



Student Assessment During COVID-19

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Schools face enormous challenges regarding how to operate efficiently and safely for the 2020-21 school year. As part of that response, some state leaders are asking the U.S. Department of Education to waive the annual federal testing and accountability requirements for 2021, which are key to understanding and addressing gaps in education among students. This call follows the mass request and granting of waivers of the federal annual standardized test requirements in the spring of 2020, when schools physically closed, and tests could not be administered.¹

The spring cancellations were a reasonable response to the burgeoning coronavirus pandemic and the unprecedented circumstances requiring the immediate closure of schools without notice or planning. And while most schools are still physically closed until their communities reach critical benchmarks for controlling the virus—and likely will remain closed for a significant portion of the school year—the nation is now in a different moment.² States have sufficient time to plan how to administer not just the state academic assessment next year, but also to establish protocols through which schools can gather additionally critical information about students. A wider spectrum of data can better guide principals, teachers, and families in fulfilling students' needs this school year, which continued disruptions will almost certainly exacerbate until students can return to the classroom.

Parents, educators, administrators, and policymakers need more information about how students are doing and being served, not less. These data need to capture multiple aspects of student well-being, including social-emotional needs, engagement, and conditions for learning so that families, educators, and local and state leaders can be responsive to the needs of all students. Just as importantly, there is a need for comparable data to look across schools and student groups to better understand the overall academic performance of children. Therefore, the annual assessment requirement should not be waived; instead, states must adapt and be responsive to the nation's new reality and create a plan to scale back the assessments—not eliminate them. They must also provide options for how schools can administer tests in a way that provides actionable information for administrators and policymakers who need these data to allocate resources that will support educational recovery.

The annual statewide assessment provides critical data to help measure equity in education. However, there are other data—including leading indicators related to student well-being, engagement, and conditions for learning—that provide insight into students’ opportunities to learn but are not systematically collected for every student as they should be. This entire collection of data—gathered through assessments and qualitative methods—makes up a comprehensive assessment system. Such a data system should be timely, relevant, and actionable.

This issue brief discusses why schools should assess students next year using the annual state assessment; the role that other academic assessments should play in providing high-quality instruction; and what states and districts can do to support sound, timely, relevant, and actionable practices for collecting a variety of student information next year.

Key definitions

This issue brief uses the terms “assessment,” “assessing,” “assessment strategy,” and “tests.” By assessment, the author means a test developed by the state or by teachers that is given to all students. Thus, the terms assessment and test are used interchangeably. Assessing refers to the process of collecting data about students in all forms, including academic and nonacademic information. By assessment strategy, the author is referring to the entire process of administering assessments and collecting data about student performance through an array of methodologies.

The case for assessing students in 2020-21

The main reason to administer assessments next year—particularly the state academic assessment—is to better understand and address the extent of the gaps in education among students and student populations that have been made worse by the coronavirus pandemic. Maintaining the federal annual testing requirements is a matter of equity in education.

Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and low-income students disproportionately lacked access to opportunity and high-quality instruction even before COVID-19 hit.³ Now, in the midst of the pandemic, they are more likely to experience the stressful impacts of the coronavirus outbreak and the economic recession it has helped to create.⁴ For example, parents of these students are far more likely to work in “essential” positions, meaning that they cannot work from home and support their children’s learning.⁵ Students of color and low-income students are also more likely to feel the effects of lost income due to their parents’ job loss.⁶ Finally, they are more likely to experience the trauma of losing a loved one to the coronavirus.⁷ Enabling students to learn at their highest levels would require mitigating these traumatic and stressful conditions. Schools cannot play that role unless they know what students are experiencing and, most importantly, how the pandemic has affected their well-being.

Creating clarity regarding the purpose of academic assessments

Tests used in schools provide data to meet two distinct purposes: support effective teaching and learning and inform decisions on where states, districts, and schools should focus resources. The data needed to meet these goals come from three types of assessments, which yield different types and levels of information.

Diagnostic tests are given at the beginning of the year to gauge students' starting points and provide guideposts for teachers, schools, and parents to help students access grade-level content. These assessments can be designed by teachers, embedded within the curriculum, or off-the-shelf and not connected to any specific curriculum.

Formative and interim tests provide touchpoints throughout the year to give guidance on how teachers should customize their practice to improve learning. They can be a combination of teacher-designed, short-cycle assessments such as daily exit tickets or longer-form assessments built into the curricula. Teachers can also share these data with families to provide additional learning support. The main differences between formative and interim tests are the time of the year they are administered and their length.

Year-end summative tests provide data that show how well all students achieved the state's academic standards and can be compared across a variety of subsets. These data provide insight into how effective schools were overall in the previous year, which is critical information in light of how differently education will be delivered in the 2020-21 school year. These data also show trends and reveal which student groups and schools need more support in accessing and mastering grade-level content. Year-end testing data, however, are not as helpful in guiding teaching and learning because they collect data at too high a level to inform day-to-day practice and their results do not arrive until the next school year. Thus, a state's system of academic assessments should include a well-organized and thought-out combination of formative, interim, and year-end summative tests that serve to provide a clear purpose for educators, families, administrators, and policymakers.⁸

Moreover, a useful set of academic assessments must be followed by other rich student datasets along with good practices for how they can be used to support students.

