




ADVOCATES' GUIDE TO ASSESSMENTS: ADDRESSING COMMON CONCERNS ABOUT STATEWIDE ANNUAL ASSESSMENTS

As state and local leaders face renewed concerns from some quarters about administering annual statewide assessments, it's critical that advocates emphasize the unique, irreplaceable data these assessments provide for parents and families; educators; school, district, and state leaders; and policymakers. This document is designed to provide advocates and policymakers with direct responses to common concerns about, and arguments against, the use of annual statewide assessments.



Annual statewide assessments provide important data that cannot be provided by grades and other tests.

CONCERN: *Parents and educators are already aware of how students are doing from grades and other tests of academic progress throughout the year.*

Grades and progress reports alone provide a helpful but incomplete picture of how students are doing, especially across an entire district or state. Annual statewide assessments provide key information about how students are performing against grade-level academic standards, as well as comparative inter-district data that allow policymakers and advocates to identify areas of strength and growth for their community and provide key information for families making decisions about which schools are the best fit for their child.


While students take quizzes, tests, and—sometimes—other standardized assessments throughout the year that give parents and educators a snapshot of student progress—helping to inform instructional decisions such as additional review of topics or grouping students for additional support—these other assessments are likely not aligned to grade-level standards and may also assess standards and skills above or below grade level. They may not sufficiently cover key topics, knowledge, and skills that are essential for students to move on to the next grade level, or to graduate. They are also not comparable across schools and districts in a state, which is critical for making decisions about equitably allocating and targeting resources.

While grades and other assessments provide useful information for educators and parents, they should be considered alongside results from statewide assessments to get a well-rounded picture of student learning, school and district performance, and state system equity.

Student report card grades also provide important information about how students are performing academically. However, grades also usually incorporate factors beyond academic performance, including work completion, effort, and even behavior—some of which are [highly subjective](#). Additionally, the academic portion of grades are based only on content addressed in

the classroom, which—particularly for students from low-income backgrounds, students of color, student with disabilities, and English learners—is [not always as rigorous](#) as grade-level academic standards.

Therefore, while grades and other assessments provide useful information for educators and parents, they should be considered alongside results from statewide assessments to get a well-rounded picture of student learning, school and district performance, and state system equity. Schools and families must meaningfully engage in two-way communication regarding assessments, including how schools and families can work together to use assessment data to support student growth and learning.



Annual statewide assessments should be treated as just a regular part of instruction, and their purposes for students and schools should be clearly communicated to students and families.

CONCERN: *Annual statewide assessments cause too much anxiety for students.*


While annual statewide assessments are required by federal law, the many uses of the assessments—including federally required reporting and the identification of schools in need of additional support and state-level uses such as graduation requirements or holding back 3rd graders who score below a certain threshold—could cause confusion or anxiety if not clearly communicated by state, district, and school leaders.

Educators are strongly encouraged to explain the ways annual statewide assessments are used and differentiate to families how assessment results will be utilized on behalf of their individual child and the school community as a whole.

Students, parents, and families truly understanding the intent behind assessments is vital to building trust between families, educators, and administrators. These assessments are designed to provide information so schools, districts, and the state can allocate appropriate resources and supports and target interventions to support students and educators in an effort to improve academic performance. Therefore, educators are strongly encouraged to explain the ways annual statewide assessments are used and differentiate to families how assessment results will be utilized on behalf of their individual child and the school community as a whole.

Some states have also begun piloting ways to break these assessments into smaller sections or “through-year assessments” that are administered over the course of a school year, instead of in one single test all the way at the end of the school year, so

that they become a regular part of instruction and do not consist of one big event that may heighten anxiety.



Annual statewide assessments only represent a small fraction a school's assessment practices.


CONCERN: *Schools are over-testing students.*

The federally required annual statewide assessment is only a small part of schools' assessment practices, typically taking up [just 2% of instructional time](#) for the year.

If students and educators are feeling burdened by the amount of time devoted to assessments throughout the year, district and school leaders should work in consultation with families and educators to adjust assessment practices, to address both how long students are actively taking formative and interim assessments, by reducing or eliminating those assessments that provide redundant or otherwise less useful data, and reduce isolated test prep for annual statewide assessments.

As a part of the process of reducing instructional time devoted to assessment, school leaders should ensure all assessments are aligned with both state academic standards and local curriculum and that local curricula are high-quality and also aligned to state academic standards. Doing so will help ensure coherence across instruction and assessment practices and reduce the need for isolated test prep because the "prep" for the test becomes just normal curriculum-based instruction. Additionally, taking time out from instruction to prepare students for taking assessments can add to perceptions of over-testing, and may, in fact, not actually improve student performance on the assessments.

