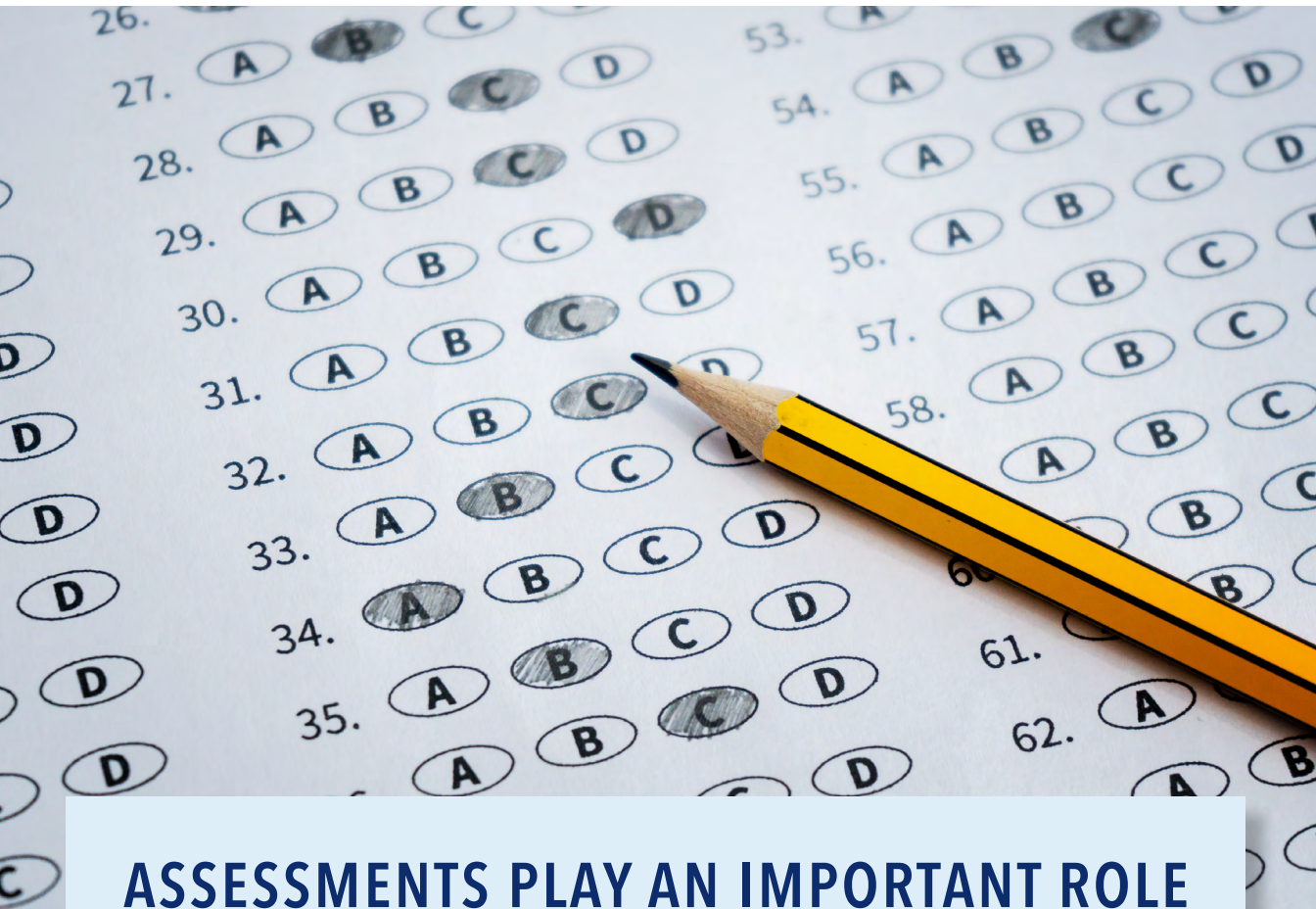


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Policy Recommendations from the George W. Bush Institute

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**ASSESSMENTS PLAY AN IMPORTANT ROLE
IN SERVING STUDENTS**



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ASSESSMENTS PLAY AN IMPORTANT ROLE IN SERVING STUDENTS

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Assessments are one of the most important – and often misunderstood – elements of education. In most cases, tests are administered by the state as well as by districts and schools. Assessments at each of these levels have distinct purposes, yield different information, and are part of a powerful, coordinated approach to improving student outcomes.

