Many Models, One Problem:

How State Through-Year Assessments
Can Support Instruction

Our country's K12 academic summative assessment systems are overdue for an update. A handful of states are out front, rolling out innovative—in some cases, truly ground-breaking—methods of assessing student outcomes and school quality. Other states are likely to follow soon, encouraged by federal grant opportunities designed to incentivize new approaches to school assessment.

At Education First, we've supported 15 states over the last four years to consider, select and develop new summative assessment innovations in English language arts (ELA), mathematics, science and social studies, as well as newer measures of student success such as high school graduate profiles. We're increasingly convinced that the most-promising innovations fall under a broad label that we refer to as "through-year assessment." Several of our state partners have captured national attention for their field-leading approaches to through-year assessment.[1] Others are deep in the work, discovering insights and posing questions that have yet to be shared broadly.

In this report, we share insights from leading states pursuing through-year assessments and recommendations to other states to emulate their early successes. Our goal: Facilitate learning across the country and help education leaders arrive at a clearer understanding of the specific design decisions that will make the most of through-year assessment models' promise.

Through-year assessment holds promise to make summative tests more meaningful to educators and families. But not all through-year models are created equal. We believe that states need to make through-year assessment design choices that prioritize instructional usefulness and will help educators to improve student learning in real time. If states don't share this priority goal, then we suggest they would be better off pursuing other ways to respond to legitimate criticisms from educators and families about their summative tests.

The testing problem we all want to solve

American students are both overtested and lagging academically. Parents and educators are increasingly skeptical about the value of state summative tests. They wonder: What is the point of these end-of-year tests if the results arrive too late to inform what we teach this group of students?[2] Such complaints are familiar to public education leaders, who've also grown frustrated with the political friction and diminishing returns of statewide assessment systems and who themselves are asking: What's next?

America's K12 assessments have come a long way from the fill-in-the-bubble Scantron tests of the past. Today's assessments are more aligned with college and career-ready standards and demand more complex thinking and application of learning. The original purpose of these new assessments was to ensure all students have access to the opportunities and resources they need to succeed. The disaggregated data they provide has shed necessary light on long-standing disparities in learning opportunity, and the data helped drive critical conversations about racial and economic equity, school accountability and instructional improvement. A recent meta-analysis shows that in fact schools and states have made important gains in learning opportunity and outcomes in the decades since the tests were introduced.[3]

This original purpose remains critical, but state assessment systems are overdue for updating.

More testing isn't the answer. In most school systems today, students experience an incoherent jumble of over-testing and educators are on the receiving end of a flood of disconnected data that fails to provide them with useful insights.

- More than 40 states require a universal literacy screener administered multiple times a year in the earliest grades. Every state is required to administer state summative assessments in English language arts and mathematics for grades 3–8, plus once in high school and science at least once in elementary, middle and high school. And close to half of the states require some sort of civics and/or social studies assessment.[4]

- School districts layer in their own diagnostic, performance, benchmark or interim assessments throughout the year—so much so that overall district spending on such measures has quadrupled in the last decade.

In all, the average American student takes at least eight standardized tests per year, few of which provide instructional utility.[5]

A 2014 study by the Council of Great City Schools found that students spend 25 hours per year taking assessments and were required to take an average of 112 tests between pre-K and grade 12.[6] These estimates don't even include the tests that teachers and schools give, such as end-of-course exams, curriculum unit tests, additional diagnostics and screeners to identify students who need intervention, and teacher formative assessments.

The answer is neither to scrap all existing tests, as some argue, or to keep state testing purely as is, as others insist. At Education First, we believe states should take advantage of the opportunity to innovate, within federal law, right now, to improve their systems. We see two clear, distinct choices: make the state assessments less intrusive by articulating a clearer purpose and changing the design to reduce the tests' outsize footprint in schools -- or make the state assessments more meaningful for teaching and learning.

States that want the less-intrusive option can clarify that end-of-year summative assessments are meant to serve as a dipstick of what's happening in schools, with results used to share information to the public and hold school systems accountable for improving student learning. They would clearly articulate that such tests aren't meant to inform instruction and should be as short as possible. Federal law requires states to test the "full depth and breadth of the state standards," which can still be done with shorter tests taken by individual students. For example, states can reduce the time each student spends on end-of-year tests by matrix sampling the standards across different student forms. Individual students and families would still receive an overall ELA, math or science proficiency rating. The more-detailed information on performance against domains within the standards would be available at the school, district and state levels.

