

National Association of State Boards of Education

## ➔ Take It Off the Consent Agenda: Nine Questions State Boards of Education Should Ask about State Assessment Systems

By Kris Amundson and Gene Wilhoit

Over the next 18 months, states will be making major decisions about their state assessment system. Between now and the start of the 2017–18 school year, when the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) takes full effect, members of state boards of education (SBEs) will make many of these calls. Before making those decisions, state board members need to engage in discussions and ask many questions about what their state's assessment system, including summative tests, should look like.

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act, first passed in 1965 and signed by President Lyndon Johnson, was always targeted at promotion of educational equity. The federal government has experimented with various policy levers over the 50 years since its passage to ensure that it aimed toward what President Johnson called its twin goals of “quality and equality.”

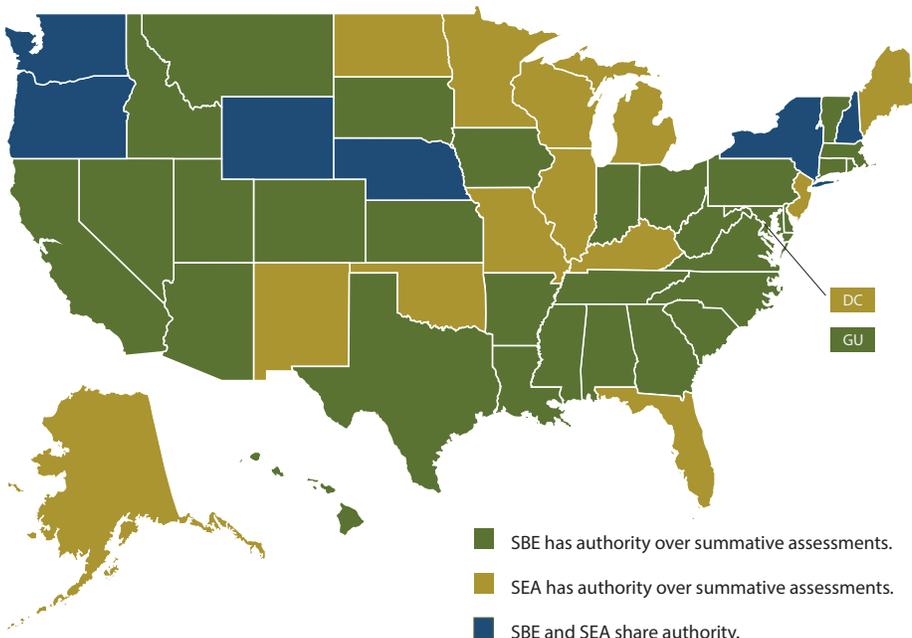
The 2002 reauthorization, known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB), made student testing the primary driver for meaningful measurement of student achievement, bolstered by public reporting, school rankings, and consequences. NCLB required state agencies receiving Title I funds to implement

high-quality, yearly academic assessments in the following subjects and grades:

- mathematics and reading or language arts in each of grades 3 through 8 and at least once in grades 10 through 12; and
- science at least once in grades 3 through 5, grades 6 through 9, and grades 10 through 12.

ESSA maintains the annual testing requirement. This 2015 reauthorization of ESEA starts from the premise that annual summative tests inform parents, teachers, policymakers, and citizens about all students' achievement and also how individual students are progressing. And it supports the notion that a properly designed, high-quality system of assessments allows parents, teachers, and policymakers to make important decisions about instruction and how to support students who need extra help or greater challenges. But ESSA gives states much more flexibility in how and when they assess students. It also lets them use different types of testing (e.g., competency-based), and they can decide whether to allow local education agencies (LEAs) to make their own choices about high school tests (more on this below).

### 31 State Boards Choose State Tests



A recent NASBE analysis underscores the importance of SBEs in these decisions. In 31 states (see map), state boards have primary authority over the state summative assessment. In addition, 45 state boards adopt the learning standards on which the assessment should be aligned. Clearly, SBEs are key players in the development of the state assessment system.

### CLEAR AUTHORITY FOR STATE BOARDS

Each state's education governance is different, and state boards exercise their authority in a variety of ways. Regardless of the extent of their authority, state boards need to be involved throughout the process of developing a state assessment system, including summative tests.

