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Assessment Project

A Complicated Conversation:
A Framework for Guiding Assessment Conversation and Decision-Making
February 2015

Policymakers in all states are dedicated to improving student learning. And while debate remains about the roles of new standards and assessments to clarify and raise expectations for learning, most agree that students deserve a system that expects more, delivers more, holds adults responsible for helping students achieve, and targets resources and support when students are struggling. Tests don't measure everything that is important in schools, but tests do yield data to help gauge progress and results.

At the same time, practitioners, policymakers, parents and other school stakeholders don't always understand why certain assessments are in place, who decided to put them there (federal government, state, local district), how data from various tests are used for learning and accountability, what kind of data are used for what purposes (absolute achievement vs. value-added), and the practical implications of changes to the system. This varied experience and understanding makes it challenging to determine what changes will have the intended impact policymakers seek. Plus, each state context is unique, and the history of previous reform efforts and expectations matters a great deal in determining a shared way forward.

Developing a common understanding of the facts and a framework to guide discussions to advance the work is critical.

> **ABOUT THIS TOOL**
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> *Education First developed the framework and approach described in this fact sheet while working with Ohio policymakers in 2014. The framework helps policymakers understand how assessment decisions relate to standards, school/district accountability systems, teacher evaluation goals and high school graduation requirements. By grounding discussions in fact, it provides a way for policymakers to work together on a highly charged topic and identify a shared path forward.*
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> *This tool also helps participants understand each other and the various positions they have articulated: How do different approaches (or changes to different testing requirements) contribute to a balanced—or imbalanced—approach to accomplishing state goals for accountability, school improvement and testing? What choices avoid unintended consequence?*

Key Questions

Clarifying what testing and accountability should accomplish overall is the first step in setting the table for a productive conversation. While most agree that streamlining and minimizing testing is ideal, there are other important considerations—and complications. Before launching into a full discussion of individual tests and whether there are enough, too many or the right ones in place, work through the four key guiding questions below.

1. *What are the shared guiding principles for college and career readiness in your state?*
    It is helpful to articulate these expectations, as stakeholders, practitioners and policymakers may actually agree on more than they disagree. Using these principles as a checkpoint for ideas is a helpful way to keep the discussion on track and drive to the best and most concrete solutions.

    For the conversations in Ohio in 2014, the assembled group agreed on the expectations described on the following page.

College and Career Readiness in Ohio Shared Guiding Principles

1. Graduate more students who are college- and career-ready and do not require remediation.

2. Ensure that students meet high expectations based on clearer standards.

3. Implement meaningful assessments to drive toward that goal.

4. Maintain a focus on all students and continue to close achievement gaps.

5. Assure accountability that provides transparency and drives system improvements to support better student outcomes statewide.

6. Build a strong, sustainable system that can ensure long-term student success.

7. Maintain the integrity of the state's accountability system, while balancing local control, choice and flexibility.

8. Guarantee protection of student data and privacy with proper safeguards, requirements and oversight.

9. Provide for a clear, orderly and manageable transition to the new assessments and for how the assessments will be used in the accountability system (including teacher evaluations).
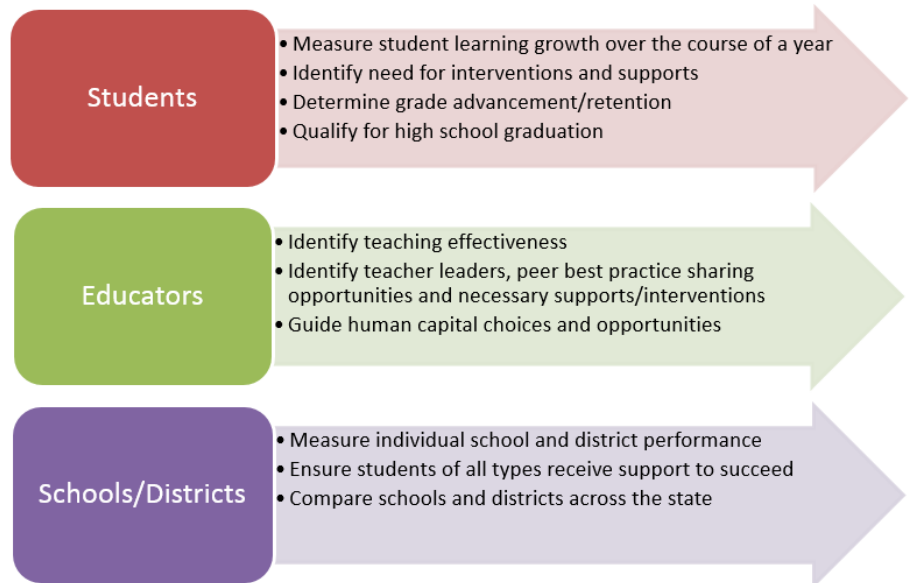
2. *Who is being held accountable and for what purpose?*
Accountability systems are put in place to make sure the people and systems are accomplishing what they are tasked with doing; to measure progress and results; and to get support to those who need it.

