

States Experiment with Assessment through Innovative Pilots

The Innovative Assessment Demonstration Authority (IADA) program, written into the Every Student Succeeds Act, gives up to seven state educational agencies the opportunity to launch innovative assessment pilots in their public schools, with the goal of eventual statewide implementation.¹ As of August 2020, the U.S. Department of Education (ED) had approved five states' applications.

Beginning with Louisiana and New Hampshire in 2018, Georgia and North Carolina in 2019, and most recently Massachusetts in 2020, each state received a federal waiver for regular assessments so they could pilot assessment systems in select districts or schools over five years. Largely, the pilots focus on building a competency-based system that is more locally informed and better aligned to coursework.

Louisiana

As the first state to receive an IADA waiver, Louisiana is furthest along, implementing its first pilot in the 2018–19 school year. With a through-course assessment model based on the Guidance curriculum, which about 70 percent of the state's school systems use, participating districts merge English language arts and social studies content in the same through-year assessments to cover students' knowledge of passages aligned to their social studies instruction or books they have covered in class.² Louisiana officials said they responded to research showing that “students need deep knowledge of a subject in order to think creatively or critically about it.”³

Aligning content in this way helps avoid testing students on their comprehension of passages dealing with subjects they have not previously

learned. Students thus can show they have mastered content gained in class as part of their assessment experience, said Chanda Johnson, deputy assistant superintendent at the Office of Academic Policy and Analytics, Louisiana Department of Education. “By connecting these assessments to that unit of instruction, we’re ensuring a more equitable experience for all of our students.”

As the pilot progresses, Louisiana will gather feedback through surveys and focus groups with teachers and school leaders to determine what they want to see in assessment data, what instruction they would change because of it, or what extra professional development they would like to receive. “[T]he best way to understand what’s best for kids is to talk to people who are the closest to those kids—make sure everyone is engaged in the process,” Johnson said.

Though unable to complete the 2019–20 pilot year due to the pandemic, participating schools were able to complete two of the three assessment windows before schools closed, thereby providing at least some data for the school year, Johnson said.

New Hampshire

The second state to receive approval, New Hampshire applied in 2018 for its IADA pilot with its Performance Assessment of Competency Education (PACE) program. The PACE initiative, for which ED previously granted permission in March 2015, lets schools and districts provide multiple means for assessment other than standardized tests, with an emphasis on performance assessment. “The PACE system is based on the belief that a rich system of local and common ... performance-based assessments is necessary for supporting deeper learning as well

as allowing students to demonstrate their competency through multiple performance assessment measures in a variety of contexts,” according to New Hampshire’s IADA application.⁴

Established as a competency-based educational approach, PACE encompasses a combination of local, common, and state-level assessments administered to students in grade 3 English language arts (ELA), grade 4 mathematics, grade 8 ELA and mathematics, and grade 11 ELA, mathematics, and high school science. Each grade and subject receives one common performance task, called the PACE Common Task, which is developed and administered by all participating schools.⁵

“When PACE started off, they noticed the districts were all over the place and there wasn’t a lot of coherence on what proficiency is,” said Melissa White, administrator for academics and assessment at the New Hampshire Department of Education. PACE gathers input from local schools and teachers to help inform the state academic assessments with the content they cover in class.

While some states may have staff capacity sufficient to implement a new assessment system, others will rely on outside entities for operation and data management, as New Hampshire has. Thus, as response to the COVID-19 pandemic eats into budgets, states looking at implementing new assessment systems should be clear about the cost and the capacity requirements, White said.

Georgia

ED approved the Georgia Department of Education’s application in 2019 to implement two innovative assessment consortia models: the Georgia MAP Assessment Partnership and the Putnam County Consortium.⁶ The first partners with NWEA to develop MAP Growth for Georgia, a through-year assessment that leverages adaptive interim assessments to provide timely insights on students’ command of grade-level standards, measure academic growth, provide norm-referenced test results, and produce summative proficiency scores. The second group is working with Navy Education LLC to develop an on-demand assessment system that provides real-time diagnostic data.

“Both assessment systems seek to assess students throughout the school year in order

to provide feedback to teachers while instruction is still occurring,” said Allison Timberlake, Georgia’s deputy superintendent for assessment and accountability. “The main difference is that the MAP Growth for Georgia model is a computer-adaptive assessment and the Navy model is a standards-level assessment.”

Georgia’s objective in the IADA program is to leverage district work to explore alternate, innovative assessment solutions, Timberlake said. Ultimately, they will explore multiple models and work with stakeholders to select an assessment to implement statewide.

Georgia originally applied for three district consortia assessment systems, but the third—a model developed at Cobb County School District—did not meet ED’s requirements and selection criteria because they did not align with state academic achievement standards.⁷

North Carolina

In October 2014, the North Carolina State Board of Education convened the Task Force on Summative Assessment to address concerns over the amount of time students spend on standardized assessments and the usability of the data at the classroom level. The task force recommended a through-grade assessment model called NC Check-Ins to replace the end-of-grade summative assessments.⁸ After receiving feedback on the original IADA proposal, the department of public instruction revised its NC Check-Ins design to develop the North Carolina Personalized Assessment Tool (NCPAT), which measures students’ knowledge of content standards in three intervals across the school year. The first two NCPAT assessments, taken at the end of trimesters two and three, provide detailed feedback so classroom instruction may be tailored immediately to individual needs and serve as indicators to determine an appropriate starting point for developing the third NCPAT assessment. At the end of the school year, the final NCPAT assessment will feature multiple “clusters” of items based on results of the first two assessments.

