Student Assessment Inventory for School Districts

Across the country, educators, parents and students are saying that there is too much testing in our schools and that testing is taking valuable time away from teaching and learning. These concerns are legitimate and merit attention. School district officials have the opportunity to respond to concerns about over-testing by leading a conversation among educators and the broader community that directly addresses the amount of testing – and points the way toward a more coherent, educationally-sound approach to assessment.

This *Student Assessment Inventory for School Districts* is a tool district leaders can use to take stock of their assessments and assessment strategy, and do so from a student perspective. The tool supports a process by which districts evaluate the assessments students are taking, determine the minimum testing necessary to serve essential diagnostic, instructional and accountability purposes, and work to ensure that every district-mandated test is of high quality, is providing the information needed for specific school and district purposes, and is supported by structures and routines so that assessment results are actually used and action steps taken that will help students. We encourage local district leaders who use this inventory to discuss the outcome with parents and the school board. What tests have been eliminated? How will the remaining tests be used, and why are they important?

DISTRICT ASSESSMENT CONTEXT

Tests play a critical role in improving teaching and learning. They provide consistent measures that allow teachers, parents, and students themselves to monitor student progress, understand specific strengths and weaknesses, and set learning goals. They help teachers identify who needs support, who needs enrichment, and what changes in classroom instruction are needed. They inform teachers' understanding of how effectively they are advancing student learning. And, they can provide meaningful learning experiences for students. However, while tests are valuable, each test takes time and resources that could be used for other activities in the school day. Thus, it is essential to ensure that every assessment is used for an important purpose and leads to actions intended to improve student learning.

In too many districts, there is simply too much testing. In addition to statewide assessments, districts often require many more districtwide assessments. Students must also take classroom-based tests and quizzes that are core to the instructional process. Students take still other tests for college admissions, placement or scholarships. Over time, school districts or individual schools may add assessments championed by a specific district leader, embedded in new instructional materials, or in response to a specific need such as evaluating teachers without ever taking a comprehensive look at what has outlived its usefulness. As a result, districts may have a plethora of diagnostic, formative, interim and summative assessments as well as assessments for special populations. However, districts have significant control over which tests to administer and the amount of time devoted to testing. For example, a recent study looking at district-mandated tests (excluding tests for special

populations) across 12 urban districts showed that students in the districts with the most district-mandated testing spent 3.3 times as much time on testing as students in the districts with the least district-mandated testing.[1] Unfortunately, district choices are sometimes made without an explicit overall assessment strategy, without a clear understanding of the overall testing burden within the district and without an in-depth analysis of whether the time and resource costs of testing are justified by the importance of the information or experience the test provides and the action steps taken as a result.

Of course, along with test quantity, test quality is critical. To serve students and educators well, tests must be aligned to standards, meet criteria of high quality, and provide useful and timely results. Equally important, the approach to testing should be crafted in the context of the district's overall strategy to improve student learning. Within that context, districts must consider what insight they will gain from each assessment, who will use the information, what actions they will take, how they will be supported to take action, and how student learning will improve as a result. Looking across all the assessments used in the district, a consideration is whether the overall array of tests is as limited and efficient as possible while obtaining essential information that will be used for improvement. The bottom line is that any time and resources spent on district assessments should provide valuable information and experiences that are not available on the state large scale assessment or in the classroom through daily instructional activities.

TRANSITION TO COLLEGE- AND CAREER-READY STANDARDS AND ASSESSMENTS

States' and districts' transitions to new college- and career-ready assessments is heightening the urgency to review district assessments. Benchmarked to the demands of entry-level careers, freshman-level college courses, and workforce training programs, these new standards focus on the critical-

thinking, problem-solving, and analytical skills students need to be successful. As states move to new statewide summative assessments aligned to these new standards, districts need to ensure that their district-mandated assessments are the best possible in this new context. Moreover, many new diagnostic, interim and curriculum-embedded assessments are being developed — by the state assessment consortia developing statewide assessments, by test publishers and by instructional materials developers – that are said to align to the new standards and usefully complement statewide assessments. And, current assessments used widely by districts are being updated and presented as now aligned with the new standards. Thus, districts now have both additional options for assessment that may better meet their needs and an obligation to examine carefully the new claims of alignment and quality put forward by test vendors.

WHY A DISTRICT ASSESSMENT INVENTORY

Achieve has long recommended that leaders take stock of what tests students are required to take and determine what these tests are designed to do. Such a review will build a shared understanding of what purposes the assessments are designed to serve, point out gaps and redundancies overall and for specific populations of students, identify lack of alignment with standards or low quality, illuminate the costs of testing in the district, and highlight which assessments provide results that are useful to teachers and students and which do not. States should take a role in this area, both in examining the state assessments and in partnering with districts to streamline the amount of testing and increase the coherence. However, district leaders can best foster a conversation about the assessment strategy that is appropriate for their own district and lead an inventory process that streamlines the amount of testing required and works to ensure that the assessments that are in place are supported by structures and routines so that assessment results are actually used for improvement.

