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# Implementing the Every Student Succeeds Act

## Toward a Coherent, Aligned Assessment System

By Catherine Brown, Ulrich Boser, Scott Sargrad, and Max Marchitello

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# Introduction and summary

In December 2015, President Barack Obama signed the Every Student Succeeds Act, or ESSA, which replaced No Child Left Behind, or NCLB, as the nation's major law governing public schools. ESSA retains the requirement that states test all students in reading and math in grades three through eight and once in high school, as well as the requirement that states ensure those tests align with states' college- and career-ready standards.

However, the law makes significant changes to the role of tests in state education systems. For example, ESSA requires states to include a broader set of factors in school accountability systems rather than just test scores; provides funding for states and districts to audit and streamline their testing regimes; and allows states to cap the amount of instructional time devoted to testing. It also eliminates the requirement under the Obama administration's NCLB waiver program that states evaluate teacher performance based on, in part, student test score growth.<sup>1</sup>

Taken together, these provisions greatly reduce the stakes of state tests for schools and teachers. They also give states substantially more autonomy over how they define school success and the interventions they employ when schools fail to demonstrate progress. The likely result? A significant reduction in the level of angst regarding testing among teachers and parents. Absent other reforms, however, the legislation will not necessarily lead to better outcomes for students.

States and districts must work together to seize this opportunity to design coherent, aligned assessment systems that are based on rigorous standards. These systems need to include the smart and strategic use of formative and interim tests that provide real-time feedback to inform instruction, as well as high-quality summative tests that measure critical thinking skills and student mastery of standards. Failure to take such an approach may result in states inadvertently exacerbating frustration with tests by keeping the same testing regime in place but not making the tests more useful for students and teachers.

There is a better path. Today, states have an opportunity to use the new flexibility embedded in ESSA to develop stronger testing systems without the pressure of NCLB's exclusive focus on summative tests. They also have the opportunity to innovate: Through a new pilot program that will allow seven states to develop radically new approaches to assessments, states can experiment with performance-based and instructionally embedded tests and use technology to advance testing. Indeed, these pilot states will have the freedom to imagine a testing system of the future in which standardized tests taken on one day each year are no longer the typical way of assessing student learning.

So how can states build on the research base and knowledge regarding high-quality assessments in order to design systems that do not just meet the requirements of federal law but actually drive student learning to a higher level—especially for students from marginalized communities?

Over a six-month span, researchers at the Center for American Progress interviewed dozens of parents, teachers, school leaders, system leaders, advocates, assessment experts, and policy leaders in an attempt to identify what can be done to ensure that tests are being used in service of teaching and learning.

Although they are few and far between, models of coherent, aligned teaching and learning systems do exist. In these systems, the curriculum and end of year summative assessments are aligned with high academic standards. Interim tests, administered at key points throughout the year, provide a check on whether students are on track to meet the grade level standards. Short, high-quality formative tests give real-time feedback to teachers and parents so that they can use the results to inform instruction and to course correct when needed. School and system leaders use data to determine if all students receive the high-quality education they deserve and to provide more support or intervention if the results show that individual students, entire classrooms, or schools are off track.

Unfortunately, these models are the exception—not the rule. Instead, testing today often occurs in a vacuum. Disconnected from the curriculum, standardized tests halt or disrupt actual schooling for weeks on end, and they create significant anxiety for both students and teachers who report heartbreakingly stories of children crying in class or vomiting in the bathroom.<sup>2</sup> The test results, which take months to arrive, rarely result in positive changes or benefits for students that either parents or teachers can observe.

As part of their research, CAP staff found many examples of these sorts of testing issues. To cite a few of these examples:

- **Communication about tests is insufficient.** To the extent that it occurs, public communication has focused on logistical details such as when the tests will occur and not on more important questions such as why tests were administered and how the results will be used.
- **State summative assessments are often not aligned with the district's curriculum.** Tests that are not aligned with the curriculum lead to confusion among teachers about what topics to focus on when teaching and drive test preparation practices.
- **Too much test prep is occurring.** Around 60 percent of parents reported that their child participated in some sort of test prep at least once during CAP's month-long diary study, and some 15 percent of parents reported that their child participated in test prep more than three times during the study period.
- **Weak logistics and the limits of technology often lengthen testing windows and create major disconnects between taking a test and seeing the results.** By disrupting the schedule of all students in a school, long testing windows have created the impression that tests take up much more of students' time than they do in reality.

In a way, these findings are all examples of testing for testing's sake. Looking forward, the goal must be an effective assessment system that aligns with rigorous standards and helps determine whether students are meeting grade-level expectations and making progress. In other words, the goal is to have tests that support and encourage effective teaching and learning.

How can state and district leaders use the new ESSA framework to transition to a clearer, simpler, and more intentional system where tests offer valuable, natural opportunities for students to demonstrate what they have learned throughout the course of the year? This report attempts to answer these questions and provide a roadmap for school and district leaders to create stronger systems of teaching and learning where tests are one important and useful component.

Because the problems with testing are structural and systemic, they do not lend themselves to an easy fix. Nevertheless, ESSA provides an opportunity for a fresh start, and system leaders can capitalize on the flexibility in the new law to make changes in the short and long run to develop a system of better, fairer, and fewer tests.

What's important to keep in mind is that in the new education policy world of ESSA, testing systems continue to need to be refined—not discarded. Parents and teachers want annual standardized testing to continue. Despite media reports to the contrary, there remains significant support for tests. But parents also want tests to be useful and to provide value for their children.

With this changing policy landscape, CAP recommends that states:

- **Develop assessment principles.** Leaders and advocates should develop or adopt a set of principles— informed by assessment experts; research on assessment quality and the purpose of assessment; and feedback from parents, teachers and students—that define a high-quality testing system for their state. These principles should articulate a vision for a testing system at both the state and local levels that is simple, intentional, and supports strong and thoughtful school accountability systems. Leaders should ground all conversations about testing in these principles, using them as a guidepost to constantly remind the general public and key stakeholders of why tests are valuable, as well as of the purpose they serve.
- **Conduct alignment studies.** System leaders should take a holistic look at their systems in order to ensure that students are tested on what they are learning and that what students are learning aligns with state standards. These alignment studies should be executed up and down the school system so that the states know that teachers are teaching to the standards and that the tests are actually measuring what composes the standards. They should go beyond the typical studies that look at alignment between assessments and standards by looking at instructional alignment and student learning.
- **Provide support for districts in choosing high-quality formative and interim tests.** Not every district has the capacity to evaluate all of the formative and interim tests that are available. States should show leadership in this area by reviewing these tests and making available information about their quality and alignment with state standards or by providing their districts with professional development in conducting their own reviews and making informed decisions.

- **Demand that test results are delivered in a timely fashion.** The results of large-scale assessments, such as the SAT, are often delivered within weeks.<sup>3</sup> While that aggressive timeline might not be realistic for new assessments, states should push testing companies for a much faster turnaround time in the delivery of test results. And while faster results might require higher costs and greater use of automated scoring for open response test items, CAP believes that a policy of two months or less needs to be the norm, not the outlier, when it comes to state testing programs.
- **Increase the value of tests for schools, parents, and students.** States should partner with institutions of higher education to use the state required high school exam as a college placement exam. States could also consider replacing the required high school proficiency test with a college entrance exam. Some states are using the ACT or the SAT as the required high school summative test, and ESSA now permits individual districts to use nationally recognized high school assessments in place of the state's assessment if they are aligned to the state's standards and can provide comparable data. Since most college-bound students have to take one of these tests, substituting them for the high school proficiency test will reduce the amount of testing and provide greater value to students. However, states still have the responsibility to make sure that these tests are aligned with their state high school standards. In addition, states should reward students that perform well on the tests with scholarships or other awards or recognition—similar to the National Merit Scholarship Program, for example—which could help students find value in the tests.

Schools should also provide parents with the data from all assessments—including formative, interim, and summative assessments—along with individualized resources to help their children improve.

Finally, states can help schools see value in the exams by celebrating schools that achieve high performance or significant progress on the tests with rewards similar to the federal Blue Ribbon Schools Program or public recognition ceremonies with the governor or state legislators.

- **Take advantage of the new ESSA assessment pilot program to design and implement truly innovative assessment regimes.** ESSA maintains the federal requirement for annual statewide assessments in reading and math in grades three through eight and once in high school. But the law also includes a pilot program that initially allows up to seven states to develop innovative assessment systems—such as competency-based assessments and instructionally embedded assessments—that provide valid, reliable, and comparable data on student

achievement. States approved for this program can pilot these innovative assessment systems in a few districts before implementing them statewide. States should take advantage of this flexibility in order to design and implement truly out-of-the-box assessment systems that move beyond a single summative test.

- **Develop better communication tools.** State communication regarding testing is in disarray. For example, in many states, score reports for state assessments are a muddle of confusing data. CAP recommends that states develop clearer score reports that are accompanied by an explanation of how to interpret the results, as well as the promotion of a website that provides a broad spectrum of sample test items that cover the range of potential testing topics and other FAQs about state testing programs. States should also train district and school leaders in how to communicate about test results to parents.

School districts should:

- **Identify overlapping testing programs.** Districts should identify tests that are unnecessary and eliminate them. ESSA includes new funding to support state and district efforts to audit their assessments and eliminate redundant and unnecessary tests. Another process that may work to limit testing is to have district leaders sort the tests by their purpose. If there are redundancies, leaders should consult educators and work to eliminate the redundant tests. Furthermore, standardized tests in kindergarten through second grade should be eliminated. This would reduce some of the overtesting and avoid subjecting young children to high-stakes and stressful exams. That said, districts should continue to screen young elementary children to make sure they are on track.
- **Build local capacity to support teachers' understanding of assessment design and administration.** Teachers need more support around assessments—particularly the new assessments—and districts should provide more professional development regarding both the use and content of the new tests, as well as better ways for teachers to use testing data in the classroom. It is important that teachers are included in building this professional development in order to ensure it meets their specific needs. Districts should help school leaders understand how best to communicate with parents and teachers, as well as help students prepare for the tests.

- **Create coherent systems of high-quality formative and interim assessments that are aligned with state standards.** In many areas today, formative and interim tests are weak and lacking in alignment and cognitive rigor. District leaders should revamp these assessments so that they are more robust and better aligned with the state’s academic content standards, curriculum, and state summative tests.
- **Better communicate with parents about tests.** Communication about testing should consist of more than robocalls urging parents to give their children a good breakfast. To build trust, districts should be far more transparent and proactive around assessments. This includes posting testing calendars online, creating easily understandable overviews of the district’s assessment system—including the purpose, use, and time for each assessment—releasing sample test items, and doing more to communicate important information about the assessments.
- **Tackle logistics.** If a school only has one computer lab, it will take a long time to cycle every student through an online test. These sorts of long testing windows lead to disrupted schedules for every student in the school. Well in advance of testing, district leaders should create detailed plans for how they will test all students with the least disruption to learning. They should also develop creative solutions such as mobile testing centers or partnerships with local businesses or community organizations. Finally, districts should work with schools to ensure that all technology necessary for assessments functions properly prior to testing.

Schools should:

- **Make the actual test-taking process as convenient and pleasant as possible for children.** For example, schools should allow students who complete the test early to go to the playground or to another area where they can relax; permit children to go to the bathroom as needed during testing; provide multiple opportunities to make up the test if students are out of school on testing day; and allow breaks between test sections. In order to create a positive and low-stress culture around test taking, schools should provide written, online, or in-person guidance and training for teachers administering the tests. Rather than schools across the state developing their own respective guidance, state leaders could create guidance for districts and school leaders regarding test taking practices that could be disseminated statewide. Finally, to the fullest extent possible, schools should ensure that their testing coordinators do not also serve in student support roles, such as school counselors, since these dual roles can create conflicts and additional stress for students who may experience test anxiety.

