

POLICY ISSUE BRIEF: HIGH-STAKES ASSESSMENT

Issue at a Glance

The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 to expand testing requirements and accountability provisions based on assessment outcomes with a focus on students from low-income families. The goal was to align instruction to academic standards, improve student achievement, close achievement gaps, strengthen state education departments, and support libraries and other educational resources. The most recent ESEA reauthorization in 2015, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), largely decouples standardized testing and accountability measures giving states more control with an emphasis on standardized testing and data reporting.

ESSA requires states to identify and create improvement plans for low-performing schools, using evidence-based strategies, mandates annual testing in math and reading (grades 3–8 and once in high school) and testing in science, with data disaggregated by student subgroups (special education, English learners, race/ethnicity). Included in the law is an aim to increase diverse and innovative teaching models such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL).

However, criticism centers on its reliance of a single test score as an assessment of student performance, one that does not consider broader skills, creativity, and individual needs, leading to inaccurate measurement or remediation rather than enrichment. More emphasis placed on a single test result encourages “teaching to the test” and “narrowing” the curriculum, activities that deny each student—especially high-need students—a full educational experience. High-stakes tests are frequently used for grade advancement, as barriers to graduation, and for rewarding or punishing students, teachers, principals, schools, districts, and states based on test performance.

National Principals Association Position

- The development of high-quality assessments must include comprehensive assessment methods, including portfolios, projects, and classroom-based evaluations, as alternatives or supplements to high-stakes testing.
- No decision, such as graduation, retention, or tracking of students should be based on a single data point or a single test. The focus of education must be on academic learning and growth as opposed to an isolated performance on a single assessment.
- A comprehensive assessment system measures growth toward mastery of state standards and a student’s capacity to:
 - Transfer and adapt learning, from application in one situation to new situations;
 - Analyze and synthesize standards-related content; and
 - Create new content beyond standards-based materials.

- High-quality assessments must include diagnostic formative and evaluative summative mechanisms to measure student progress and instructional program efficacy.
 - They include multiple structures and strategies that inform instruction, guide professional development, target intervention efforts, and support student readiness for success in postsecondary education and training.
 - They provide balanced measures of a student's capacity in the foundational functions (recall, recognize, comprehend, apply in context, and follow routines) and the more complex functions (analyze, synthesize, compare, critique, investigate, prove, explain, and create), which more appropriately assesses a student's progress toward achieving college and career readiness.

Recommendations for Federal Policymakers

- Seek comments from school leaders on assessment development and alternatives.
- Conduct research on the consequences of high-stakes testing and its impact on the promotion, retention, and evaluation of students, teachers, principals, schools, and school districts.
- Require reporting from state assessments by student subgroups, including gender, race/ethnicity, income, disability, and English language proficiency.
- Base any accountability system designed to measure school and/or state performance on multiple measures of student growth and learning.
- Provide resources and technical assistance to states to support the development of appropriate and effective assessment systems.

Recommendations for State Policymakers

- End the practice of using a single high-stakes test for the purpose of determining student graduation or advancement, measuring school performance and comparison between schools and districts.
- Invest in high-quality assessments that contain fewer multiple-choice items and more constructed responses that require students to apply key concepts to unique situations.
- Evaluate and review assessment systems and tools to ensure that they are accurately and fairly measuring student achievement toward college and career readiness standards providing valuable data to inform teaching and learning.
- Clearly articulate to school districts, principals, teachers, students, and parents how state assessment results will be used.
- Provide reporting from state assessments by student subgroups, including gender, race/ethnicity, income, disability, and English language proficiency.
- Provide adequate resources to schools and school districts to ensure reliable testing methods and assessments.
- Annually review the time spent by school districts on conducting state and local assessments.

Recommendations for School Districts

- Clearly articulate to principals, teachers, students, and parents how state assessment and local assessment results will be used.
- Monitor assessment results by student subgroups to ensure schools receive the resources and instruction necessary to enhance student learning and eliminate achievement gaps.
- Annually review and monitor time spent by schools conducting state and local assessments.
- Provide the necessary resources to schools to implement assessments and provide interventions for students to meet the appropriate academic benchmarks.

Recommendations for Principals

- Allocate adequate resources to intervention strategies for students and schools to improve teaching and learning. Provide principals and teachers with professional development opportunities focused on how to optimize each student's learning based on the results of instructionally supportive assessments.
- Clearly articulate to teachers, students, and parents how state assessment and local assessment results will be used.
- Ensure appropriate systemic interventions are in place to improve teaching and learning schoolwide by developing a clear set of expectations and a common language around instructional practice.
- Ensure teachers are provided with and obtain professional learning opportunities to interpret assessment data and use it to effectively inform instruction.
- Support teachers and other instructional staff to develop and integrate into their instruction ongoing diagnostic assessments to continuously identify students who are not ready to proceed so they can provide these students with additional support and assistance.
- Integrate the data from teacher assessments and standardize assessments to guide the use of interventions (tutoring, after-school programs, and mandated summer schools) as part of the school's plan of action.
- Monitor the use and evaluation of assessment results by student subgroup to ensure each student receives appropriate interventions where needed.