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[1]TeachPlus. 2014. *The Student and the Stopwatch: How Much Time do American Students Spend on Testing?*

Taking stock and then taking action requires significant district commitment. A superintendent and/or school board must commit to the process and timeline, frame the purpose and importance of the effort for staff and district stakeholders, and support staff in prioritizing the work.

While a suggested process for using the assessment inventory is described below, a few overarching issues leaders should keep in mind are:

- The inventory tool is only one element of a thoughtful longer process that both engages productively with concerns about testing and leads to real changes in testing time. The process begins before the inventory with recognizing stakeholder concerns and framing the usefulness of an inventory process. It continues afterwards with implementation of recommendations.

- The inventory tool is a suggested template, but districts are free to modify the tool to better meet their needs.

- The inventory is not a one-time event. Districts should regularly re-examine their assessments in light of changing district needs and improvements in available assessments.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

The assessment inventory tool envisions a four-stage process in districts: Reflect and Plan, Conduct the Inventory, Analyze the Inventory and Make Recommendations. The guiding questions below are designed to assist districts in going through each of these stages.

School districts can carry out each of these stages in different ways, using different individuals or groups based on the specific district context. Some districts may conduct the initial planning and information collection within the central office, either using internal staff or consultants, and then work with a broader stakeholder team, including school leaders, teachers, parents and students, to refine and analyze the information and make recommendations to the district superintendent and school board based on the results. Some districts may begin the initial planning with a broader team, assign certain pieces of the assessment program to members of the team for information collection (e.g., district-required benchmark assessments), and then compile the results. They may then develop recommendations within the central office and seek feedback on the recommendations from the team members. Other districts may use hybrids of these approaches or other approaches.

Regardless of the approach, district leaders should ensure that they have the necessary district staff involved. While the appropriate district staff will vary, the expertise and perspectives of those responsible for curriculum and instruction, for assessments and accountability, and for heavily tested content areas are likely to be essential. The same is true of staff members who work closely with teachers in analyzing data to improve instruction (e.g., principals, lead teachers, data coaches). Given that the inventory analysis and recommendations may have implications for professional development, data management or budget, among other areas, district staff in those areas may need to be engaged as well. Because decisions about what assessments to use and how their use is supported are often made within district "silos," it is particularly important that the team crosses offices and responsibilities to ensure a holistic approach. Districts should also consider thoughtful processes for authentic input from teachers, parents and students. Finally, it is likely to be beneficial to start the process by grounding district staff and stakeholders in a common understanding of and common language for discussing assessment.

A. Reflect and Plan

Districts (or teams) should answer the following questions to plan the inventory:

1. What is the district context in which the inventory is being considered (e.g., implementation of new standards and/or assessments, parent or school board concern about testing load)?

2. What are the objectives of the student assessment inventory?

3. What would indicate to the district that the process was a success?

4. What individual or individuals are responsible for the success of this process?

5. Will the district bring in an external party/consultant to assist with the inventory?

6. How will the results of the inventory be communicated to district policymakers (e.g., school board), school leaders, parents, students and the community?

7. Who will collect the information needed for the inventory table? How will they access this information?

8. How will the district communicate to necessary parties that these individuals will be collecting this information?

9. What is the scope of the inventory? Which assessment should be included and excluded from the inventory table?[2] Based on this scope, what information is needed?

10. What groups should be convened or surveyed to help provide answers (e.g., groups of teachers and other assessment users)? How will they be convened (e.g., in focus groups by grade level or subject) and/or surveyed?

11. What individual or entity has the authority to act on the results of the inventory? Who will be making the recommendations?

12. Are there other districts with whom it would be useful to collaborate during this process?

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[2] It is suggested, for example, that districts exclude teacher-created formative assessments that are used in classrooms (e.g., quizzes, end-of-unit tests).

B. Conduct the Inventory

The Inventory Table is designed to capture information the district collects about the assessments administered to students in the district. The Inventory Table begins on page 8. It is openly licensed, which allows for modifications as needed to suit the district's goals and context. For instance, the district may put all assessments in one inventory table or use multiple tables categorized by grade level, subject or time administered. The district could also translate the table into another electronic format or online tool. It could transpose the rows and columns. It could also create a "calendar" view based on the time assessments are administered. Please see FAQ on page 10 for additional guidance.