- **Hold communications events such as annual explain-the-test nights.** When it comes to state tests, parents receive very little high-quality information. One promising initiative is the explain-the-test nights offered by schools to answer parents' questions about exams.
- **Work with teachers to communicate to parents.** When parents have questions, they usually turn to teachers, and schools should make sure that educators have reliable information on state and local tests, including why the assessments are given and the role the tests play in their schools and classrooms.
- **Stop unnecessary test prep.** Students need to be familiar with an exam and the types of questions it asks. There is also a place for making sure that students are familiar with the technology that they will use for the exam. But unnecessary test prep, such as spending weeks administering practice test items, must end. In addition, pep rallies and other practices that intensify the pressure on students should be eliminated.

The U.S. Department of Education should:

- **Develop regulations for ESSA implementation that support high-quality assessments.** In order to ensure that states and districts make progress in moving toward more coherent and aligned assessment systems, the U.S. Department of Education should regulate that states include in their state Title I plans a description of how the state will:
  - Ensure that district formative and interim assessments are aligned with state academic standards
  - Ensure that the testing regime in each district is as streamlined as possible
  - Ensure that communication with teachers and parents about the tests is frequent and includes the purpose, timing, and results of the assessments and resources for students to help them learn the appropriate grade-level material
- **Provide strong technical assistance to states wanting to submit applications for the innovative assessment pilot program.** The new testing pilot allows states to develop next-generation testing systems, but many states do not have the capacity to design and implement these innovative ideas. The U.S. Department of Education should provide technical assistance to states wanting to explore what this pilot program could mean for them and should provide support to states during the development and application process.

- **Spread best practice and research next-generation assessments.** The U.S. Department of Education must do more to disseminate thoughtful assessment practices to states, particularly about ensuring that the tests provide real value to parents and students and communicating with school districts and parents. This set of activities could include providing model score reports that clearly explain the purpose and value of the test. Better information will be critical for educators at the local level as they roll out robust programs.

State and district testing systems will not be fixed in a single year. Over the next three to five years, education leaders and policymakers should develop a robust, coherent, and aligned system of standards and assessments that measures student progress toward challenging state standards. In this system, formative and interim assessments work together to provide teachers, parents, and students with actionable information throughout the year about what students know and can do and whether students are on track. Summative assessments, on the other hand, should act as a final check of teaching and learning.

Improving the quality and alignment of formative and interim assessments is particularly important. These are the tests that are most useful to teachers and provide them with the most up-to-date information regarding their students. However, if those tests are low quality and are not aligned with state academic standards, then the information is rarely useful for either teachers or students. But in a healthy assessment system, formative and interim tests are closely aligned with what is taught in the classroom on a daily basis and the results of these tests provide information that informs teaching and learning.

Formative and interim assessments should only be used if they are both high quality and add value. Therefore, any local assessment that is unaligned, out of date, or duplicative should be eliminated. As a result, the amount of time students spend testing will decrease significantly, and teachers will still have important information about student progress to help guide their instruction.

In this new vision for testing, an effective assessment system will routinely evaluate student knowledge and skills through formative and interim assessments that provide timely and actionable feedback to teachers and parents, culminating in a summative test that helps to determine whether students are meeting grade-level standards and making progress.

For this assessment system to be as useful as possible, alignment is key. All assessments—formative, interim, and summative—must align with academic standards. In other words, what is tested should match what students are expected to know at each grade level. Furthermore, formative assessments and interim assessments should lead into the summative assessments. Simply put, how well students perform on a summative test should not be a surprise.

In short, testing is a vital piece of a student’s education. However, far too often, U.S. testing policies, the tests themselves, and the support provided to teachers proves to be inadequate. It does not have to be this way. Through the recommendations detailed in the paper, national, state, and local education leaders can take significant steps toward improving their assessment systems and ensuring that students, teachers, and parents receive the information they need in order to help all students receive a high-quality education.

# Background

High-quality assessments play a critical role in student learning and school improvement. If used well, assessments enable teachers and students to continuously improve by providing vital checks on how students are progressing toward acquiring the knowledge and skills they need in order to be ready for both college and career by the time they graduate from high school. When aligned with the standards students are expected to have mastered by the end of the year, tests can identify gaps in student learning or areas where students' instructional programs should be accelerated. Because standardized tests are designed to provide comparable data across all students who take the test, they are easier to administer and score than projects or other individual assignments. Without these regular checks, teachers and parents do not have the opportunity to understand where students are struggling and make adjustments before the summative end of year tests.

High-quality tests can also show how well states, districts, and schools are doing in meeting the educational needs of all students. Standardized tests provide the only opportunity to compare students or groups of students through objective data. These apples to apples comparisons make it easier to identify a school's strengths and weaknesses and subsequently target support. They enable teachers to compare their classrooms to other classrooms where the same material is being covered and learn from their colleagues. Standardized tests also make it possible for parents to compare one school to another. This comparison can have particular significance for parents of children who need additional supports and services, such as English language learners or students with disabilities. The disaggregated data from these assessments make it possible for parents to compare outcomes for students overall, as well as for those who have similar educational needs as their children, enabling them to become better advocates and make informed choices.

When standardized tests are vertically aligned across grade levels, they also make it possible to track a student's growth over time. This data is valuable for students, parents, system leaders, and advocates in determining whether students are growing enough to stay on track or making adequate progress to catch up to grade level.

But tests—and student performance on tests—are not a goal in and of themselves. Instead, tests are but one relatively small tool that should be used in service of the real goal: learning.

Unfortunately, the reality in schools today is far different: Tests are driving the agenda. For instance, in the fall of 2014, CAP released a paper documenting the amount of testing in schools. It found that, even though less than 2 percent of instructional time is devoted to testing, there is a culture of high-stakes testing in many schools that is problematic. In many schools, preparing for high-stakes tests takes up far too much time, and, as a result, some parents and teachers feel that schools are placing too great an emphasis on standardized testing.<sup>4</sup>

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## The Every Student Succeeds Act

ESSA, signed into law by President Obama on December 10, 2015, includes a number of key new provisions aimed at addressing the problems with today's testing systems and helping states and districts move toward a more coherent, aligned system of assessments.<sup>5</sup>

- 1. State accountability plans:** The new law eliminates NCLB's overemphasis on state standardized tests by requiring states to include broader measures of school success in their accountability systems, such as measures of teacher and student engagement or access to rigorous coursework. Instead of requiring schools to be labeled as "failing" if they miss a single target on a single test, the law requires state accountability systems to include five factors: proficiency in reading and math based on state tests; graduation rates for high schools; another academic indicator for elementary and middle schools; progress in achieving English language proficiency for English language learners; and at least one additional indicator of school quality or student success. The law also provides more flexibility for states to set their own goals for these indicators and to develop their own set of interventions based on local context and need.
- 2. Teacher evaluation requirements:** Under the Obama administration's waivers from NCLB, states were required to implement teacher and principal evaluation systems that were based on multiple measures, including student growth on state tests as a significant factor. ESSA eliminates this requirement, which will likely result in states reducing the weight of state tests as a measure of teacher performance—or their removal from evaluation systems entirely.

3. **Dedicated funding for streamlining testing systems:** ESSA provides dedicated funding to assist states and districts as they audit their testing systems and eliminate duplicative and unnecessary tests. Among other things, these audits must include feedback on the assessment system from key stakeholders and a plan for improving and streamlining the assessment system at both the state and local levels.
4. **Allowable cap on testing time:** While the new law does not set a specific cap on the percentage of instructional time that can be devoted to standardized tests, it does allow states to set such a cap.
5. **Innovative assessment pilot:** The law includes a new Innovative Assessment and Accountability Demonstration Authority that provides flexibility for states to develop innovative testing regimes, such as competency- or performance-based assessments; instructionally embedded assessments; or interim assessments that combine to a summative proficiency determination. During the first three years, the U.S. Department of Education is authorized to approve up to seven states to develop and implement an innovative assessment system. These states can pilot their new system in place of their current statewide assessments in a small number of districts before scaling it up to a statewide system. After the first three years, the Department of Education can expand the program to more states.

All of these measures, taken together, will undoubtedly release the pressure that schools, teachers, parents, and state leaders are currently experiencing about the focus on standardized tests—and that is a positive development. But will these changes lead to better learning for students? Without a purposeful plan to use tests to assess student progress and advance student learning, there is a risk that testing will become a mere compliance exercise.

This report outlines a vision and provides specific recommendations to help federal, state, and local leaders realize the promise of tests as they implement ESSA. At CAP, we want states to develop coherent, aligned systems of assessment that meaningfully track student progress throughout the year and ultimately drive better student learning gains. This vision will require state and local leaders to systematically plan toward a goal of helping teachers and students understand the academic standards, as well as what is expected of them. It is a vision that will require districts to be supported in developing and evaluating the curriculum to ensure it is aligned with state standards. This vision will require high-quality formative and interim tests that can accurately assess student progress and provide timely and actionable

information to teachers and parents. This vision will require better data that educators can use to determine whether students are on track and identify areas where students and teachers need additional support or intervention. And this vision will also require rigorous summative tests that give teachers and parents a clear-eyed view of whether students are on grade level and making appropriate progress to graduate from high school prepared for college or the workplace.

In some places, this vision is already being realized, and, in many others, the foundation for this future is in place. As the authors note throughout this report, there are some clear examples of schools and districts that are using tests in a thoughtful way. But how can all schools and districts get to that point? It starts by understanding a bit more about tests and their role in school improvement.

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### A short history of tests

Different forms of tests have existed for centuries. In ancient Greece, instructors used the Socratic method through which students were drilled orally in order to assess student mastery of academic content.<sup>6</sup> In 605 A.D., the Chinese established a nationwide imperial exam as a means to identify strong candidates for government service.<sup>7</sup> Centuries later in the Western world, essays emerged as the preferred way to ascertain whether students understood complex concepts. In the early 1800s, England established a nationwide standardized test to identify competent individuals for government jobs.<sup>8</sup> In 1905, a French psychologist developed the first IQ test.<sup>9</sup> A variation of this test is still commonly given today.

In the United States, standardized tests emerged during the Industrial Revolution—when students started to attend schools in large numbers—as an efficient way to check on the progress of large groups of students at once.<sup>10</sup> By World War I, standardized tests were commonly used to determine soldiers' assignments.<sup>11</sup>

The SAT, a large-scale standardized test of general academic knowledge and college readiness, was developed by the College Board in 1926 and quickly became a requirement for any student seeking to enter college.<sup>12</sup> The ACT standardized test was developed in 1959 as a competitor to the SAT. At first, the ACT spread throughout the American South and Midwest.<sup>13</sup> Today, colleges and universities across the United States widely accept both the ACT and the SAT. Both the SAT and the ACT have evolved significantly: Both now include multiple sections that assess reading and math ability. The AP exams, also administered by the College Board, are offered in a range of subjects.<sup>14</sup> Students receiving a high score on these tests often receive college credit.

