

National Association of State Boards of Education

➔ Flexibility for Streamlining Tests

By Stephen Prociw

Under fire for taking up too much classroom time, failing to provide clarity on students' progress, and for poor quality and redundancy, assessment practices are getting new scrutiny. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), signed into law last December, offers fresh impetus for streamlining assessments. But even before ESSA goes into full effect, states can take advantage of existing authority and funding under No Child Left Behind (NCLB) to reexamine their current strategies.

The ultimate purpose of a state's accountability system does not change under ESSA: It is to drive school improvement and identify schools that need intervention. Under existing accountability systems, state assessments have been the primary indicator of academic achievement and thus the primary measure of school success. ESSA

TESTING ACTION PLAN

In the administration's view, a good assessment has these characteristics:

- high quality
- worth taking
- time limited
- fair
- transparent to students and parents
- one of many measures, and
- tied to improved learning.¹

1. <http://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/fact-sheet-testing-action-plan>.

retains the fundamental testing requirements for states under NCLB, and states and districts are still required to test at least 95 percent of students annually.

Yet ESSA represents a clear shift away from high-stakes testing. Furthermore, it expands state authority over accountability and assessment policy, eliminates the adequate yearly progress measure, and allows state accountability systems to include measures other than student test scores to identify which schools need improvement.

Under ESSA, states will be able to limit the amount of instructional time devoted to standardized tests, use multiple measures of student learning and progress in school accountability systems, and decide not to factor student test scores into teacher performance evaluations.

To reduce overtesting and encourage state and local innovation, ESSA authorizes an assessment pilot program for up to seven states. Districts also may choose to administer a nationally recognized test like the ACT or SAT in lieu of the state's test in high schools. In addition, states can measure growth in student achievement through a single summative assessment or through multiple, statewide interim assessments during the course of the academic year that results in a single summative score.

President Obama's Testing Action Plan, released last October, outlines a set of principles that define a good assessment (see box), and it provides steps that states can take to improve their testing regimes.

In February, the US Department of Education released guidance detailing how states could use existing federal formula grants during the ESSA transition year to

improve the quality of tests administered, increase communication with students and families about the purpose of statewide assessments, and facilitate professional development to increase assessment literacy of educators.¹

The department's guidance provides examples of how states and districts could potentially leverage the available funds. For instance, a state might use the 6111 category of funds under NCLB to modify or create an audit that evaluates assessment quality across districts, or a district might reserve ESEA Title II-A funds to support professional communities that improve educators' understanding of test data. States may also use existing federal funds to audit their assessment systems. These audits are designed to inventory which assessments are given and for what purpose.

Results from the audit can help determine whether a test is useful and worth keeping or redundant and unnecessary. In addition, audits gather feedback from stakeholders about how the testing data are used to improve instruction. Audits also help states create testing schedules that ensure the timely release of data and analyze how much time is spent administering and preparing the test.

The US Department of Education recently established "office hours" to further assist states and districts with strategies that eliminate tests while still ensuring federal assessment requirements are met. State boards of education should take advantage of federal assistance to audit and streamline assessment systems.

The Education Department's guidance offers states a head start on transitioning to the new law. ESSA provisions advance the department's assessment principles, further encouraging states to develop high-quality assessment systems. In the coming months, the department plans to release further guidance on how ESSA funds might be used to reduce overtesting.

STATES GET A HEAD START

Some states have already begun the work of inventorying their assessments. For example, the **Illinois** State Board of Education participated in a pilot study in 2015 to identify which local tests provided educators with valuable information and which tests could be eliminated. Information from three districts was collected using a modified version of Achieve's Student Assessment Inventory for School Districts. As a result, the districts eliminated tests that were not aligned to their standards or used to improve classroom teaching, reclaiming an additional 270 minutes of instructional time per year.² The Illinois SBE offers training on the assessment inventory process as a statewide professional learning opportunity for educators.

To identify best practices in student assessment, **Tennessee** created the Tennessee Task Force on Student Testing and Assessment in spring 2015. The task force established principles that tests be aligned with state standards, communicate effectively to stakeholders the reasons behind the tests being administered and their benefits, and provide testing data that provide educators useful information on student achievement. The task force's final report, released in September 2015, recommends 16 things the state can do to improve the quality of assessments and reduce overtesting.³

Eliminating low-quality and redundant tests is one way that states can mitigate the fears that buoyed the opt-out movement. Assessments are an essential tool in student learning, helping educators identify students' needs and providing parents with information about their child's learning. State boards should advocate for the use of funds that are already available for developing better communication with parents and ensuring that educators receive test results in a timely way. High-quality assessments can be instruments that promote equity and increase academic achievement. However, if done poorly, assessments burden educators and students. States should use ESSA and the flexibility for existing federal funds on a fresh start for their assessment systems.

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RESOURCE

Kris Amundson and Gene Wilhoit, "Take It Off the Consent Agenda: Nine Questions State Boards of Education Should Ask about State Assessment Systems," *Policy Update* 23, no. 11 (2016).

NOTES

1. Most of the new provisions in ESSA will go into effect during the 2017–18 school year. The funding formulas from the 2015–16 school year will remain during 2016–2017 transition year to ESSA. See John B. King Jr., "Guidance on Reducing Assessments," letter to chief state school officers, Washington, DC, US Department of Education, February 2, 2016.
2. US Department of Education "Testing Action Plan: State and District Profile 2," Progress: Teachers Leaders and Students Transforming Education website, accessed March 15, 2016, <http://sites.ed.gov/progress/2016/02/testing-action-plan-state-and-district-profiles-2/>.
3. US Department of Education, "Testing Action Plan: State and District Profile 1," Progress: Teachers Leaders and Students Transforming Education website, accessed March 15, 2016, <http://sites.ed.gov/progress/2016/01/testing-action-plan-state-and-district-profiles/>.