Or, to make state tests more meaningful, states can go all in on instructional utility with through-year assessments that return results quickly to educators and connect to the curricular scope and sequence that's being taught. This report provides examples and guidance to states considering or pursuing this option.
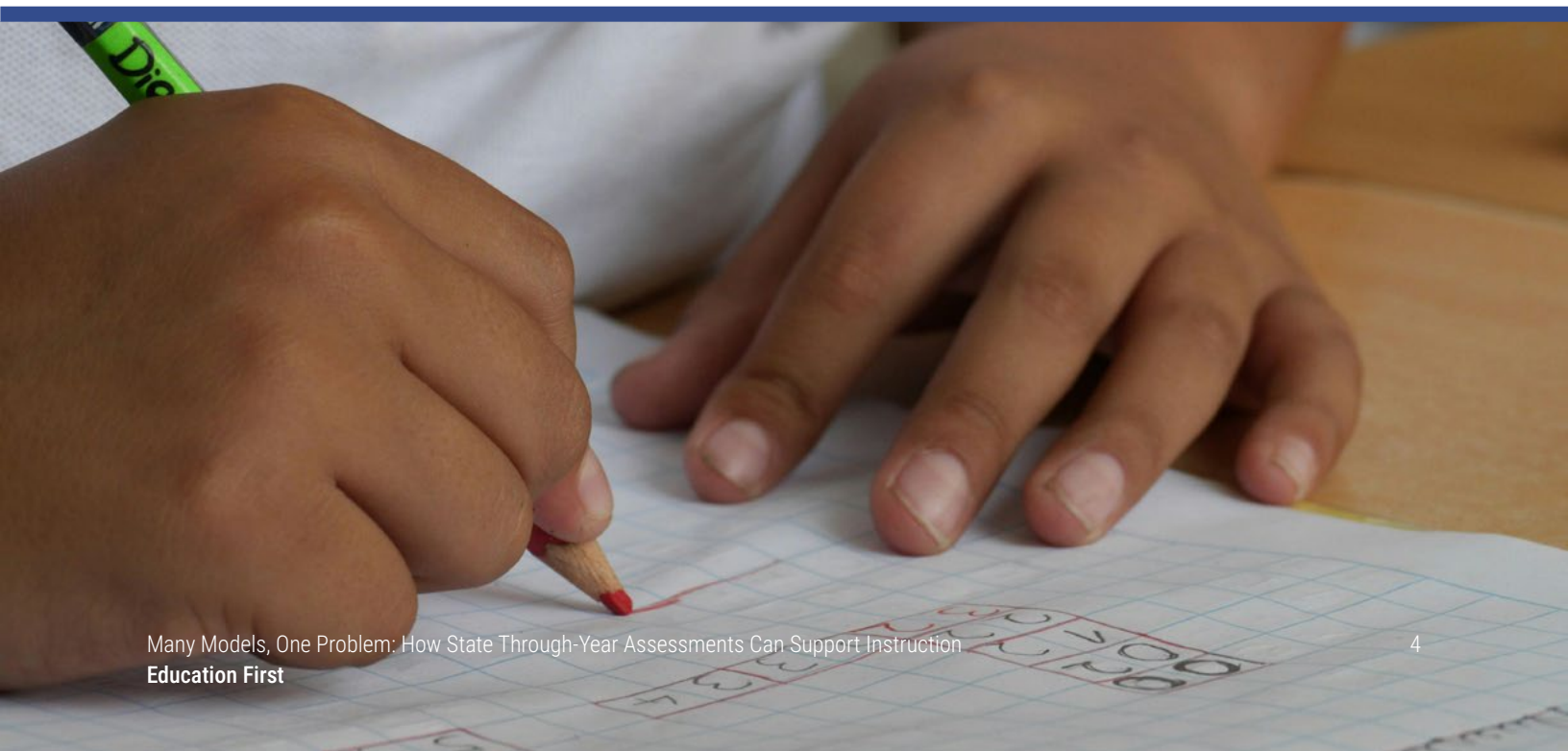
The promise of through-year assessments

Through-year assessments are administered over the course of a school year and are designed to generate a single summative score meeting federal and state accountability requirements.[7] The model offers several advantages over traditional end-of-year summative assessments. At Education First, we hypothesize that through-year models that seek to <mark>align what is tested to what is being taught</mark> offer the most promising direction for states that want to increase student achievement with more accurate assessments.

A body of evidence about how students learn supports our hypothesis. Specifically, research suggests that—if designed well—through-year assessments can serve student, educator and district leader needs better than traditional end-of-year assessments—in at least five ways.

1. **Provide timely feedback to students, educators and others.** Through-year assessments can increase the timeliness and relevance of feedback to educators and families—factors that are critical to feedback's effectiveness.[8] Timely and frequent reports of student performance allow instructors to adjust instruction based on student misconceptions and specific learning needs, and they help students understand where they are in their learning and make adjustments for their next learning task or goal.

2. **Create greater coherence among instruction, curriculum and assessments.** When through-year assessments are linked to specific, recently-taught content, they can become part of a coherent instructional process, rather than acting as a time-intensive interruption to teaching. Research

indicates that student learning is more likely to improve when assessments are integrated into a coherent system that includes high-quality curriculum and rigorous instruction.[9]

3. **Allow space for course corrections.** Teachers can use "real-time" information gained from through-year assessments to inform and adjust their instruction—for example, quickly addressing unfinished learning, reteaching a concept during an upcoming unit where the concept is relevant, or shuffling a scope and sequence to allocate time where it is most needed. These kinds of behaviors, which tailor instruction to meet students' true learning needs, help students access grade-level instruction and advance more rapidly and efficiently.[10]

4. **Increase opportunities for students to retrieve information.** When students have frequent opportunities to retrieve and apply information they've learned in the taught curriculum, it increases their acquisition and retention of knowledge.[11] This increases the tests' fundamental fairness and means the tests themselves are helping students to learn.