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## The recent push for greater accountability

Standardized tests designed and used for school accountability purposes emerged in the 1980s and 1990s as part of the standards-based reform movement, which was launched by the groundbreaking 1983 report “A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform.”<sup>15</sup> Commissioned by the Reagan administration, the report warned of severe consequences resulting from America’s mediocre education system. The report also drove the standards-based reform movement, which emphasized clear expectations for what students should know and be able to do in each subject and grade; called for regular assessment of student progress toward meeting academic standards; and created accountability systems that reward or sanction schools based on how students perform against these academic standards.<sup>16</sup>

This accountability-focused approach was codified through the Improving America’s Schools Act, or IASA, of 1994. The act required states to establish math and reading or language arts standards for all students; assess student progress against those standards at least once in elementary school, middle school, and high school; and take action if schools were not making adequate yearly progress.<sup>17</sup>

NCLB, enacted in 2002 increased the amount of testing, as well as the stakes associated with standardized exams. It required states to test students in math and reading or language arts once annually in grades three through eight and once in high school, as well as at least once in science in elementary school, middle school, and high school.<sup>18</sup> It also required that the data be publicly reported and include overall student data, as well as data broken down by groups of students who have been traditionally disadvantaged. Further, NCLB mandated specific consequences for schools that were not on track to have all students become proficient in math and reading by 2014.<sup>19</sup>

When Congress failed to reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, or ESEA, after many years, the U.S. Department of Education starting issuing waivers to states to allow them to move beyond NCLB’s outdated, one-size-fits-all accountability provisions and implement new reform efforts. Under these waivers, states were no longer required to set targets at 100 percent proficiency by 2014; make “adequate yearly progress” determinations based on those targets; identify schools for improvement, corrective action, or restructuring; or implement specific mandated interventions in these schools. Instead, states committed to moving forward with reforms in three areas: college-and career-ready standards and high-quality assessments; differentiated accountability systems; and teacher and principal evaluation and support. In each of these areas, states developed their own plans and systems within a framework set by the Department of Education.

By 2015, 43 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico were approved for waivers, as well as a consortium of nine districts in California.<sup>20</sup>

ESSA, as was mentioned in the previous section, retains NCLB's requirement for annual statewide assessments and disaggregated data but with a few wrinkles. Districts have the option, with their state's approval, of using rigorous nationally recognized high school assessments in lieu of the state's test. States now have the ability to pilot innovative assessment systems that could include performance-based assessments, instructionally-embedded tests, or new approaches to technology-enhanced testing. Up to seven states can be part of these pilots, which allow local innovation with the goal of radically rethinking the statewide assessment model.

The requirements for state accountability systems in ESSA also differ from those in NCLB. In ESSA, student performance on state summative assessments is only one of at least five different indicators of school quality. For example, states have the flexibility to include measures of student engagement, successful completion of advanced courses, or any other indicator of school and student success.

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### The promise of the Common Core State Standards

Development of the new Common Core State Standards, or simply Common Core, was an outgrowth of the standards movement. The Common Core set ambitious expectations for what students should know and be able to do in English language arts and mathematics. Currently, 43 states and the District of Columbia are implementing the Common Core in their schools.<sup>21</sup> The Common Core standards are comparable to the academic standards in the highest performing nations in the world.<sup>22</sup> In short, the new standards raise the bar for millions of American students.

Moreover, there are a number of new tests aligned with the Common Core. In 2010, two multi-state testing consortia began developing new assessments aligned with the standards: the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium, or Smarter Balanced, and the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers, or PARCC. These consortia, in collaboration with educators and testing experts, have developed summative, formative, and interim assessments. In the spring of 2015, for the first time, 18 states administered the Smarter Balanced summative assessments, and 10 states, as well as the District of Columbia, administered the PARCC assessments.<sup>23</sup> Like the Common Core, these tests are more rigorous and of higher quality than what many previous states had before. The new tests include more writing, in-depth questions, and performance tasks to better assess student knowledge and skills.

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Within the Common Core are embedded several significant shifts in learning: a deeper approach to fewer topics; more attention to complex texts from both literature and nonfiction; and a focus on conceptual, as well as procedural, understanding.<sup>24</sup> In addition, these standards focus on analytic, communication, and problem-solving skills—skills needed for success in today’s economy. These shifts help support richer instruction and make the tests that are aligned to the Common Core standards more difficult to game using rote test-prep practices.<sup>25</sup> The move toward higher standards represented a major transition for the United States—and an opportunity to dramatically improve teaching and learning.

### How testing works in schools today

The tests required by federal law are termed summative tests. These tests are used to evaluate whether individual students have met grade-level expectations and to draw conclusions about overall school performance. Ultimately, summative tests are used to give students, parents, and educators a detailed picture of student progress toward meeting state standards over the past school year.

While the summative assessments mandated by NCLB—and now ESSA—have garnered the most attention of late and are the focus of the so-called opt-out movement due to the fact that they are considered high stakes for schools, teachers, or students, they are far from the most common standardized test taken in schools today. Many states require summative assessments in subjects and grades beyond those required under federal law.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, many districts require additional assessments such as formative assessments or interim assessments. Teachers might use formative assessments, including quizzes, exit slips, or other learning checks, on a daily basis to inform instruction and adjust their practice based on student understanding. Interim assessments, given at different points in the school year, assess student progress toward meeting end-of-year academic standards and can help determine whether students are on track to be successful on the summative assessments.<sup>28</sup> Both formative and interim assessments are diagnostic in nature and are designed to provide actionable information about how well students are learning particular concepts and skills.

According to a CAP report released in September 2014—“Testing Overload in America’s Schools”—standardized tests required by states and districts take up three times as much instructional time as federally required tests.<sup>29</sup>

### Test types

**Formative:** These assessments are generally very short during-instruction check-ins on student understanding that teachers use as a means to gauge whether students are on track with the lesson or if a specific area needs to be retaught. These tests are useful exclusively at the classroom level.

**Interim:** These tests can be thought of as more formal formative tests that are used to periodically assess student knowledge and skills against a set of academic standards. Interim assessments should be aligned with both academic standards and the end-of-year tests. Interim tests are used to inform instruction and can also be aggregated to the school and district level in order to give some indication of how well students will perform on the summative assessments.

**Summative:** These tests are often given at the end of a course, typically at the end of a semester or school year. The most common summative assessments are the statewide and state-required tests. These exams are often used for accountability purposes and are not designed to inform classroom instruction.<sup>26</sup>

## What is a high-quality test?

High-quality tests measure critical thinking and problem-solving skills that ensure that students can apply their skills and knowledge to different contexts. Because facts are more readily available today than at any point in history thanks to the Internet, students must learn how to sort through information, discern what is useful, recognize patterns and frameworks, and ultimately apply their critical-thinking skills to different situations. Open response questions such as essays and multistep mathematics questions, where students are required to show their work, do a better job of assessing important problem-solving skills than the multiple choice tests of the past.

High-quality tests are also fully aligned with what students are expected to know. Students are taught to master grade-level academic standards, and the tests they take should cover all of those standards. With strong alignment between tests and standards, the tests serve as a natural component of the instructional program. When there is

not alignment, the tests end up either being a diversion from instruction or worse: The test replaces the academic standards.

Good assessments are also field tested and evaluated by experts. Strong tests have been piloted and refined to ensure that they are not biased against any group of students; that they are valid, fair, and reliable; and provide an accurate assessment of student mastery of and growth toward rigorous content standards. Proficiency on a summative test should mean a student is on track to graduate high school prepared for career or college. Finally, high-quality tests provide comparable data across students, schools, and districts. Strong standardized tests allow for accurate comparisons of different groups of students.

These criteria align with the principles of high-quality assessment developed by the Council of Chief State School Officers,<sup>30</sup> as well as the U.S. Department of Education's definition of a high-quality assessment.<sup>31</sup>

### Opposition and support for tests

Over the past year, there was a clear and dedicated backlash against tests, and, in many ways, the view of the anti-test crowd can be summed up by one of the placards that was held by a student protester in Boulder, Colorado: “More teachers, fewer tests, education at its best.”<sup>32</sup> In recent months, versions of the anti-test movement have gained steam in several states. This past spring, for example, 20 percent of elementary and middle school students in the state of New York opted out of state-mandated annual tests.<sup>33</sup> One-third of high school seniors in Washington state opted out the annual high school assessment as well. Over the past year, there has been legislation introduced to address so-called overtesting in 24 states, while four states have moved forward and enacted such legislation.<sup>34</sup>

Despite testing backlash, national polling data finds that parents and the general public support standardized tests—albeit with some reservations. A recent poll by Education Next found that 67 percent of respondents support testing students in reading and math yearly, whereas 21 percent oppose such testing. An August 2014 poll commissioned by Education Post and conducted by Schoen Consulting—

a strategic research consulting firm based in New York City—drew similar conclusions: 66 percent of parents support standardized testing, with even higher percentages of support among Latino and African American parents at 79 and 75 percent, respectively.<sup>35</sup>

A 2015 Phi Delta Kappa, or PDK, and Gallup poll similarly found that Latinos and African Americans—groups that have been traditionally disadvantaged by the U.S. educational system—support standardized tests at higher rates than white parents. Also, 57 percent of respondents believe tests are “very important” or “somewhat important” in measuring school effectiveness, and 67 percent say that using tests to measure what students have learned is “very important” or “somewhat important” for improving public schools.<sup>36</sup>

Support for tests can also be seen in some statehouses. For example, in Delaware and New Hampshire, the governors vetoed legislation to allow parents to opt their children out of tests.<sup>37</sup> At the federal level, during the debate over the Every Child Achieves Act of 2015 that would reauthorize the federal ESEA, the U.S. Senate soundly defeated an amendment that would have permitted students to opt out of required statewide assessments without any consequence for school accountability. Despite the approval of a similar provision as part of the reauthorization bill that passed the U.S. House of Representatives,<sup>38</sup> the final ESSA bill signed by the president did not include this testing opt out language.

### How states and districts have improved their testing systems

Some state and local policymakers have tried to address the issue of overtesting. Colorado has had perhaps the most success in its efforts to reduce the testing burden and find a commonsense middle ground. After protests against standardized testing began to spread across the state, Gov. John Hickenlooper (D) worked with other state leaders to push for reforms to the state’s testing framework. The emerging legislation significantly improved the quality of tests while simultaneously reducing their quantity. As a result, Colorado was able to preserve its system for helping schools and districts improve.<sup>39</sup> But other states have taken action too. This year, for example, the Illinois State Board of Education established the Assessment Review Task Force—comprised of parents, educators, administrators, an assessment expert, and representatives of institutions of higher education—to look at its testing framework.<sup>40</sup> In addition, the Illinois

State Board of Education adapted the assessment inventory tool developed by Achieve—a national education nonprofit—to provide school districts with guidance, as well as a protocol to inventory assessments and eliminate unnecessary and redundant tests.<sup>41</sup> The Achieve Student Assessment Inventory for School Districts has been adapted by Delaware and Idaho for this purpose as well.<sup>42</sup>

In the early part of 2015, the Ohio Department of Education, or ODE, also released a report on testing<sup>43</sup> that examined the kinds of tests administered in Ohio, why students take tests, and how much time is devoted to testing. The ODE recommended eliminating some tests, including removing assessments of student learning objectives from teacher evaluations in some grades and subjects.<sup>44</sup> Finally, the ODE recommended action steps that would successfully implement the new Common Core-aligned assessments and provide professional development for educators on a number of topics and issues, including “how to make testing more efficient and less disruptive to instructional time.”<sup>45</sup>

In March 2015, the Tennessee Department of Education established a task force—the Tennessee Task Force on Student Testing and Assessment—to analyze the current role of testing in the state and provide recommendations on how to improve the state’s assessment system.<sup>46</sup> The task force was comprised of 18 educators and leaders from across Tennessee. Six months after forming, the task force developed a set of assessment principles and made 16 recommendations to address overtesting concerns and ensure that assessments improve teaching and learning. These recommendations include eliminating some tests; making the ACT and SAT available to all students in the state; and improving assessment transparency by releasing more test items publically.<sup>47</sup>

Likewise, districts have responded to address overtesting. For example, Tulsa Public Schools launched an Assessment Study Group that was tasked with evaluating the district’s use of assessments and the utility of every required test. As a result of their work, Deborah Gist, the Tulsa superintendent, recently announced that the district will reduce the amount of time that students spend taking tests by 54 percent for the 2015-16 school year. This dramatic reduction in testing was achieved by administering some tests less frequently and eliminating unnecessary exams altogether.<sup>48</sup>

