

WHITE PAPER

K-12 assessment policy recommendations for the 117th Congress and the administration



Congress passed the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) to establish a less prescriptive and more holistic federal assessment and accountability framework to better support the provision of a high-quality education and equal opportunity for every student to succeed. While the law was effective to a degree, resulting in most states looking at “multiple measures” of success such as academic growth, it fell short of its promise in some areas, including assessment innovation. In addition, the opportunity and achievement gaps it aims to eliminate remain, and the impacts of the pandemic have only exacerbated those gaps.

Our education system has been disrupted in a way that has been trying for all involved, and while we expect somewhat of a return to “normal” eventually, learning and teaching will never be quite the same. Some level of blended learning is likely here to stay as part of more resilient and efficient systems that leverage technology to support teachers and students. As teaching and learning systems evolve, so should accountability and related assessment systems.

Current conditions provide a unique window—and responsibility—for innovation. Now more than ever, schools need significantly bolder action to help their students succeed. ESSA’s limited assessment flexibilities and flawed innovation demonstration program aimed to address the right problems, but they did not produce the systemic changes needed to support next-generation learning, close equity gaps, and better support individual students.

ESSA’s assessment innovation initiative has been overwhelmed by requirements rooted in the notion that the purpose of systems of accountability and associated assessments is and must remain separate from the purpose of systems of learning and associated assessments. This idea has created an artificial wedge between states and districts, resulting in inefficiencies and incentivizing behaviors that work against the shared goals of these systems.

This administration has the opportunity to move statewide assessment and accountability out of a passive, purely evaluative role focused on classification and compliance to one that protects equal opportunity to a high-quality education while also actively fostering it. Instead of confirming the same challenges and gaps in outcomes year after year, the system can support and galvanize the action needed to improve learning. This means including appropriate measures of the critical preschool and the early elementary grades and increasing the focus on using assessment data to provide insights that students, parents, teachers, and leaders can act upon to impact outcomes.

Federal leaders must shift assessment’s purpose within the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) and drive states to adopt more innovative assessment and accountability models

The new Congress and the next administration have an opportunity to reorient and improve the next ESEA’s assessment and accountability policies, particularly the Innovative Assessment Demonstration Authority (IADA), to better support teaching and learning. The best elements of the existing system should be retained, including high standards for all students; reporting of disaggregated data designed to measure and monitor achievement and opportunity gaps; and a focus on student and system growth.

However, policymakers should abandon ESSA’s narrowly tailored assessment flexibilities and replace them with a new vision and approach that better balances assessment’s valuable role in accountability with its equally valuable role in the classroom. They can also place much greater emphasis on other data that can substantially improve how the nation identifies underperforming schools and assists them.

If we do not respond to community stakeholder calls for leaders to rethink rigid accountability and assessment requirements to make them more student-centered and productive in the goal of fostering student learning, an increasing call to “get rid of standardized assessment” threatens the vitally important educational equity that the current model aims to promote.

This can be remedied by incentivizing, instead of merely allowing, innovation at the state level to rethink and reconfigure statewide assessments to be more instructionally supportive, and to embed the use of assessment data in a more holistic accountability system that requires and more heavily weights a range of nonacademic indicators. Specifically, NWEA® strongly encourages federal leaders to adopt the following recommendations:

- **Require statewide assessments in spring 2021 but provide flexibility**
- **Replace the Innovative Assessment Demonstration Authority (IADA)**
- **Align peer review requirements with innovation goals and advancements**
- **Support statewide assessments that are more relevant to teaching and learning**
- **Promote accountability systems that are responsive to communities and foster next-generation learning and equity**

These recommendations are unpacked and contextualized on the pages that follow.

REQUIRE STATEWIDE ASSESSMENTS IN SPRING 2021 BUT PROVIDE FLEXIBILITY

Statewide assessment and accountability are being conflated in discussions about spring 2021; many of the requests to waive statewide testing appear to be driven by a desire for accountability flexibilities. Given the varied learning contexts and the exacerbation of disparities in learning opportunity in 2020–21, it is critical to understand how the pandemic has impacted student learning and education equity.

Instead of waiving the tests, the purpose of statewide testing this spring should be

adjusted to reflect the current context and needs of students, teachers, and parents. Targeted flexibilities should be offered to states in the areas of assessment and accountability if they are able to show how they are evaluating and supporting their students and systems using relevant data to meet their local context.

The data from spring statewide tests should not be used for high-stakes accountability designations but instead should be used to help federal, state, and local leaders understand the impact of the pandemic and drive meaningful conversations across local communities to inform future planning

about how to best serve students. Spring assessment results should be interpreted in the context of other relevant data, including indicators of opportunity to learn, such as homelessness, access to devices and broadband, and mode of instruction.

REPLACE THE IADA

Congress and the next administration should not wait for ESSA reauthorization to replace the IADA. Given the importance of this work to ensuring equity, policymakers should quickly fund a new innovation program to begin in 2021 to support innovative statewide assessments that are part of the learning system; aligned to rigorous academic standards; coherent within and across years; efficient in measurement; useful for teachers, families, and students to foster learning; and fair for all students and schools.

The new program should fund approved pilots, allow more time for states to scale new systems, and adjust existing evaluation requirements that require new assessments to be comparable to existing ones—a rule that stifles innovation. This can be achieved by incentivizing research partnerships with experts across the country who can help evaluate and speak to quality metrics outside of traditional peer review processes. The program should also be implemented in a way that promotes balance and removes the redundancy and burden of maintaining the existing system while the new one is being implemented, which results in double-testing.