Each year, states are required by federal law to administer an annual summative assessment to all public-school students. State tests are based on state standards, which articulate what students should know and be able to do in each subject area for each grade. The results of these tests are broken down across student groups – including by race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender, English-language learners, and special education students – and provide an apples-to-apples comparison of student performance by grade across school and district lines.

These results give policymakers meaningful information to use in targeting resources to the campuses and students with the greatest need, determining when to intervene in underperforming schools and monitoring campus and district improvement efforts. They also provide an important signal to parents about how well their child performed against grade-level expectations. State exams have also produced 20 years of student outcome data that informs research about the efficacy of educational programs, policies, and interventions.

Schools and districts often administer formative and interim assessments throughout the school year to measure students' progress. These tests are used by educators to adjust instruction and ensure that students are learning new concepts as expected. Regular checks for understanding like this are an important part of good teaching.

Unlike report cards and teacher observations, assessments provide the only objective and comparable information about student performance. They are core to [school accountability systems](#) and an essential part of meaningful education policy.

OUR RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Congress should maintain the current federal requirement that states administer annual statewide assessments to inform school accountability systems
- State policymakers should ensure statewide summative assessments are valid, reliable, and comparable to provide clear measures of student progress
- State policymakers should make state test results clear and transparent for parents
- State policymakers should ensure districts align local assessments with the annual state test and state standards to support improved instruction
- State policymakers should ensure that teachers have access to high-quality instructional materials aligned to state standards
- State policymakers should explore modernized approaches to assessment to allow for innovation to meet stakeholder needs

Arguments against testing often focus exclusively on the inability of annual state tests to provide timely data to help inform day-to-day instruction. But that is not their purpose. Rather, formative and interim tests, aligned to state standards, are intended to meet that need. A continuum of assessments – from formative to interim to state summative tests – provides comprehensive information to educators, parents, and policymakers, who then can act on behalf of students.

Policymakers should safeguard the use of assessments so that objective, comparable information about school and district performance is readily available to guide decision-making and improve learning.

Congress should maintain the current federal requirement that states administer annual statewide assessments to inform school accountability systems

Current federal policy requires that states administer annual assessments for every student in third through eighth grades and once in high school. This important check on the progress of all students is core to state accountability systems and ensures that all students have the ability to access a quality education, regardless of where they live, their family income, or their race or ethnicity. While states rightly control most policymaking for education, the federal government provides this critical backstop to ensure that all children are seen and served in our public system.

States must release assessment results by campus and district, disaggregated by race/ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, special education status, and English-language learners. Trendlines over time demonstrate which students are on track and which groups (or schools or districts) are struggling. Policymakers can use this information to allocate additional resources and support – or to determine when a campus or district requires direct intervention to ensure that students have a chance to learn and succeed.

State policymakers should ensure statewide summative assessments are valid, reliable, and comparable to provide clear measures of student progress

Statewide summative assessments measure student achievement and growth against state standards. They should be valid (measure what they're intended to measure), reliable (yield a consistent score every time they're taken), and comparable across the state (provide an apples-to-apples comparison). Policymakers should also ensure that standards are continuously evaluated and refined so that aligned assessments measure student progress against the most critical knowledge and skills for success in the 21st century.

Cut scores, or the minimum requirement to meet proficiency, should align to grade-level expectations. Low cut scores inflate student performance, making it less likely that students graduate ready for their next step. State leaders should compare their state assessment results with National Assessment of Educational Progress ([NAEP](#)) outcomes and investigate material variations in student scores. If significantly more children score proficiently on state tests than on the NAEP exam, then the state standards and/or cut scores may be too low.

State policymakers should make state test results clear and transparent for parents

Many parents today don't know how to access state test data or understand what the information means. State leaders should communicate to parents in plain language how the state summative assessment is created, what it measures, why it's important, and where they can find results.

States should provide timely, easy-to-access information to parents about their child's performance, including how to interpret test results and questions to ask their child's teachers. Parent communication should also include information about how schools and districts performed relative to other schools and districts. This kind of comparative information helps parents to make informed decisions about what's best for their children, especially in states with numerous education providers and/or education savings accounts.

State policymakers should ensure districts align local assessments with the annual state test and state standards to support improved instruction

Testing and teaching are often discussed as if they are two disconnected, competing concepts, but assessment systems provide important information to educators about what students know and how much they've grown, which should drive instruction.

Assessment systems must be coherent. Formative and interim assessments should be aligned to the summative assessment, which should be anchored to the state standards. Curricula should support instruction that is also aligned to those standards. Data from formative assessments should clearly link to instructional materials and interventions so that teachers can improve instruction and learning.