## Taking steps to reduce unnecessary testing

In response to growing backlash against overtesting, Florida Gov. Rick Scott (R) called for a review of all required student assessments with the aim to identify and eliminate duplicity. In late 2014, Florida Department of Education Commissioner Pam Stewart led the study and analyzed the use of standardized tests, including both state and district-level summative and interim assessments.<sup>49</sup> The results of the review were released in February 2015 and stressed the importance of a strong K-12 assessment system but also included a set of recommendations for the state to adopt in order to achieve the stated goal of “fewer, better” assessments.<sup>50</sup>

The review found that several exams, including the Grade 11 Florida State Assessment, or FSA, for English language arts and the Post-secondary Education Readiness Test, or PERT, were unnecessary due

to other state requirements. It also uncovered the fact that many districts were requiring final exams in subjects where there is also a statewide end-of-course exam—meaning students were undergoing multiple tests on the same subject in order to fulfill two different requirements.<sup>51</sup> The assessment review also recommended that districts cut back on interim assessments; improve communication with parents, teachers, and students about the purpose and results of tests; and eliminate tests that have the sole purpose of evaluating teachers.<sup>52</sup> As a result of the review, Gov. Scott signed into law legislation that eliminated the Grade 11 FSA for English language arts, rolled back local-district testing requirements, and “limited the amount of time students can spend on tests.”<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, Miami-Dade County Public Schools—the state’s largest district—was able to cut the number of district assessments from nearly 300 to only 10.<sup>54</sup>

# Methodology

In preparing this report, the authors used several different research methods to engage with parents and educators on the issue of assessment. We conducted parent and teacher focus groups, developed an online parent diary survey, and held one-on-one interviews with assessment experts, state and local leaders, policy-makers, advocates, and state and district assessment coordinators.

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## Parent focus groups

CAP partnered with Geoff Garin from Hart Research Associates—a progressive research firm based in Washington, D.C.—to conduct parent focus groups in February 2015. CAP hosted focus groups in three locations: Westchester, New York; Boston, Massachusetts; and Dallas, Texas. There were two focus groups held in each location—one comprised of predominantly upper-income parents and another with predominantly lower-income parents.

During the focus groups, parents discussed a range of topics, including their general feelings about the quality of education their child receives, academic standards, and the curriculum used to teach their children. This approach provided the authors with a broader understanding of how parents feel about education generally, which helped to contextualize their opinions on assessment. The authors asked parents for their thoughts about tests in general, how test results are used, on students opting out of tests, and whether they believe the tests their children take are useful.

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## Teacher focus group

In late April 2015, CAP held a small focus group comprised of teachers, including those from California, Illinois, Maryland, Minnesota, New Jersey, and Virginia. The discussion centered on teachers' experiences with assessments; their thoughts on how state and district assessment policies and practices could be improved; and their views on the Common Core-aligned assessments.

The authors asked specific questions about school and district communications regarding assessments. The focus group also discussed professional development on assessments, efforts to decrease test preparation and testing time, as well as how best to increase the value of assessments for teachers and students.

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### Parent diary study

We conducted a testing diary study during a four-week period in April and May 2015. We surveyed parents about testing and their children's experiences with state tests. This report focuses on parents whose children took tests during the diary-study weeks. We restricted our analysis to 194 parents who completed at least three diary surveys.

We asked parents to report about who gave them information on tests and what they learned from that communication. There was an initial prescreen survey used to identify parents who could participate in the diary study itself. Parents eligible to participate in the diary study received emails every few days with links that asked them to report about recent tests and testing-related communications. Parents were asked to answer a total of seven additional surveys. Parents were sent two reminders per survey. As expected, some parents responded to more surveys than others.

We have not seen any other study of this kind. Nevertheless, our study has its own limitations, including the fact that more than 100 parents started the study but did not keep up regularly with the diaries, as well as the fact that the sample was not representative of the nation as a whole. Moreover, for the sake of transparency:

- Most of these parents were white women. Nearly 90 percent of the sample was white, and around two-thirds of respondents were women.
  - Most were employed full time but did not typically live in more affluent households. Around 60 percent were employed full time, and 65 percent lived in households with total incomes less than \$75,000.
  - The parents surveyed were split in terms of their political ideology. Forty-five percent described themselves as “left-wing,” and 32 percent claimed to be “right-wing.” The other 23 percent identified as moderates.
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- Around one-fifth of respondents were teachers at the elementary, secondary, or postsecondary level.
  - Half of the parents in the study were from one of nine states: California, Connecticut, Florida, Georgia, Missouri, New York, Pennsylvania, Texas, and Wisconsin. The other half were from 30 other states.
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## Interviews

To complete the research, we conducted more than 20 individual or small group interviews with assessment experts, state and local leaders, policymakers, state and district assessment coordinators, and advocates from across the country. We spoke with experts and practitioners from Illinois, Arizona, Connecticut, Rhode Island, and Florida. We also spoke with assessment experts, including members of the Gordon Commission on the Future of Assessment in Education. Finally, we spoke with national groups such as Achieve, the College Board, and the Education Trust.

# Findings

Despite hearing from a wide variety of stakeholders and experts from across the country, there was surprising consistency in the responses we received about state and district testing.

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## Parents generally recognize the value of tests—but want them to be better

While our research did reveal that the number of standardized tests need to be scaled back and their value made more evident to parents and teachers, it did not reveal a wholesale dissatisfaction with testing. In fact, many parents that we interviewed had a relatively nuanced understanding of the purpose of tests and wanted annual standardized tests to remain a part of their child’s educational experience. When polled, the vast majority of parents in the focus groups said they would prefer to keep the annual testing requirement a part of federal law. Parents generally recognized that the value of testing is to show if the system, the teachers, the curriculum, and the classes are working.

One parent explained that he is “not against standardized testing, because there is a need to understand on a national level whether our children are being educated and where different districts need to have extra resources and the like.” While another noted that testing ensures “that each school district is doing a good enough job.”

Many parents expressed the view that tests provide a useful check on the system, as well as on their child’s school. Specifically, they believe tests can and should:

- Provide objective, reliable, and valid information about how students are performing relative to grade-level standards and their peers and whether they are on track to graduate ready for college and career
- Provide comparable data for subgroups of students in order to allow system leaders to identify achievement gaps

- Enable good instructional practices, such as tailored instruction, and provide meaningful feedback for parents
- Inform prioritization of resources and interventions for schools and classrooms that are struggling

Parents, however, did share some concerns with testing. While most saw the value in testing overall—particularly as providing checks on a classroom, a school, or an entire system—they did not feel that the tests provided much utility for their child. They want their child to receive feedback and support—to get placed in the correct math group, for example—or to access advanced material if appropriate. Many parents believe that the tests could confer benefits for individual students, but they do not see that happening at present. Parents want their child’s school to receive additional support or be identified as in need of intervention if that is what’s needed based on test results, but they also want their child to derive value from participating in the test.

Instead, there is a sense among parents that testing happens in a vacuum, disconnected from the instruction that occurs throughout the school year, and that preparation for the test—again disconnected from everyday instruction—consumes a great deal of students’ time. “I don’t even show the results to my son,” said one New York state parent, articulating how unhelpful she finds the tests for her child.

In addition, many parents expressed concern that their students were not given the best possible opportunity to demonstrate what they know. In many states, tests are given so early in the calendar year that teachers have only gotten through about half of the curriculum. For example, the PARCC assessments begins as early as February 16th in Ohio and several other states, while the Smarter Balanced assessment window begins on March 10. In addition, parents noted that, too often, students are not being tested on what they are being taught.

It is clear from our research that, while parents do not want testing to end, they do believe that their children are taking too many tests that take up too much instructional time and are not as valuable or useful as they could and should be.

## Testing windows for PARCC and Smarter Balanced

In districts all across the country, testing windows start as early as mid-February—only two-thirds of the way through the school year—and end in late April. This wide window means that teachers have not been able to cover a considerable amount of that year’s standards and content by the time students take their summative exams.

### Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers

*10 states, as well as the District of Columbia*

States choose four weeks from the following windows:

- February 16–May 8: Performance-based assessments
- April 13–June 5: End-of-year component

### Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium

*18 states*

- Mid-March to early June
- Performance tasks and computer-administered segments scheduled at the convenience of the state

### Non-consortium tests

*22 states*

- Administered throughout the Spring<sup>55</sup>

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## Teachers often do not receive the time and support they need

Despite the fact that districts spend \$18 billion and dedicate 68 hours each year to professional learning, most teachers are not receiving the support they need to effectively teach to the new higher standards and tests.<sup>56</sup> By teachers' own accounts, the support they receive is not relevant, effective, or connected to helping students learn.<sup>57</sup> Many of the teachers we heard from reported not being provided with sample test items, high-quality instructional materials, opportunities to observe excellent teachers, or the chance to practice new skills.

## Increasing assessment literacy for teachers

The Northwest Evaluation Association, or NWEA, recently announced a new effort to promote assessment literacy for K-12 educators.<sup>58</sup> The effort will include a website with a number of resources to help teachers to better understand data from both formal and informal assessment, which in turn could help inform their testing practice and target student needs.<sup>59</sup> The resources range from explanations of different types of assessments used in classrooms to the review of measurement concepts such as mean and median. The resources also include tips on integrating assessments into teaching, as well as how to best to talk with parents about the purpose and results of tests.

Washtentaw County, Michigan, which includes nine different school districts, has been working for several years to improve dramatically teacher assessment literacy and transform how tests are used to improve teaching and learning. Four years ago, Washtentaw County began to work with teachers to help them to understand better how to develop their own tests that are aligned with state academic standards, as well as how to put assessment data to better use in the classroom. In short, Washtentaw attempted to recouple assessment and instruction.<sup>60</sup>

The first year of this initiative was spent researching different models of using assessments as a means to track student progress to standards, as well as how teachers can use that information to refine their instruction. Washtentaw County settled on the Essential Principles of Assessment, which were developed by the Assessment Training

Institute and founder Rick Stiggins. Then, a network of teacher leaders was established to delve deeply into the principles and discuss how best to use them to monitor student progress to standards and gather evidence of students' knowledge and skills, as well as to learn how to use test data to improve teaching. These teachers then shared the principles and assessment best practices with their colleagues.<sup>61</sup>

After learning how to build effective assessments, teachers are now constructing their own high-quality formative, interim, and summative assessments that are closely aligned with Michigan state standards. As a result, teachers can design their own assessments in order to meet the specific needs of their students while ensuring that they are accurately measuring these same students' progress toward the state's academic standards.

While Washtentaw County has been successful in improving teacher assessment literacy and increasing the value of assessments in bettering both teaching and learning, there is still work to be done. For example, Washtentaw presents parents with data regarding their child's growth and progress to academic standards without using traditional letter grades. For some parents, this transition has been challenging since it does not score students against their peers and is a new way to present student academic success. Washtentaw will need to continue to communicate with parents about their assessment system and clearly demonstrate how it is improving teaching and learning.

Even teachers we spoke with who did receive professional development that focused on the new assessments aligned with the Common Core nevertheless felt underprepared for such significant shifts in assessment. For example, a teacher in Baltimore, Maryland, reported feeling that “the [professional development] we got upfront was from people who were still figuring out what [the PARCC test] is so we can pass it on to students.” According to this teacher, the PARCC test crash course provided only a cursory review of the exam without delving into details about how the new assessments align with what students are learning in the classrooms.

Another teacher, a math instructional coach in Virginia, was tasked with developing and facilitating professional development around assessments for her school. Given the pressure for students to do well and for the school to avoid being identified by the state as a so-called priority school—indicating it is among the lowest-performing schools in the state—the teacher was asked to simply show, as she put it, what “teachers need to know to get [students] to pass.” Ultimately, according to the teacher, the professional development was “not well received” and left her feeling as though this approach was “not fair” for teachers and did nothing to help students’ critical thinking.

