

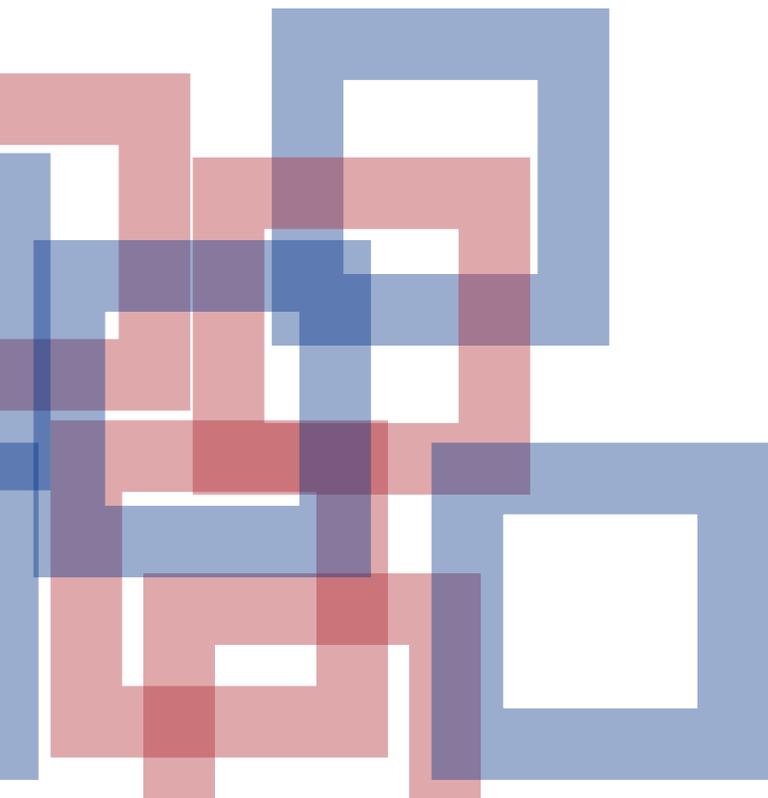
# Assessments & The Every Student Succeeds Act

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High-quality assessments are vital for ensuring a sound and equitable education for all students. Tests are used to measure what students know and can do, and this information is very important for both instructional and accountability purposes. This brief, which should be read as a complement to *High-Quality College and Career Ready Assessments*, provides an overview of the main assessment provisions contained within the *Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA)*.

Since the passage of the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB)*, standardized test scores have been used as the principal metric for evaluating student achievement and school effectiveness. The strong emphasis that NCLB placed on test data and accountability helped fuel a sense of urgency regarding the need to raise standards and boost the performance of all students.<sup>1</sup> Yet this elevated focus on test scores also led to concerns among stakeholders that the curriculum had been unduly narrowed, that valuable time was being taken away from teaching and learning, and that the pressures associated with high-stakes testing were responsible for a host of other unintended and counterproductive effects.<sup>2</sup>

In response to such criticisms, ESSA takes steps to reduce the number of unnecessary, duplicative, or burdensome tests being administered in our nation's schools.<sup>3</sup> ESSA also offers a series of new flexibilities to be used for the development of high-quality assessments that better meet the needs of students. These changes to the law present state policymakers with a valuable opportunity to revisit and improve state assessment systems.



## What's the same?

There are a number of ways in which ESSA's testing provisions match those associated with NCLB. Examples of notable similarities between NCLB and ESSA are listed below.

-  Each state is required to implement high-quality, valid, and reliable annual assessments, which must be aligned with state standards.
-  Every child's progress must be measured in reading/language arts and mathematics (each year in grades 3-8 and once more in high school) and in science (one time in each grade span: 3-5, 6-9, 10-12).
-  The assessments administered by each state must allow for the disaggregation of results at the state, district, and school levels by each of the following subgroups: economically disadvantaged, racial/ethnic status, children with disabilities, and English learners.
-  ESSA includes three new subgroups for data reporting: homeless status, status as a child in foster care, and status as a child with a parent serving in the military.
-  States are required to test no less than 95 percent of all students and 95 percent of all students in each subgroup.
-  Assessments should include multiple up-to-date measures of student academic achievement, including higher-order thinking skills and understanding.
-  ESSA is more explicit than NCLB about the use of multiple measures, listing the use of portfolios, projects, and extended performance tasks as options for partial delivery.

## What's changed?

Although many of the testing provisions parallel those associated with NCLB, ESSA also contains several new requirements concerning student assessments. Some notable examples of shifts within the new law are listed below.

-  ESSA caps the total number of students with the most significant cognitive disabilities who can be tested using the alternate assessment at one percent. (Though the final regulations for student assessments permit states to request a waiver of the one percent cap, the law requires that such waivers should be reserved for only exceptional situations.)
-  ESSA Title I requires each state to include an annual assessment of the English proficiency of all English learners as part of its accountability system. Formerly, provisions pertaining to assessments for English learners were listed under Title III of NCLB.
-  The authority to determine how test scores should be used for accountability purposes has devolved from the federal government back to the state level.

