcomings of the current system while maintaining stakeholder access to transparent, disaggregated school quality data.
- » Streamline opportunities to pilot new accountability approaches with the current IADA program so states can explore coherent strategies for transforming accountability and assessment systems to better meet the needs of students.
- » Encourage accountability designs that aim to explore the following areas:
 - Public-facing dashboards that provide data on a range of indicators to ensure stakeholders can identify student needs, particularly those of historically underserved students
 - Greater emphasis on opportunity to learn measures to create balance between system inputs and outputs
 - Processes to co-design new accountability approaches with diverse local stakeholders and strategies to ensure measures are relevant to communities
 - Inclusion of district accountability measures that provide information on how well districts are serving their schools
 - Real time and accessible data and aligned supports
 - Strategies to remove the stigmatization of school identification by identifying and supporting growth areas for all schools while ensuring resources are prioritized for communities in greatest need
- » Include a research and development focus to capture insights on how new accountability approaches helped stakeholders improve student outcomes.
- » Convene state and district learning networks to replicate effective accountability designs and practices.

Federal emphasis on these strategies will shed valuable insights into the future of school accountability – insights the nation needs in order to engage in productive discussions about needed improvements in the next reauthorization of ESEA. These examples will also reveal gaps in capacity, technical support, data infrastructure and research that will help federal leaders design a comprehensive strategy to maximize the effectiveness and relevancy of state accountability systems.

