

EVERY STUDENT SUCCEEDS ACT (ESSA): Assessment Work Group Meeting #1 – June 14, 2016

I. Anticipated Timeline of ESSA Stakeholder Engagement in Pennsylvania¹



2. Scope of Assessment Work Group²

The work group's charge is to develop framework recommendations for state assessment policy with respect to ESSA, bearing in mind that the new federal law – and its corresponding [proposed draft regulations](#)³ – would continue much of the annual testing, technical, and accountability rules established through No Child Left Behind. The majority-practitioner committee was also asked to evaluate recommendations based on the goal of fair and useful assessment; in other words, within the context of ESSA, what approaches align with the Department's vision that every student graduates ready for meaningful postsecondary opportunities? Finally, work group members were asked to contemplate these changes within the context of relevant state policy to ensure as coherent an approach as possible. (A [crosswalk](#) of ESSA requirements and related state policy was provided to work group members ahead of the June 14 meeting and is available on the Department's ESSA webpage.)

ESSA's core tenets governing state assessment systems include:

- Alignment with postsecondary education;
- Annual assessments in grades 3 through 8 and once in high school;
- Disaggregation by subgroup;
- Alternate assessments;
- Participation rate of 95 percent for all students and subgroups; and
- English language proficiency assessments.

Under ESSA, states also have flexibility to explore the following:

- Alternate formats (e.g., portfolios, projects, etc.);
- Single summative or multiple interim assessments;

¹ Note: In its [Notice of Proposed Rulemaking \(NPRM\) on accountability, state plans, and data reporting](#), published in the Federal Register on May 31, 2016, the U.S. Department of Education (USDE) proposed two deadlines for state education agencies to choose to submit their State Plan(s) under ESSA: March 6 or July 5, 2017. These deadlines are [proposed](#), and timelines will depend on final promulgated regulations as well as further guidance from USDE.

² Discussion notes from the April 28 breakout sessions on assessment are available on PDE's [website](#).

³ On July 6, 2016, the U.S. Department of Education released two NPRMs regarding assessments: [Part A proposed regulation](#) (consensus-based proposed regulations addressing assessment requirements for all states developed as part of the negotiated rulemaking process in the spring), and [Part B proposed regulation](#) (innovative assessment demonstration authority for up to seven states).

- 8th grade advanced math assessments in place of grade-level tests;
- Locally-selected, nationally-recognized tests (high school only);
- Computer-adaptive assessments;
- Assessment audits (states may apply for funding); and
- Innovative assessment pilots (seven states).

The Assessment work group discussion was facilitated by Scott Norton of the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO). PA Department of Education (PDE) staff were also available to the work group to provide support and assistance, as needed.

3. Emerging Themes – Assessment

Assessment work group members identified several key themes during discussions on June 14:

1. Testing time associated with federal accountability should be reduced to maximize instructional time. Work group members identified two potential strategies to support this priority:
 - a. Reductions in open-ended items (would require a change to Chapter 4 and may reduce ability to measure certain standards); and
 - b. Matrix sampling (yielding slightly reduced information at the student level, while preserving strong coverage of the standards at the classroom level).
2. Concerns about testing time, more broadly, cannot be fully disentangled from the time and energy devoted to formative assessments; however, the group felt the state should avoid setting uniform policies that could constrain local decision making.
3. Assessment results should provide as much detail as possible regarding student performance (e.g., on content subcategories/topic areas).
4. Earlier administration of assessments and faster turnaround of assessment results.

There was significant diversity of opinion on other fronts – which highlighted the tension between an ideal assessment system, and ESSA’s requirements that the assessment system work uniformly across 500 unique districts and be integrally linked with a statewide accountability system. For example, some members argued that the state should explore flexibility to administer assessments at multiple points in time to better inform instructional planning and measure student growth; others expressed concerns that multiple administrations of a test used for high stakes purposes (and the preparation and test security procedures that go with it) would present logistical burdens. With respect to new flexibility around 8th grade testing, members strongly agreed that there was no defense, from an instructional quality standpoint, to assess students on both the PSSA and Algebra I Keystone; however, members differed on the question of adding a new battery of state tests to address the high school grade span requirement. Some members highlighted provisions in the law that would allow Pennsylvania to consider the ACT or SAT in lieu of the Keystones for high school grade span testing, while others suggested computer-based and adaptive testing (while noting the variability in technological capacity statewide).

A more detailed breakdown of the day’s discussion areas is below.

4. Discussion Points – Assessment

Emerging Theme #1: Testing time associated with federal accountability should be reduced to preserve instructional time.

- Eliminate double testing in 8th grade.
- Shorten testing time by removing open-ended items (takes too long for the hand scoring to be completed in a timely manner).
- While open-ended/essay responses and performance-based assessments might be useful, it takes too much time to be effective.
- Eliminating open-ended items and reducing complexity of assessment could also reduce costs of statewide assessments.
- Benefits of formative assessment with diagnostic components.
- Perception that administering shorter, more frequent assessments throughout the year might reduce testing time and improve turnaround time.

Emerging Theme #2: Concerns about testing time, more broadly, cannot be fully disentangled from the time and energy devoted to formative assessments; however, the group felt the state should avoid setting uniform policies that could constrain local decision making.

- Value of assessment is in focusing on and understanding student growth and achievement; local decision making is key in making assessment meaningful and relevant.
- Concerns about role of external testing companies in making decisions around content and structure of assessments.
- Localized assessments are more helpful and relevant to districts than statewide assessments; students can be more authentically assessed through curriculum-based assessments rather than having those components included in statewide assessments.
- Some concerns regarding whether more local control would exacerbate Pennsylvania's equity gaps, with some districts better able to create and administer high-quality assessments and opportunities than others.

Emerging Theme #3: Assessment results should provide as much detail as possible regarding student performance (e.g., on content subcategories/topic areas).

- Assessment data should be useful for guiding instruction.
- Importance of providing training and professional development for teachers to understand and interpret these data to inform effective instructional practice.
- Assessments should be aligned with standards and should provide relevant information on students' performance against those standards.

Emerging Theme #4: Earlier administration of assessments and faster turnaround time for assessment results following administration.

- Work group members expressed a desire for real-time data that can inform instructional practice.
- Consider a multiple choice assessment administered at the beginning and end of the school year, using locally developed interim assessments to evaluate ongoing progress.

5. Other Discussion Areas – Assessment

In addition to the emerging themes and discussion highlights noted above, work group members also discussed the following:

- **Defining the Purpose of Assessments:** Work group members discussed the importance of ensuring that the assessment(s) should be valid and reliable for the purpose(s) the assessment is being utilized.
- **Parent/Guardian Notification and Opt-Outs:** Rights of parents/guardians to review and opt-out of assessments, including need to notify parents and more explicitly define choices and options.
- **Accommodations:** Universal design should be incorporated in statewide assessment system. The group also discussed national assessments (e.g., ACT, SAT), accommodations for these assessments, and whether national assessments administered with accommodations can be used for postsecondary admission.
- **Cultural Competency and Accessibility:** Members discussed the importance of ensuring that assessments are culturally competent and accessible, particularly for English learners. Language acquisition timelines are 5-7 years for academic language, 7-10 years for students with interrupted or insufficient schooling in their first language.
- **Cost of Assessments:** Work group members spent significant time discussing the costs of developing, administering, and scoring statewide assessments. Many felt that the state spends too much money on assessments; others felt that test cost was not as important as test quality.
- **College and Career Readiness:** Members discussed the role of assessments to measure proficiency and growth tied to college and career readiness, and a perception that the current system is too focused on “college ready,” and does not serve “career ready” goals.