Most teachers do not receive significant additional dedicated time and guidance to internalize the new standards that they are being asked to teach. The new standards represent a significant shift in instruction,<sup>62</sup> yet the average teacher has only 45 minutes of planning time per day. And the typical professional development experience for teachers consists of occasional full- or half-day workshops where they hear lectures and see presentations.<sup>63</sup> Moreover, in most schools, the principal manages 30 or more teachers—often with no assistant principals or other instructional leaders to help.<sup>64</sup> Additionally, many labor contracts prohibit or cap the number of peer or principal observations, which makes it difficult for teachers to receive the kind of ongoing support and feedback that is critical as they make this transition to higher standards.<sup>65</sup>

## Tennessee: A leader in professional development on teaching the Common Core

Tennessee stands out as a state that provides extensive opportunities for teachers to learn about the new standards and how best to teach them to their students. Tennessee hosts intensive summer multiday workshops for all teachers in particular grade and content levels, as well as school leader trainings.

In the summer of 2011, the Tennessee Department of Education undertook a statewide effort to introduce the Common Core State Standards to educators. The focus of these learning sessions was to provide teachers and school administrators with a general sense of the standard's structure, as well as the differences between the Common Core and Tennessee's previous standards.<sup>66</sup>

In Tennessee, the Common Core was implemented gradually, beginning with the early grades. To make the transition smooth, more than 1,200 K-2 teachers participated in sessions on implementing the standards. Then, the participants shared the information with their colleagues back at school.<sup>67</sup>

But these trainings were just the beginning. The Tennessee Department of Education provided training to virtually every teacher in the state. To do this, the department first established what it dubbed the Common Core Leadership Council to partner with school and district leaders.<sup>68</sup> Through the council, the state was able to incorporate educator perspectives on Common Core-aligned assessments, profes-

sional development, and the development of instructional materials.

To build on the work with the council and ensure all teachers are trained on implementing the Common Core, the Tennessee Department of Education sought out the strongest teachers in the state to be designated as "Core Coaches."<sup>69</sup> A total of 200 teachers were selected in 2012, awarded a bonus of \$5,000, and provided with eight full days of professional development on the Common Core and how best to train their peers.<sup>70</sup> As a part of this training, coaches developed math, writing, and English constructed response items. During these trainings, teachers also completed Common Core constructed response questions so that they might better understand how those items are scored.<sup>71</sup>

Within a few short months, the coaches reported training 11,000 teachers across the state.<sup>72</sup> This effort was so successful that the number of applications for a second round of Core Coaches nearly tripled, and the state selected 700 teachers to be coaches in math and English. Finally, there was a third cohort of 500 Core Coaches in 2014.<sup>73</sup> Through this approach of training the trainer, more than 60,000 educators in Tennessee received robust, teacher-led professional development on the Common Core within two years.<sup>74</sup> Due to the success of the program, Tennessee continued its Core Coaches program through the summer of 2015.<sup>75</sup>

### Communication to stakeholders is weak

According to our research, communication with teachers and parents about testing is weak in most states and districts. Most schools and districts do not provide parents or teachers with much information about the purpose of the tests or how the results will be used. To the extent parents and teachers do receive information about the tests, it conveys only information about when tests will occur without explaining the purpose behind the test or how the test results will be used.

Approximately 75 percent of parents in our diary study reported that they had received at least one communication about testing over the course of the study.

But, for the most part, the communications were low quality and did not provide much information about the tests their children would take. Most of the documents were merely a short letter or an email that covered very limited information and generally focused on testing dates. Most districts did not post testing calendars on their respective websites or make public the testing windows.

Through the diary study, we also found that few schools or districts provided parents with information about the role of the exams or why students were taking the exams. Almost no parent had heard about the tests at an event or through an in-person communication. Several parents in our focus groups described receiving robocalls prior to tests that urged parents to make sure their children got a good night's sleep and had a good breakfast. And the districts that did provide additional details about testing to parents were often heavy handed in their communications. For example, one district informed parents that the exams were compulsory.

Without accurate, clear messages about the purpose of tests, parents are left to fill in the blanks. Several parents in our focus groups expressed the belief that the tests would be used to allocate funding and that schools that performed badly on the test would lose money, despite neither of these assertions being true. Others believed that teachers' jobs depend on the tests even though the state had imposed a moratorium on the use of test scores in determining tenure or compensation.

Based on our in-person parent focus group, we found that parents from low-income families were particularly concerned that their children would not do well on the test and that, as a result, they would suffer a significant consequence. A number of parents assumed that their child would be held back or put on a low-achieving track from where it would be hard for their child to exit. Moreover, communications from their schools sometimes reinforced this fear. According to one Dallas, Texas, parent, "The teachers even said stuff like you have to make this grade if you're going to pass to the next grade, and I think that stresses her (student) out too, because then she's thinking in her mind 'if I don't make a good grade and I fail, then I'm not going to go to the fifth grade.'"

More affluent parents tended to view the tests as an inconvenience. The lack of communication from districts and schools led these parents to deem the tests as tangential to real learning, although they did view the tests as particularly consequential. Sometimes the communication regarding the tests that these parents received was explicitly negative. A parent from this grouping said, "I learned today that the tests are taking away from my student's assignments: Specifically, a book that her literature class was reading together will not be finished because state testing took away from their time with it."

Weak communication practices also left many parents feeling frustrated. “No information on what to study with my kids or how to help them be ready,” one parent wrote in the diary study. Another wrote, “Teachers should be over-communicating with parents about upcoming state tests so we can better prepare our children.”

To be sure, parents appreciated knowing the dates of the tests. However, they wanted far more detail on why and how the tests were being administered. As one parent noted, it was “a little helpful” to know the dates of tests, “but other than that, the information provided wasn’t helpful.”

That parent, clearly frustrated with the quality of communication, went on to add, “I’m fully aware that my child should be well rested and prepared for the test.”

There are examples of states and districts that communicate about tests more effectively than others. The Colorado Department of Education, or CDE, prepared and made available a variety of resources to help district and school leaders communicate about new Common Core-aligned state tests.<sup>76</sup> One document provides so-called “key messages” to share with teachers and other school-based staff, including a short speech summarizing the value of the tests along with other talking points.<sup>77</sup> The CDE also provided a short list of important statistics to cite in order to build urgency around the need for the new tests.

## DCPS hosts parent night on new Common Core test

District of Columbia Public Schools addressed parental anxiety and concern about their PARCC tests by hosting an in-person forum in the spring of 2015. Below is the text of a flyer sent to parents:

**Would you like to hear more about the implementation of PARCC in our schools this year?**

**Have you wondered...**

How the current implementation is going?

- Whether DCPS has the required infrastructure to optimally administer the tests?
- How PARCC will be able to distinguish between a students’ mastery of information vs. a students’ mastery of computer skills?

When schools/parents can expect to see results?

- What is the expected impact of PARCC on curriculum, particularly in regard to computer mouse and keyboard skills?
- What assurances are being made as to student privacy? What steps are PARCC, OSSE, and DCPS taking to ensure security of the information gathered in this process?

**The Ward 3 - Wilson Feeder Education Network is hosting a PARCC Forum on Wednesday, May 20, 2015 at 7pm at Alice Deal Middle School (3815 Fort Dr NW).**

**Representatives from PARCC, DCPS, and OSSE will answer these questions and take questions from the community. Please come join us!! All are welcome.**

## PARCC's scorecard

In order to address the issue of unclear communication on student performance, PARCC designed score reports to clearly and accurately identify where a student is excelling or needs help. The report uses graphics, colors, and labels to ensure that parents and educators can quickly read and gauge a students' understanding of the Common Core State Standards. The score reports also make it easy to compare where students rank in relation to their peers.<sup>78</sup> In the coming years, PARCC will aim to release student scores as close to the end of the school year as possible, allowing schools and teachers to better align instruction to students' needs and give families a greater amount of timely information on their child's performance.<sup>79</sup>

When it comes to district and school communication about tests, some surveyed parents half-jokingly said that they got more information about the state tests from comedian John Oliver during a segment on standardized testing on his "Last Week Tonight" show.<sup>80</sup> In fact, six parents in our survey mentioned the May 3, 2015, episode, saying that it provided them with crucial details. As one parent wrote, "As silly as it sounds, I am pretty influenced by the fact that John Oliver made a show on the tests ... This makes me better understand how controversial these tests are."

### The tests lack value for individual students

Many parents value standardized tests—just not the ones given by their state or district. Tests such as AP exams, the SAT, and the ACT present clear value to parents because they have clear value to their child's admittance to and success in college.

A student's SAT or ACT score has a strong influence over whether a student gains admission to a particular college or university. A high score on an AP exam or in an AP course translates into college credit, which can allow students to accelerate through their program of study and perhaps even save money on college tuition.

## Increasing the value of tests: Lessons from Advanced Placement courses

The AP<sup>81</sup> program began in 1952 as a way to implement rigorous, college-level curricula and standards in high schools, both allowing students to gain college credit and reducing the gap between secondary and higher education achievement.<sup>82</sup> Today, the AP program—operated by the College Board—is seen as the gold standard in implementing a cohesive and coherent educational system.<sup>83</sup> The program offers students across the country the opportunity to take rigorous coursework in more than 30 subjects that cover a multitude of content areas.<sup>84</sup> Each May, students have the opportunity to take a comprehensive examination that covers the course’s curriculum, which includes both free-response and multiple-choice questions.<sup>85</sup> The exams are created to test a student’s understanding at a college level, and, therefore, students with high scores often receive course credit at institutions of higher education.

The College Board creates detailed descriptions of each AP course for teachers to use throughout instruction.<sup>86</sup> This guidance clearly outlines the goals of the course, curricular requirements, and instructional strategies for AP teachers to follow throughout the year.<sup>87</sup> Each teacher, however, still maintains the flexibility to choose texts and materials and to present the lessons in the way that he or she sees fit.

In order to ensure that teachers are well equipped to handle the rigorous curriculum, the College Board provides a number of professional development resources. Throughout the year, in-person workshops on aligning instruction with curricula and understanding assessments are held across the country, grouping participants by course subject and a teachers’ level of expertise.<sup>88</sup> The College Board also provides online resources and opportunities for AP teachers to connect virtually to share strategies and materials.<sup>89</sup>

While the courses are challenging and the examinations can be stressful for students,<sup>90</sup> parents and educators remain supportive of the AP program, as well as its direct student benefits. Test takers score on a scale of one to five—with five being the highest score. For many colleges and universities, a score of three or higher earns a student credit in an equivalent course.<sup>91</sup> This direct result of the coursework and the aligned exam allows both parents and students to see the benefit in both time and tuition savings. In addition, 85 percent of colleges and universities report that AP coursework on a student’s transcript positively affects admissions decisions.<sup>92</sup> The clear connection between a student’s participation in an AP course and the benefits for that student in the form of improved college preparedness make the AP program stand out as a gold standard for instruction.<sup>93</sup>

For this reason, as well as the rigorous nature of the AP classes, more and more schools offer AP courses. Today, more than 14,000 schools have an AP program, and nearly one-third of students take at least one AP class in high school.<sup>94</sup> In short, the AP program is incredibly popular with students and families because it provides clear value. It helps prepare students for the academic challenges of college and also provides them an opportunity to earn college credit.

In contrast, in many schools and districts, the result of a student’s summative assessment does not appear to have much—if any—direct effect.