ALIGN PEER REVIEW REQUIREMENTS WITH INNOVATION GOALS AND ADVANCEMENTS

Peer review requirements are based on systems of assessment that originated in a different era. Validity and reliability of data should remain paramount, but it is time to

revisit requirements to ensure that they reflect the latest advancements in assessment technology and design. Peer review should increase flexibility to allow consideration of assessments that are designed to produce data differently than traditional paper-and-pencil or multiple-choice assessments. This may mean rethinking historical assumptions about criteria such as comparability and standardization to incorporate new statistical checks for quality.

In addition, peer review requirements should not exist as a disconnected technical checklist, but should instead be examined through the lens of the overarching theory of action. In a new era of assessment and accountability focused on catalyzing action, peer review should focus on the utility of the information returned by assessment and accountability systems for students, teachers, parents, schools, and policymakers. It should also increase flexibility to take into account new and different learning environments, such as hybrid or remote learning options that may necessitate consideration of remote administration.

SUPPORT STATEWIDE ASSESSMENTS THAT ARE MORE RELEVANT TO TEACHING AND LEARNING

Accountability systems and the statewide assessments that are a part of them are critical components that must remain in place to support high-quality education and equitable opportunity for every student. However, improvement in educational outcomes has been largely stagnant for years. To move the needle, these systems must go beyond simply measuring learning to more actively fostering it.

Statewide assessments used for accountability should be complementary to and coherent

with less formal assessments used to inform teaching and learning decisions—not disconnected from them, as this can result in competing priorities, putting teachers in the challenging position of having to choose which compass to follow. Statewide tests should also be administered in a format and frequency that is less disruptive to instruction and that produces data that can be used productively—whether at the program, policy, or practitioner level—to impact learning.

This means making room for innovative assessments that are more connected to instruction and efficient, taking into account what is already known about students instead of assuming that nothing is known going into a final year-end assessment event. Examples include through-year assessments, competency or performance-based assessments, short-cycle assessments, and other models designed to be part of the teaching and learning experience while also producing data for accountability purposes.

Innovative assessments like these can be designed to maintain measurement against rigorous college- and career-ready standards, while also producing individualized information about student learning level that goes beyond strict age and grade bands. This allows for grouping and regrouping of cohorts of students as instruction is scaffolded to meet their needs and supports targeted interventions for students with learning gaps to maximize access to challenging content.

In the unfortunate event that these more integrated, innovative options continue to face roadblocks, the door should be open for minimizing the amount of assessment needed for accountability by shortening end-of-year summative tests, administering them less frequently, and/or using matrix

sampling methodologies. In this scenario, federal policy should incentivize states to develop comprehensive systems of assessment that include a focus on student learning and improving instruction more frequently (multiple times a year) to support classroom instruction and school improvement efforts, in between the less frequent assessments that are administered for accountability purposes.

PROMOTE ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEMS THAT ARE RESPONSIVE TO COMMUNITIES AND FOSTER NEXT-GENERATION LEARNING AND EQUITY

The accountability system exists largely to ensure that all students are held to the same high standards and have the same opportunity, including adequate resources and appropriate supports, to reach or exceed those high standards. This must remain the core goal. However, to address inequities, differentiated approaches and investments are needed; applying the same lens across all schools, teachers, and students only serves to maintain the status quo.

Under the current system, a school serving affluent students and a school serving students with inequitable access to opportunity are viewed the same way based on whether their students are proficient or not, yet the latter school must grow students significantly more in the same amount of time to get students to “proficient.” To avoid accountability systems serving as measures of poverty and racism, the whole picture should be considered. When interpreting assessment results, other contextual information should be considered, including equity indicators and indicators of opportunity to learn, to support productive action informed by the strengths and needs of the communities served.

Another way to round out the view is to support assessment systems that provide all students with a fair opportunity to show what they know and that enable evaluation not only of annual growth in proficiency, but also fall-to-spring academic growth. This reveals how much a school has grown its students—whether proficient or not—and can be an effective way to encourage, incentivize, and recognize schools that do a good job of scaffolding instruction to ensure that all students are challenged.

In addition, when looking at growth in proficiency, evaluating outcomes over a multiyear period rather than annually recognizes that closing gaps takes time and may give a more accurate picture of school performance while providing achievable yet aggressive targets based on the necessary, not normative, growth required for students to leave the K-12 system ready for college, career, and life.

Federal policy should also encourage accountability systems that establish locally selected measures tied to school improvement work at the district level and differentiate when and how data is to be used to support different purposes, including public reporting of achievement gaps; identifying schools in need of support and intervention; and helping families advocate for what is best for their students.

The road ahead

NWEA recognizes that some of these changes, including moving to more balanced accountability models that are less dependent on the results of a single assessment, will require federal leaders to grant greater trust to states and will require states to collaborate more closely with local educational agencies to ensure that every student has an opportunity to succeed. We understand that step may be worrisome to policymakers disappointed by past state failures, but we believe greater flexibility is absolutely necessary to spark the assessment innovations and other practice changes that will ultimately be needed to close equity gaps once and for all.

States must be called on by the next ESEA to demonstrate their progress in this work. They must also be pushed aggressively to innovate and supported when they are enterprising enough to work towards that innovation. Implementing new federal policies that allow states to continue using dated assessment models or that continue to make it onerous to try something new will amount to the maintenance of a flawed system. It is time to make significant changes to accountability and its relationship to assessment that reflect the evolution of learning and teaching systems and help transform outcomes for students.



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