

WHITE PAPER

Assessment and accountability in a post-coronavirus world



Education leaders face a seemingly insurmountable challenge today: to reconsider our traditional back-to-school routines, redesign the teaching, learning, and assessment systems, and remove any related policy barriers so we can expand learning opportunities and address our communities' collective trauma. In this challenge lies great opportunity—opportunity to reimagine systems of assessment and accountability to address longstanding educational inequities and remove systemic barriers that are inherent within our assumptions about measurement, achievement, ability, and schooling. As an education community, we can establish a new era for education instead of returning to business as usual.

The US Department of Education (USED) waived federal assessment and accountability requirements for the 2019–2020 school year due to school closures in response to the coronavirus pandemic. This unavoidable decision created a problematic data gap, but canceling spring [statewide summative testing](#) also opened the door for states to consider new ways of evaluating school performance. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) is due for [reauthorization](#) next year, which provides an opportunity for lawmakers to explore how assessment systems and accountability infrastructure can better serve untapped racially/ethnically and linguistically strong communities—not just in recovery from this pandemic, but into the future.

What states can do

ASSESSMENT:

Invest in remote proctoring capabilities.

Teaching and learning will go through many changes to respond to the coronavirus pandemic and beyond, and it is likely that hybrid and blended learning are here to stay. Thus, it is possible that educators may not be able to administer tests in the typical classroom setting, and using online and/or remote proctoring will become a necessary option. There will be a variety of challenges to overcome, like test security, student privacy, and accessibility features, but they are not insurmountable. In addition to [NWEA®](#), the [Association of Test Publishers](#) and [Educational Testing Service](#) have already begun addressing such issues. In the bigger picture, this transition offers a chance for states and the education community to overcome the limits of in-person testing environments and empower educators to address student learning needs with timely, accurate, and relevant student achievement data.

Use assessments to drive equitable outcomes and ensure students can access high-quality content. Education leaders have an opportunity to refine how standardized assessments are used to address systemic inequities in learning opportunity. Assessment systems that provide [cohesion across measurement, rigorous standards, and high-quality curriculum](#) can create efficiencies that will [enable teachers to spend more time engaging students](#) and expanding instructional offerings that accelerate learning. Educators will need these data to refine broad curriculum mapping and develop instructional scaffolding in real time, so students can quickly access grade-level content. In addition, the right kind of assessment will [ensure students with disabilities are protected with accurate goals](#) for their Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) at the start of the school year. Without a system-wide assessment it will be challenging for educators and leaders to [ward against unintended](#)

[consequences](#) associated with the unprecedented and complex upcoming school year.

Prioritize innovative statewide assessment design. Comprehensive assessment data must be available to teachers, students, and families. With learning occurring across a continuum of hybrid and blended environments, state leaders need to [prioritize systems that provide timely, individualized student data, aligned with standards and summative expectations](#). Districts can work with states to rethink how statewide summative test designs can also support instructional leadership, scaffolding, and differentiated pacing through competency-based or through-year assessment models.

ACCOUNTABILITY:

Be intentional about using growth and proficiency. As states define new ways of schooling to accelerate learning under a variety of learning environments, they must consider how much growth is realistic over the course of next year and [how to weight proficiency and growth altogether](#). In the wake of the pandemic, where students could return in the fall having [lost as much as a year of learning](#), state leaders should consider the fairness of using proficiency standards set under different learning conditions for accountability purposes. That context does not mean proficiency expectations should be lowered, but rather that it is worth considering the amount of time it will take to get many learners back on pace to be college, career, and life ready.

Use seasonal learning as an opportunity to build transparency around data. Interim assessments used to measure school effectiveness illustrate seasonal learning patterns attributed to the traditional school calendar. One [NWEA research study](#) evidenced how student data from fall-to-spring growth were often different than the data based on spring-to-spring growth, a common practice under ESSA accountability plans. Using [data patterns to explore student progress related to strategic inputs](#) is one avenue for state leaders to

build transparency, communication, and trust into their school systems within an evolving context.

Consider using two-year growth to measure school efficacy and school improvement goals. Student growth data is an important step in determining the impact of spring school closures on student achievement and identifying future interventions. Even though states lack spring 2020 data, they can measure student [growth over two years instead of one](#) by using their spring 2019 and spring 2021 test data. [Research shows](#) that schools held accountable for short-term student growth are often very different than ones that would be identified for improvement under ESSA if more years of data were used. The two-year approach is applicable for different growth models and can also be disaggregated by student subgroups, an important feature for understanding how the collective trauma of a global health pandemic affects different student communities.

How the federal government can provide support

ASSESSMENT:

Fund assessment innovation aligned with distance and hybrid learning. States and districts [can use next year as an opportunity to explore innovative assessment](#) systems that meet the new bounds of distance and hybrid learning. In the wake of other disruptions to learning, we discovered [that innovation and stamina are key to getting students back on track](#) and reaching their highest potential. While programs like [IADA](#), [CGSA](#), and the [Education Stabilization Fund](#) provide some pathways, achieving a [systematic approach to high-quality innovation](#) requires targeted investments in infrastructure that supports distance and hybrid learning across the teaching, learning, and assessment systems.

Incentivize research partnerships to establish and evaluate new assessment models. By investing in these efforts, the federal government has the opportunity to lead system-wide shifts in state assessment and accountability

infrastructure. The USED can incentivize states to work in tandem with research institutions to determine optimal methods for addressing the challenges of assessment in distance and hybrid learning. For example, [statewide research partnerships are useful for the rapid design, exploration, and innovation](#) of testing features that can be eventually scaled.

ACCOUNTABILITY:

Maintain integrity to broad accountability provisions with targeted flexibilities. The USED should commit early to refraining from providing blanket waiver opportunities for spring 2021 testing due to the coronavirus pandemic. At this point, until we know whether there will be additional school closures next year, blanket waivers from ESSA and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act are [dangerous and unnecessary](#) next year and beyond. The federal government should work with individual states to apply a continuum of targeted flexibilities regarding the accountability and assessment provisions, maintaining integrity to the spirit and intent of the law while also ensuring historically underserved students remain protected.

Incentivize and elevate states promoting balanced assessment and reducing test redundancy. The [widening distribution of learning needs](#) in classrooms and the pause to traditional summative testing systems may create demand for state and local assessment systems to move closer to instruction. The federal government can take

steps like considering flexibilities for peer review standards to incentivize innovation and reducing assessment redundancy. The federal government can elevate states whose assessment systems capture student learning over time, address federal accountability requirements, and are transparent for educators and parents.

Conclusion

Many stakeholders agree that states should administer their annual statewide assessment in the spring of 2021; however, it is unclear how states should use the results in their accountability systems. One analysis found that lawmakers in [36 states introduced legislation to reduce testing between 2014 and 2019](#). However, as an education community we must follow the lead of our peers in health care and epidemiology—reasonable academic testing throughout the year will provide states, districts, schools, and educators with a picture of where our students are so they are not haphazardly resourcing and planning for teaching and learning. Statewide testing will protect students' civil right to high-quality education when school contexts are varying more than ever. The education community must be intentional about what data is needed and what is done with it.



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