

MEANINGFUL MEASUREMENT

The Role of Assessments in Improving High School Education in the Twenty-First Century

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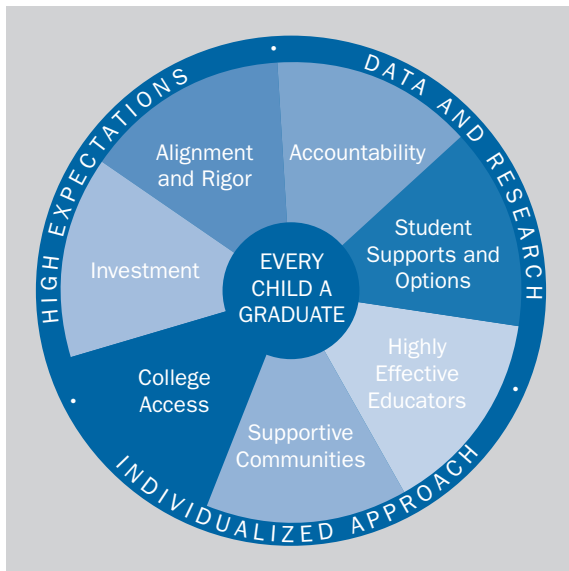
About the Alliance for Excellent Education

The mission of the Alliance for Excellent Education is to promote high school transformation to make it possible for every child to graduate prepared for postsecondary learning and success in life.

The Alliance for Excellent Education is a national policy and advocacy organization, based in Washington, DC, working to improve national and federal policy so that all students can achieve at high academic levels and graduate high school ready for college, careers, and citizenship in the twenty-first century.

The Alliance has developed a “Framework for Action to Improve Secondary Schools” that informs a set of federal policy recommendations based on the growing consensus of researchers, practitioners, and advocates about the challenges and solutions for improving secondary student learning.

The framework, shown graphically here, encompasses seven policy areas that represent key leverage points in ensuring a comprehensive, systematic approach to improving secondary education. The framework also captures



three guiding principles that apply to all of the policy areas. Although the appropriate federal role varies from one issue area to another, they are all critically important to reducing dropouts and increasing college and career readiness.

About the Editor

Lyndsay M. Pinkus is director of strategic initiatives at the Alliance for Excellent Education. Since joining the Alliance in January 2002, she has served in a variety of research, coordination, and advocacy roles, where her work has included managing policy and grant work on a range of issues including graduation rates, data, secondary school accountability, and secondary school improvement, and authoring a number of publications for the Alliance. Prior to rejoining the staff in January 2006, Ms. Pinkus served as a legislative associate at Washington Partners, LLC, providing government relations and policy research and analysis for a variety of clients, including the Alliance. She is a graduate of the School of Public Affairs at American University as a presidential scholar; the Public Affairs and Advocacy Institute at the Center for Congressional and Presidential Studies; and the Institute for Educational Leadership's Education Policy Fellowship program.

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Introduction

“[D]ropping out of high school is no longer an option. It’s not just quitting on yourself, it’s quitting on your country—and this country needs and values the talents of every American. That is why we will provide the support necessary for you to complete college and meet a new goal: by 2020, America will once again have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world.”

—President Obama, February 24, 2009

College and Career Readiness for All: The Dual Challenge

Success in today’s global and entrepreneurial economy increasingly requires some form of postsecondary education or training. Yet too many students—particularly poor and minority students—leave the K–12 system without the knowledge and skills necessary for success after high school. The long-term implications of an inadequate education have social and economic consequences for individuals, the communities in which they live, and the nation as a whole. As a result, the country is beginning to embrace a new goal for the public education system: graduate every child ready for college and careers in the twenty-first-century global economy. And at the highest levels of national leadership there is a call to action to dramatically increase the number of American students going on to success in college.

The challenge ahead is twofold. First, the mission of our public education system must shift from “educate some students and prepare them for the twentieth-century American economy” to “educate all students and prepare them for the twenty-first-century global economy.” The system goals must be radically altered. These new expectations must be made clear at all levels of the system—from federal and state policies establishing standards, accountability systems, and graduation requirements to the culture established in individual schools. The second part of the challenge is to fundamentally improve the education system’s performance in delivering this twenty-first-century education to all students. This will require improvements in the delivery of instruction, the allocation of human, financial, and other resources, and efforts to address the nation’s chronically lowest-performing high schools, among other things. Ultimately, the nation demands that the education system not only aspire to higher performance for all students, but that it deliver that result.

The federal government has traditionally taken action in the education arena for three specific reasons: (1) to reduce poverty, increase equity, and serve the most disadvantaged; (2) to ensure national security and economic and competitive position; and (3) to advance research that supports state and district innovation, policies, and practices. Given the economic, societal, and civil rights imperatives of ensuring that the public education system adequately prepares our students—the nation’s future workers, consumers, and leaders—there is clearly a federal role in addressing the current weaknesses in the system.