Leaders should also ensure that local, formative and interim assessments are not just aligned to state standards but provide families and educators with timely, relevant, accessible, and actionable data, since these data are used to make day-to-day adjustments to instruction. State leaders should work with vendors to also make annual statewide assessment data more timely, relevant, accessible, and actionable, while understanding that these data are not designed to directly influence educators' daily practice.


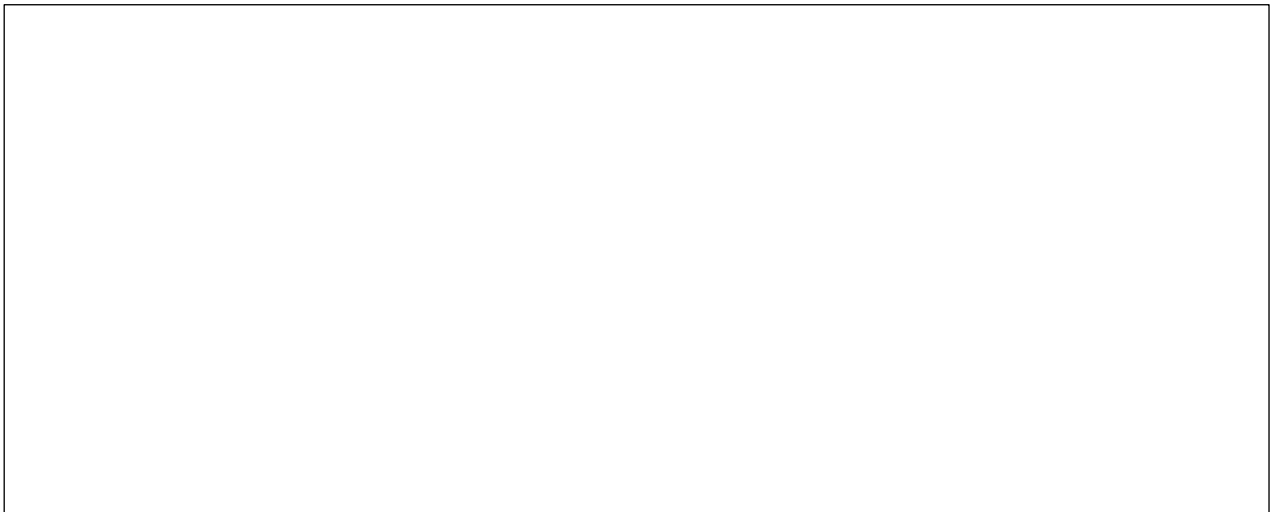


Federal law does not take money away from schools or districts based on test results. In fact, the opposite is true. Schools identified for improvement by the state—in part determined by the annual statewide assessment—are entitled to additional federal funds to support improved instructional

CONCERN: *When students do poorly on the annual statewide assessments, students, teachers, and schools are punished or lose money.*

To support all schools in serving all students, the federal government requires states to use assessment results—along with other measures, such as graduation rates, progress in attaining English language proficiency, and at least one measure of school quality or student success (such as attendance, school surveys, or access to advanced coursework)—to identify schools most in need of additional support. These identified schools are then asked to develop a plan to improve performance and are eligible for *additional federal funding* to implement their plans and provide extra resources for students.

Beyond federal resources and improvement plans, state leaders can also take additional actions to help students and schools across the state improve academically using state assessment data to identify specific needs and/or target interventions or supplemental funding. For instance,



Annual statewide assessment results provide critical information for families and educators, which are valuable after the school year ends, while other types of assessment provide data for informing day-to-day instruction.


CONCERN: *Parents and educators already aware of how students are doing from grades and other tests of academic progress throughout the year.*

Assessment results provide educators in the following school year with important insights about their incoming students and allow them to adjust curricula and instruction based how students in a particular grade are performing over time. Summative assessments also provide school, district, and state leaders with critical information about how to target resources to students most in need of academic support, while formative and interim assessments can provide educators with more timely data that can directly influence decisions throughout the school year. They allow families fuller understanding of their child's academic performance, which is critical for ensuring they are on track for graduation, identifying potential areas for growth, and advocating for any needed academic supports.

