

## Discussion Notes: Assessment Breakout Session

*Stakeholder Session #1 | April 28, 2016*

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### I. Overview

Scott Norton, Strategic Initiatives Director for Standards, Assessment, and Accountability at the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), led morning and afternoon breakout sessions on the potential impacts and opportunities of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) with respect to assessment policy in Pennsylvania. Approximately 45 stakeholders participated in the sessions.

Mr. Norton provided an overview of core tenets of ESSA governing state assessment systems, including:

- Alignment with higher education
- Annual assessments in grades 3 through 8 and once in high school
- Disaggregation
- Alternate assessments
- Participation rate of 95 percent
- English Language Proficiency assessments

Mr. Norton also detailed new flexibility in the areas of:

- Alternate formats (i.e., portfolios, projects, etc.)
- Single summative or multiple interim assessments
- 8th grade advanced math assessments in place of grade-level tests
- Locally selected, nationally recognized tests (high school)
- Computer-adaptive assessments
- Assessment audits (states may apply for funding)
- Assessment pilots

### 2. Discussion Points

The facilitator encouraged stakeholders to consider priority areas related to assessment (both administration and use) that work group members should contemplate as they begin work in June. In particular, breakout session participants focused on the following key questions:

- How can we reduce testing time while ensuring valid assessments aligned to the academic standards?
- What timeline and format for reporting results maximizes opportunities for effective instructional decision making?
- What are the implications for Act 82?
- Which assessment areas in ESSA offer Pennsylvania the greatest opportunity to improve the assessment system?
- What policy drivers should be considered?

### 3. Key Themes

Comments from both breakout sessions appear below. The most consistent comments are italicized.

#### **What are some of the drawbacks/challenges in the current assessment system?**

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- *Too much testing*; too cumbersome and time consuming; duplication (e.g., middle school students taking both Keystones and PSSAs).
- *Stress inducing* (for both students and teachers); high stakes
- Teaching to the test
- Punitive; grueling
- *Isolated from academic content; not an authentic gauge of student learning; “one size fits all”*
- *Bias – not responsive to cultural and social differences*
- Results come too late to inform instructional decision making; student-level results should be shared to inform instruction
- Results overwhelm course grades
- Not sufficiently coherent
- Not well-aligned to standards; particular gaps for career and technical education students
- Too top-down
- *Special education and English language learners are marginalized*
- Adult-focused
- Lack of parental involvement
- Lack of support for teachers
- *Insufficient attention to growth*

#### **What does a successful state approach for assessment look like given the opportunities created by ESSA?**

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- Spread out over the year
- *More meaningful assessment; portfolio assessment*
- Greater connection to academic content beyond core subjects, clearer link to postsecondary expectations
- More focus on science and social studies
- *Greater customization; greater flexibility*
- Greater local control
- More consistency; commit to the current system of standards

#### **What are some possible strategies for overcoming those challenges?**

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- Empower educators to play a more meaningful role in test development and administration
- Reduce stakes
- Balance test security with the need to provide assessment results that can inform instruction
- Do the “bare minimum” to comply with federal requirements, and free up resources for other purposes

## What additional information is required?

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- Develop a chart that outlines current state assessment policy and where these requirements sit (e.g., ESSA, state statute or regulation, other policy).

### 4. Key Takeaways

Key takeaways from the two breakout sessions include:

- Discussions revealed significant (but healthy) tensions. For example, many stakeholders argued for reduced state spending on assessment; others called for revisions to the assessment system (especially in the areas of large-scale portfolio assessment and open-ended responses) that could increase costs. Similarly, stakeholders in both sessions argued for less testing overall, while several practitioners in “untested” areas (e.g., social studies, health and physical education) felt that additional assessments—though not necessarily standardized tests—could ensure more balanced curriculum.
- Stakeholders were roughly equally concerned with test design, administration, and use. Many stakeholders voiced concerns about the relationship between current standards in regulation, eligible content, and the assessments themselves.
- Overall, stakeholders seemed enthusiastic about the opportunities and flexibilities offered by ESSA. At the same time, participants—and especially practitioners—attributed assessment fatigue to constantly evolving policy and guidance; in other words, is there appetite for still more change?

Breakout session participants identified these takeaways and the preceding themes as areas where the Assessment Work Group should begin their initial discussions in June.