ALLIANCE FOR EXCELLENT EDUCATION

NEW ASSESSMENTS:

A GUIDE FOR STATE POLICYMAKERS

FEBRUARY 2014

States face a critical decision in the next year: how to assess student learning against new college- and career-ready standards. This decision has important ramifications, because testing and assessment have long had a powerful influence on instructional practice. Thus the assessment that states choose will affect teaching and learning in virtually every classroom.

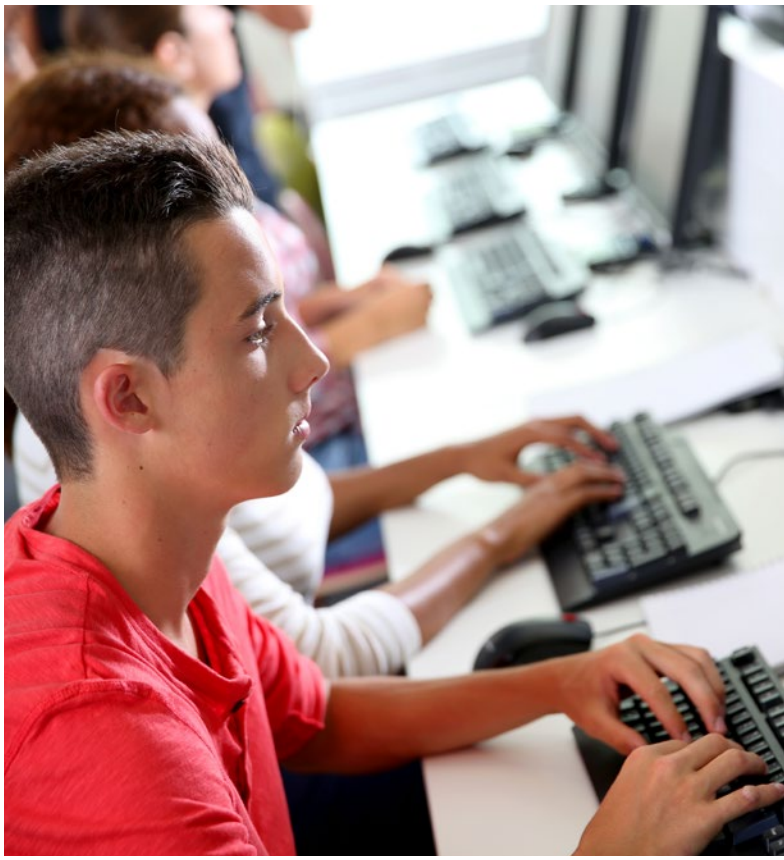
The need for new assessments stems from the new standards that all states have adopted in the past few years. Forty-six states and the District of Columbia have adopted the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in English language arts and mathematics. The other states have also upgraded their standards to lead to college and career readiness. While it is typical that states modify their assessments when they adopt new academic standards, they are using the opportunity of having adopted shared standards to create assessment systems that are very different from state tests in the No Child Left Behind era. These standards set new expectations for student learning, and in many cases call for substantial shifts in instruction designed to move toward students' development of deeper mastery of subject matter, greater critical thinking and problem-solving skills, and stronger ability to craft arguments. These higher expectations demand new assessments to measure whether students have met these learning goals.

States have several options from which to choose. Most states are part of one of two consortia of states that are developing assessments explicitly aligned to the CCSS. These assessments, the Partnership for the Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) and the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium, are scheduled to be available for administration in the 2014–15 school year. Other organizations, such as ACT, are also creating new assessments to align to the CCSS.

This brief will outline some of the questions policymakers should ask about proposed new assessments and the ways in which the consortia assessments appear poised to answer them.

WHAT DO THE ASSESSMENTS MEASURE?

In order to ensure that schools make the shift toward the expectations for student learning embodied in the CCSS, assessments need to measure the full range of standards. Studies of previous standards and assessments have found that when there is a mismatch between standards and assessments, teachers (understandably) focus primarily on what is tested, rather than what is in the standards.[1]



The consortia are trying to build their assessments to measure a broad range of standards, in several ways. First, they are using a process called evidence-centered design that will enable them to make "claims" about student performance that are directly related to the CCSS. (For example, the PARCC English language arts assessments are expected to indicate whether students can "read and comprehend a range of sufficiently complex texts independently," while Smarter Balanced shows whether students can read "closely and analytically to comprehend a range of increasingly complex literary and informational texts"—statements taken directly from the CCSS.)