5. **Decrease the impact of disparities in background knowledge when assessing reading comprehension.** For more than two decades, many notable researchers have found that, controlling for other factors, knowledge plays the largest role in reading comprehension. <mark>The more a reader knows about a topic, the more likely they are to successfully comprehend a text about it.</mark> Yet traditional summative tests ask students to

read brand-new content. This occurs in the name of test fairness -- test developers don't want some students to be advantaged because they have knowledge about the content of a text. But the result is the opposite of what test developers seek: Current state tests may not provide accurate information about whether students are comprehending what they read.

Students are constantly acquiring background knowledge at school, at home and in their community, and a rich ELA curriculum helps students acquire a common body of knowledge with its content-specific vocabulary. Tests meant to assess reading comprehension have an equity problem when the tests ask students to read texts and content that are wholly unfamiliar to the students. The vast majority of state summative tests use such "cold reads." Cold reads often more accurately assess a students' familiarity with a given text, its themes and its specific vocabulary words, rather than their reading comprehension skills.[12] To decrease such disparities and improve the tests' accuracy, through-year assessments can be designed to include "hot reads" excerpted directly from the taught curriculum or "warm reads" that are related to content and themes in local curriculum, but that haven't been explicitly taught in that curriculum.
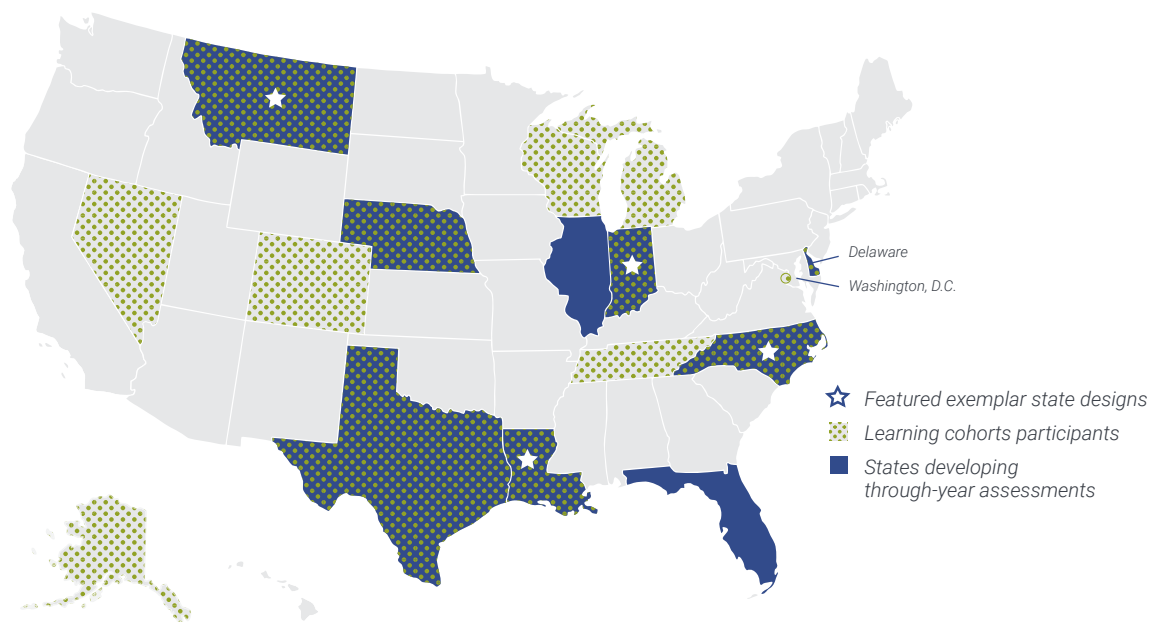
In 2022, Education First published *Transitioning to a Through-Year Assessment System: Toolkit for State Leaders* who are considering transitioning to a through-year assessment. The toolkit includes resources such as a self-assessment of through-year assessment enabling conditions, stakeholder engagement tools, a guide to engaging district leaders and action planning tools for state education agency leaders.

In 2023, Education First also published a white paper authored by Aneesha Badrinayaran and David S. Steiner. In *Positioning State Assessment Systems in Service to Teaching and Learning*, the authors explore in depth the enabling conditions, design considerations and choices states can make to more closely assess local curriculum in ELA, mathematics and science without infringing on local control, and why they should.

Similar goals, with many design choices

Education First has worked alongside state education agencies (SEAs) and several test vendors that are implementing variations of through-year assessments. With several funding partners, we launched a grant program in 2021 with three test developers and two states to seed multiple new through-year designs that would provide valid, reliable and comparable results, and we convened a dozen additional states to learn about through-year testing in two communities of practice between 2022–2024. The idea from the beginning was that these through-year designs could eventually replace end-of-year summative models, provide instructionally useful information and potentially decrease the problems associated with current end-of-year tests.

