

Elementary and Secondary Education Act Reauthorization: Standards and Assessments

Useful Facts for the U.S. Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee Hearing
April 28, 2010

Under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), currently titled No Child Left Behind, each state sets standards and implements assessments aligned with them. Standards vary widely from state to state, and many state standards do not meet expectations for college or career readiness. Many state assessments do not measure all the knowledge and skills students need to be college and career ready. Research clearly shows that nations with high-performing education systems have a set of rigorous academic standards and aligned assessments in place that are common to all students. In the United States, a state-led effort is now under way to develop a common set of college- and career-ready standards in English language arts and mathematics, and the U.S. Department of Education is providing funds for consortia of states to develop new assessments aligned to college- and career-ready standards.

THINGS TO KNOW

The fifty states' standards set widely different expectations for student performance. In some states, standards are challenging and aligned to college and work readiness; in other states, students meet the standards and graduate from high school unprepared for college and careers.¹

- **The content students are expected to know varies from state to state. Students are unlikely to encounter the same topic if they moved to a different state in the middle of a year.**²
- **The standards vary in quality. A recent review of English language arts standards gave a grade of "A" to five states, a "B" to fifteen, a "C" to twenty-two, a "D" to four, and an "F" to four.**³
- **To be considered proficient, the level at which students are expected to achieve varies widely. In most states, the proportion of students considered proficient on state tests is quite high, while the proportion of those considered proficient on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) assessments is far lower. In a few states, the two definitions of proficiency are similar.**⁴

State assessments do not measure all of the knowledge and skills students need to know and too often focus on low-level knowledge and skills.⁵

- **Only twenty-nine states use tests that require short answers, and twenty-four states use tests that require extended responses in subjects other than English language arts. Every state uses multiple-choice tests.**⁶
- **Because of the strong influence of poor testing on instruction, the reliance on multiple-choice testing has led in many cases to an emphasis on test preparation and low-level instruction in classrooms.**⁷
- **There is little emphasis on formative assessments that can help teachers guide instruction.**

Testing is expensive, but pooling resources among states can save money.

- **States spend as much as \$1.3 billion annually on tests. But a recent study shows that, by forming consortia, states can cut the cost of testing by more than half.**⁸

FLAWS IN THE CURRENT LAW

- The current version of ESEA requires each state to set its own standards and its own definition of "proficiency," rather than college and career readiness.
- The current accountability requirements create incentives for states to raise students above the "proficient" bar, rather than measure their progress toward college and career readiness.
- There are few incentives for states to develop or implement more complex assessments that measure a broader range of knowledge and skills, and there is no funding or support for formative assessments.

RECOMMENDATIONS

A reauthorized ESEA should:

- Codify the goal of graduating all students on time, ready for college and careers.
- Support, but do not require, state adoption of state-led common core standards for college and career readiness in English language arts and mathematics.
- Ensure that accountability includes results from assessments that measure student progress toward college and career readiness.
- Support the development of comprehensive assessment systems that include a mix of measures, formative assessments, and data that informs school leaders about teacher effectiveness to support professional development.

For additional legislative recommendations, visit
<http://www.all4ed.org/files/ESEAREcs.pdf>.

¹ B. Rothman, "Common Standards: The Time Is Now" (Washington, DC: Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009).

² A. Porter, M. Polikoff, and J. Smithson, "Is There a de Facto National Curriculum?: Evidence from State Standards" paper prepared for the National Research Council Workshop on Assessing the Role of K–12 Academic Standards in States, http://www7.nationalacademies.org/cfe/Porter_Smithson%20State%20Standards%20Paper_Tables.pdf (accessed October 28, 2009).

³ C. E. Finn Jr., M. Petrilli, and L. Julian, *The State of State Standards 2006* (Washington, DC: Thomas B. Fordham Institute, 2006).

⁴ U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *Mapping State Proficiency Standards onto NAEP Scales: 2005–2007* (NCES 2010-456) (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2009).

⁵ Alliance for Excellent Education, "Principles for a Comprehensive Assessment System," <http://all4ed.org/files/ComprehensiveAssessmentSystem.pdf> (accessed April 19, 2010).

⁶ Editorial Projects in Education, "Fresh Course, Swift Current," *Education Week* 29, no. 17 (2010).

⁷ L. Darling-Hammond and R. Pecheone, "Reframing Accountability: Using Performance Assessments to Focus Learning," in *Meaningful Measurement: The Role of Assessments in Improving High School Education in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. L. Pinks, 25–54 (Washington, DC: Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009).

⁸ B. Topol, J. Olson, and E. Roerber, *The Cost of New Higher Quality Assessments: A Comprehensive Analysis of the Potential Costs for Future State Assessments* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University, Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education, 2010).