But, there are different actors within a state's education system and different accountability measures can apply. Thinking through who the state and districts are holding accountable and how is an important starting point for determining which kind and how many measures—including tests—are necessary.

Clarifying and considering a state's accountability expectations for three groups—students, educators, and schools and districts—is an important starting point, and reminder.

Shared Accountability Goals in Ohio

Students
- Measure student learning growth over the course of a year
- Identify need for interventions and supports
- Determine grade advancement/retention
- Qualify for high school graduation

Educators
- Identify teaching effectiveness
- Identify teacher leaders, peer best practice sharing opportunities and necessary supports/interventions
- Guide human capital choices and opportunities

Schools/Districts
- Measure individual school and district performance
- Ensure students of all types receive support to succeed
- Compare schools and districts across the state

3. *Do the groups at the table have the same or different priority issues when it comes to testing and accountability? Within priorities, what common ground might exist?*
Honest disagreements on testing and accountability exist, as do differing priorities. In Ohio, there were (and remain) differing priorities from different policymakers and stakeholders. Fully understanding these various perspectives is the first step to finding a shared solution or common ground.

4. ***What data do you already have on your current testing and accountability systems?***
    Gathering the data and knowledge about the existing system, tests and accountability requirements is important to creating a shared understanding.

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Conversation Framework for Policymakers

The framework on the next page is one to consider organizing conversations and deliberations. The questions in each row require a good deal of information. But once there is a common understanding of what policies are currently in place, policymakers can start identifying changes. By noting the changes on the framework as they're proposed, participants can double-check for questions of balance. For example: "If we change the third grade literacy assessment next year, will it still be aligned to our standards and tests in the fourth grade? Does it provide us the opportunity for value-added data? Will it still be appropriate for use as part of our educator evaluation system? Is the implementation plan timeline reasonable?" This will allow the group to discuss and debate the full implications of the change, as well as any unintended consequences it could create.

The final set of questions at the bottom of the framework double-check the total proposed set of solutions make sense and examine whether they align with other key priorities in the education system.

Conversation Framework for Policymakers (used in Ohio)
Building a Coherent Assessment and Accountability System

	STUDENTS	EDUCATORS	SCHOOLS/ DISTRICTS
What assessments are administered when?			
For what purpose?			
How are data reported and to whom?			
What data and privacy protections are in place?			
What are the consequences of the data? How is data used? Is the data part of a larger set of measures or used alone?			
When do consequences occur? What is the process?			
Are these right data for the right purpose? For example, is value-added perceived as a valid & fair measure?			
Are implementation plans and supports sufficient?			
Is there pushback on timeline? Is there reason to reconsider any actions or expectations related to the timeline?			
OVERALL	- Do the measures above make sense when taken together within a state system? - Do the measures, reports and consequences actually shine a useful light on student achievement, growth and how our students, educators and schools are doing? - Does the system help to support the reform behaviors and outcomes we are hoping to achieve? - Are there perverse incentives or unintended consequences of any of these elements?		