Delaware
Washington, D.C.

☆ *Featured exemplar state designs*
▦ *Learning cohorts participants*
■ *States developing through-year assessments*

Ten states continued learning together in SY 2023–2024 in a Learning Cohort and an Implementation Cohort. Each came to the table seeking to solve multiple problems with their existing assessment systems. Collectively, the state leaders in each cohort are interested in better measures of student learning and growth, reducing the testing burden for schools and families, and producing assessments that meet state accountability requirements and federal peer review. Some states also want to explore ways to improve instructional use of the state tests and better connect what is tested to what is taught, and a few also are eager to generate predictive information for districts and families.
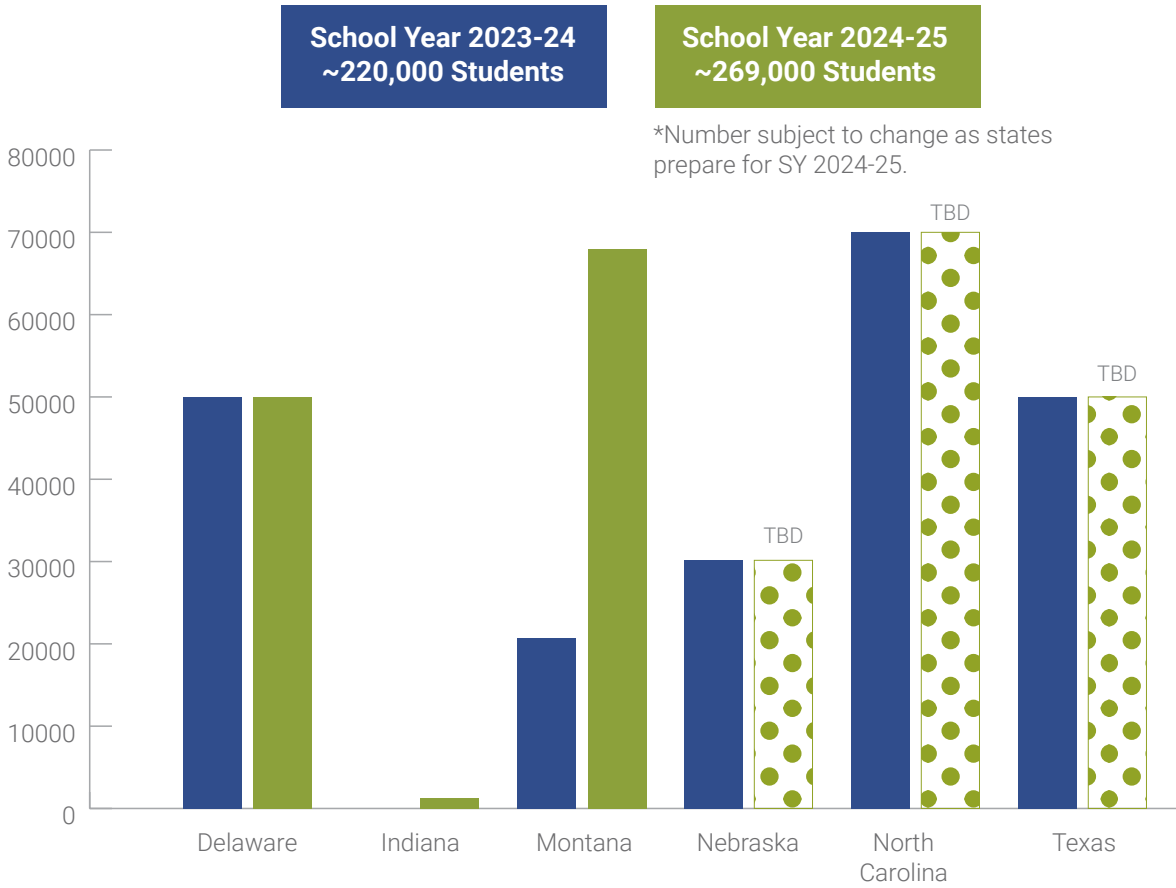
States must address four fundamental questions when designing a through-year assessment system. The answers to these questions will vary, depending on the state's policy context and its own goals for assessment innovation. In a companion to this report, we profile six states' various through-year assessment designs that reflect their varied purposes: Delaware (social studies), Indiana (ELA and mathematics), Nebraska (ELA and mathematics), North Carolina (ELA and mathematics), Montana (ELA and mathematics) and Texas (ELA and mathematics).

To maximize instructional utility, states need to make design choices in four areas that preserve local control, assess what's being taught close in time to when it's taught, and return results quickly, during the school year.

1. **What will be assessed and when?** States need to decide whether each test administration will measure all grade-level standards or a subset of standards. States also need to decide whether and how to link assessments to a specific curriculum scope-and-sequence (locally or state-determined) or to high-quality instructional materials in use in the state. In Education First's view, measuring a subset of standards and linking to specific curricular materials or scope-and-sequence will improve the tests' instructional utility.