It's also important to stop administering assessments that are not useful. State policymakers should require that districts inventory their assessments to ensure they are meaningful and aligned.

State policymakers should ensure that teachers have access to high-quality instructional materials aligned to state standards

High-quality instructional materials (HQIMs) are engaging, content-rich educational materials that are aligned to state standards, are easy for educators to use in the classroom, and designed to meet the needs of all students. State and district policymakers should ensure educators have ready access to these resources and are trained in how to use them. Connecting standards, assessments, and HQIMs is the core of strong instruction and, done well, will improve outcomes for students.

State policymakers should explore modernized approaches to assessment to allow for innovation to meet stakeholder needs

Policymakers can both support the system we have today and embrace innovation to strengthen assessment in the future. As technological advancements continue, states may find it beneficial to explore modernized approaches to assessments. While these advancements create potential opportunity, state policy leaders should also be thoughtful about this process. Trend lines matter for all stakeholders to see changes over time, and those are disrupted when assessments change. Any changes to a state assessment system must be rolled out carefully with clear communications to all stakeholders about what is changing, when it is changing, and why it is changing, along with implementation support for schools and districts.

Regardless of the options pursued, states must continue to ensure that the knowledge and skills of every child are measured and acted upon every year. Innovation offers some potentially promising alternatives, but those should not come at the expense of measuring the progress of every child.

Now more than ever, all our students need access to an education that will prepare them for the 21st century. We cannot meet this goal without testing. Assessments provide policymakers, educators, and parents with the reliable, valid, and comparable information they need to make good policy decisions on behalf of kids and allocate resources effectively. State and federal policy play important roles in ensuring that valid, comparable, and reliable assessments are available and used in our public education system.

Glossary

ACT: A standardized test covering English, reading, math, science, and writing (optional), used primarily for college admission. The highest score a student can receive is a 36.

Advanced Placement: College-level classes created by the College Board, a national nonprofit organization, that high school students can take on-site at school while completing their high school degree.

Advanced Placement or “AP” tests: Standardized exams administered by the College Board that allow students to show mastery of content and skills in an Advanced Placement course to earn college credit.

Comparable: The degree to which the results of an assessment relate and support the results of another assessment.

Curriculum: A sequenced plan for teaching the knowledge and skills articulated in state standards.

Cut score: The score that separates levels of student achievement – such as advanced, proficient, needs improvement, or unsatisfactory – on a test.

Diagnostic assessment: A tool to help teachers determine a student’s skills and knowledge ahead of a new class or program of study. The exam gives teachers the ability to adapt instruction to best meet students’ needs. Diagnostic assessments can be formal, like a standardized test, or informal, like a work sample.

Formative assessment: A short exam given by teachers to determine whether students have mastered a specific skill. Results are used to inform future instruction. Examples include a short quiz or exit tickets given at the end of class.

High-Quality Instructional Materials (HQIMs): Instructional resources that align to state standards, are evidence-based, and support all learners.

Interim assessment: Tests given at the grade or classroom level to monitor student progress toward achieving end-of-year proficiency against academic standards. Examples include a unit exam.

NAEP: The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), also known as the Nation’s Report Card, is a test in reading and mathematics administered to samples of fourth, eighth, and 12th grade students across the country. NAEP was first administered in 1969 and provides decades of trendline data about the performance of American students. NAEP also allows for comparisons across states as students around the country take the same test.

Objective: A measure that is consistent and produces impartial, quantifiable outcomes.

Proficiency: A level of achievement that indicates grade-level academic performance and competency in a subject. Each state sets its own standards for proficiency and cut scores to determine which students meet the mark.

Psychometrician: A scientist who studies the measurement of people’s knowledge, skills, and abilities and designs, administers, and interprets assessments.

Reliable: Assessment produces consistent results regardless of where, when, or how the test is taken.

SAT: A standardized test covering math, reading, and writing, with an optional essay. Administered by the College Board, it’s primarily used for college admission. The highest score a student can receive is 1600.

Standardized assessment: A test that’s administered and scored the same way for all test takers.

Standards: Learning goals determined by a state agency on what each student should know and be able to do at each grade level and in each subject. Federal law requires that every state have clearly articulated educational standards for grades K-12.

Summative assessment: A test that’s administered annually at or near the end of a school year to measure student progress against academic standards. Results of these tests also demonstrate student performance trends across districts, schools, and student subgroups over many years. Examples include an annual state test or a final research paper.

Test prep: Materials and instruction focused on preparing a student for an exam.

Valid: An assessment measures what it is supposed to measure.



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