## Using tests to improve classroom instruction

Ruidoso Municipal School District in New Mexico has undertaken a district-wide initiative to change the culture of testing and ensure tests are far more valuable to both teachers and students. As part of this effort, Ruidoso instituted weekly mini-assessments under a practice model in reading and math. These assessments are not called tests and are not punitive. Instead, they are intended to provide students with a chance to show what they have learned and allow them to track their own progress while also giving teachers data on how well students are doing.

These mini-assessments, which are referred to as “math monsters” and “brave readers,” are administered once weekly and are aligned with New Mexico’s state academic standards.<sup>95</sup> They include both multiple choice and open-ended questions. To make sure the information can be most useful in informing instruction, teachers are required to return the results to students the day after they are given and go over them. At the end of the week, the principal announces the students with the highest score totals, as well as those students who achieved personal bests. In fact, there are small competitions among classes and grades to see which can make the most progress. All in all, the students actually enjoy math monsters and brave readers and look forward to demonstrating what they know and are able to do.

Teachers in Ruidoso quickly recognized the value of having almost real-time information on student progress to standards and have now taken complete ownership of these mini-assessments. Originally, these mini-assessments were developed at the district level. However, teachers asked for the responsibility of developing them. Furthermore, teachers use some of the weekly 90-minute common planning time to work together, using this data to prepare lessons; sharing best practices on teaching certain standards; and developing new ways to reteach information if necessary.

These efforts have already proven worthwhile. In just a year, the district’s elementary school improved from an F to a C school. In other words, the school improved significantly across the multiple measures of academic progress used in New Mexico’s state accountability system, such as performance growth in math and reading. Teachers of other subjects have noticed the success and are implementing their own mini-assessments. For example, the high school science department recently began to develop and administer their own weekly practice tests. All in all, giving students the opportunity to demonstrate what they have learned in a more relaxed fashion than a standardized test and providing actionable data aligned with standards helps teachers dramatically improve the quality of teaching and learning in their schools.

In too many states and districts, test scores are not used to thoughtfully influence instruction or create a meaningful individualized educational experience for students. In fact, some parents questioned whether schools used the test scores at all, and many of the teachers that we spoke with said they never see their students’ test scores. According to one Washington, D.C., parent, “We got our score report in the fall. We actually had a parent-teacher conference right afterward, but the teacher didn’t mention the results.” Another parent mentioned that they had brought the score to the teacher who expressed surprise about the result. It was apparent that the teacher had never seen the score report or the aggregate results for her class.

## End-of-year summative assessments are not aligned to district's curricula

In a perfect world, end-of-year summative assessments would provide an opportunity for students to demonstrate what they have learned throughout the course of the year as measured against challenging academic content standards. Teachers' curricula would be aligned with the state standards, and they would use very short, frequent formative assessments to check student understanding and make adjustments to their lessons. Interim assessments, administered at key points throughout the year, would assess student progress toward mastering state standards by the end of the year.

These tests would provide parents and teachers with a useful benchmark upon which to evaluate whether students are on track and help identify areas where students need additional support or intervention. Together, the results of these different assessments—all part of a coherent system of teaching and learning—would give teachers and parents a clear-eyed view of whether students are at grade level and making appropriate progress to graduate from high school ready for college or the workplace.

This vision should be attainable—if not the norm—right now. Yet, unfortunately, the opposite is more common.

"Consistency and coherence is important, particularly year to year. It needs to be easier to see year over year growth in a linear progression."

— John White, Louisiana state superintendent<sup>96</sup>

### Using formative and interim tests to improve instruction

For years, the Pattonville School District in Missouri has incorporated results from formative and interim assessments into the strategic plans of their schools. In all grades, these assessments are used to monitor student progress, and teachers work together in order to use test results to develop improvement goals and strategies to meet them. In high school, the formative and interim assessments are aligned with Missouri's end-of-course exams, or EOCs. Pattonville is a socioeconomically diverse school district that continually outperforms state scores on EOC tests. In fact, African American students in Pattonville outperform the state average on the majority of EOC exams.<sup>97</sup>

We found that one of the biggest drivers of the testing backlash is the fact that tests are seen as both separate and apart from the state's academic standards. Unfortunately, in far too many communities, instructional materials, curricula, and assessments are not fully aligned with academic standards. For instance, despite claims to the contrary, most vendors have not yet developed the high-quality instructional materials and curricula needed to enable teachers to teach to the new standards. According to a set of Consumer Reports-style reviews published by the website EdReports, 17 out of 20 K-8 math curricula were not aligned with the new, higher academic content standards.<sup>98</sup> Without high-quality, aligned instructional materials, teachers are largely forced to go it alone when it comes to deciding what should be on formative and interim tests.

Another issue is attachment to current tests. Many district and school leaders feel as though they obtain valuable information from the tests that they currently administer, and they are unwilling to jettison them—even if they are disconnected from the new state content standards.

This lack of alignment leads to spurious test prep practices, including repeatedly administering practice tests or teaching students tactics and strategy for test taking, such as not choosing the bubble next to C three times in a row. Rather than offering challenging academic content throughout the year to prepare students for state summative tests, teachers instead must take time away from instruction to focus specifically on preparing students for the state summative test.

### Value of tests increased by schools' robust data systems

Achievement First—a highly successful charter management organization based in the Northeast—administers benchmark assessments every six weeks in many subject areas, including math and reading.<sup>100</sup> Teachers grade these assessments and record the results, which their principals compile into school-wide reports. Then, the school hosts a “data day” in which teachers are provided dedicated time to work together, analyze these data, and use them to plan how and what to teach during the next six-week period.<sup>101</sup> The charter network created its own assessment system, Athena, to manage the data and share results in a timely manner with teachers.<sup>102</sup>

“There must be strong curricula aligned with standards, and states need play a bigger role in their development. As it is, there is too much left on the backs of school districts and teachers.”

— Kati Haycock,  
The Education Trust<sup>99</sup>

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## Too much test prep is occurring

In many schools and districts, test prep has long been an issue. Some schools have test prep rallies with cheerleaders.<sup>103</sup> Other schools have students engage in test prep chants as a means of motivation. At the same time, test prep courses for college admission exams, such as the SAT, have become a big business. The test prep company Kaplan recently reported revenues of more than \$80 million by the end of June 2015.<sup>104</sup>

In this study, we found that, while around 60 percent of parents reported that their child participated in some sort of test prep at least once during the month of the study, some 15 percent reported that their child participated in test prep more than three times during the study. Test prep can be a major emphasis of districts. As revealed during the diary study, one district promised students an ice cream reward if they scored 80 percent or higher on a practice assessment.

Test prep was much more common for children from lower-income families. Parents with the lowest family incomes—those with less than \$25,000 total annual household income—were about twice as likely as the highest-income parents—those with a total annual household income of more than \$100,000—to say that their child had some test prep.

These sorts of testing practices concerned parents. One parent remarked, “I feel like it’s testing for testing’s sake—that it takes the creativity of teaching out of the teacher’s hands and unfairly punishes lower-income schools by withholding funding if they don’t meet certain testing criteria.”

When schools spend precious class time on test-prep activities, they are taking time away from teaching and learning. Not surprisingly, our research confirms that parents are not pleased. Instead of requiring teachers to drill students on practice test questions, schools should allow teachers to focus on high-quality instruction throughout the year in order to provide students with the opportunity to gain a deep understanding of subject matter so that they are ready to demonstrate what they know and can do on assessments. Good teaching is the only test prep that students need.

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## Weak logistics and the limits of technology often lengthen testing windows

The logistical arrangements involved in administering testing represent a major challenge for many school and system leaders. As more and more states move toward computer-based tests, technology is becoming a bigger issue and many districts, especially rural ones, lack sufficient computers, adequate Internet infrastructure, and, in some cases, even enough electrical outlets to efficiently test every student in their school. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, or NCES, in 2009—the most recent year for which data is available—the average student-to-computer ratio in schools is 5.3-to-1.<sup>105</sup> Many schools still have only one computer lab, and the computers in the lab are often out of date.<sup>106</sup> One-fifth to one-third of schools that were part of the Smarter Balanced field tests used the antiquated Windows XP operating system for which Microsoft no longer issues updates.<sup>107</sup>

As a result, schools often have to extend their testing period significantly beyond what would be required if they were equipped to simultaneously give the test to every student. This situation results in disrupted schedules for every student in the school throughout that time period, fostering a perception among parents that testing takes up a lot of time. To underscore the point, Elsie Goines, the superintendent of the Las Animas School District in Colorado, said in a *Denver Post* article, “If all online tests were given at Las Animas School District, computer lab space would be given over solely to testing for up to 2½ months.”<sup>108</sup>

It would also appear that these large testing windows also undermine the reliability and comparability of the results. It is difficult, if not impossible, to meaningfully compare the performance of students who took the tests at different times during the year since some students received additional instructional time.

At the same time, there is the issue of scheduling. PARCC testing in 2015 started as early as February 16 and ended as late as June 5.<sup>109</sup> Smarter Balanced started testing in mid-March and finished in early June. In both cases, districts were given specific time requirements for each section of the test.<sup>110</sup> Finding time and rearranging the schedules of every student in a school—usually for at least a week—in order to accommodate the time required to take tests is very challenging for school leaders who already have many responsibilities.

# Recommendations

With the passage of ESSA, the potential negative consequences of performing poorly on standardized tests will be much lower for school and system leaders and for educators. Federal policy will no longer require states and districts to assess teacher performance in part based on their students' growth on standardized tests. Schools will no longer face clear and significant consequences as a result of a group of students failing to meet a proficiency target on a test. But reducing the pressure on tests and leveraging tests such that they improve student learning are two entirely separate things. ESSA provides a unique opportunity to reset the conversation about testing, but states and districts must make a concerted and dedicated effort to reform their testing programs.

CAP makes the following recommendations to improve the quality of assessments, address concerns about overtesting, and make assessments more valuable for students, parents, and teachers.

In the short term, states should:

- **Develop assessment principles.** Leaders and advocates at the state level should develop or adopt a set of principles— informed by assessment experts and high-quality research—that define a robust testing system. These principles should articulate a vision for a testing system that is simple, intentional, and supports strong school accountability structures. Leaders should ground all conversations about testing in the principles, using them as a guidepost to constantly remind the general public and key stakeholders of why tests are valuable.

At a high level, these principles need to address the fact that, while testing has clear value, there are real concerns that need to be confronted in many communities. According to Chad Aldis of the Fordham Foundation, “There is too much testing. We should not be afraid to say that.” On the other hand, leaders should also not be afraid to champion the idea that testing is important. CAP recommends that leaders and advocates define a high-quality test and ground all discussions about test reduction or overhaul in that definition.

- **Conduct alignment studies.** Leaders should not dig in their heels and cheerlead for the current testing regime if the system is not aligned with instruction or student needs. In particular, leaders should take a holistic look at their systems to ensure that students are being tested on what they are learning and that what students are learning aligns with the standards in the state.

Alignment studies should be executed up and down the school system so that the policy leaders know that teachers are teaching to the standards and that the tests are actually measuring what is in the standards. Curriculum and homework should also be included in these reviews. These reviews should go beyond the typical studies that look only at alignment between assessments and standards and look at instructional alignment and student learning as well. School leaders should also look at other school practices, such as funding, to see if these practices also need to come into closer alignment with the new standards.

Higher education should also play a role, and there should be agreement across the K-16 system around testing policy. There is no reason, for instance, that colleges should make students take additional tests to determine course placement if those students have passed a high-quality Common Core-aligned exam in high school.

- **Provide support for districts in choosing high-quality formative and interim tests.** Not every district has the capacity to evaluate all of the formative and interim tests that are available to them. States should show leadership in this area by reviewing these tests and making available information about their quality and alignment with state standards or by providing their districts with professional development in conducting their own reviews and making informed decisions.