2. **How are the assessments administered?** States must decide whether to align test administrations to a fixed curricular scope and sequence or via flexible administrations; whether to provide districts or schools decisionmaking for the timing of administration; and whether to include adaptive features (such as, questions that become more or less advanced based on student responses).

3. **What will be reported, when and with what supports?** The purpose of the assessment will help a state determine what types of scores they will report to whom (student level, teacher/classroom level, school level); what type of analysis and interpretation of results they intend to do and for what purpose; and the type of guidance they should provide on how the information will be used. Most report raw scores to students, families and teachers to provide immediate feedback. Some states provide classroom and school level reports to inform instructional decisions and support. Some states report achievement levels during the year to provide educators and families information about student performance and achievement.

4. **How will each student be awarded a single summative test score?** States must consider whether all, a subset or none of the test administrations during the school year will contribute to a student's final summative proficiency level score. Across the states we profile, states are trying all three approaches.

Number of students participating in pilot or operational administrations of the through-year system

School Year 2023-24 ~220,000 Students	School Year 2024-25 ~269,000 Students

*Number subject to change as states prepare for SY 2024-25.

Chart axis values: 0, 10000, 20000, 30000, 40000, 50000, 60000, 70000, 80000

States: Delaware, Indiana, Montana, Nebraska, North Carolina, Texas

TBD labels appear on Nebraska, North Carolina, and Texas (SY 2024-25 bars)

Number of days after testing until results

1 — Nebraska

2

3 — Delaware, Indiana, North Carolina

4

5

6

7 — Montana, Texas

State Design Features: At a Glance

		DE	IN	LA	MT		NE	NC		TX
		Social Studies	ELA & Math	ELA	ELA	Math	ELA & Math	ELA	Math	Math & Social Studies
What is assessed, and when?	Assesses the breadth and depth of the standards in each administration			x	x		x	x		x
	Assesses a subset of standards in each administration	x	x			x			x	
	The test design is multi-stage or phase adaptive						x	x		x
How are the assessments administered?	The administration windows are fixed	x	x	x	x		x			x
	The order of administrations are fixed	x	x	x			x			x
	All administrations are required	x	x	x	x			minimum of 2 are required		x
When and what is reported?	Reports delivered within a week			x	x		x	x		x
	Individual student reports provided for instructional purposes	x	x	x	x		x	x		x
	Aggregate reports provided at class and/or school level	x	x	x	x		x	x		
How is the summative rating produced?	The summative score is calculated based on multiple administrations	x		x	x					TBD
	The summative score is calculated based on a singular administration			x			x	x		TBD
How are the assessments administered?	The administration windows are fixed	x	x	x	x		x			x
	The order of administrations are fixed	x	x	x			x			x
	All administrations are required	x	x	x	x			minimum of 2 are required		x

Design choices that live up to the through-year promise: four exemplar states

Four states—Indiana, Louisiana, Montana and North Carolina—have prioritized test designs in ELA and mathematics that can provide real-time instructional utility while still generating a valid summative score. These are the models we consider most promising, as they have the greatest likelihood of addressing the frustrations expressed by students, families and educators, and of producing meaningful improvements in student learning outcomes. Together, the four states also help demonstrate how states can prioritize instructional utility across different policy contexts.

Indiana

Indiana's through-year model (ILEARN) aims to improve monitoring of student learning by providing real-time, actionable data that are fully-aligned to Indiana's streamlined academic standards and by connecting educators and students with tailored instructional practices and individualized interventions. Indiana intends that the computer-adaptive, scope-and-sequence-based design will provide more-actionable reports for teachers at the time of learning; help teachers and parents identify next steps of learning for students; and connect them with instructional resources to take those next steps.

Three interim ILEARN assessments each assess 4–7 state standards with 20-25 test items. Indiana's interim assessments must be administered in a fixed sequence, but flexible administration windows of 9–11 weeks each allow districts to decide when to administer the interim assessments in each window. The interim assessments are used solely to guide instruction, and the results are available immediately.

Indiana's summative scores are based entirely on a shortened end-of-year summative assessment with 30-35 items; each requires about 25-40 minutes (mathematics) and 30-45 minutes (ELA) to complete. Individual student reports describe performance on groups of 2–5 academic standards, with recommended next steps for instruction. Aggregate data are used by the school and district to inform professional development and resource decisions.

At Education First, we are most excited about how Indiana has:

- Developed a testing model that aligns with its theory of action for teaching and learning

- Provides highly-granular score reporting on the interim assessments along with personalized instructional resources for educators and for families

Louisiana

Louisiana's through-year assessment in ELA is being tested through the Innovative Assessment Demonstration Authority (IADA) and is aligned with the "Guidebooks" curriculum adopted by a majority of school districts statewide. The state also has been testing whether it can develop and equate multiple through-year models aligned to different curriculum. The Guidebooks assessment is administered three times. Each interim assessment covers the full breadth of standards and includes a mix of 'hot' and 'warm' reads drawn from specific anchor texts and themes covered in the curriculum. This model provides the closest connection of testing to teaching of the seven states profiled in this report.