C. Analyze the Inventory

The assessment inventory tool is intended to guide districts in looking across assessments to inform their recommendations and decisions, in addition to reviewing assessments independently. As such, districts (or teams) should answer the following questions to analyze the inventory, inform public dialogue, and begin to formulate recommendations based on this look across assessments and within assessments.

1. The most important way to first analyze the information collected through the inventory process is to develop a student-level perspective on the assessments students are taking. One way of doing this is to look at all of the assessments that a student takes while they are in a particular grade level, or grade band (e.g., grades K-5). You can then look at any additional assessments that students may be taking based on particular needs and characteristics. The district should also answer these questions for other select grade levels or grade bands depending on the district's goals (e.g., to address concerns throughout K-12, or to address testing in high school).

    The set of questions you ask could look like this:

    a. How many required assessments (beyond teacher-developed classroom assessments) do ALL 4th grade students (*for example*) typically take in a given year?

    b. How often are ALL 4th grade students typically taking required assessments? How many required assessments are many, but not all, 4th grade students taking in this district, based on their specific needs or characteristics?

    c. How frequently are these students taking required assessments, including retakes?

    d. Based on this analysis, are there particular grade levels, subject areas, or times in the school calendar where students are taking too many tests?

2. A next level of analysis is to identify the assessments that appear to be ones that the district will continue to administer, and clarify if any of these assessments do need any changes to ensure they are helpful for their intended uses.

    a. What assessments are essential for students to continue taking because of clear requirements in law or policy (and identify law/policy)?

    b. What assessments have real benefits to students, teachers, parents and the system as a whole?

    c. Which of these assessments are high quality and aligned to our state's standards?

    d. Of the assessments identified, what might strengthen the use of assessment results for their intended uses (e.g., assessment or report quality, professional development and school data teams, data management, test timing in relation to professional development cycles or curriculum pacing)?

3. The next step is to identify the assessments that seem to be on the table for elimination or significant changes.

    a. Are there assessments that are not being used for their intended uses?

b. Are there assessments that users do not find useful? Of these, what might be the causes for lack of usefulness (e.g., assessment or report quality, alignment with full assessment system, professional development and school data teams, data management, test timing in relation to professional development cycles or curriculum pacing)?

c. Are there assessments that are redundant?

4. The last step is more detailed analysis to help districts start building toward recommendations. **As districts reach this point, it will be crucial for them to reengage with teachers, parents, students or others who deeply informed the inventory process to review potential options and decision points.** Doing so will help ensure sound recommendations and solid base of support for them.

a. For assessments that you identify as those you need to continue administering, are there certain assessments that need changes? Identify the assessments, potential changes that need to be made, and how those changes could occur.

b. For assessments that you identify as not being used for their intended uses, are not useful, or are redundant, analyze the potential options and considerations:

i. Stop administering the assessment

• Are there any current contracts or other operational issues that you need to be aware of?

• If an assessment of this kind is needed to comply with a law or policy, or has critical instructional uses, would you need to replace the assessment with another assessment? If so, what criteria would you use to select an assessment that better serves your district's needs?

ii. Continue administering the assessment but make significant changes in design and/or administration

• What are the design and/or administration changes that are needed?

• If the assessment was developed within the district, who will need to be involved in the redesign or restructuring process?

• If the assessment is off-the-shelf, will the vendor be amenable to working with your district for changes? Can you work with other districts?

iii. Continue administering the assessment as is or with minor changes

• If your process has identified problems with this assessment, why will you recommend continuing as is? What mitigating factors are involved?

• What evidence will teachers, parents and district leaders need to see for assurance that this process has explored all options?

If the district is interested in evaluating alignment and quality of assessments, they can use resources such as Student Achievement Partners' Assessment Evaluation Tool individually or in partnership with other districts. If these are "off-the-shelf" assessments, districts may wish to work with other districts that use the same assessments to determine if alignment and quality evaluations have already been conducted, and to work with vendors in concert to demand improvements. It may also be helpful to utilize the Council of Chief State School Officers' (CCSSO) Criteria for High-Quality Assessments Aligned to College and Career Readiness.

D. Make Recommendations

Based on the analysis above, what recommendations will the district make to streamline and/or strengthen its assessment program?

