

National Association of State Boards of Education

➔ State Strategies on Assessments in 2021

By Abigail Potts

When the U.S. Department of Education (ED) signaled that the broad waivers for state assessments it had offered in 2019–20 would not be widely offered in 2021, it sought to balance the need for student learning data to inform pandemic recovery with the very real operational challenges states face in administering tests this year.¹

In his confirmation hearing, U.S. Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona made clear that it was not his intention to return students to the classroom for the sole purpose of testing. ED also moved to decouple the accountability provisions of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act from assessment requirements (see box) and has approved school accountability waivers for 45 states.

FLEXIBILITY AND WAIVERS

At the same time, the department offered new flexibility in administering assessments, such as an expanded testing window and shortened tests. With guidance from ED, states used a variety of strategies to chart a path on assessment that best fits their contexts.

Testing Window. Extending the window allowed schools to find the optimal time to assess students and acknowledged that some schools would need extra time to deal with constraints posed by social distancing requirements within school facilities. States allowed testing to start early and extend into the summer or even fall 2021.

New Jersey delayed standardized testing for the majority of its students until fall, allowing more time for in-person instruction before students take the test. New Jersey's Start Strong streamlined assessments will be administered in person during September and

October 2021, with disaggregated results reported publicly. The Maryland State Board of Education shifted some assessments to the fall but also let high school students take required end-of-course exams, such as Algebra I, at the conclusion of the year.

Shortened Test Forms. Some states opted for shortening test forms to minimize time spent on testing and maximize time spent on instruction. The California State Board of Education voted to administer shortened Smarter Balanced assessments for grades 3–8 and 11, which reduces the number of the tests' computer-adaptive questions by about half. New York shortened tests for grades 3–8 English language arts and math to one session and required only one written test component of the grade 4 and 8 science tests.

Several state boards discussed trade-offs to shortening, including loss of more precise reporting on how students were mastering subdomains in the content standards. States like Illinois also released anchor standards that focused instruction on key knowledge and skills students need to build current and future grade-level mastery of content.

Federal Waivers in Special Circumstances.

The department waived assessment provisions in a few cases. Colorado was the first approved to administer its mathematics assessments

to all students in grades 4, 6, and 8, and its reading/language arts assessments in grades 3, 5, and 7. In other grades, Colorado offers but will not require assessments. Subsequently, Oregon received approval to administer math assessments to all students in grades 4, 7, 8, and 11; reading/language arts assessments in grades 3, 6, 7, and 11; science assessments in grades 5 and 8. The approval rested on the fact that in-person instruction only became available to Oregon K-5 students on March 29 and by April 19 for grades 6–12.

The District of Columbia's waiver rested on data revealing that 88 percent of students were learning remotely and most students receiving hybrid instruction were in school only one day per week. "As a result, very few students would be able to be assessed in person this spring," according to ED. "This would also likely result in OSSE not being able to report much, if any, data due to OSSE's minimum subgroup size for reporting and the need to protect personally identifiable information."²

WAIVING STATE POLICIES

Federal requirements are just a sliver of the broader assessment and accountability systems state boards manage. Assessment results factor into teacher evaluations, promotion and graduation decisions, and kindergarten readiness assessments. State boards waived rules on state-required assessments, grade promotion, and graduation, for example.

Fewer Assessments. State boards deliberated on whether and how to administer assessments on subjects beyond the federally required ones. Ultimately, several suspended

ASSESSMENT AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Assessment and accountability are intertwined in the education narrative but nonetheless distinct. Academic assessment is fundamentally a measure of student learning. It can cover a range of practices, from classroom teachers gauging understanding of a lesson to end-of-year summative assessments that aim to provide systemwide, comparable data on students' mastery of state content standards. Accountability is about how data are used, ranging along a continuum from lower-stakes consequences, such as public data reporting, to higher-stakes consequences, such as classifying schools for interventions and support under the Every Student Succeeds Act.

administration of social studies, civics, writing, and other subject tests. New York suspended all but English, Algebra 1, Earth Science, and Living Environment. Ohio made the state American history assessment optional for 2020–21, with the state legislature waiving requirements but allowing districts the option to test students enrolled in U.S. history courses. Maryland ultimately waived 2020 kindergarten readiness assessments after initially extending the deadline to November 1, 2020.

Promotion and Graduation. Experts voiced concerns over how testing conditions in 2021 could threaten the validity of using test results for school accountability and warned against using the results for student or teacher accountability. In response, the Mississippi state board rolled forward with reading and language arts assessments in grade 3—key data for tracking progress on its statewide push to improve early literacy—but suspended the policy requiring grade 3 students to receive a passing score for promotion to grade 4.