In fact, in more than half of all states, the state board is the key. For example, Arizona’s *state code* gives its SBE the authority to “[a]dopt and implement an Arizona instrument . . . to measure pupil achievement of the state board—adopted academic standards in reading, writing and mathematics in at least four grades designated by the board. The board shall determine the manner of implementation.” (Emphasis added.)

The *Alabama* Administrative Code says, “The Alabama State Board of Education shall choose the tests to be used, grades to be administered, and when chosen tests shall be administered.” Similarly, *Louisiana*’s Board of Elementary and Secondary Education is given the authority over the state assessment program: “Standards-based assessments . . . shall be implemented by the State Board of Elementary and Secondary Education.”

In some states, the board has primary responsibility over assessment, but other policymakers—usually the state legislature—have created additional ad hoc groups (typically, with members appointed by the legislature) to participate in the decision. For example, in *Iowa*, the SBE establishes the statewide standards that form the bases of the state assessment. The legislature created an assessment task force made up of educators, business leaders, and members of the public to recommend the assessment that best meets those criteria. The board then took a final vote on the adoption of the state exam.

In 14 states, the state education chief or the state education agency (SEA) has primary authority for adopting the state summative assessment. (It is worth noting that three of these states—Minnesota, New Mexico, and Wisconsin—do not have an SBE.)

*Alaska* assigns clear responsibility for testing to the state chief: “The commissioner shall develop a statewide student assessment system composed of multiple indicators.” Similarly, *Kentucky* statute requires that “[t]he Department of Education shall develop a plan for implementing the state assessment and accountability system.”

However, even when the state chief or the SEA takes the lead, the state board frequently plays a role. For example, Section: 6A-1.09422 of *Florida’s Administrative Code* requires that “[t]he Commissioner of Education shall design and implement a statewide,

standardized assessment program aligned to the core curricular content established in the Next Generation Sunshine State Standards.” But the Florida State Board of Education has the authority to develop the rules that implement the state assessment program.

In six states, authority is shared between the state chief and the state board. For example, in *Nebraska*’s state code, the SBE is given the power to “[p]rovide, through the commissioner and his or her professional staff, enlightened professional leadership, guidance, and supervision of the state school system . . . [including the authority to] institute a statewide system of testing to determine the degree of achievement and accomplishment of all the students within the state’s school systems if it determines such testing would be advisable.”

Similarly, Oregon and New Hampshire designate some responsibilities for assessments to the state chief and others to the state board. Since New Hampshire has worked to develop its own competency-based tests, local school districts are also heavily involved in the design and implementation of the state assessment.

Clearly, state board members play a significant role in the development and adoption of coherent, balanced statewide assessment systems, including summative tests. Because they are generally not experts in assessment, state board members need to get answers to a number of questions before they can cast an informed vote on the adoption of any state assessment system.

Robert’s Rules of Order suggests that a board’s consent agenda be used only for “routine or noncontroversial items.” State assessments are neither. We are advocating for comprehensive state board involvement in the development of the assessment system, which implies full discussion and examination of a host of issues. While we do not provide an exhaustive description of all the issues that surround state assessment, we do lay out nine big questions board members should address before they raise their hands in public to adopt a new state assessment.

## 1. WHO HAS THE AUTHORITY OVER THE STATE ASSESSMENT SYSTEM?

State board members should be aware of their state’s laws and regulations governing the adoption of an assessment. In the 32

states where the board has primary authority, the board must be integrally involved in selecting a new test.

Even in states where the primary authority to select the assessment is designated to the state chief, the board should play a role. Some of the big policy decisions have no single right answer—rather, they require states to balance a number of factors. Morgan *Polikoff*, who recently led a comprehensive study examining the quality of state tests, *noted* that there is “no perfect way to examine the quality of a state test. Any method is going to have flaws and challenges, and they all leave something important out.” He concluded, “It’s all about the trade-offs.”<sup>1</sup>

State boards and state chiefs, working collaboratively, are better able to weigh the pluses and minuses of these choices. At a minimum, the state assessment should be a topic on the board’s agenda for several months prior to the vote on adoption, with plenty of time for board members to ask questions and be engaged in the decision-making process.