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During the pandemic, states such as Massachusetts provided initial results sooner to school and district leaders and educators in early summer to allow results to influence plans for the coming year, while the data went through quality control checks needed for public reporting and use in accountability systems. Such practices could continue as the pandemic subsides.

Additionally, there are currently pilots underway in a handful of states designed to change statewide summative assessments so that they can provide educators with more immediate and actionable data. These states, including Louisiana and North Carolina, are developing "through-year assessments" where students take statewide assessments in small parts over the course of the year. After each assessment, educators get information about student performance in order to inform instructional practices. Then, depending on the pilot, the score from the final part is used to determine the student's cumulative progress or is determined by combining each of the small parts. The results of these pilots could inform other states' efforts.



Annual statewide assessments, while imperfect, contain anti-bias and accessibility protocols absent from local assessments and are a critical tool in the fight for racial equity and inclusion in education.

CONCERN: *Questions on annual statewide assessments are racially biased and inaccessible, and the results further marginalize students of color and students with disabilities.*

Concerns about racism or ableism and assessment are important and should not be ignored. There is much room for improvement within current assessments to make them more culturally

affirming and accessible for all students. Current anti-bias protocols in the creation of annual statewide assessments, though, do provide some counter balance to local measures of student achievement, including grades and locally-developed assessments, which can be [heavily biased](#) and typically don't undergo systematic review.

Furthermore, some students with disabilities and English learners require access to accessibility features and accommodations to meaningfully participate in assessments. Professional development opportunities can help ensure that educators have the knowledge to select, implement, and evaluate accessibility features and accommodations. State leaders can also ensure that accessibility and accommodations policies are clear and appropriate so educators can support students with disabilities and English learners to equitably participate in the assessments.

Abolishing summative assessments would only serve to once again hide where students of color and other students are being denied access to a quality education and the resources they need to succeed.

Efforts are underway to center students of color and other students who are historically marginalized in assessments, and they should be encouraged and receive further investment. Yet, while this improvement continues, abolishing summative assessments would only serve to once again hide where students of color and other students are being denied access to a quality education and the resources they need to succeed.

Annual statewide assessments—particularly federal requirements that results be disaggregated by race/ethnicity, English proficiency, and disability status—are a critical tool in the fight for

equity and inclusion in education. Prior to federal summative assessment requirements, gaps in academic performance across race, ethnicity, income, disability status, and English proficiency were hidden from public view, obscured by averages and students of color were often held to different standards than white students.

In addition, many students with disabilities and English learners were specifically excluded from taking assessments altogether because it was thought incorrectly that these students could not meet grade level standards. State assessment data allow families, educators, advocates, and policymakers the ability to fight for additional resources that are systematically denied to students of color and other students from historically disadvantaged groups in districts and schools across the country.

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QUICK GUIDE TO ASSESSMENT TYPES

Below is a brief overview of the different types of assessments that students will likely take over the course of the year. Having a basic understanding about each type of assessment can help you when you are discussing results from any type of assessment with teachers or school leaders.

DIAGNOSTIC ASSESSMENTS

- *What They Are/Can Do*
 - Gauge student skills *prior* to instruction
 - Provide a baseline for determining student growth over the course of the year
- *What They Are Not/Can't Do*
 - May not be directly aligned to state academic standards
 - Don't provide comparable data across students in different classrooms, schools, or districts

FORMATIVE ASSESSMENTS

- *What They Are/Can Do*
 - Gauge student understanding to directly inform instructional decisions
 - Focused on single skills or concepts
 - Range from entrance or exit tickets to teacher-designed quizzes and tests
- *What They Are Not/Can't Do*
 - May not be directly aligned to state academic standards
 - Don't provide comparable data across students in different classrooms, schools, or districts

INTERIM ASSESSMENTS

- *What They Are/Can Do*
 - Assessments conducted a few times throughout the year to ensure students are on track to and making progress
 - Used to identify students for formal interventions or support services
- *What They Are Not/Can't Do*
 - Don't directly inform day-to-day instruction
 - Don't provide comparable data across different schools or districts
 - Don't assess student growth from year-to-year

ANNUAL STATEWIDE ASSESSMENTS

- *What They Are/Can Do*
 - Measurement of student achievement against state academic standards, aligned to skills and knowledge needed for postsecondary success
 - Focused on all the content and skills for current grade-level
 - Allows for results to be compared between students, student groups, schools, and districts
- *What They Are Not/Can't Do*
 - Don't provide information to make direct, real-time changes to instruction
 - Don't measure whether students are learning content that is above or below their grade level