

A NEW ERA FOR EDUCATIONAL ASSESSMENT

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JOBS FOR THE FUTURE



In order to succeed in today's postindustrial society, all young people need to complete a rigorous academic curriculum that focuses on advanced content knowledge, critical thinking, and problem solving. Moreover, recent research has shown that in order to become truly ready for college and careers, students must also develop an array of personal and interpersonal competencies—such as the ability to manage their time, persevere in the face of challenges, set realistic goals, and monitor their own learning—as well as learning critical lessons about the transition to life after high school.

Nonetheless, most U.S. schools continue to measure students' progress by testing them on a narrow set of discrete reading and math skills. Indeed, these are just about the only indicators of student achievement that “count” in federal and state accountability systems.

In this paper, David T. Conley, well-known for his influential research on college readiness, argues that the time is ripe for the nation's schools to make a major shift in their approach to assessing student progress, from an overreliance on standardized tests of math and reading to the use of multiple measures—many of them low stakes—that combine to give much more robust information about young people's readiness for college and careers.

The new Common Core assessments—Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) and Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC)—take a step in the right direction by including items that require high level analysis and writing. However, Conley notes, PARCC and SBAC have serious limitations, too, in that they focus exclusively on math and language arts, and do nothing to assess other subject areas and developmental skills.

Even more promising are current efforts by a number of states—including California, Kentucky, Oregon, New Hampshire, New York, and Ohio—to invest in new models of performance assessment, which gauge students' progress by requiring them to produce extensive written work,

give public presentations, complete challenging projects, or otherwise demonstrate the depth of their knowledge and skills. In the 1990s, several states developed such approaches, but they were mostly abandoned after the passage of No Child Left Behind, which emphasized the use of standardized tests. Thanks to a new level of flexibility on the part of the U.S. Department of Education, many states are now giving performance assessment another look.

But the most effective policy strategy for the coming years, argues Conley, would be for states and the federal government to encourage the use of multiple measures of student progress, including a combination of PARCC and SBAC-style achievement tests, state performance assessments, and any number of low-stakes measures designed to help teachers gauge students' various needs. Such a balanced "system" of assessments will still allow states to hold schools accountable for meeting high standards, but instead of giving top priority to high-stakes math and reading tests, they will aim above all else to provide teachers with information they can use to improve instruction.

Recommendations for federal, state, and local policymakers:

- **Encourage states and districts** to develop clear, consistent definitions of college and career readiness that encompass the broader set of knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to succeed in college and work.
 - **Support efforts** to create reliable and scalable measures of certain nontraditional—but critical—capacities and skills, such as problem solving, goal-setting, self-motivation, and perseverance.
 - **Give states flexibility** as they develop, refine, and build capacity around their new assessment systems, affording them the time needed to introduce those systems to teachers and school leaders, as well as time to work out kinks in assessment rollout and use for accountability purposes.
 - **Provide clear guidelines** as to which assessment results will be used for accountability purposes and which will be used to inform instruction and improvement. It may be tempting for states to attach high stakes to measures of students' goal-setting, ability to work in teams, persistence, and other personal/social competencies. But such measures are not currently reliable enough—nor attentive enough to individual and cultural differences—to be used in this way.
- **Ensure that K-12 and higher education data systems take advantage of new technological capacities** to store and manage complex assessment data, while guarding student privacy. This could be encouraged through federal support for enhanced state data systems, and through state-level efforts to upgrade and connect data systems across the K-12 and higher education pipeline.
 - **Support the development of valid and reliable measures of college and career readiness.** Waivers from the Elementary and Secondary Education Act have allowed states to explore new forms of assessment. However, the federal government could do much more to support such work, particularly by further encouraging states to look to high-quality metrics beyond reading and math when trying to assess college and career readiness.
 - **Use the National Assessment of Educational Progress to field-test more complex problem-solving performance tasks** and to set a baseline across states, in order to gauge students' problem-solving skills over time. NAEP's design makes it an especially good tool for capturing this type of information.
 - **Ensure that a broad base of stakeholders are included in the design and development of new systems of assessment,** including teachers, postsecondary education, state policymakers, and business leaders. Insist that statewide assessment systems, including PARCC and SBAC, have built-in review and updating mechanisms to ensure they continue to refine their tools and processes, fix problems, and keep up with technological advances.

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