States can take different approaches in order to help their districts choose high-quality aligned assessments, but every state should take responsibility for providing resources and support. For example, Louisiana has developed a robust review process for both instructional materials and benchmark assessments. The state developed criteria for alignment and quality; leads online reviews in partnership with teachers from across the state; and posts the results of these reviews on the state education department's website.<sup>111</sup>

- **Demand that test results be delivered in a timely fashion.** The results of large-scale assessments, such as the SAT, are often delivered within weeks.<sup>112</sup> This sort of quick turnaround creates more buy-in at the local level. For one, a quick turnaround means that the schools can use the exams to gain feedback on the quality of instruction. A quick turnaround also creates more value, and educators and families can use the assessment results more readily in their decision-making.

Some of the testing experts we spoke with argued that returning results quickly is not necessary because summative assessments are not designed to inform instruction and that prioritizing speed will inevitably lower test quality. However, other experts believed that a faster turnaround time is both possible and desirable—particularly with increased use of automated scoring of open response items, which allows for the use of more complex item types while still keeping scoring time to a minimum. We recognize that there may be a trade-off, but we believe that the current delay in delivering results significantly reduces the usefulness and value of tests. In addition, this trade-off will become less pronounced with investments in research and development to advance the field of automated scoring.

In testing, there are always trade-offs. While faster results might require higher costs, we believe that a policy of delivering test results in two months or less needs to be the norm—not the outlier—in state testing programs. In its application for the Race to the Top assessment program, PARCC set a goal of scoring its end-of-year assessments within one week.<sup>113</sup> While there are other steps in the process of reporting results to students, parents, and teachers, this one-week scoring goal is the kind of aggressive approach that states and assessment vendors should take when it comes to test results. States should push for these policies to be written into their testing contracts. There is no reason why the SAT should come back within a few weeks while educators have to wait months to receive the results on state exams.

- **Increase the value of tests for schools, parents, and students.** Throughout our research, we heard that tests do not carry much value for individual students or their families. Parents recognize that tests can be used to inform and improve the school system, but they believe that their children do not get much out of the experience.

To address this problem, states and districts need to provide more value to students. Many states are increasing value for students by partnering with institutions of higher education in order to allow student performance on state high school exams to also count as their college placement exam.

Today, nearly 197 college and universities allow students to skip remedial classes if they score at the college-ready threshold on the Smarter Balanced 11th grade assessment.<sup>114</sup> In fact, all public colleges and universities in Oregon, Hawaii, and South Dakota have adopted this policy.<sup>115</sup> All states should follow the lead of these three states and implement high-quality, rigorous assessments for high school students and ensure that the test results are also used for college placement.

States could also consider replacing the required high school proficiency test with a college entrance exam, such as the ACT or the SAT. ESSA now permits individual districts to use nationally recognized high school assessments in place of the state's assessment if they are aligned to the state's standards and can provide comparable data. Since most college-bound students have to take one of these tests, substituting them for the high school proficiency test will reduce the amount of testing and provide greater value to students. However, states still have the responsibility to make sure that these tests are aligned with their state high school standards.

Rewarding success can also add value for students. We heard from many parents that state assessments do not seem to provide any clear benefits. Giving schools or students prizes or other recognition could potentially change that. In this regard, the National Merit Scholarship is a good model. The program flags high-performing students for national recognition and undergraduate scholarships, although the tests are just one of a number of indicators of success. States could take a page from this playbook and offer students recognition on their performance on state exams.

At the same time, states and districts need to provide value to parents. Testing is too often seen as simply a way to identify low performers. However, for the parents to see tests as valuable, the exams must be more than just a cudgel. Be a Learning Hero—a nonprofit that partners with national groups such as the National PTA, the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, and the Council of Great City Schools to provide parents with helpful educational resources—runs an initiative called “Game Plan for Success,” which is centered on a contest that identifies, rewards, and celebrates schools that best demonstrate a commitment to the implementation of high-academic standards. Winning schools receive \$5,000 and a visit from their city’s major league baseball team.<sup>116</sup>

We also believe that parents need to receive information for all exams, including formative assessments, in a way that they can use to help their children. This would add significant value by giving parents timely, much-needed feedback on their children. To start, this means states should develop and implement formative assessment systems that use tests as tools of continuous improvement. By providing actionable information to parents, as well as to teachers and students, about areas where students are doing well and where they need additional support—including individualized tools and resources—tests can be vital tools in a student’s education.

And finally, there should be ways for schools to realize more value from exams. Like parents, many schools view tests as a cudgel. Therefore, CAP recommends that schools that perform well on tests—with either high performance or significant progress—be recognized with rewards similar to the federal Blue Ribbon Schools Program,<sup>117</sup> which acknowledges and celebrates outstanding schools across the country, or with public recognition ceremonies featuring the governor or state legislators.

- **Take advantage of the new ESSA assessment pilot program to design and implement truly innovative assessment regimes.** ESSA maintains the federal requirement for annual statewide assessments in reading and math in grades three through eight and once in high school. But the law also includes a pilot program that initially allows up to seven states to develop innovative assessment systems—such as competency-based assessments and instructionally-embedded assessments—that provide valid, reliable, and comparable data on student achievement. States approved for this program can pilot these innovative assessment systems in a few districts before implementing them statewide. States should take advantage of this flexibility to design and implement truly out-of-the-box assessment systems that move beyond a single summative test.

As states work to develop these new systems, it will be important that they do not backtrack on quality and that they design systems that continue to protect historically disadvantaged students by ensuring that all students are held to the same high standards. If states move forward with performance-based or competency-based assessments, they should consider carefully whether their districts and educators have the capacity and time to create high-quality, valid, reliable, and comparable performance assessments. Instead of looking to dramatically change the content of assessments, states should consider how they can dramatically change the delivery of assessments. States should explore moving away from a single end-of-year test and toward the use of shorter, more frequent interim assessments that measure student learning throughout the year and can be combined into a single summative determination. This approach could significantly reduce the pressure on the end-of-year test and open the door for more instructionally relevant assessment systems.

- **Develop better communication tools.** State communication regarding testing is in disarray. Just consider state report cards or even student score reports. In many areas, they are a muddle of confusing data. CAP recommends that states develop clearer score reports that are accompanied by an explanation of how to

interpret the results, as well as the promotion of a website that provides a broad spectrum of sample test items that cover the range of potential testing topics and other FAQs about state testing programs. States should also train district and school leaders in how to communicate about test results to parents.

For example, parents in every state typically receive a score report explaining their child's results. This communication represents a key opportunity for parents to hear directly from the state about why the test is important and how the results will be used. State leaders, particularly those in states that are administering consortium assessments aligned to the Common Core, should use this report to demonstrate that the new tests are better than the tests of the past. Officials should carefully consider the language and information contained in the reports and the accompanying cover letter.

Achieve has developed open-source score reports that they have run through focus groups as a means to help states include the right amount of information. CAP also believes that states should release more than 50 percent of all test items each year so that parents can see the tests directly. This will demystify the exams and enable parents to better help their children prepare.

In the short term, districts should:

- **Identify overlapping testing programs.** As a first step in the process of responding to the testing backlash, leaders should undertake a thoughtful process to reduce the number of tests given. ESSA includes new funding to support state and district efforts to audit their assessments and eliminate redundant and unnecessary tests. During this process, leaders should ask themselves: If you could create a perfect instructional system, what information would you really need? At the same time, leaders should be aware that every test has its advocate.

“When the rubber hits the road, there is always someone defending the assessment that you want to take away,” said a Tennessee-based advocate who was involved in the process of identifying duplicative tests and recommending which ones to eliminate.

One process that may work is to write the names of all the tests that are administered on a notecard and then ask school- or district-based teams to sort them into three piles: must keep, must shed, tough call. According to this Tennessee-based advocate, this process helped encourage people to think differently about testing and be more open to consolidation.

When reducing tests, stakeholders should be creative and open minded. For example, some states are using the ACT in high school to meet the state high school test requirement under ESSA. Since parents tend to see more value in college admissions tests than in state tests, this policy could be one way to reduce the testing burden and build more support for state tests. In addition, standardized tests in kindergarten through second grade should be eliminated. This would reduce some of the overtesting and avoid subjecting young children to high-stakes stressful exams. That said, districts should continue to screen young elementary children to make sure they are on track.

- **Build local capacity to support teachers' understanding of assessment design and administration.** Policymakers are asking much more of teachers than they have in the past. Teachers themselves were not taught to these new, more rigorous standards. Specifically, teachers need more time to learn the new standards and additional support as they develop new instructional approaches.

To address this issue, school and district leaders should build time into school schedules to allow teachers to learn and refine their practice. Peer-led professional development designed and run by exceptional teachers provides a useful path forward. As noted above, the Tennessee Department of Education undertook a statewide effort to introduce the Common Core State Standards to educators that has been widely seen as successful.<sup>118</sup> States also need to invest more in high-quality instructional materials and make sure that those materials get into the hands of teachers.

- **Create coherent systems of high-quality formative and interim assessments that are aligned with state standards.** Today, far too many formative tests are weak and lacking in alignment and cognitive rigor. The new testing consortia understand the importance of including formative and interim assessments as part of a comprehensive testing system, and they provide an example of one way forward.

Smarter Balanced, for instance, provides teachers with benchmark assessments aligned with their end-of-year tests.<sup>119</sup> Teachers can access thematically connected groups of sample questions on these assessments to measure student learning throughout the year. These interim assessment blocks can help teachers understand how well their students perform. Teachers grade the tests on their own and can adjust their instruction accordingly. Data is not yet available about how many teachers have taken advantage of these Smarter Balanced resources. PARCC is looking to develop an online test that would provide formative feedback.<sup>120</sup>

District leaders should keep in mind, however, that formative assessments are meant to give them in-time feedback and data. Miscommunication from the state about the purpose of these assessments can exacerbate parent frustration about testing. Indeed, there is good evidence that formative tests have helped to contribute to the sense of overtesting at the local level.

- **Better communicate with parents about tests.** To build trust, districts should be more transparent around assessments. This includes posting testing calendars online, releasing sample items, and doing more to communicate about the assessments. In short, communication about testing should consist of much more than robocalls urging parents to give their children a good breakfast and make sure they get a good night's sleep.

If local schools are not already holding these sorts of forums, districts should consider holding “Testing the Test Nights” to discuss assessment practices. Districts should also post and distribute a link to an assessment calendar that shows which tests are required by state and local entities. One of the biggest complaints from parents was as lack of information about exams—something that can be easily addressed by clear and concise websites, mailings, and other outreach. Districts should create easily understandable overviews of their assessment system, including the purpose, use, and time for each assessment; releasing sample items; and communicating more consistently about the assessments.

- **Tackle logistics.** If a school only has one computer lab, it is going to take a long time to cycle every student through an online test. These sorts of long testing windows lead to disrupted schedules for every student in a school.

District leaders should plan well in advance about how they will test all students with a goal of minimizing disruption. District leaders should figure out the schedule that would be most effective. The goal should be to shorten the testing window as much as possible. This may require obtaining additional computers or bandwidth, even if just temporarily. Districts should also develop creative solutions, such as mobile testing centers or partnerships with local businesses or community organizations, to provide additional computers or other resources. Finally, districts should work with schools to ensure that all technology necessary for assessments functions properly prior to testing.

In the short term, schools should:

- **Make the actual test-taking process as convenient and pleasant as possible for children.** For example, schools should allow students who complete the test early to go to the playground or to another area where they can relax; permit children to go to the bathroom as needed during testing; provide multiple opportunities to make up the test if students are out of school; and allow breaks between test sections. In order to create a positive and low-stress culture around test taking, schools should provide written, online, or in-person guidance and training for teachers administering the tests. Rather than all schools developing their own guidance, state leaders could create guidance for districts and school leaders regarding test taking practices that could be disseminated statewide. Schools should also choose their testing coordinators wisely. CAP recommends, for instance, that school counselors not serve as testing coordinators. These dual roles can create conflicts and additional stress for students who may experience test anxiety.
- **Hold communications events such as an annual explain-the-test night.** When it comes to state tests, parents get very little high-quality information. One initiative that we came across in our research was schools offering explain-the-test nights in order to answer parents' questions.<sup>121</sup>

Another option would be for principals to have open office hours to discuss the exams or provide sample exams during school hours. After the test scores have been returned, principals can offer similar opportunities for parents, giving the public the chance to ask questions, review items, and discuss potential reforms.