At Education First, we are most excited about how Louisiana has:

- Developed a model that connects to high-quality instructional materials in wide use in the state

- Prioritized including "warm reads" to more-accurately assess students' reading comprehension

Montana

The Montana Aligned to Standards Through-year Assessment (MAST) in ELA and mathematics in grades 3-8 aims to bring assessment closer to the time of learning, provide actionable insights for teachers, students and parents, and ultimately foster a culture of continuous improvement and academic success. The ELA assessment occurs three times a year for a total testing time of about three hours, including a performance task. The complexity of assessed standards increases as the year progresses, aligning more closely with students' learning over the course of the year. The mathematics assessment consists of 12 total testlets

that each cover a unique cluster of state standards. Each testlet takes approximately 20–30 minutes to complete, and schools give 4-6 testlets in each of the three administration windows. All together, students are tested for about five hours per year in mathematics.

Montana's testlets can be sequenced to align with what students have recently been taught, and districts configure the order in which the testlets are administered during three administration windows. This approach prioritizes testing what's been taught recently, while allowing for maximum flexibility in a state where curriculum is locally determined. Student-level reports for both ELA and math arrive promptly within the administration week.

MAST was piloted over the last two school years; full operational implementation is planned for ELA in 2024-25 and for mathematics in 2025-26 in all grades 3-8. Many stakeholders throughout the state have provided feedback and partnered with the state superintendent's office to optimize the implementation of the new system. Montana is currently operating this assessment under a federal field-testing flexibility waiver and expects to submit their new system for full approval via peer review in fall 2025.

At Education First, we are most excited about how Montana has:

- Developed a model that aligns the standards tested closely to the time they are taught, while preserving local control of curriculum; in mathematics, the state allows districts the flexibility to configure the sequence of their administration to their local curriculum

- Prioritized reporting insights that allow educators to plan and adjust instruction, address misconceptions and provide targeted supports to students year round

North Carolina

The North Carolina Personalized Assessment Tool (NCPAT) is a through-year assessment system comprised of an interim component, NC Check-Ins 2.0, and a "multistage adaptive" end-of-grade (EOG) component administered at the end of the year. The system was designed in response to consistent feedback received for several years that EOGs do not give administrators, teachers, parents and students information on what students know in time for additional instruction and that the current EOGs are not accessible, especially for students at the lowest performance level. Piloted from 2019-2023, the state took these operational in school year 2023-24 at grades 4, 5, 7 and 8 in mathematics and reading.

The "NC Check-Ins 2.0" are a series of three optional interim measures designed to provide immediate and detailed feedback on student performance so classroom instruction can be tailored to individual students' needs. Schools can administer the Check-Ins in any order, on-demand, between mid-September through late May. Each administration takes about 90 minutes. In ELA, each Check-In covers a representative sample of the full assessed standards; each math Check-In covers a subset of about 5-6 standards. Student-, class-, school- and district-level reports are provided for each Check-In.

The Check-In results are not aggregated to contribute to the student's final summative result. Instead, students take the EOG during the last 10 days of the school year. The EOG covers the full breadth of grade-level standards and takes approximately two hours. However, each multistage adaptive EOG has three forms and students are assigned to one of these three forms based on performance information gathered throughout the year from the Check-Ins 2.0. Each form of the multistage adaptive EOG is designed with a range of items that are aligned to grade-level content standards and are most appropriate for students in that range. All forms of the multistage adaptive EOG will allow students to score at any of the four academic achievement levels. This allows the test to more-accurately measure students at the tails of performance, low and high.

At Education First, we are most excited about how North Carolina has:

- Shortened the end-of-year summative component to acknowledge and align with what kids have already demonstrated proficiency during the year on the Check-Ins

- Provided data that provides insights to adjust instruction along with instructional resources and supports throughout the school year.

Recommendations for states considering or implementing through-year assessments

We see great promise in the through-year assessment innovations underway in many states. While there is more learning to do—especially as we see how variations in through-year designs play out in districts and the extent to which different models support improved student learning—strong concepts have emerged with multiple ways of aligning assessment more closely with instruction.

For states that are early in the design process or still considering whether to pursue assessment innovations, we offer four recommendations we identified by supporting multiple states that are designing and implementing through-year assessment models.

Six out of the seven states (DE, IN, LA, MT, NE, NC) that are profiled in this report intend to make their through-year assessment systems instructionally useful. While SEAs may have differing definitions of instructional utility, all states plan to provide educators with student results either immediately or within one week of test administration and provide aligned instructional guidance or instructional resources.

Recommendation 1:
States need a coherent vision for assessment that is driven by instructional goals.

Transforming a state assessment system requires a coherent and strategic approach to planning and implementation. State leaders need to make the right design choices for their own context, engage and build buy-in among stakeholders, effectively communicate the vision and put strong implementation plans in place.

As a first step, state agencies need to clearly articulate their vision describing why a new assessment system is needed. The vision should be informed by wide-ranging stakeholder input and aligned with the state's academic vision. The vision must clearly articulate the problems the state intends to solve and what the intended end state would look like for students, teachers and system leaders. That vision must be clear enough and owned by enough SEA staff--across the agency and not only in the assessment office--so that the vision can survive changes in leadership.