## 2. WHAT DO YOU WANT YOUR STATE TEST TO DO?

Tests designed for one purpose often get used for another. For example, a test can be designed to measure a student’s mastery of state standards. But can that same test be used to determine which students should be placed in an advanced class? Not unless the test was developed or validated for that purpose. Lou Fabrizio, director of data, research and federal policy for the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, says, “Everyone wants an assessment that has only 10 questions, takes 10 minutes to administer, and provides teachers with 10 pages of diagnostic information! It can’t be done, and that’s where the trade-offs come into play.”

For example, he notes, “In general, shorter assessments (in terms of number of items) cannot do a good job of content coverage (alignment), and fewer items result in lower reliability. Assessments with performance tasks and constructed-response items also take more time to administer than multiple-choice items, cost more to develop and score, and usually require a delay in receiving the scores. However, the performance tasks and constructed-response items are really good at assessing higher-order thinking skills.”

## HIGH-QUALITY ASSESSMENT

The US Department of Education defines a “high-quality assessment” as one that

“results in actionable, objective information about student knowledge and skills. Assessment systems should measure student knowledge and skills against state-developed college- and career-ready standards in a way that, as appropriate:

- covers the full range of the relevant state standards to ensure a full picture of what students know and can do;
- elicits complex student demonstrations or applications of knowledge and skills so that teachers and parents know that students are prepared for the real world;
- provides an accurate measure of student achievement for all students, including for high- and low-achieving students, so that all educators have the information they need to provide differentiated supports to students; and
- provides an accurate measure of student growth over time to recognize the progress that schools and educators are making to help students succeed.

Yet in the NCLB era, state policymakers came to rely on a single test as a measure for many different outcomes. Thus one of the first tasks of a state board is to clearly define what the test is designed to do. Does the assessment need to provide information about student growth or student proficiency? Should it provide information to teachers that can allow them to improve their practice? Should this assessment be incorporated into teacher evaluations? School report-card grades?

Ask for the evidence of quality and validity for its intended use. Be aware that using tests for high-stakes decisions (e.g., student promotion, teacher evaluation) can undermine the validity and scores for those uses. It may be helpful to keep in mind Fabrizio’s final observation on testing: Nothing is simple.

The board should involve stakeholders during this process. When teachers, local board members, parents, and the business community come together to define key goals for

the state assessment, they are more likely to support the test that results from their involvement.

### 3. HOW WELL ALIGNED IS YOUR STATE TEST TO STATE STANDARDS?

Tests can and do shape what teachers teach in the classroom. So if your state assessment is not aligned with your state learning standards, teachers will over time focus less on the standards and more on the material covered in the test. When states give low-quality assessments that are poorly aligned with standards, the tests will undermine the hard work that state boards have done to create high-quality standards.

Conversely, if states give high-quality assessments that are well aligned with state learning standards in content, modality, and rigor, teachers cannot help but “teach to the test” because they are teaching the standards. SBEs need to carefully measure the alignment of any test they select to the standards they have already established.

This is exacting work. Recently, the [Fordham Foundation](#) and the [Human Resources Research Organization](#) developed a protocol that allows groups of trained educators and content experts to measure the alignment of a variety of standardized tests against college- and career-ready standards. States can use the same approach to determine the alignment of any new state summative assessment with their own state standards.

Amber Northern, senior vice president for research at the Fordham Foundation, recommends that states do their own analysis: “Teachers and other content and assessment experts should have an opportunity to ‘look under the hood’ of state tests. Such an evaluation allows them to see what content and skills that test developers have prioritized, which is not always evident or well explained. It also gives stakeholders the chance to improve upon the test, assuming they find it mostly commendable; wise test developers will take such feedback seriously.”

One additional benefit of involving state teachers in this analysis is that it provides teachers excellent professional learning and leadership opportunities. In a 2013 [paper](#) published by the Center for American Progress, Linda Darling-Hammond notes that, in high-performing countries, “[t]eachers are engaged throughout the assessment process

in developing, reviewing, scoring, and analyzing the results of student assessments, which enables them to understand the standards and develop stronger instruction.”<sup>2</sup>

### 4. DO THE TESTS ASK STUDENTS TO DEMONSTRATE HIGHER-ORDER THINKING?

A high-quality assessment should require all students to demonstrate the range of thinking skills, including higher order skills, called for in your state standards. That means questions should require students to do more than recall basic information.

