# ASSESSMENT REFORM VICTORIES 2016:

## *LESS TESTING, LOWER STAKES, BETTER LEARNING MEASURES*

**By Lisa Guisbond with Monty Neill and Bob Schaeffer**

FairTest
The National Center for Fair and Open Testing

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Public schools are opening around the nation following a wave of assessment reform victories during the past year. Grassroots campaigns by parents, educators and students, including widespread opting out and other actions, have yielded real progress.

- ***Fewer states require exit exams;***
- ***Many states delinked teacher evaluations from test scores;***
- ***Dozens of jurisdictions across the U.S. cut back the amount of required testing;***
- ***Policy-makers began to replace standardized exams with assessments that support high-quality teaching and learning***.

The new federal education law, the Every Student Succeeds Act, or ESSA, cracks the door open for states to build better systems of assessment and accountability. However, much more hard work is needed to unravel the damage caused by No Child Left Behind and win more testing policies that support learning. The 2015-2016 wave of victories puts another gust of wind in the sails of the assessment reform movement.

## Eliminating High-Stakes Testing

States reversing a decades-long trend toward high school graduation tests and moving away from the use of student test scores in teacher evaluations are among the most significant recent wins for the movement.

- The current number of graduation test states is the lowest since at least the mid-1990s. At its peak, exit exams were required by more than half the states, especially those with large populations of low-income students of color. Many teenagers were deprived of a high school diploma after doing all required schoolwork and passing all their courses, sometimes based on a point or two on a standardized exam.

- Only 15 states had graduation tests in place for the high school class of 2016, down from 27 that had or planned to have such tests. States that recently ended their graduation tests include Arkansas, Arizona, Georgia, Idaho, Minnesota, Nevada, Oregon and South Carolina. California, Pennsylvania and Rhode Island have instituted moratoria on exit exams.

- In addition to rolling back their exit exams, Alaska, Arizona, California and Georgia awarded high school diplomas retroactively to students who had failed the tests but completed all other graduation requirements.

Parents and students protest high-stakes testing in New York City. Photo Credit: Deidre McFadyen

- To win federal Race to the Top education funds or obtain waivers from No Child Left Behind, 41 states had passed laws linking teacher evaluations to student test scores. Among the negative consequences: using math or language arts scores to judge teachers in other subjects and creating hundreds of new tests solely for this purpose. In a significant national victory for assessment reformers, ESSA, the new federal education law, does not require test-based teacher evaluations. In the first months after it became law, **Hawaii**, **Utah**, **Oklahoma** and **New Hampshire** moved to delink teacher evaluations from student scores. **Louisiana, New York** and **Georgia** reduced the weight of test scores in teacher evaluations.

- Due to the recommendation of a **Connecticut** state commission established to give guidance on teacher evaluation, educators received a one-year reprieve on test score-based evaluations.

## Fewer Top-Down Mandated Tests

So far in 2016, many state legislatures and education policymakers have adopted meaningful assessment reforms in response to grassroots pressure. According to the National Conference of State Legislatures, more than 600 bills were filed this year to deal with standardized test overkill. Some passed and were signed by governors. In other cases, state commissioners of education took action to reduce testing. At the local level, a growing number of districts are also cutting back testing mandates.

- The **Kansas** State Department of Education announced in July 2016 that it would reduce by 60% the number of test questions students must answer. The goal is to cut the amount of time the average student spends taking tests from 14 hours to six. State officials said they were responding to complaints from teachers, parents and students about too much testing. “We can get quality information about where our students are — what they’ve mastered and what they haven’t — with less testing,” said Lawrence, KS, school board Vice President Shannon Kimball. “I think that’s a win-win for everybody.”

- In August, Governor Nathan Deal signed a law reducing **Georgia** testing mandates. Elementary and middle school students will now be required to take eight fewer “Milestones” tests in math, science and reading. The legislature also made optional another set of exams, the Student Learning Objectives, which measure subjects not covered by the Milestones. Georgia educators said the law means that hours or even days will be freed up for learning.

- In **Tennessee**, Education Commissioner Candice McQueen has announced that state testing requirements will be cut by 30% for the 2016-2017 school year. McQueen said the changes, which reduce testing in all subjects, were in response to feedback from teachers, parents and students. “These adjustments will give educators a greater ability to maximize rich, well-rounded instruction for all our students,” she said.

- **Dallas**, Texas, Superintendent Michael Hinojosa has announced that testing will be cut by one-third in the 2016-17 school year. “We were just testing people to death,” Hinojosa explained. Elementary and middle school students in the state’s second largest district will see most of the reductions. The schools are eliminating 41 of 109 Assessments of Course Performance, which were given twice a year to measure student growth, mostly in the elementary grades.

