As the new school year begins, states will want a better understanding of the social, emotional, and academic learning needs of students so they can respond to them rapidly. Yet with shrinking budgets and increasing demands, states are grappling with tough decisions about how to balance giving students time to adjust to a new normal of schooling and assessing the scope and extent of learning loss due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

For example, state boards over the summer wrestled with the prolonged negative impact of learning loss in reading, especially in the early years. Some states, such as Indiana, chose to make early reading assessments optional for the fall, in hopes of giving teachers more time to focus on helping students adjust to new school contexts. Others, such as Colorado, plan to continue administering assessments to ensure that students received interventions to address learning needs.

Four key questions will help guide decision making during these unprecedented times.

**What is the purpose?**

An essential first step for a state board is defining an assessment’s intended purpose, which is vital to ensuring the reliability and validity of the data. No one assessment can achieve all goals. For example, formative assessments are better suited to exploring individual student learning on discrete standards and guiding the learning process, while summative assessments are better suited for reliably measuring average school performance across student groups. With a clear purpose statement, state boards will be well equipped to ask whether a given assessment validly supports its use for the intended purpose.

**How should the data be used?**

Inherent in an assessment’s purpose is a clear articulation of the actions or changes in behavior expected as a result of the data. State boards can build narratives around how to make the data actionable. Who is using the information? What actions are taken as a result? How does this action help achieve the strategic vision of education in your state? Testing by itself does not mitigate achievement gaps. Rather, the actions teachers and administrators take based on the data to better support students are the key levers to achieving the state’s vision for education. If the data do not support these actions, then the time spent on assessment is not well used and runs the risk of crowding out instructional time, with negative impacts on students.

**Is the test fair and accessible?**

As conveners and questioners, state board members serve a vital role in ensuring the fairness and accessibility of an assessment. As assessments are developed or selected, state boards can pave the way for accessibility by ensuring that experts on students with disabilities, English learners, and culturally diverse perspectives guide the process. By asking about the diversity of design and review committees, state boards can set a state up to identify and resolve issues efficiently rather than adopting the costly strategy of trying to retrofit an assessment that was not designed with the needs of some students in mind.

**What resources and capacity building empower educators to act on data?**

Data can be complicated and complex. Supporting teachers’ assessment literacy is vital. States can encourage professional learning that explores assessment data and how they can be integrated with other information. State boards can also draw attention to resource inequities and catalyze action to address them.

— Abigail Potts