

FairTest

National Center for Fair & Open Testing

Overhauling Assessment to Improve Teaching and Learning: New Opportunities under the Every Student Succeeds Act

The federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) creates valuable opportunities to replace standardized tests with performance assessments. These can promote the engagement, creativity and critical thinking skills that have been stifled by teaching to standardized tests.

States can shift to better assessments under ESSA's Innovative Assessment pilot program. They can also revise their accountability systems to match ESSA's less onerous requirements. Together, these changes will reduce pressure to boost test scores and create opportunities for schools and districts to overhaul local assessments.

Parents, teachers, students and other reform activists must organize to persuade state and local officials to transform these opportunities into policy. Communities can come together to identify what they value in curriculum, instruction, assessment, school climate and other aspects of schooling, then build new assessments on that foundation. The following recommendations are based on what we know about high-quality assessing that supports strong learning and provides evidence of student and school progress.

ESSA accountability changes provide opportunities for better assessment

States that had No Child Left Behind (NCLB) waivers no longer must judge educators by student test scores. Some have already ended the practice or reduced the weight of the scores in these evaluations. This lessens pressure to narrow curriculum and instruction to focus on tests.

ESSA also eliminates NCLB's requirement that states impose sanctions on schools based on test scores. That allows states to drop sanctions.

ESSA does require states to focus on the lowest-performing five percent of schools. They must also identify high schools that graduate less than two-thirds of their students and schools with persistently low scores by one or more identified "sub-groups." Such schools must then implement improvement plans that address the needs identified by a detailed review. *Nothing in the new federal law requires staff to be fired or schools to be closed, taken over by the state, or turned over to private management* (Klein, 2016; FairTest, 2016; ESSA, 2015).

ESSA requires states to include at least one new school quality indicator in their accountability systems, in addition to various test scores and graduation rates. States should add others to provide a more multifaceted picture of school quality and establish a

more balanced accountability structure. States are considering important indicators such as school discipline rates and climate, student engagement, grade retention and chronic absenteeism. California has implemented a local accountability system that includes eight factors (Elgart, 2016; California, 2013).

If states make good use of these options, educators need not fear putting their students, schools or careers at risk if they do not concentrate on raising test scores. Districts can replace their mandated multiple-choice and short answer tests with teacher-controlled assessing that gathers classroom-based evidence of student learning. These can also become the basis of new state systems.

Innovative Assessment Pilot

ESSA's "Innovative Assessment" program allows an initial seven states to overhaul their systems. FairTest has developed a model statewide system of local assessments. ([*Assessment Matters: Constructing Model State Systems to Replace Testing Overkill.*](#)) In this model, local educators determine the structure and content of their assessments. These can range from performance tasks rooted in inquiry- and project-based learning, with extensive student choice, to more traditional exams. Teacher-designed assessments could be supplemented with state or district-wide common tasks or limited standardized testing.

ESSA requires innovative assessment pilots to demonstrate "comparability." States must determine whether students deemed "proficient" in one district would also be "proficient" in a district with a different system. Under draft federal regulations, this requirement can be met by using primarily classroom-based evidence of student learning.

New Hampshire's Performance Assessment for Competency Education (PACE), now operating under a federal waiver from NCLB, provides one example. Participating districts administer the state exam once each in elementary, middle and high school. (ESSA allows sampling, which is preferable.) Teachers from the districts also create Common Tasks. One task each in reading and math is administered in grades without state tests.

The heart of the program is local assessing. District teachers create tasks to be administered when they fit into their curriculum. At the end of the year, teachers evaluate each of their students' overall body of work, including the local tasks. They then assign each student a proficiency level, as ESSA requires. Under ESSA, teachers would not need to create local tasks to administer as tests. They could instead rely only on each student's yearly body of evidence to assign a level.

PACE analyzes the teacher-determined proficiency levels, Common Task results, and scores from tested grades to determine comparability district-to-district and with the state exam results. Overall, the various kinds of scores are consistent. This demonstrates the feasibility of largely locally-controlled systems. Scores are also broken out by demographic groups to monitor efforts to close achievement gaps.

Assessment Matters (Neill, 2016) outlines the model system, describes PACE, and provides six examples of high-quality assessments that could be used in a state system of systems.

Resources

California Community-Based Accountability. 2013.

<http://www.lao.ca.gov/reports/2013/edu/lcff/lcff-072913.pdf> (see second part).

Elgard, M.A. 2016, September. Creating state accountability systems that help schools improve. *Phi Delta Kappan*.

Every Student Succeeds Act. 2015. <http://www.fairtest.org/ESSA-BasisForStrongerReformMovement>

FairTest. 2016. The New Federal Education Law: A Basis for a Stronger Testing Resistance and Assessment Reform Movement. <http://www.fairtest.org/ESSA-BasisForStrongerReformMovement>

Klein, A. 2016, September 27. ESSA clears out underbrush on school improvement path. *Education Week*. <http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2016/09/28/essa-clears-out-underbrush-on-school-improvement.html>

Neill, M. 2016. *Assessment Matters: Constructing Model State Systems to Replace Testing Overkill*. <http://www.fairtest.org/assessment-matters-constructing-model-state-system>