- **Work with teachers to communicate to parents.** Teachers are not being provided with sample test items, high-quality instructional materials, or other much-needed information on the new state tests. But when parents have questions, they usually turn to teachers. Therefore, schools should make sure that educators have reliable information on all of the tests that their students take, including why the assessments are given and the role that the tests play in school improvement. In short, schools should recognize teachers as the strongest ambassadors to parents and help them better communicate test information.
- **Stop unnecessary test prep.** Certainly, students need to be familiar with an exam and the types of questions that are on the exam. There is also a place for making sure that students are familiar with the technology that they will use for the exam. But unnecessary test prep, such as test prep rallies, need to end. Teachers should also not teach to specific test items.

Schools should also stop other short-sighted testing practices, such as robocalls and one-page emails, that only detail the dates of the exams. At the same time, schools should ensure against cheating—either by individual students or individual staff. This means following state and district procedures around test administration.

In addition, schools should stop the practice of requiring students who are close to achieving proficiency to repeat the test right away. Schools should not game the results or force students to take the same test multiple times simply for the school's benefit. Students should do the best they can on test day and then the schools should accept the results.

In the short term, the U.S. Department of Education should:

- **Develop regulations for ESSA implementation that support high-quality assessments.** In order to ensure that states and districts make progress in moving toward more coherent and aligned assessment systems, the U.S. Department of Education should regulate that states include in their state Title I plans a description of how the state will:
  - Ensure that district formative and interim assessments are aligned with state academic standards
  - Ensure that the testing regime in each district is as streamlined as possible
  - Ensure that communication with teachers and parents about the tests is frequent and includes the purpose, timing, and results of the assessments and resources for students to help them learn the appropriate grade-level material
- **Provide strong technical assistance to states wanting to submit applications for the innovative assessment pilot program.** The new testing pilot allows states to develop next-generation testing systems, but many states do not have the capacity to design and implement these innovative ideas. The U.S. Department of Education should provide technical assistance to states wanting to explore what this pilot program could mean for them and should provide support to states during the development and application process.

Some support networks for states interested in innovation in assessment already exist, such as the Council of Chief State School Officers' Innovation Lab Network, which currently includes 12 states.<sup>122</sup> However, in the context of the new pilot program, the U.S. Department of Education should play a much greater role in supporting assessment innovation by developing technical assistance resources, enlisting the help of national experts, and creating peer-to-peer learning opportunities among states.

- **Spread best practice and research next-generation assessments.** The U.S. Department of Education must do more to disseminate thoughtful assessment practices to states, particularly about ensuring that the tests provide real value to parents and students, as well as communicating with school districts and parents. For instance, the department’s “What Works Clearinghouse” does not include information on assessment programs.<sup>123</sup> But, without better information, educators at the local level cannot roll out robust programs.

Many areas are considering testing time caps, for instance. In Ohio, legislators wanted a firm cap on the number of hours of testing in each subject, so advocates worked with policymakers to identify a cap that would be workable while simultaneously partnering with civil rights leaders and other advocates to send a strong message that testing is important. Ultimately, leaders in Ohio drafted legislation to cap testing at four hours per subject.<sup>124</sup> National leaders in the philanthropic community should fund research to examine the effects of these programs.

Additionally, the assessment consortia have provided a great return on investment, and the federal government should do more to push for better assessments that cover a wide range of skills. The federal government, for instance, could fund more research on performance-based assessment systems that evaluate student knowledge and skills through projects, portfolios, and other activities. Furthermore, additional research should be conducted into an increasingly popular assessment strategy in higher education—the use of clickers and other tools to assess student knowledge in real time. Finally, philanthropies should also fund more assessment development around the Common Core.

As the Urban Institute’s Matt Chingos has argued, “[S]pending on testing is barely a drop in the bucket of a public education system.”<sup>125</sup> The federal government should make more direct investments in testing programs. The U.S. Department of Education, specifically, could help by paying for specific exams, investing in research on exams, and playing a role in developing some of the materials that support schools and districts rolling out such tests.

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## Long-term recommendations

It is clear that state and district testing systems will not be fixed in a single year. Over the long run—a timeframe of three to five years—system leaders should develop a robust, coherent, and aligned system of standards and assessments that measures student progress toward meeting challenging state standards. This exam system should be deeply grounded in the standards as assessed by an end-of-year summative test. Formative and interim assessments administered throughout the year will routinely—at natural transition points in the instructional program, such as the end of a unit—assess student understanding and progress and provide the results to teachers, parents, and students in close to real time. This system will enable everyone involved in a student’s education to make adjustments where needed in order to support learning so that no student slips through the cracks.

High-quality formative and interim assessments should become the most reliable and useful indicators of how a student is doing throughout the school year. These assessments should be akin to report cards or many teacher-developed assessments today, which teachers and parents alike rely upon for the most up-to-date information about whether a student is on track. By using formative and interim assessments in this way and eliminating unaligned, out-of-date, and duplicative local assessments, state and district leaders will both reduce the amount of testing students have to endure and eliminate the sense that standardized tests are distinct from so-called real school. In this new vision for testing, an effective assessment system will routinely evaluate student knowledge and skills through formative and interim assessments that provide timely, actionable feedback to teachers and parents, culminating in a summative test that helps to determine whether students are meeting grade-level standards and making progress.

For this assessment system to be as useful as possible, alignment is key. All assessments—formative, interim, and summative—must align with academic standards. In other words, what is tested should match what students are expected to know at each grade level. Furthermore, formative assessments and interim assessments should lead into the summative assessments. Simply put, how well students perform on a summative test should not be a surprise.

# Conclusion

Testing is a vital piece of a student’s education. But, far too often, American testing policies, the tests themselves, and the support provided to teachers to prepare students for tests are inadequate. However, it does not have to be this way. From the national, state, and local levels, far more can be done to improve how and when schools test students with the goal of moving toward better, fairer, and fewer assessments.

With the passage of ESSA, states and districts have the opportunity to dramatically rethink their testing systems so they are coherent, aligned, and supportive of student learning. But they must seize the momentum to take on these broad reforms—not just tinker around the edges of existing systems or assume that the problems will resolve themselves. Through the recommendations detailed in this report—from better communication to improved transparency—education leaders can take significant steps toward improving their assessment systems and making sure that students, teachers, and parents receive the information they need to ensure all students receive a high-quality education.

# Appendix

	<b>Near term</b>	<b>Long term</b>
<b>School</b>	Does the school publish the district assessment calendar on its website?	Has the school provided regular information to teachers, parents, and student about how assessment results have informed improvements in policies and practices?
	Does the school provide teachers with the time to work together in order to review student test results and plan how to incorporate that information into their instruction?	Has the school limited the amount of time students spend preparing for standardized assessments?
	Does the school host communications events about assessments?	Has the school eliminated unnecessary and unhelpful test preparation practices?
	Does the school work with teachers to improve communications around testing?	
<b>District</b>	Are students honored or recognized or receive any credit if they do well on a standardized test?	
	Has the district conducted an assessment audit or inventory?	Has the district eliminated all redundant and unnecessary tests?
	Are the results of all district-required assessments returned to parents and teachers in a timely fashion?	Has the district invested in research and development for the next generation of assessments, including game-based assessments and the use of clickers?
	Does the district support teachers with high-quality professional development around assessments?	Have school leaders and teachers received guidance about how best to help students prepare for the tests, including by limiting the time spent learning test-taking strategies and other test preparation other than high-quality instruction?
<b>State</b>	Has the district developed an assessment calendar and published it online?	Does the district provide parents and educators with a process to provide feedback on the district's assessment system?
	Does the district communicate the dates of when standardized tests will be administered, who requires them, and their purpose, including any stakes attached?	Has the district implemented policies and practices to ensure that logistical issues, including necessary technology, are addressed so all students can take tests with minimal disruption to normal school operations?
	Are the results of all state required assessments returned to parents and teachers in a timely fashion?	Does the state provide support for districts in choosing high-quality, aligned formative and interim assessments?
	Does the state set a limit on how much time student should spend taking standardized assessments?	Does the state publish online and distribute accessible resources to help students succeed on the state test?
	Does the state provide guidance to districts about best practices with respect to test preparation and administration?	Has the state conducted a robust alignment study of assessments, standards, and curricula?
	Has the state collaborated with key stakeholders and experts to develop assessment principles?	Has the state developed a website with a significant amount of sample test items that cover the range of possible test topics?
	Has the state developed a clear and effective plan to communicate with educators and parents about assessments, score reports, and how to interpret test results?	

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## About the Authors

**Catherine Brown** is the Vice President of Education Policy at the Center for American Progress. Previously, Brown served as the vice president of policy at Teach for America and as a senior consultant for Leadership for Educational Equity. Prior to her role at Teach for America, Brown served as senior education policy advisor for the House Committee on Education and Labor, where she advised Chairman George Miller (D-CA). In 2008, Brown served as the domestic policy advisor for presidential candidate Hillary Clinton.

Earlier in her career, Brown directed Teach for America’s Early Childhood Initiative and served as a legislative assistant for both Sen. Hillary Clinton (D-NY) and Rep. Jim Langevin (D-RI), as well as a research assistant at Mathematica Policy Research in New Jersey. Brown received her bachelor’s degree from Smith College and holds a master’s in public policy from the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University.

**Ulrich Boser** is a Senior Fellow at the Center. He examines education, crime, and other social issues. He is currently working on a book about learning, which is tentatively titled *Learning to Learn: Why Being Smart in the Information Age Isn’t Important—and Why Learning Is.*

Boser has served as a contributing editor for *U.S. News & World Report*; was a founding editor of the online criminal justice magazine “The Open Case”; and has had his research featured everywhere from “The Tonight Show with Jay Leno” to the front page of *USA Today*. Boser’s work on school spending made headlines around the country and helped inspire initiatives to improve the effectiveness of education dollars.

Boser is also the author of *The Leap: The Science of Trust and Why It Matters*, which Forbes called “recommended reading” and Talking Points Memo described as “both comprehensive and engaging.” Boser’s career has included stints as a reporter, editor, and English language instructor. He graduated from Dartmouth College with honors.

**Scott Sargrad** is the Director for Standards and Accountability on the Education Policy team at the Center. In this role, he focuses on the areas of standards, assessments, school and district accountability systems, and school improvement.

Prior to joining the Center, Sargrad served as the deputy assistant secretary for policy and strategic initiatives in the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education at the U.S. Department of Education, where he had the primary responsibility for key K-12 education programs and initiatives, including the Title I program, Elementary and Secondary Education Act flexibility, and School Improvement Grants.

Sargrad received his undergraduate degree in mathematics with a minor in philosophy from Haverford College and a master's degree in education policy and management from the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

**Max Marchitello** is a Policy Analyst for the Pre-K-12 Education Policy team at the Center. He has focused principally on accountability, standards, assessments, and education issues related to low-income students and students of color.

Prior to joining the Center, Marchitello served as the inaugural William L. Taylor Fellow for Education Policy at The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights. In this capacity he worked on federal legislation related to K-12, higher education, and workforce development. Before coming to Washington, Max taught high school English and coached basketball in north Philadelphia. He holds a bachelor's degree from the University of Chicago and a master's degree from the University of Pennsylvania.

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