Many states and districts use Webb’s [depth of knowledge](#) as a way of measuring the type of thinking required to answer a question in an assessment. (Others use Bloom’s taxonomy, which is similar.)

Questions that ask students to recall, copy, compute, define, or recognize typically make up the majority of state summative assessments. Yet these questions have a low depth of knowledge level. Instead, policymakers should look for questions that ask students to demonstrate that they understand the information and can use it in another context.

Not all questions on a good test will be at the higher levels, but at least some of them should be. State boards should ask for an analysis of how many test questions at each depth of knowledge level will be asked at each grade level.

It is worth noting that while the types of test items identified in question 5 are often thought of as synonymous with measures of higher-order thinking, they may not be. A technology-enhanced question that asks students simply to copy information into a table is still at a low depth of knowledge.

### 5. ARE YOU ARE ADOPTING HIGH-QUALITY ASSESSMENTS?

In 2015, the Council of Great City Schools and the Council of Chief State School Officers released a set of principles governing state assessments. One key is that they must be high quality. The principles note, “We cannot waste student or teacher time with low-quality tests. Assessments must be aligned with college- and career-ready standards. Assessments must measure students’ abilities to think critically, synthesize material from multiple sources, analyze problems, and explain and justify responses.”

## ASSESSMENT CHECKLIST

- Who Has the Authority over the State Assessment System?
- What Do You Want Your State Test to Do?
- How Well Aligned Is Your State Test to State Standards?
- Do the Tests Ask Students to Demonstrate Higher-Order Thinking?
- Are You Adopting High-Quality Assessments?
- How and When Will Test Results Be Reported?
- What Flexibility Does Your State Want to Incorporate into Your Testing System?
- What Is the Capacity of Schools and Districts to Administer the Tests?
- How Much Time Are Districts Spending on Assessment?

Some of the backlash against standardized testing is a reaction to exams that consist entirely of multiple-choice, fill-in-the-bubble questions. Before adopting a test, state boards should ask about the inclusion of other types of items:

**Constructed response questions.** These are open-ended questions that ask students to apply their knowledge and understanding in a short written answer. It is harder for students to guess, since they have to explain their thought processes.

**Technology-enhanced questions.** For math questions, students might be asked to use a number pad to enter points on a graph. For an English question, students might be asked to highlight part of a reading passage that supports their answer.

**Performance assessment questions.** As defined by New Hampshire's Student Assessment System, which has pioneered this type of assessment, these are "multi-step assignments with clear criteria, expectations, and processes which measure how well a student transfers knowledge and applies complex skills to create or refine an original product."

These items are more expensive to administer and to score. Yet as [Matt Chingos](#) has noted in a Brookings Institution report, any of the new assessments costs less than a single textbook.<sup>3</sup> "It seems shortsighted to accept a

significant decrease in test quality in order to save \$10 or \$20 per student in the context of an education system that spends more than \$10,000 per student," he says.

Questions like these also take more time for students to complete. That is why limits on state testing time should be discouraged, since it inherently discourages the use of questions that ask students to do more than fill in a bubble.

## 6. HOW AND WHEN WILL TEST RESULTS BE REPORTED?

Teachers cannot possibly use test results to improve their instructional practice if they do not get the results until well into the next school year. The results of the state test should be timely, transparent, and easily accessible to teachers, parents, and policymakers. They must be delivered in sufficient time to enable teachers to access, reflect upon, and adjust their instruction to better meet the needs of their students.

In addition to timeliness of reporting, there are some other concerns that policymakers should address before adopting the test. When the state of [Michigan](#) adopted state summative assessments in 2013, it evaluated all potential vendors on a series of additional criteria. They asked

- that the information be reported in sufficient depth (including disaggregating results) so that educators could have information

needed to change their practice;

- that states' LEAs would have access to their students' data so they could perform further analysis if they wished; and
- that students who were testing with state-approved accommodations would have scores that provided parity with students in the general population.

In general, states need to help parents see the value in the tests students are required to take. One national poll of parents found that they "generally see value and promise in testing, but their experiences with testing do not come close to matching what they want for their kids," according to Education Post Executive Director Peter Cunningham. "Parents told us that they see standardized tests as a tool for the system. They want them to be used more as a tool to help their kids learn."

