

# IN PURSUIT OF TRANSFORMATION:

HOW SCHOOL SYSTEM AND STATE EDUCATION  
LEADERS CAN ADVANCE ASSESSMENT AND  
ACCOUNTABILITY INNOVATION



Since 2019, over ninety organizations – including state education agencies, nonprofits, advocacy groups, assessment developers, and researchers – have led efforts to transform K-12 assessment and accountability systems. *In Pursuit of Transformation: Five Years of Investments in Assessment and Accountability Innovation*, a report developed by Education First, details the explorations, accomplishments, and lessons learned from these 90+ organizations.

**D**rawing on insights from **New Meridian and Montana’s Office of Public Instruction (Montana OPI)**, organizations among the 90+ highlighted in the report, this brief illustrates how school system and state education leaders can advance assessment and accountability.

## **HOW NEW MERIDIAN ADVANCED ASSESSMENT AND ACCOUNTABILITY INNOVATION IN MONTANA**

Educators, administrators, and students have long called for statewide assessments that better align with classroom curriculum; provide timely and actionable feedback; capture a more comprehensive and accurate picture of student learning; and reduce students’ stress. In response, New Meridian—a non-profit educational assessment developer—partnered with state education leaders in Montana to design, develop, prototype, and pilot the Montana Aligned to Standards Through-Year (MAST) program between 2022 and 2024. MAST employs an innovative design of short “testlets” for elementary and middle school math and English Language Arts that can be flexibly aligned to the different curriculum programs in use across the state. Utilizing user research and psychometric analysis, New Meridian’s work validated through-year assessments’ use cases for students, educators, district and state leaders. As a result, Montana is implementing MASTs statewide in the current 2024-25 school year, reaching 68,000 students in grades 3-8.

In the Pursuit of Transformation report, Education First offers the following considerations for school system and state education leaders for future assessment and accountability:

- 1. Set a clear vision and theory of change** for how you want to assess student learning, academic progress, and school quality. Identify evidence-based practices, technological advancements, and research efforts that could enable continuous improvement and coherence across your systems.
- 2. Ensure educators are authentically informing and participating** in research and development efforts, surfacing implementation needs early in order to build adequate buy-in and support the scaling of new solutions.
- 3. Plan for transitions early and build internal capacity and buy-in** how new solutions beyond cabinet leadership to ensure long-term sustainability.

New Meridian's work with school and state leaders in Montana demonstrates that the three considerations for school system and state education leaders in the "In Pursuit of Transformation" report can be achieved.

1

## **Set a clear vision and theory of change for how to assess student learning, academic project, and school quality.**

Montana OPI found that its assessment systems were disconnected from instruction, leading to misaligned educational practices, inequities in outcomes, and a lack of timely, actionable data to support student learning and instructional improvement.

Montana OPI aimed to create a cohesive, instructionally aligned assessment approach that fosters continuous improvement, enhances educational opportunities, and equips stakeholders with timely and actionable insights to support student learning.

When setting its Theory of Action, Montana OPI prioritized engaging stakeholders and educators, aligned the design of its assessment to its desired purpose and use, and worked to ensure the policy and resource conditions enabled the change.

To do this, Montana OPI secured a federal double-testing waiver to lessen the testing burden on students and schools piloting the new model. Montana OPI was also awarded federal and philanthropic grants to design, develop, pilot, and field test MAST.



## 2

### **Ensure educators are authentically informing and participating in research and development efforts, surfacing implementation needs early in order to build adequate buy-in and support the scaling of new solutions.**

New Meridian and Montana OPI engaged educators and students through empathy interviews, focus groups, surveys, and open feedback forums throughout the design and pilot phases of MAST. Many of these practices are continuing into the operationalization of MAST to ensure the needs of Montana students and educators are heard and met.

For example, New Meridian partnered with Montana educators and administrators to design a tool that aligns testlets with curriculum and instruction to ensure that students are tested on material soon after it is taught. The resulting Scheduler tool provides pre-configured arrangements of testlets aligned to popular curricula or the ability to align testlets to any local scope or sequence. From July to September 2024 Montana district and school administrators used the Scheduler tool to generate 878 unique testlet schedules in math. Stakeholders provided overwhelmingly positive feedback on the tool's usability.

Montana stakeholders also participated in extensive focus groups and surveys to help New Meridian develop score reports that provide clear, precise diagnostic data to inform instruction and administrative decision making. For example, educators encouraged New Meridian to include information in reports on common misconceptions students demonstrated in each math testlet to help them group students for targeted interventions. Misconceptions reporting launched in Montana during the fall 2024 administration window, drawing praise from educators.

Feedback from teachers, students, and families following the fall 2024 testing window has been positive, with comments often noting that never before have teachers or parents been able to use standardized test scores to inform targeted instructional decisions. Teachers also report that the short, targeted assessments are much less disruptive to instruction, and are a better measure of learning rather than testing stamina. Students find them much less stressful compared to traditional end-of-year summative exams. New Meridian and Montana OPI will conduct additional feedback sessions, interviews, and surveys throughout spring 2025 to better understand the strengths and challenge areas to inform the design and strengthen buy-in as schools transition to a very different testing model.

### 3

#### **Plan for transitions early and build internal capacity and buy-in for new solutions beyond cabinet leadership to ensure long-term sustainability.**

The Montana OPI focused on building capacity internally and across the state by engaging stakeholders, and school and district leaders, and ensuring they were involved in the planning and piloting. New Meridian's partnership with the state also provided additional capacity. Their long-term partnership ensures that the vision is carried out in implementation.