Four steps states can take to support good assessment practice at the local level

State policies and resources play a role in shaping what districts do regarding assessments and data gathering. There are four steps states can take to support districts in collecting and using good information about how students are doing.

1. Collect and report data on school models in which students are enrolled

Students will not be receiving the same amount of instruction as usual due to the limitations on assembling indoors. Therefore, schools will be completely virtual, have limited in-person instruction, or provide a combination of the two. Furthermore, schools will provide instruction using a variety of duration options—all day, part of the day, all week, or a few days per week. States should collect data on instructional mode and hours to provide useful context for student achievement data on the state assessment in order to analyze which models were the most successful. None of these data are collected by existing tests because inherent to their design is the assumption that students are enrolled full time in a regular school day.

2. Provide guidance on streamlining academic assessment systems

An important step states can take to support districts in developing a coherent and streamlined assessment strategy this school year and for years to come is to provide districts with the tools that they need to review the assessments that they have traditionally administered to students, the purpose of each type of assessment, and how the data from those assessments were used.

States can develop their own or modify and adopt existing questionnaires and assessment audits for districts to use. For example, the Achievement Network developed a pandemic-specific assessment planning checklist. This resource explains how to document what assessments are being given, what purpose they serve, and what data they provide. This tool also shows educators how to triage student needs based on the information gathered.⁹

Additional resources from the Achievement Network also emphasize the primary goal of assessments: to support grade-level instruction.¹⁰ If assessments are disconnected from the grade-level curriculum that teachers use in the classroom, they will provide little useful data to guide or inform their practice.

Given the limited instructional time students will have in the 2020-21 school year, this streamlining process will provide a way for schools to assess students across other dimensions that are critical for learning.

3. Collect data across four dimensions related to learning

At the start of the school year and moving forward, states should develop protocols for districts to follow in collecting data that address four dimensions critical to student success: conditions for learning, social-emotional needs, student engagement and attendance, and family engagement. The primary question these protocols should answer is, “What do students need to have in place in order to be ready to learn?”

As students suddenly transitioned to online learning this spring, thousands of them seemingly disappeared, whether by not completing assignments or failing to respond to communications from the school.¹¹ While some of these students were absent because of lack of internet access, others were no longer connecting with school for other reasons, such as behavioral and environmental challenges or other learning hurdles. With students no longer able to receive needed services in person, it is critical for schools to reach out and engage with students and their families through other avenues. Phoenix Unified School District in Arizona, for example, is helping to identify and meet a broader range of student needs through its Every Student, Every Day initiative.¹² The district's Student and Family Services Division developed a protocol to protect student privacy and a script for district staff to call and check in on student well-being. The Phoenix district has been able to provide support to students in crisis because they have timely and relevant data on student needs.

It is important that these protocols yield data that can be used to inform both customized and timely supports to students in need, as well as inform systemwide supports where the data show broader trends.

4. Modify policy and guidance to administer the annual state assessment in 2020-21

The annual state assessment is the only consistent and comparable measure available for all students related to their learning. Without these data, district and school system leaders will have limited to no information to understand the extent of the overall academic impacts the pandemic and economic downturn have had on student learning and student group performance. These data are essential to understanding the successes or ongoing challenges of the different learning environments, resource allocation, and interventions that—out of necessity—are being implemented this upcoming school year, some of which have yet to be widely studied. Finally, state assessment data provide federal, state, and local policymakers with information on the efficacy of recovery funding for schools.

Administering the annual state academic assessments in their current form is likely not practical in the circumstances of next school year. That is why, starting now, states must work with their test vendors and technical advisory committees to identify what is feasible regarding the statewide annual assessment. Six questions are critical to answer:

- How can the assessment be condensed in content and length and still provide useful results?
- How can assessment results be provided in a timely manner—in 30 days or fewer—so that their results can affect the current school year?

- How can the assessment be cognizant of digital and connectivity equity concerns and be administered under different scenarios, including at home, at school, or virtually at an off-site location?
- How must the assessments be adjusted to accommodate the needs of students with disabilities and English-language learners?
- How can schools be supported in using high-quality curricula that are aligned to statewide standards and assessments?
- What state assessment policies must be revised to allow for these changes?

Given how differently the annual assessment may look next year and the unique circumstances schools face, test results should not be used to formally rate teachers or schools but rather should be used to inform how to respond to students' needs on a classroom, school, district, and statewide level.

Conclusion

Education system leaders, teachers, and parents need a broad array of information about their students in order to begin educational recovery. Supporting districts in creating streamlined assessments that look at a wide range of student factors, as well as identifying how the annual state assessments and their administration can be adjusted to collect needed information about student performance, is among the most important work states can undertake if schools are ever to close historic learning gaps. Before students can learn, their well-being, engagement, and conditions for learning must be addressed, and in order to do so, schools must collect these data to inform how they should respond to the challenges raised by the COVID-19 pandemic. This will not be an easy feat, but it is necessary to address the longstanding inequities borne by vulnerable students.

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Endnotes

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