In addition, the consortia assessments are expected to include performance tasks that take students several hours to complete and require them to write extensively. These tasks will ask students to analyze a range of documents, draw conclusions based on the evidence they find, and write an argument that cites that evidence. These tasks are designed to measure critical thinking and communications skills that cannot be gauged effectively through multiple-choice questions. A study of current state tests has found that very few items measure high levels of cognitive challenge; by contrast, studies of nations that perform well on the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) have found that those nations place much more of an emphasis on performance tasks that measure higher-level competencies.[2]

The consortia assessments are also expected to be delivered online, taking advantage of technology to design innovative test items. For example, the Smarter Balanced assessment will be "computer-adaptive," meaning that the test questions a student sees are tailored to her abilities. That method provides more accurate information about student performance.

HOW DO THE ASSESSMENTS HELP TEACHERS?

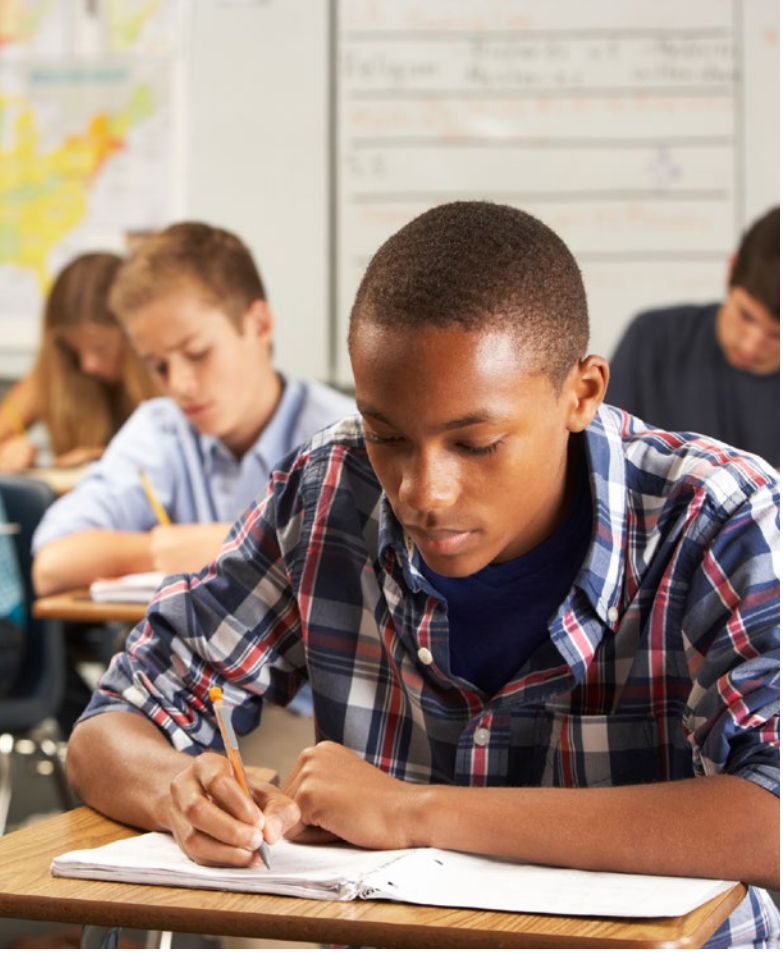
While assessments can provide valuable information for students, parents, and policymakers, perhaps their greatest value is in the information they can provide to teachers. By giving teachers an external benchmark against which to gauge student learning, the assessments can help teachers identify strengths and areas where students need additional help, and enable them to adjust instruction accordingly.

The consortia assessments will help teachers by providing optional interim and benchmark assessments that they can use during the course of the year to track student progress. These assessments will be aligned to the standards, unlike the interim tests currently in use in many districts.

The consortia are also building digital libraries to provide additional tools for teachers. These will include model content frameworks to help teachers construct curricula aligned to the standards, sample lesson plans, and other materials.

HOW DO THE ASSESSMENTS HELP STUDENTS AND PARENTS?

Research on student learning shows that students learn best when the expectations for their knowledge and skills are clear.[3] Standards help provide clear expectations by spelling out what students should know and be able to do; assessments help make those expectations concrete by laying out exactly how students should demonstrate what they know and can do.



The consortia are making expectations transparent in a number of ways. Both consortia have already produced and posted sample test items and performance tasks on their websites. They plan to release test items each year so students can have a continual supply of examples to look toward.

