

Rapid Brief #1: Best Practices for Assessments During the COVID-19 Pandemic

This series of rapid briefs is being developed by the [Wisconsin-Minnesota Comprehensive Center - Region 10](#) (WMCC10). The purpose of these briefs is to provide succinct and timely guidance on best practices for schools and school-based early learning programs regarding the assessment of student learning, with the goal of informing instructional planning and decision-making during the COVID-19 pandemic.

This brief synthesizes guidance from the [Minnesota Department of Education](#) (MDE) and existing guidance offered by professional educational associations, assessment/test vendors, state departments of education, and educational organizations (see [reference list](#)). This brief is intended for instructional and school/program leaders (including but not limited to principals, curriculum directors, instructional coaches, assessment coordinators, early learning coordinators, and special education administrators).

Note: The content of this brief is focused on general best practices regarding assessing student learning. If you are looking for information specific to administering and decision-making related to the MN Comprehensive Assessment (MCA), please refer to MDE's [Student Instruction Resource page](#) and [MCA and MTAS During COVID-19](#).

Purpose and Role of Assessments

Districts/schools/programs must understand why they are administering an assessment. Academic and social emotional well-being assessments administered must have a clear purpose linked to actions that will benefit students and their families.

- To understand where students are in their learning progression.
- To guide instructional planning and decision making regarding student needs (e.g., identifying strengths, learning gaps, and opportunities; allocating resources).
- To partner with families about their child(ren)'s learning.
- To understand students' progress towards mastering academic and [early learning standards](#), including [social emotional learning](#).
- To inform continuous improvement of the instructional system (e.g., to identify areas for professional development, to examine effectiveness of core instruction).

Districts are encouraged to implement a [comprehensive assessment system](#), particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. Districts can disaggregate student data to help ensure equitable student outcomes, instructional practices, and decision-making in promoting school success for all students.

Assessment Best Practices During COVID-19

Classroom Assessments

Classroom assessments provide ongoing (formative) and cumulative (summative) evaluations of instructional effectiveness and student understanding (e.g., [KEP-approved assessments](#), teacher-made tests, curriculum unit tests).

- Prioritize assessments that align most closely to classroom instruction to support teachers with instructional planning and to inform families of their child(ren)'s progress.
- Increase regular use of informal assessments (e.g., pre-tests, post-tests, polls, daily reviews, classroom assessments, teacher-made assessments) to assess student learning and inform instructional planning to target critical skills necessary for proficiency.
- Be efficient with teacher/practitioner time and maximize the use of existing data to assess student needs and progress. Avoid administering duplicative or redundant assessments.
- Provide professional development specific to creating and designing high quality classroom assessments.

Standardized Assessments

Standardized assessments have consistent administration and scoring procedures and norms (e.g., Measures of Academic Progress, FASTBridge, aimsweb).

- Prioritize administering universal screening assessments (e.g., MAP, FASTBridge) when students are in-person or in school.
- Continue administering assessments that were in place before the COVID-19 pandemic began and avoid introducing new assessments.
- Offer a flexible testing window to increase higher engagement and completion rates.
- When administering standardized assessments remotely (both for assessments students are expected to complete independently and those with proctor guidance throughout), consider the following guidelines:
 - Assessments administered remotely must be conducted and interpreted based on the guidance provided by the test vendor.
 - Establish procedures that ensure teachers, families, and students have the appropriate materials and understand how to complete the assessment accurately.
 - See the [School Recommendations section for an example on how to prepare staff for remote testing](#).
 - See a [Sample Remote Administration Guide for Teachers](#).

- See [Sample family letters on testing](#).
- Results from standardized assessments administered with altered or modified procedures should be interpreted with caution and in the context of the procedures used to administer the assessment.

Data-Based Decision Making

- Do not aggregate student outcome data collected during the pandemic with data from previous school years for important system-wide educational decisions at the school, district, or state level.
 - Consider analyzing data within the categories of pre-COVID and during COVID (and eventually post-COVID).
 - It is best to disaggregate data according to the instructional model in which a student has predominantly received instruction (e.g., hybrid, in-person only, distance learning only). Districts may observe differences in student outcomes, student needs, and patterns of missing data based on whether students are in-person, hybrid, or distance learning. As a result, districts, schools, and programs may need to develop action plans that address the different needs of families and students that emerge as a function of the model families have selected for instruction.
- Continue using multiple sources of data to inform instructional planning, assess students' needs, and inform decision-making. If different sources of data are missing at the local level, districts/schools/programs should dive deeper to examine reasons for the missing data and create a plan for targeted data collection.
 - Sources of data may include: Local standardized assessments (e.g., MAP,, FASTBridge, interim assessments); Kindergarten Entry Profile (KEP) approved assessments, Teacher-created assessments (e.g., classroom assessments, observations, feedback from teachers and students, work samples); Grades; and Attendance.
- Ensure grade-level (e.g., professional learning communities) and cross-grade level (e.g., pre-kindergarten and kindergarten, vertical transition, departmental) teams have scheduled opportunities to collaborate, plan, and engage in professional development to learn and use assessment data to drive instructional planning.
- Establish routines where collaborative teams (e.g., grade level teams, cross-grade level teams, professional learning communities) conduct regular and timely data review to make instructional decisions for individual and groups of students.
- Make instructional decisions promptly after collecting assessment information.