“Matrix sampling will be used to design these mini clusters to ensure they are aligned to grade level test specifications, and across all NCPAT 3 clusters, the full breadth and depth of grade level content standards will be assessed,” states the North Carolina IADA application addendum.⁹

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With IADA approval in June 2019, North Carolina will expand this program from a first-year sample of participating students in through-grade assessments for mathematics and ELA to two districts participating in the second year, and a sample of at least 15 percent of students statewide in years three and four.

Early on, the task force engaged stakeholders as members and discussants, which provided vital input on the use, development, and technical requirements for a more balanced assessment system.¹⁰

Massachusetts

Massachusetts received its waiver from federal assessment requirements in April 2020, and state leaders plan to focus on increasing access to deeper learning, piloting an assessment system in science and technology/engineering for grades 5 and 8.¹¹ The new design will combine the current Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) with a new hands-on session, where students will be assessed in dynamic, interactive simulations, much as they might experience a task in a science class. “We want to make sure the assessment reflects the kinds of tasks that we’re asking teachers to give their students,” said Sam Ribnick, special advisor for innovative assessments and data at the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.

The IADA pilot will expand another Massachusetts pilot, the Kaleidoscope Collective for Learning, in which select schools and districts organized classroom instruction around deeper learning. About half of the IADA pilot group are Kaleidoscope schools.

Its pilot is part of a broader state effort to reduce disparities and make deeper learning more ingrained into the instruction all students receive. “Any state that’s getting into this process has to be really clear on what are the goals and the intended purpose of doing this and let that drive the initial conversation about what the new design will look like,” Ribnick said. ■

¹Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, “Innovative Assessment Demonstration Authority,” webpage (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 2020), <https://oese.ed.gov/offices/office-of-formula-grants/school-support-and-accountability/iada/>.

²Louisiana Believes, “Louisiana Innovative Assessment Pilot,” fact sheet (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana Department of Education, N.d.), https://www.louisianabelieves.com/docs/default-source/key-initiatives/louisianas-key-initiatives--innovative-assessment-pilot.pdf?sfvrsn=a6219f1f_18.

³Daniel T. Willingham, “Knowledge and Practice: The Real Keys to Critical Thinking,” issue brief (Knowledge Matters, March 2016), <http://knowledgematterscampaign.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Willingham-brief.pdf>.

⁴New Hampshire Department of Education, “New Hampshire: Application for the New Authorities under the Innovative Assessment Demonstration Authority” (Concord, NH: author, 2018), <https://www.education.nh.gov/sites/g/files/ehbemt326/files/files/inline-documents/nhpaceapplication.pdf>.

⁵New Hampshire Department of Education, “Performance Assessment of Competency Education,” webpage (Concord, NH: author, N.d.), <https://www.education.nh.gov/who-we-are/division-of-learner-support/bureau-of-instructional-support/performance-assessment-for-competency-education>.

⁶Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, Georgia’s IADA approval letter (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 2019), <https://www2.ed.gov/admins/lead/account/iada/gaiadaapproval2019.pdf>.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, “North Carolina: Application for New Authorities under the Innovative Assessment Demonstration Authority” (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 2018), <https://www2.ed.gov/admins/lead/account/iada/nciadaappdec2018.pdf>.

⁹North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, “Items that Require Additional Information or Revision in North Carolina’s Innovative Assessment Demonstration Authority Plan” (Raleigh, NC: author, April 2019), <https://www2.ed.gov/admins/lead/account/iada/ncapplicationaddendum.pdf>.

¹⁰Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, “NC: Application for New Authorities.”

¹¹U.S. Department of Education, “Massachusetts Becomes First State to Qualify to Test New and Innovative Ways to Assess Student Achievement Next School Year,” press release (Washington, DC: author, 2020), <https://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/massachusetts-becomes-first-state-qualify-test-new-and-innovative-ways-assess-student-achievement-next-school-year>.

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recently published “Blueprint for Testing: How Schools Should Assess Students During the Covid Crisis,” drawing on recent work, to provide a ready reference for busy education leaders and policymakers as they plan for standardized testing now and into the future.⁷ ■

¹Lynn Olson and Craig Jerald, “The Big Test: The Future of State Standardized Assessment” (Washington, DC: FutureEd, April 2020).

²Deepa Srikantaiah, “How State and Federal Accountability Policies Have Influenced Curriculum and Instruction in Three States: Common Findings from Rhode Island, Illinois, and Washington” (Washington, DC: Center on Education Policy, October 2009).

³Lynn Olson, “The New Testing Landscape: State Assessment under the Every Student Succeeds Act” (Washington, DC: FutureEd, September 2019).

⁴Olson and Jerald, “Big Test.”

⁵Megan Kuhfeld and Beth Tarasaw, “The Covid Slide: What Summer Learning Loss Can Tell Us about the Potential Impact of School Closures on Academic Achievement” (Portland, OR: NWEA, April 2020).

⁶Thomas Toch, “Don’t Abandon Standardized Testing in Schools Next Year: Rethink It,” op-ed, *The Hill* (May 26, 2020).

⁷Lynn Olson, “Blueprint for Testing: How Schools Should Assess Students during the Covid Crisis,” (Washington, DC: FutureEd, July 2020).