If state agencies aim to design a through-year assessment system that informs instruction, they must articulate that goal as a key piece of the vision and ensure that instructional utility remains a core tenet at every stage of design. There are many ways in which the testing model can stray from the vision of supporting instruction, including testing all of the standars in every administrationl delaying the return of test results; and skipping the link to scope and sequence or specific curricula. Without the sustained focus on the vision, SEAs will fall short in meeting the needs expressed by educators, students and families.

States also need a clear and comprehensive theory of action that outlines clear steps, responsibilities and expected outcomes. To ensure coherence among assessments and other academic policies and initiatives, we recommend SEAs form a dedicated planning team that brings together the academics and assessment teams, as well as other robust cross-agency experts, to work collaboratively to plan and implement the new system. The participation of instructional leaders throughout the planning and initial design process is critical if the assessments are to become part of a coherent instructional system that supports student learning.
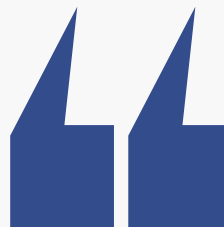
> "
> *The leader at the state has to be ready to take on the work of selling their vision. They have to be ready to convince not only their field, but often their own team of the benefits of a new through-year design.*
>
> *senior executive, assessment provider*

Recommendation 2:
Design for real-time instructional utility by aligning to local curricular materials and by reporting truly actionable data.

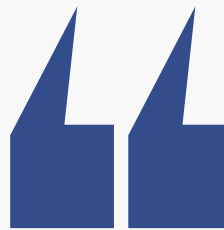*You can't really think of it as just assessment—it's a teaching and learning system with assessment at the end to help you see how it's done. That's what resonates with educators.*

state education agency assessment team member

The promise of through-year assessment models is that they can provide frequent, timely and instructionally-actionable reports of student learning to educators and students. The most-common design challenge SEAs face is how to achieve instructional utility during the current school year with a test that must generate a summative result.

The most-instructionally useful designs are those that closely connect to local curriculum. This can mean aligning to specific high-quality instructional materials, as Louisiana ELA's assessment does, or test administrations that are ordered to align to local districts' curricular scope-and-sequence, as with Montana's mathematics testlets.

We encourage all states to consider how to include "warm reads" in their through-year assessment models.

Field-leading states also are iterating on the types of data and resources they can provide directly to teachers, seeking to create reports that are user friendly, actionable and easy to understand with clear insights that support evidence-based instruction.

For years, many states have focused on improving their summative test score reports to make them understandable. Reports from through-year assessment need to move from understandable to actionable. That means, at minimum, providing sufficient detail needed for educators and school leaders to make better decisions about instruction on their own. Better is to provide specific instructional

guidance explicitly linked to the student's and class' performance on each administration.

Through-year models should, link test results to specific instructional resources that can inform instruction and interventions. That might include links to recommended instructional resources (such as additional lessons teachers can implement with students or an online learning module students can take independently); suggestions for differentiating whole-class instruction or utilizing intervention blocks (like pre-teaching key vocabulary or integrating visuals); and priorities that school leaders should consider for professional learning.

This recommendation demands thoughtful partnership between the state and participating districts to clearly articulate links between the data each assessment provides and the evidence-based instructional strategies, supports and interventions that teachers can implement in response. It also requires that educators, families and students understand the value proposition of through-year assessments, which means that SEAs must communicate clearly, build buy-in and use assessment information as intended.

Most state education agencies are significantly under-resourced to carry out their leadership missions. This is especially true with assessment offices, given that the majority of state assessment budgets are spent on test development and administration provided by external vendors. But state agencies need to have infrastructure in place to effectively roll out a through-year system. Leading states have learned that the following resources are especially important:

- Stable and sufficient funding to manage assessment piloting, scaling and full transition to a through-year systems

- Funding to support professional learning and effective implementation in districts

- State-of-the-art technology that is fully compatible with the new through-year system and that includes robust tech support and continuous upgrades

- Fully integrated, modern data systems and comprehensive reporting with analytics and insights available

- A process to continually improve data quality and use

- Consistent staffing to support coordination and coherence among instructional leadership and assessment administrators

Recommendation 3:
Allocate necessary resources, staff and infrastructure.

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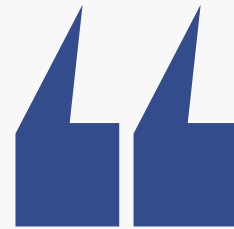
You need consistent staff who are owning what is needed. There's a strong vision from the top, which helps, but you need staff.

senior executive, assessment provider

Recommendation 4:
Make the most of emerging technology.

> " AI tools could eventually not only improve testing but also accelerate learning in areas like early literacy, phonemic awareness and early numeracy skills. Teachers also could integrate AI-driven assessments, especially AI voice tools, into their instruction in ways that are seamless and even 'invisible,' allowing educators to continually update their understanding of where students are struggling and how to provide accurate feedback.

senior executive, assessment provider

Technology is evolving much faster than our education systems. While this can be challenging —when, for example, assessment designs and technology infrastructure go out of date quickly—emergent technologies may offer better ways to drill down on instructionally-useful data and provide educators and students with actionable next steps.