The Role of Assessments in Addressing the Dual Challenge

Assessments can be vital tools in addressing the dual challenge described above—changing and raising expectations and improving the education system’s capacity to meet those expectations. Assessments both clarify expectations and measure progress toward meeting them. Assessment results have consequences for students in the form of grades, promotion, graduation, and college admission. Assessments also play a meaningful role in improving the delivery of education. Classroom assessments help inform educators’ classroom instruction on a daily basis. The results of summative assessments—large-scale assessments designed to measure student learning at the end of a period of time, such as a course or a grade—play an important role in holding the system responsible for student outcomes, particularly when they are shared publicly and transparently as part of accountability and improvement systems. And assessment data—from a variety of assessment sources—can help inform systemic improvement efforts at the school, district, and state levels, guiding decisions about professional development, resource allocation, and program effectiveness.

Federal policymakers have long recognized the power of summative assessments in playing these various roles, primarily through the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA) and the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA). Over the course of the standards-based movement, federal policy has increasingly required states to develop, administer, and report the results of statewide assessments. The focus has shifted over time from a narrow concentration on measurement to monitor specific program implementation (for example, measuring the academic achievement of

students served by a specific program, such as ESEA's Title I) to monitoring the academic achievement of all students.*

Today, the current version of ESEA, known as the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), requires that states administer annual reading, math, and science assessments to all students in grades 3–8 and once in grades 10–12, and assessments of English language proficiency to all English language learners in grades K–12. Through IDEA and NCLB, states are required to include students with disabilities in these assessments, with or without accommodations, and to develop an alternate assessment for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities. Through the NCLB accountability system, these results are reported publicly and used to trigger mandated actions in low-performing schools. States must also participate in the National Assessment of Educational Progress, also known as the Nation's Report Card.

Current Assessments and Assessment Policies Do Not Support the Dual Challenge

Unfortunately, there is a general consensus that current assessment policies and practices are not designed to support the dual challenge: they neither establish the goal of college and career readiness for all students nor support improved practices that will help educators achieve this goal. There are oft-articulated criticisms of the quality of current summative assessments, those assessments' lack of usefulness to educators in improving instruction, and the unintended consequences created by accountability systems that rely so heavily on them. Concerns also exist about the lack of incentives or policies to promote assessments that can inform teaching and learning, such as formative assessments (classroom assessment practices that inform daily instruction) and performance assessments (those that give students opportunities to demonstrate their knowledge and skills through real-world tasks that represent the key aspects of their learning). However, these challenges are not insurmountable, and promising practices from across the globe demonstrate ways forward. In the chapters that follow, leading experts

* W. J. Popham, *The Role of Assessment in Federal Education Programs* (Los Angeles: University of California, Los Angeles, 2008).

Chapter Synopses

- In “College and Work Readiness as a Goal of High Schools: The Role of Standards, Assessments, and Accountability,” John Tanner of the Center for Innovative Measures at the Council of Chief State School Officers establishes why, in the twenty-first century, the nation needs standards, assessments, and accountability systems aligned to college and career readiness, and offers recommendations for federal policymakers to support such efforts.
- In “Reframing Accountability: Using Performance Assessments to Focus Learning on Higher-Order Skills,” Ray Pecheone and Linda Darling-Hammond of the School Redesign Network at Stanford University discuss how performance assessments can help evaluate students’ ability to apply their knowledge and encourage teaching and learning of higher-order skills. They describe what performance assessments are and how they can benefit instruction, how they are being used to support policy goals in the United States and abroad, the major challenges and considerations that must be addressed to use performance assessments well, and how federal policy can support the development and implementation of high-quality assessments that both support and evaluate more complex knowledge and skills.
- In “Formative Assessment and Assessment for Learning,” Jan Chappuis, Stephen Chappuis, and Richard Stiggins of the ETS Assessment Training Institute describe the characteristics of formative assessment, with a particular focus on those formative assessment practices that engage and empower students in their own learning, or assessments for learning. They also describe challenges related to the effective use of formative assessment and recommended actions for policymakers.
- In “The Role of Interim Assessments in a Comprehensive Assessment System,” Judy Wurtzel, of the Aspen Institute, and Marianne Perie, Scott Marion, and Brian Gong of the National Center for the Improvement of Education Assessment, differentiate between true classroom formative assessment and the interim assessments currently in the marketplace. They then provide a framework for considering the appropriate role of interim assessments.
- In “International Assessments of Student Learning Outcomes,” Andreas Schleicher of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development provides a brief introduction of the history of international assessments and describes the potential benefits of international assessments for educational policy and practice. He discusses some of the methodological challenges faced in providing valid, comparable, and reliable evidence, and offers recommendations to U.S. policymakers.
- In “Measuring Student Achievement Growth at the High School Level,” Joseph Martineau of the Michigan Department of Education explains the technical underpinnings of growth models, describes the various types

of growth models, articulates challenges inherent to measuring growth at the high school level, and explores implications for policymakers interested in moving toward the widespread use of growth models.