# New Flexibilities

ESSA encourages states to look for ways to eliminate unnecessary assessments, thus reducing the amount of time spent testing. In addition, the law affords states and local districts greater discretion when it comes to the design of assessments. A fuller description of some of the new flexibilities offered in ESSA are outlined below.

## Flexibility to Administer a Locally Selected, Nationally-Recognized High School Assessment

### What is it?

ESSA allows local school districts to use nationally-recognized high school assessments in lieu of their statewide high school assessments.

### Decision Point

States must decide whether to permit the use of nationally-recognized high school assessments by local districts for federal accountability purposes. If permitted to use such assessments by the state, local leaders must decide whether to pursue this option.

### More Details

- » ESSA assessment regulations provide the following definition of a nationally-recognized assessment: “[The assessment] must be in use in multiple States and recognized by institutions of higher education in those or other States for the purpose of entry or placement in those institutions.”
- » Examples of nationally-recognized assessments include the ACT and the SAT.
- » Any district that administers a nationally-recognized assessment must use the same test in all of its high schools.
- » States must ensure that any nationally-recognized assessment administered is aligned with state standards, meets the same technical quality requirements as the state assessment, and generates results that are valid and reliable for all students and each subgroup of students.
- » Local districts that intend to use a nationally-recognized high school assessment must first consult with stakeholders and notify parents.

## Flexibility to Eliminate Double Testing in the 8th Grade

### What is it?

Students who take advanced mathematics courses during the eighth grade are now permitted to take the high school end-of-course assessment in the place of the eighth grade statewide assessment. (Such students used to be required to take both tests.)

### Decision Point

States must decide whether to exempt eighth graders who are taking advanced mathematics courses from being double tested.

### More Details

- » For states that choose to take advantage of this flexibility, the results from the advanced mathematics assessments may be used as an academic indicator within their accountability systems.
- » Participating states must describe (in their state plans) the strategies that will be used to ensure that every student is provided an opportunity to be prepared for and take advanced mathematics coursework in middle school.

# New Flexibilities

## Flexibility to Develop and Administer Computer-Adaptive Assessments.

**What is it?** ESSA authorizes the development and use of computer-adaptive tests (CATs) by the states.

**Decision Point** States must decide whether to sanction the use of CATs in lieu of pencil-and-paper assessments.

### More Details

- » Because CATs allow for questions that assess above and below the grade level in which a student is enrolled, this type of assessment may allow for a more accurate measurement of learning.
- » The use of CATs can also help reduce the number of test items that a student needs to answer in order to measure his or her proficiency and growth.
- » ESSA requires that CATs produce summative scores that measure performance against the grade level academic achievement standards for the enrolled grade of the test-takers.
- » The summative test scores produced by CATs must be reported based on the achievement levels for the enrolled grade of students, both in the aggregate and disaggregated by student subgroup.

## Flexibility to Administer Multiple Statewide Interim Assessments.

**What is it?** ESSA offers the flexibility to administer multiple statewide interim assessments during the course of the academic year. The scores from these interim assessments are to be combined to generate summative scores for students.

**Decision Point** States must decide whether to use the combined scores from a series of interim assessments for federal accountability purposes.

### More Details

- » This flexibility allows for the gathering of multiple data points across time.
- » The law requires that these interim assessments must result in a single summative score that provides valid and reliable information on student growth or achievement.

ESSA includes federal grants for a range of assessment activities,<sup>a</sup> including the option to conduct a state assessment system audit. ESSA also offers the opportunity for up to seven states to establish an innovative assessment system.

## State Option to Conduct Assessment System Audit

### What is it?

Federal grant funding is available to states for auditing their statewide assessment systems and ensuring that local educational agencies audit their local assessments.

### Decision Point

States must decide whether to apply for funding to conduct an audit of their assessment systems.

### More Details

States that receive ESSA audit grants must adhere to the following requirements:

- » State assessment audits must include the schedule for the administration of all current statewide assessments and the purpose of each of these assessments.
- » The audits must also gather feedback from stakeholders, including teachers and school leaders, on how assessment data are used and reported, the amount of time spent on assessments, and the tests that they consider to be unnecessary or duplicative.
- » The audits must include a plan for improving and streamlining state assessment systems.
- » In addition, the audits must provide the same information as listed above for local education agencies' local assessments.

## State Option to Establish an Innovative Assessment System

### What is it?

ESSA offers the opportunity for as many as seven state educational agencies (SEAs), working individually or as members of a consortium (of no more than four states), to establish innovative assessment systems over an initial period of three years.

### Decision Point

States must decide whether to apply for the opportunity to establish and pilot innovative approaches to student assessments.