- Do not use state accountability tests (MN Comprehensive Assessment) to determine instructional placements and programs for individual students. State accountability tests measure a school system's performance level on learning standards and do not provide sufficient information to make instructional decisions for individual students.
- Create a communication and professional learning plan to ensure that educators/practitioners, students (if appropriate), and families understand the purpose of the assessment, how the data are used (and not used), and how to understand/interpret the results.
- Use universal screening data to facilitate identifying students for additional supports (e.g., remediation and accelerated supports). When limited data are available for a large group of students, conduct a class-wide intervention and measure students' performance against the goals of the intervention as a proxy to understand learning gains, gaps, and response to instruction.

Family Collaboration

- Communicate assessment plans and results with families in a timely manner, and engage families as partners. Consider providing family data literacy supports and developing district-level protocols to share assessment results (e.g., sharing rationale for assessments, explaining how the data will be used) through multiple avenues (letters, phone calls, conferences).
 - See [sample family letters](#) on administering assessments.
 - See [sample of family letter on assessment results](#).
- Take into account the resources students and families require to successfully and accurately complete the assessment when administering assessments remotely (e.g., physical and electronic materials, high-speed internet, computer/device).
- Actively partner and engage families in their child(ren)'s learning and school experience. Districts/schools/programs may consider administering family interviews, surveys, sending out newsletters, or making frequent phone calls home to ensure that family voices are represented in their child(ren)'s school experience.
- Take advantage of parent portals or communication boards to increase opportunities of communication between parents and districts/schools/programs. Also take advantage of conferences as opportunities for two-way dialogue with families regarding student learning and assessments.
- Ensure families have full access to information by offering communication in the language of family choice and explaining technical terms in family-friendly language.

Considerations for Early Learning Assessments

Although many practices described above are relevant to educators working with early learners , the next items specifically address early learning (defined as birth - third grade) assessment practices.

- KEP-approved assessments are not meant to determine kindergarten eligibility. [Kindergarten eligibility](#) is based on age, immunization, and [early childhood screening](#).
- MDE encourages the use of authentic (observation-based), formative, standards-based assessments for the primary purpose of informing instruction. This includes [Kindergarten Entry Profile \(KEP\)](#) approved assessments for programs providing 350 hours of instruction per year. See [this MDE document](#) for detailed information about using KEP-approved assessments during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Many authentic and formative assessments designed to assess early learners can be administered across multiple learning models (in-person or remote, synchronous or asynchronous), as they rely largely on practitioner observations and family/caregiver interviews, photos, videos, work samples, and questionnaires. [This MDE resource](#) provides information about using authentic observation strategies during hybrid or distance learning.
- For information on remote administration of standardized, norm-referenced early learning assessments (those typically used to identify and support students with disabilities), see the [Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center's guidance on norm-referenced assessments that can be administered remotely](#). As noted above, results from standardized assessments administered with altered procedures should be interpreted with caution and in the context of the specific administration procedures.

MN Department of Education Assessment Resources

- [Minnesota K-12 Academic Standards](#)
- [Benchmark Achievement Level Descriptors](#)
- [Minnesota Early Learning Standards](#)
- [Assessment in Early Childhood](#)
- [Reading Proficiency](#)
- [Screening and Identifying Characteristics of Dyslexia](#)
- [Student Instruction COVID-19 Resources](#)
- Professional learning for educators:
 - [Writing Summative Classroom Assessments](#)
 - [Teaching and Learning Led by Evidence Webinar Series](#)

Educational Leader Resources

- [Using student achievement data to support instructional decision making \(NCEE 2009-4067\)](#)
- [Assessment Tips for Administrators: Crafting Your Data Collection Plan for the 2020-2021 School Year](#)
- [Assessment Tips for Teachers: Strategies for Partnering With Families to Collect Data](#)
- [Promising Practices to Accelerate Learning for Students With Disabilities During COVID-19 and Beyond](#)
- [Formative Assessment for Remote Teaching: Evidence and Feedback](#)
- [Learning as We Go: Principles for Effective Assessment During the COVID-19 Pandemic](#)

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