The Massachusetts board waived the state assessment graduation requirement for the class of 2022. The pandemic-related cancellation of 2020 assessments meant they did not take 10th grade math and English MCAS exams and would not have at least three chances to pass the tests before graduation.

COMMUNICATING ABOUT ASSESSMENTS

State boards are critical to conveying the purpose and intended use of assessments. Emphasizing the need for data to support recovery and focusing on how students will be supported may help allay fears that students and teachers will be held accountable for conditions outside their control. Engaging parents, educators, policymakers, and technical experts to develop, articulate, and refine the purpose and use of assessments is essential to ensuring that the results are used in valid ways.

State boards already partner with educators, families, and administrators to unpack the policy, equity, and technical implications of assessment solutions. In 2019, Virginia convened a School Accreditation Task Force—including state board members, superintendents, principals, and teachers—to recommend changes to the accreditation process for 2021–22.

LONG-TERM IMPLICATIONS

This year's assessments will spark challenging conversations on how best to use resulting data to advance equity and excellence and inform state policymaking. What do the data say about students' opportunities to learn in 2020–21? Which students were not assessed? Are the data valid, and for what purposes?

Preliminary data from 2021 interim assessments reveal larger gaps in mathematics compared with reading, younger students with greater learning recovery needs than their older peers, and opportunity gaps for students of color.³ Consistent, relevant, reliable data on student access to opportunities and outcomes will be vital to state boards' long-term efforts to mitigate the pandemic.

Opportunity to Learn. Understanding the student learning context is always vital to interpreting assessment results and even more important now. Oregon plans to pair the release of results with a Student Educational Equity Development Survey, which will collect information on access to educational resources, opportunity to learn, self-efficacy, and beliefs. Other states are reporting data on access to broadband, instructional settings, and attendance, disaggregated where possible.

Missing Students. State boards should always ask who is missing from conversations on policy; the same principle holds for assessment. Also, asking which students are missing from the results helps frame whether student groups are underrepresented compared with prior years. But it also has policy implications. Over three million students were disengaged during the pandemic. If they are not showing up in assessment results, what is the plan to learn about their academic, social, and emotional needs?

Data Use. Education data are inherently messy. Schools and students do not all fit neatly into single definitions and data collections. The pandemic adds an uncertain, unpredictable element that has state boards collaborating with state agency technical advisory committees to ensure that data can support its intended use. While high-stakes decisions are largely tabled for 2020–21, data still must be sufficiently valid to inform resource allocations and policy priorities. Preliminary results raised

concerns about the comparability of test scores from remote and in-school administrations.⁴ State boards are already planning to evaluate prior-year comparisons, comparability among districts, and strategies to uncover bias in the results. Caveats about data comparability and pandemic impacts must be clearly communicated to parents so they can interpret their student's results appropriately.

Lessons Learned. State boards can create common ground for districts to share and collaborate on effective strategies to accelerate learning, reengage students, and scale promising practices. What data informed district decisions? How can the state support wider access to that information? State boards can host authentic conversations between practitioners and test developers, incentivizing bold conceptual designs for assessment and exploring ways to maintain technical quality and fairness.

Fifty-eight percent of parents agree that the influx of education funding creates an opportunity.⁵ States can use this moment to ponder whether assessments and data collections in place prepandemic are measuring what matters most. With partnerships between practitioners, experts, and policymakers, state boards can transform not just assessments' technical designs but the supports required to meet the needs of all students.

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NOTES

1 U.S. Department of Education, Dear Colleague Letter, February 22, 2021, <https://oese.ed.gov/files/2021/02/DCL-on-assessments-and-acct-final.pdf>.

2 U.S. Department of Education, District of Columbia Waiver Approval Letter, April 6, 2021, <https://oese.ed.gov/files/2021/05/DC-assessment-response-letter.pdf>.

3 Curriculum Associates, "What We've Learned about Unfinished Learning: Insights from Midyear Diagnostic Assessments," research brief (March 2021); Megan Kuhfeld et al., "Learning during COVID-19: Initial Findings on Students' Reading and Math Achievement and Growth" (NWEA, 2020).

4 Kristen Huff, "National Data Quantifies Impact of COVID Learning Loss; Raises Questions About At-Home Testing" (Curriculum Associates, 2020).

5 Beacon Research, "A National Survey of Parents for the Walton Family Foundation," presentation, April 2021, <https://www.waltonfamilyfoundation.org/learning/national-poll-reveals-parents-priorities-for-k-12-education>.