

Q&A Fact Sheet: Why States Are Rethinking Assessment Systems and What Education Leaders Need to Know

Q: Why are states showing renewed interest in changing assessment systems?

A: Many educators and policymakers say once-a-year tests provide feedback too late to guide instruction, do not reflect how learning is tracked during the year, and create testing burden and public trust concerns. States are exploring system changes that still meet federal requirements.

Q: What kinds of assessment changes are states exploring?

A: States are experimenting with several approaches, including:

- Shorter statewide assessments
- Spreading testing across multiple points in the year
- Combining interim and summative assessments
- Using progress monitoring systems that contribute to final results
- Introducing limited local flexibility while maintaining statewide expectations

These models aim to make assessment results more timely and more useful for instruction.

Q: Have states changed testing systems in innovative ways before?

A: Yes. During the COVID-19 pandemic, several states shortened statewide assessments or focused testing on priority standards to reduce testing burden, showing systems can evolve while maintaining core elements of statewide testing.

Q: Why use multiple assessments instead of one statewide test?

A: Multiple assessments can provide more frequent information about student learning, helping educators adjust instruction during the school year, not just after. Systems using multiple assessments must still show comparable results to meet federal requirements.

Q: What tension does this create with federal requirements?

A: Federal law under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) requires states to maintain:

- Statewide comparability of results
- Public reporting for student subgroups
- Clear accountability systems

Introducing flexibility can make it more difficult to maintain these requirements.

Q: What does federal guidance currently allow?

A: ESSA allows states to make some redesigns without special approval, such as:

- Shortening statewide assessments
- Administering assessments across multiple testing windows
- Using through-year testing models
- Combining progress monitoring assessments with summative reporting

If results are valid, reliable, and comparable statewide, these changes fit under federal rules.

Q: What is the Innovative Assessment Demonstration Authority (IADA)?

A: This federal pilot program lets states test new assessment systems before scaling statewide. States participating in IADA can explore models such as:

- Performance assessments
- Competency-based assessments
- Through-year assessment systems
- Systems combining multiple measures

States must show these systems produce valid, reliable, and comparable results statewide.

Q: Why do some states request federal waivers?

A: Some states go beyond the flexibility ESSA allows by requesting federal waivers, such as:

- Allowing districts to choose assessments from approved lists
- Combining benchmark tests with national exams
- Reducing reliance on a single end-of-year test

However, federal officials have emphasized that waivers cannot remove core ESSA requirements.

Q: Does more flexibility automatically reduce testing time?

A: Not necessarily. Without careful design, multiple assessments or additional testing windows can actually increase the total amount of testing time. Successful systems clearly specify which assessments replace others rather than adding new tests on top of existing ones.

Q: How are states trying to preserve comparability?

A: States exploring new assessment models are considering strategies such as:

- Approved assessment lists
- Shared performance standards
- Linking or scaling studies across assessments
- Common reporting frameworks

These approaches help ensure that results mean the same thing across districts and schools.

Q: What should district and school leaders be watching for?

A: As assessment systems evolve, leaders should pay attention to:

- How results will be compared statewide
- Whether testing time will increase or decrease
- How scores will be communicated to families
- How accountability systems will operate during transitions

Clear communication and implementation are essential during periods of assessment change.

Q: What is the broader takeaway for education leaders?

A: Interest in redesigning assessment systems is growing, but statewide testing is not disappearing. The most likely future is continued experimentation within federal guardrails, not a wholesale replacement of accountability systems. Expect gradual changes as states explore ways to make assessments more useful, timely, and aligned with instruction.