Parents, too, need information from assessments to get a clear idea of how their children are performing, and the consortia are expected to provide information that was not available from previous state tests. First, both consortia are identifying the level of performance students need to demonstrate in order to enter college courses without the need for remediation. That is, the test scores will indicate whether high school students are ready for college and careers, and whether students in early grades are on a trajectory to be college and career ready by the time they graduate. That is a first for testing programs.

In addition, for the first time the assessments will enable parents to compare student performance across state lines. Parents in Raleigh, North Carolina, will know how their children's scores compare with students from Charleston, South Carolina. Parents in upstate New York will know whether their children are performing at the same level as those in rural Maryland. Such information is particularly important in a rapidly globalizing world.

HOW MUCH DO THE ASSESSMENTS COST?

Assessments currently total $1.7 billion, or $65 per pupil, according to a report from the Brookings Institution.[4] (This amount, the report notes, represents just one-fourth of 1 percent of total spending on education.) Spending on testing varies widely by state, however, from $13 per pupil in Oregon to $105 per pupil in Hawaii.

The PARCC assessments are expected to cost $29.50 per pupil, about the median of what PARCC states currently spend on tests; Smarter Balanced assessments are expected to cost $22.50 per pupil ($27.30 if states buy the formative and interim assessments as well). This is equal to or less than what two-thirds of consortium states currently spend on testing. The costs reflect the fact that these assessments will not be exclusively multiple choice and will require some human scoring, which is more expensive than machine scoring.

Some states that currently spend less than the consortia's estimates have expressed concerns about the increases and said that they might seek alternatives. But a report by the Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education found that states could afford higher-quality assessments by cutting back on the interim and benchmark assessments they currently administer, which are not tied to the CCSS and provide only limited information on

student progress toward the standards.[5] The report also points out that the consortia have taken advantage of economies of scale and are able to produce higher-quality assessments at lower cost than states would be able to build on their own.

ENSURING QUALITY

While state policymakers are right to be concerned about the costs of new assessments, they also need to look at the other side of the balance sheet and examine the benefits. In many cases, current state tests have not provided the kind of information that teachers, parents, and policymakers need, and have at times led to the narrowing of instruction. As experiences in high-performing nations have shown, high-quality assessments can support improved teaching and learning.[6]

A group of twenty of the nation's leading testing experts released a set of criteria for high-quality assessments. These include

- measurement of higher-order cognitive skills;
- high-fidelity assessment of critical abilities;
- standards that are internationally benchmarked;
- use of items that are instructionally sensitive and educationally valuable; and
- assessments that are valid, reliable, and fair.

Separately, the Council of Chief State School Officers issued a set of principles for high-quality assessment. According to the document, these assessments

- are aligned with college- and career-ready standards;
- yield valuable reports on student progress;
- adhere to best practices in test administration;
- provide accessibility to all students.

State officials should use these criteria and examine proposed assessments against them as they make their decisions in the next year. The choices they make are critical. States have made commitments to students by setting standards that expect all students to graduate from high school prepared for college and careers. The way that states assess progress toward that goal is a vital element in their effort. High quality matters.

ENDNOTES

[1] B. Stecher and H. Borko, *Combining Surveys and Case Studies to Examine Standards-Based Educational Reform,* CSE Technical Report 565 (Los Angeles: University of California, Los Angeles, National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing, 2002).

[2] K. Yuan and V. Le, *Estimating the Percentage of Students Who Were Tested on Cognitively Demanding Items Through the State Achievement Tests* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, November 2012); L. Darling-Hammond, *Benchmarking Learning Systems: Student Performance Assessment in International Context* (Stanford, CA: Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education, 2010).

[3] L. Resnick, "From Aptitude to Effort: A New Foundation for Our Schools," *Daedalus* 124, no. 4 (fall 1995): 55–62.

[4] M. M. Chingos, *Strength in Numbers: State Spending on K–12 Assessment Systems* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, November 2012).

[5] L. Darling-Hammond and F. Adamson, *Developing Assessments of Deeper Learning: The Costs and Benefits of Using Tests That Help Students Learn* (Stanford, CA: Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education, 2013).

[6] Darling-Hammond, *Benchmarking Learning Systems.*

[7] L. Darling-Hammond et al., *Criteria for High Quality Assessment* (Stanford, CA: Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education; Chicago: University of Illinois–Chicago Learning Sciences Research Institute; and Los Angeles: University of California, Los Angeles, National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing, June 2013).

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