### More Details

This innovative assessment pilot is subject to a number of conditions:

- » Though the innovative assessment system may be administered in a subset of districts initially, SEAs that participate should plan to scale up the new assessments (within five years) so that they take the place of the statewide tests.
- » The SEAs may elect to develop innovative assessments for all required grades and subjects, or only for a subset of them.
- » Results from the innovative assessments must be equally rigorous and comparable to the statewide assessments. In other words, all students who perform similarly should meet the same academic achievement level regardless of the test that they take, the school they attend, or the district in which they reside.
- » The innovative assessments must cover the full breadth and depth of state academic standards and must be valid and reliable for all students, including English learners and students with disabilities.
- » Participating SEAs must provide supports for teachers, parents, and students.
- » There is no federal money tied to the innovative assessment pilot.

<sup>a</sup> Examples of "assessment activities" funded under this part of the law include the development of state assessments and standards, the administration of assessments, developing or improving assessments for English learners, improving the alignment of assessments with curricula and instructional materials, and developing assessments for children with disabilities.

The framers of ESSA intend for the law to kick-start the next generation of assessments. But what are states already doing when it comes to innovative approaches to assessment? The examples below offer three snapshots.

## Competency-Based Assessments

New Hampshire's Performance Assessment of Competency Education (NH PACE) pilot offers an example of a "competency-based" approach to instruction and student assessment. Under NH PACE, which was originally authorized by the US Department of Education in 2015, a set of pilot districts have been experimenting with locally-developed, performance-based assessments tied to grade and course competencies.

The NH Pace assessments have been designed to support the goal of college and career readiness through real-world situations. For example, in mathematics, students might participate in a simulation of the car buying process by analyzing data on loans. In English Language Arts (ELA), students might analyze a range of media portrayals of the same event.

NH PACE also maintains the use of the Smarter Balanced Assessment for ELA and mathematics (once each at the elementary and middle school levels) and the SAT (in high school), thus combining local assessments with state requirements.

The NH PACE pilot provided the inspiration for ESSA's innovative assessment pilot.

For more information on NH PACE click [here](#).

## Through-Course Assessments

Through-course assessments (TCAs) provide an alternative to traditional end-of-year tests. Rather than being tested on a year's worth of content on one day, TCAs allow student learning to be assessed over time using a series of interim assessments. The scores from these tests are then combined to create a summative score. ESSA authorizes the use of TCAs by the states for federal accountability purposes.

There are no examples of states currently using TCAs. However, the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) is in the process of piloting the use of interim assessments in fifth-grade mathematics and sixth-grade ELA.

Students attending schools that are participating in this pilot take three "NC Check-In" assessments throughout the school year and a stand-alone summative assessment at the end of the year.

The Check-In assessments serve as state-produced benchmark tests, which are meant to provide educators with data that can be used to inform their instruction and provide targeted assistance to students.

At the current time, NC Check-In scores are not combined to create a summative score. Moreover, there is [no plan to replace the EOGs with the check-in interim assessments](#).

For more information on NC Check-In click [here](#).

# Innovative Assessments in Action

## Computer Adaptive Testing

Computer adaptive tests (CATs) are computer-based assessments that tailor the test items that are administered based on the test taker's responses. In other words, if a student answers a question correctly, the subsequent test item will be more difficult. Conversely, if the test taker provides an incorrect answer, the level of difficulty is adjusted and the next question will be easier.

The Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) has been using CATs since 2015. Some of the advantages of CATs listed by SBAC on their [website](#) include the following:

- » More efficient
- » More secure
- » More accurate
- » Faster results

ESSA authorizes the development and use of CATs by the states.

## Looking Ahead

Assessments are an integral part of schooling; testing is necessary for gauging both student learning and school performance. Nevertheless, the concerns raised by stakeholders about the amount of time that students spend taking tests are legitimate. Assessments should help inform instruction and guide improvement, but they should not become the main focus of a child's education.

Policymakers need to find ways to promote the use of high-quality assessments while ensuring that the tests administered in schools provide meaningful data and do not detract from the goal of a well-rounded education for every student. ESSA provides an opportunity to focus on these goals and develop assessment systems that better meet the needs of students. Performance-based assessments, computer-adaptive tests, and through-course assessments all show promise as possible replacements, or supplements, to pencil-and-paper assessments. It remains to be seen whether more states will embrace the flexibilities offered through ESSA to reimagine and redesign their testing systems.

## | References |

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- <sup>2</sup> **Hart, R., Casserly, M., Uzzell, R., Palacios, M., Corcoran, A., & Spurgeon, L.** (2015). Student testing in America's great city schools: An inventory and preliminary analysis. Council of the Great City Schools. Available at: <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED569198>
- Ladd, H. F.** (2017). No Child Left Behind: A Deeply Flawed Federal Policy. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*.
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