Very soon, artificial intelligence (AI) may be able to generate the kind of dynamic, highly individualized reports that are currently so challenging to design. Theoretically, if well-trained, AI also could better target instructional resources for teachers that are linked to individual student performance and aligned to or part of the existing written curriculum. AI is already able to make the scoring of writing assessments and extended responses more efficient and allows translation to multiple languages so that students new to English can be assessed in their native languages.

In the meantime, SEAs can lay the groundwork for these types of advancements by previewing the possibilities and by building the infrastructure and capacity internally so they may pursue new technology solutions as they emerge.

A Call to Action

The need for assessment innovation is clear. Very few are satisfied with existing summative assessment systems, and educators, students and families are particularly frustrated by taking tests that have minimal instructional utility. Getting to a place where every state has an assessment system that advances student progress while reducing the test burden will require forward-thinking and action at multiple levels of the education sector.

Through-year assessments offer a promising path forward, and several states are beginning to demonstrate how the concept of through-year assessment can help achieve their commitment to informing instruction. As these states bring their new assessment systems to full operational capacity in the next two years, we will continue to support and report on how the design decisions help educators and families to improve student learning.

For more help: Download these Education First resources

Interested in exploring through-year assessment in your state? These free resources offer practical advice and tools any state can adapt.

What are Through-year Assessments? Exploring multiple approaches to through-year design (2022) Explore how 13 states are creating 18 different through-year assessment models to help foster more coherent assessment systems | *See the webinar*

Policymakers' Guide to Through-Year Assessments: Addressing ESSA Pain Points (2022) Examine how through-year assessments may advance the goals set forth by ESSA and address pain points experienced by stakeholders

Positioning State Assessment Systems in Service to Teaching and Learning: The Role of High-Quality Curriculum in State Assessment Design (2023) Better understand the nuances of curriculum-anchored assessments and how states can design curriculum-anchored assessment systems that balance federal requirements and local curriculum decisions

Transitioning to a Through-Year Assessment System: Toolkit for State Leaders (2023) Delve into a series of resources for state leaders who are exploring, developing or implementing through-year models with resources including:

> *Transition to a Through-Year System Discussion Guide* (2023) Better understand the key questions, discussions and considerations to keep in mind when approaching a redesign of a state assessment system to a through-year model
>
> *Enabling Conditions Self-Assessment Tool* (2023) Identify the enable conditions necessary for implementing through-year assessment models
>
> *Stakeholder Mapping Tool* (2023) Determine what stakeholders to engage when determining whether to transition to a through-year assessment system, planning for a transition and designing and piloting a new assessment system
>
> *State Education Agency Cabinet Discussion Guide & Guide to Engaging District Leaders* (2023) Surface strengths and opportunities in your assessment system and determine if a through-year assessment might be right for your state through a two hour discussion with your SEA cabinet and your District Leaders
>
> *State Policymakers' Discussion Guide* (2023) Build policymakers' understanding of what through-year assessments are and explore support for transitioning to a new system
>
> *Stakeholder Engagement Protocols* (2023) Explore how to engage students, parents and teachers through focus group protocols
>
> *Sample Logic Model and Template* (2023) Outline the resources, inputs and activities required to reach your desired outputs and outcomes
>
> *Sample Implementation Plan and Enhanced Task List* (2023) Examine resources to support developing an implementation plan for a through-year assessment system

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About this Report

Acknowledgements

About Education First

Education First is a national, mission-driven strategy and policy organization with deep expertise in education improvement. We help system leaders, advocates, funders and policymakers think bigger and work smarter to create the conditions that drive equity, coherence and excellence for all students. Our mission is to deliver exceptional ideas, experience-based solutions and results so all students—and particularly Black, Indigenous and other students of color and students living in low-income communities—are prepared for success in college, career and life.

We are seasoned strategists and trusted practitioners. Since 2006, Education First has partnered with state and local education agency leaders in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. Our 80+ team members live across 24 states and bring deep credibility in their home communities coupled with national connections and content expertise. Our team have taught in public schools, advised superintendents, governors and CEOs, staffed national and state policy organizations and school districts, developed public policies and lobbied legislatures, led successful nonprofit advocacy organizations, worked for and with major media outlets, and managed multimillion-dollar education grantmaking programs. We bring authentic, in-your-shoes expertise in the content, issues, and politics of making real change that yields real results for educators and students.

We seek to advance racial equity in everything we do. We believe inequitable systems are a product of design—and they can be redesigned. We hold a deep commitment to helping clients see themselves as systems designers and to actively participate in remaking those systems to better meet the needs of those farthest from opportunity. We developed the Coherence Framework to provide a set of foundational practices leaders can adopt to move from fragmentation to coherence, resulting in more equitable systems for all, and we routinely incorporate principles of equitable design into our projects to support our clients in interrogating the problems they are trying to address through a process that centers the perspectives of people most proximate to those problems.

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