Number	Recommendation	Rationale	Authority	Timing of Recommendation	Action Steps
Example	Discontinue use of PLACE ELA beginning in January 2015	Redundant with ELA Grow test	Superintendent	Sept. cabinet meeting	Need to write proposal memo with supporting evidence
1					
2					
3					
4					
5					

Name of Individual(s) completing the table Date				
Optional Category: English Language Arts (e.g., grade level, subject)				
Name of assessment	(Example) PLACE ELA			
Entity requiring assessment *state – SEA or other agency; district; or school*	District			
Grade(s) tested	5-8			
Course(s) or subjects tested	ELA			
Which students are eligible or required to take assessment?	All students in these grades who are also required to take regular state assessment			
Type of assessment *summative; interim/benchmark; formative; diagnostic*	Benchmark			
To which content standards is the assessment aligned? *(source of alignment verification)*	Common Core State Standards *(Independent review by Dr. Anne Jones using Student Achievement Partners Assessment Eval. Tool)*			
Intended purpose(s) of the assessment	Measure student knowledge of ELA standards in reading comprehension			
Intended use(s)[1] of the assessment	Predict ELA performance on state assessment and inform instructional practice			
Users of the assessment	District assessment staff and teachers			
Do users of the assessment use it for its intended use(s)?	Yes *(district)* No *(educators)*			
To what degree do users of the assessment find it useful or not useful? *1 – not useful* *2 – somewhat useful* *3 – useful* *4 – very useful* **Explain why.**	*2 – district staff find it accurately predicts performance on state assessment, but that the results are not useful for educators to inform instruction*			

[1]*Federal and/or state accountability, district accountability, predictive, diagnostic, instructional uses (e.g., grouping), high school graduation, student promotion/retention, factor into course grades, college admissions, teacher evaluation, Advanced Placement credit, International Baccalaureate, English language proficiency, international comparisons, other uses.*

Type of administration	Paper booklet/scantron			
Item type(s)	Selected response			
Test administration time	150 minutes (includes 15 minutes of instructions read aloud by teacher)			
Testing window	10/1–10/15 and 3/1–3/15			
Test frequency	Given twice a year, in October and March			
Time between test administration and results to users	24 hours for raw data to district; 3 weeks for analysis			
Vendor	Tests4Schools			
Contract expiration date	4/1/2015			
Entity that holds contract	District			
Annual cost *(total and per student)*	$38,000 total, $19.00 per student (grades 5-8)			
Funding source(s)	Local funds			

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

1. **Can my district modify the inventory table?** YES. The inventory table, as well as the entire student assessment inventory tool, is openly licensed, allowing for modifications to be made as needed to suit the district's goals and context. Districts are free to modify the tool to better meet their needs. Districts can translate the table into different electronic formats, including into online survey tools. They can transpose columns and rows, or create additional "snapshots" of the information — such as a calendar view.

2. **My team does not agree on the type of assessment — formative, interim, etc. We all seem to have different ideas about what these terms mean. What do we do?** There are various resources that have developed definitions of different assessment types. For instance, you can review pages 1–2 of the publication *The Role of Interim Assessments in a Comprehensive Assessment System* developed by Achieve, the Aspen Institute and the Center for Assessment. For more discussion on the research base on such assessments, please see *this framework* by the National Center for the Improvement of Educational Assessment. We would not encourage you to spend much time, however, sorting this out. If you do not agree, we would suggest that you document the various perspectives and move on.

3. **What is the difference between the assessment's intended purposes and uses?** The purpose of the assessment is what it was designed to measure, while the intended use of the assessment reflects the kinds of decisions that the assessment is designed to inform. For example, the purpose of an assessment may be to measure students' reading comprehension while the intended use is to identify students in need of extra support/intervention.

4. **How do we know if users are using the assessment for its intended uses?** After identifying the users of the assessment, you will need to ask them about what decisions they are making based on the information. If their responses align with the intended use, the answer is yes. If not, the answer is no. You can do this through a survey or through interviews/ focus groups. If the answer is no, it will also be helpful to find out why.

5. **How do we know to what degree users find the assessment useful and why?** After identifying the users of the assessment, you will need to ask them about the degree to which they find the assessment useful. You can do this through a survey, asking them to rate the degree of usefulness as the table describes. You can also do this through interviews or focus groups. It will be very important to find out what attributes of the assessment, or context in which the assessment is being given, contribute to its usefulness or lack of usefulness.

6. **What are some ways to tell if an assessment is aligned to the content standards?** Many assessments, and other instructional resources, make claims about alignment to standards, but it is critical for your district to have confidence in these claims. Your district, individually or in partnership with others, may commission an independent analysis from an external expert or ask a team of master teachers to conduct an analysis. For assessments intended to align with the Common Core State Standards, there are tools such as Student Achievement Partners' Assessment Evaluation Tool that may be helpful for these analyses. The Council of Chief State School Officers' (CCSSO) Criteria for High-Quality Assessments Aligned to College and Career Readiness is also a helpful set of guidance in evaluating quality and alignment.