- In “Assessing High School English Language Learners,” Jamal Abedi of the University of California at Davis describes the challenges inherent in assessing the English proficiency and content knowledge of the diverse high school English language learner (ELL) population and offers recommendations to federal policymakers for creating reliable, valid, and accessible assessments for ELL students.
- In “Students with Disabilities: Expectations, Academic Achievement, and the Critical Role of Inclusive Standards-Based Assessments in Improving Outcomes,” Rachel Quenemoen of the National Center on Educational Outcomes describes issues concerning the assessment of high school students with disabilities in a standards-based accountability system, ways to evaluate assessments that are inclusive of all students in the accountability system, and recommendations for policymakers.
- In “Assessments and Technology: A Powerful Combination for Improving Teaching and Learning,” Erin Martin Gohl, Daniel Gohl, and Mary Ann Wolf of the State Educational Technology Directors Association describe how the use of technology to assess students and to record and analyze performance can result in timely, appropriate, and individualized instruction for all students. They highlight some of the innovative approaches in using technology to assess student progress, address current challenges in the use of technology, and provide recommendations to federal policymakers to overcome those challenges.

describe some of the assessment challenges in greater detail and provide federal recommendations on how to address them.

Rethinking Assessments and the Federal Role

Meeting the dual challenge of raising the bar for high school graduation to represent college and career readiness while simultaneously helping to ensure educators and students clear that bar will require rethinking the assessments and the federal role in supporting them.

Current federal policy does nothing to establish college and career readiness as the goal for all students or to ensure that standards and assessments are both aligned to this goal and comparable across states. Today, the nation relies on more than fifty sets of state standards and assessments that define

expectations and proficiency in fifty different ways. As a result, expectations about what students should learn are dependent on their state of residence, zip code, and curriculum track rather than on a common understanding of the skills, content, and competencies necessary for college, careers, and life. Meanwhile, current federal policy mandates how educators should address low-performing schools by requiring a specific sequence of one-size-fits-all interventions that are not informed by more specific data about the challenges that are unique to the schools themselves.

This approach should be reversed. Federal policy should establish college and career readiness as the goal for all students and support collaborative state-led efforts to define those expectations through a set of common standards and assessments. Federal policy should require that policymakers, administrators, and educators use information from these assessments to inform decisionmaking around teaching, learning, and student outcomes and ensure improvements. However, it should leave those decisions—about what to do, when, and how—to the educators who are closest to students and schools.

With this approach in mind, federal policy should do the following to support the development and use of assessments to establish college and career readiness as the goal for all students, and to improve the education system's capacity to meet that goal:

Support the development of common standards and assessments. Federal policymakers should support state-led efforts to develop common standards and assessments that are aligned to college and career readiness and reflect global best practice. This should be accompanied by incentives for states to adopt these standards and assessments, to use them as part of their K–12 accountability systems, and to better align secondary and postsecondary education. Federal policy should continue to require states to include all students, including students with disabilities or limited English proficiency, in the assessment process, through the development of high-quality, appropriate accommodations and modifications for those assessments.

Federal policy should also ensure full U.S. participation at the national and state levels in international assessments of student performance, including

the Programme for International Student Achievement (PISA) and the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS). These opportunities to compare our performance and the quality of our standards and assessments internationally are critical to efforts to improve policies, practices, and student outcomes.

Support the timely and transparent communication and use of assessment results. Assessment data is only actionable if it is accessible. NCLB made significant progress on this front by requiring the public reporting of test results for every school and each of its student subgroups. Federal policymakers should continue this progress by supporting the timely and transparent communication of all assessment results for use by educators, parents, policymakers, and researchers. Federal policy should require the use of information about students' college and career readiness, along with other important data, to inform decisionmaking about school improvement efforts and allocation of resources, such as distribution of teachers and targeting of professional development. Federal policy should support development of the technical infrastructure necessary for communication and use of assessment results. It should also provide incentives for the development of coherent data systems at the state, district, and school levels that support the collection, communication, analysis, and use of assessment data.

Improve educators' capacity to use data to improve teaching and learning. The assessment landscape is broad and complex. As described in various chapters in this report, educators at the school, district, and state levels are using innovative tools such as performance assessments and formative assessment processes that engage students in their learning and give educators valuable information that can be immediately used to improve instruction. Federal policy should help build educators' assessment literacy: this includes both their ability to embed assessment practices in instruction and their capacity to use multiple kinds of assessment data to make informed decisions about instructional practice and program design. Beginning with pre-service education and continuing through induction programs and professional development practices, educators must be prepared and supported to effectively use a wide range of assessments that

inform instruction and student interventions. Federal policies and funding streams designed to help make educators more effective—such as ESEA’s Title II, the Higher Education Act’s professional development programs, or the Enhancing Education through Technology program—should be targeted to support these practices.

Invest in research and development to improve our collective knowledge about the development and use of assessments in ways that improve teaching, learning, and student outcomes. There are a number of assessment issues that need further exploration, such as the impact of interim assessments on students’ learning, the development of appropriate assessment options for some students with disabilities, and the development of sound growth models at the high school level, to name a few. Federal policymakers should dedicate some of their research and development agenda to exploring these key assessment issues. Also, educators are demanding increased information about how to effectively use assessments and assessment data to improve teaching, learning, and student outcomes. Federal policy should support the collection and dissemination of best practices related to assessment use.