## 7. WHAT FLEXIBILITY DOES YOUR STATE WANT TO INCORPORATE INTO YOUR TESTING SYSTEM?

Although many NCLB requirements continue under ESSA, states have been given significantly more flexibility. Among the decisions states must now make are these:

- whether to give a single summative test, as is currently required, or to break up the assessment into smaller components that would be given throughout the year;
- whether to allow LEAs to use a nationally recognized high school academic assessment (like the SAT) in lieu of a state-developed assessment, so long as the test can provide comparable data and the state signs off; and
- whether to undertake a new locally designed competency-based and performance-based assessment.

## 8. WHAT IS THE CAPACITY OF SCHOOLS AND DISTRICTS TO ADMINISTER THE TESTS?

When schools and districts do not have enough computers (or enough bandwidth) to test all students simultaneously, they have to schedule long, disruptive testing windows. This is clearly an equity issue, since productive teaching and learning is difficult at best when students are cycling in and out of the computer lab. The state should require districts to assess their capacity to test all students efficiently and with minimal

disruption to normal school operations. The state then should use this information to develop a more level playing field, so that students across the state have the same opportunities.

## 9. HOW MUCH TIME ARE DISTRICTS SPENDING ON ASSESSMENT?

As public officials, state board members often are the first to hear concerns about the state's education system. And most board members report that they have heard many complaints about overtesting.

While a specific limit on testing time was not included in ESSA, the Obama administration recently released a Testing Action Plan, which recommended a limit of 2 percent of instructional time spent taking "required statewide standardized assessments."

US students take an average 112 standardized tests between preK and grade 12, according to a report from the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) and the Council of Great City Schools (GCSC).<sup>4</sup> That being the case, overtesting cannot be pinned solely on the 17 tests that NCLB and now ESSA require.

In fact, most of the overtesting stems from district decisions to use interim tests as a way of diagnosing and addressing student learning issues prior to the state summative tests. The proliferation of interim tests has increased testing time but has demonstrated limited value in stimulating improved teaching and learning. Furthermore, these interim tests are often not aligned with standards and do not provide sufficient guidance to teachers. Still, pushback against over-testing most frequently hones in on state summative tests rather than the district-administered interim tests.

ESSA includes funding to support state audits of the tests that states are giving. Some states have already funded testing audits. For example, Connecticut provided funding to a number of local districts to determine which of the tests given by schools and districts were outdated or did not support the state's learning standards.

Achieve has created the Student Assessment Inventory for School Districts. This tool lays out a comprehensive review process to help LEAs review their entire assessment system.

The CCSSO/CGCS **framework** suggests using these questions before initiating an audit:

- What are the key elements of a high-quality system of assessments that can best and most efficiently advance college- and career-ready teaching and learning?
- What current assessments are being administered at all levels and which, if any, can be eliminated or reduced in length because they are low-quality, duplicative, and/or do not serve a core purpose as part of a comprehensive, high-quality system of assessments?
- And ultimately what can and should be done to enhance the system of assessments to improve quality and build a more comprehensive system that can best measure the full range of knowledge and skills, improve teaching, and advance growth of all students toward college- and career-ready outcomes?

In most states, education spending constitutes the single largest item in the state budget. The state assessment system will be only a small fraction of that budget. But if state board members work in a transparent, inclusive way, they can develop a system that provides real value and useful information to parents and guardians, teachers, and community members, and thus build public support for the state's public schools.

*Kris Amundson is executive director of the National Association of State Boards of Education, and Gene Wilhoit is executive director of the University of Kentucky's Center for Innovation in Education. They thank Eve Tilley-Coulson for able research assistance on this report.*

## NOTES

1. Morgan Polikoff, "Pencils Down: What I Learned from Studying the Quality of State Tests," *Common Core Watch* (blog), Thomas H. Fordham Institute, March 7, 2016.
2. Linda Darling-Hammond and Beverly Falk, "Teacher Learning through Assessment: How Student-Performance Assessments Can Support Teacher Learning," (Washington, DC: Center for American Progress, 2013).
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4. Council of Chief State School Officers, "Comprehensive Statewide Assessment Systems: A Framework for the Role of the State Education Agency in Improving Quality and Reducing Burden," (Washington, DC, 2015).