Student protesting high-stakes testing in Chicago.
Photo Credit: Sarah-Ji

- **Kentucky’s** largest school district, Jefferson County

around Louisville, is shrinking the volume of district-mandated exams by 35% for the coming school year. Diagnostic pre-tests will be optional. Instead, teachers and schools are being encouraged to use authentic, project-based assessments. Tammy Berlin, vice president of the Jefferson County Teachers Association, said, "I think these reductions are a start, but I don't think they are enough to create the room for deeper active learning opportunities that we need. We'd certainly like to see further reductions to create room for more project-based and presentational assessments."

- Other states that have moved to reduce testing include **Michigan, Rhode Island, New Mexico** and **Connecticut. Maryland** put a 2% cap on testing time, which will lead some districts to make cuts. Individual districts include **Tulsa, OK,** and **Hillsborough County, FL.** After a vigorous push by the **San Diego** Education Association, the San Diego Unified School District will stop collecting interim test data, making it optional for schools to give interim tests, which are typically administered multiple times during the school year.

ESSA provides funding for states and districts to evaluate the amount of testing with an eye toward reductions. Activists can use the process to push for an end to district-mandated "interim" tests or at least a major cutback.

## Assessment Alternatives that Support Learning and Teaching

The movement toward educationally sound approaches to assessment and accountability is as important as unraveling harmful test-and-punish policies. Here are a few nascent but encouraging examples.

- **New Hampshire** received an NCLB waiver to begin constructing what is intended to become a new statewide system, the ***Performance Assessment for Competency Education (PACE).*** It started with four districts in 2014-15 and will include nine in 2016-17. Ten more are preparing to join what New Hampshire expects to become part of the ESSA "innovative assessment" pilot. PACE is designed to unite rich learning, assessed locally, with federal accountability requirements. It focuses on a combination of teacher-designed common performance tasks used across districts and locally designed tasks. The assessments tap higher order thinking and problem solving while strengthening teacher capabilities. Students have a range of ways to show their knowledge and skills, many of which are not adequately covered by the state tests. Students in PACE districts only take state tests once each in elementary, middle and high school .[1]

[1] A forthcoming FairTest report looks at performance assessment models and how they fit ESSA requirements.

Student working on a science performance assessment.
Photo Credit: FairTest

- **California** is moving toward a system that looks at multiple measures of learning and school quality. Under the plan, school districts focus on eight priority areas, including school climate, parent engagement, new state academic standards and student achievement. (ESSA requires *all* states to incorporate at least one measure of school quality, beyond test scores and high school graduation rates.) The state is currently identifying reliable indicators that enable statewide comparisons of schools and districts. Districts will select other tools to measure the eight priority areas on a local basis. School report cards will illustrate how a school or district is doing on every state indicator (Resmovits, 2016).

- **Kentucky** is soliciting input from parents, students, teachers and others as it designs a new assessment and accountability system. ESSA requires all states to including meaningful public participation in system re-design. Rather than promoting competition between schools, Kentucky seeks to reduce standardized testing and look at neglected subjects like art and music when measuring student achievement. Education Commissioner Stephen Pruitt proposed a "dashboard" system to show a variety of areas in which schools are excelling and/or need improvement. The new system is slated to be in place for the 2017-18 school year, when all states must implement their new federally approved plans. The National Education Association (NEA) is also promoting a dashboard of indicators.

- **Idaho's** state board of education has given initial approval to a new approach to school accountability that would measure and report a range of school-quality indicators instead of ranking schools based on student test results. The system would report data including teacher quality, student engagement and test scores, and display them in dashboard-style. Though U.S. DoE regulations call for states to rank schools, Idaho board members said their proposed system complies with the intent of ESSA and expressed the hope that the regulations will be changed. The state board will solicit input from community members and incorporate feedback into a final proposal for submission to the legislature in the spring.

- Nine school districts in **Massachusetts** have formed a consortium to develop and implement new ways to assess students and school quality. The Massachusetts

> Consortium for Innovative Assessment (MCIA) aims to create comprehensive methods for assessing students and schools that educators can use to improve instruction and help each child grow up to be a self-reliant and skillful adult. MCIA is focusing on including two major areas. First, authentic student performance assessments that measure the real-life academic and socio-emotional skills needed in the adult world. Second, a multi-faceted approach to assessing schools that can give educators, students, parents, and other community members a clear view of school strengths and areas of needed improvement. The choice of measures will be based on what stakeholders want from their schools rather than what information happens to be readily available.

Activist parents, students and educators have good reason to be energized by these victories for less testing, lower stakes and alternative assessments. However, the achievements so far are largely modest and incremental. New threats loom from initiatives such as incessant computer-based "curriculum-embedded" tests.

To build the political power needed to win more significant legislative and policy changes, the nationwide assessment reform movement must expand and diversify. A tipping point in the battle against standardized testing overuse and misuse is on the horizon.

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