

BLUEPRINT FOR TESTING

HOW SCHOOLS SHOULD ASSESS STUDENTS DURING THE COVID CRISIS

BY LYNN OLSON

JULY 2020

FutureEd
GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY

About the Authors

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About FutureEd

FutureEd is an independent, solution-oriented think tank at Georgetown University's McCourt School of Public Policy, committed to bringing fresh energy to the causes of excellence, equity, and efficiency in K-12 and higher education. Follow us on Twitter at @FutureEdGU.

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FOREWORD

As schools reopen this fall, educators will need to get a handle on exactly where students are in their learning and development in order to guide instruction, target interventions, and allocate resources. Using tests to support the nation's students and teachers and to inform policymaking in the wake of the coronavirus crisis is one of the most significant challenges facing the education sector in the coming months.

How quickly should schools begin assessing students' learning when they return to classrooms? How much testing should they do and for what purposes? What types of tests should they use? Should schools administer surveys or other measures of students' social-emotional well-being? When should states restart federally mandated assessments? When should they restart accountability systems?

This guide to testing during the pandemic outlines how and when states, school districts, and schools should use assessments in this unprecedented period: to gauge student learning, help accelerate students to grade-level performance, and provide systems-level insights into educational recovery.

Able researched and written by FutureEd Senior Fellow Lynn Olson, the blueprint draws on FutureEd's extensive work on standardized testing, on the insights of more than two dozen testing experts that we consulted for the project, and on the advice of FutureEd Research Advisors Martin West and Andrew Ho of the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Research Associate Vasilisa Smith helped track down state plans. Molly Breen edited the report. Merry Alderman designed it. And we are grateful to the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation for funding the project.

While each state and school district will have to develop its own testing plan for the year ahead, based on its unique assets and challenges, we hope these recommendations will provide a valuable starting point.

Thomas Toch

Director

This spring, faced with the Covid-19 pandemic, U.S. public schools flipped to remote instruction for 50 million students with almost no warning. The pandemic’s profoundly uneven health and economic impacts, including the loss of family members, housing, jobs, and food security, have also exposed existing inequities in the nation’s 13,300 school districts. Studies suggest school closures have had severe repercussions for student learning, particularly for disadvantaged students. A nationally representative survey of teachers from the RAND Corporation found only 12 percent reported covering all or nearly all of the curriculum they would have covered had their buildings remained open, with teachers in high-poverty schools more likely than peers elsewhere to focus on review rather than new material.¹ On top of the academic costs, the pandemic cut students off from their friends and from badly needed school supports, such as school meals, nursing, and counseling.

As schools reopen this fall, educators will need to get a handle on exactly where students are in their learning in order to guide instruction, target interventions, and allocate resources—and that means assessment.

Deploying assessments to support the nation’s students and teachers and to inform policymaking in the wake of the coronavirus crisis is one of the most significant challenges facing the education sector. How quickly should schools begin assessing students’ learning when they return to classrooms? How much testing should they do and for what purposes? What types of tests should they use? Should schools administer surveys or other measures of students’ social-emotional well-being? When should states restart federally mandated assessments? When should they restart accountability systems?

This guide to testing during the pandemic outlines how states, school districts, and schools should use assessments in

this unprecedented period: to gauge student learning, help accelerate students to grade-level performance, and provide systems-level insights into educational recovery. The blueprint draws on FutureEd’s extensive work on standardized testing, on the insights of the more than two dozen testing experts we consulted for the project, and on the recommendations of a panel of testing experts convened by the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) to provide guidance on the use of assessments for instruction in the coming school year. While each jurisdiction will have to develop its own plan, based on its unique assets and challenges, we hope these recommendations will provide a useful starting point.

We were guided by two principles: First, the priority this year must be on equipping teachers with the information they need to support students’ well-being and grade-level learning. Second, high-quality assessments matter more than ever, but they must have a clear and actionable purpose.

Given the other burdens on teachers and schools this year, this is a moment when less is more.

Just as Covid-19 testing and contact tracing can help the nation recover economically, the smart use of educational testing in the months ahead can help the nation's schools recover faster and more completely. Done well, these efforts can also lay the groundwork for improved future testing systems that more fully reflect the needs of teachers, students, and parents, offering meaningful windows into performance without overwhelming educators.

Why Assessments Matter More Than Ever

Given the months of remote learning this past school year, and the various ways the pandemic affected individual students' health and development, it's more important than ever for teachers, schools, and school systems to have accurate, easy to understand, and timely information about students' learning. Without such data, it's hard to plan instruction, design appropriate interventions and supports, reallocate resources, and make policy decisions going forward.

"The key thing when we return to school is going to be to try to aim for a supportive, responsive classroom environment, as students return from having missed so much time," says John King, the president and CEO of Education Trust and a former U.S. Secretary of Education. "But in order to figure out what academic experiences, what interventions students need, it will be important to have low-stakes, high-quality diagnostic assessments to gauge where students are."

The pandemic has had a disparate impact on low-income, rural, and Latino communities and communities of color, including higher infection and unemployment rates and more limited access to the technology devices and broadband needed for remote learning. "We're going to need information on how students are doing [in order] to address those equity gaps," King says.

Get Clear on Purpose

Yet before jumping to test students, educators first need to determine which questions they hope to answer with assessments and how they plan to use that information. There are many different types of assessments and no single test is useful for every purpose.

Andrew Ho, a psychometrician at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and a FutureEd research advisor, urges states, districts, and schools to think about who is making what diagnosis for what decision. For example, a teacher may need to know what concepts and skills her students already have learned to adjust an upcoming lesson. While a superintendent may want to know which schools have the lowest math performance in order to target additional resources.

Scott F. Marion, executive director of the Center for Assessment, argues that in a year when time and budgetary resources are limited, if educators cannot identify clear, constructive actions to take based on assessment results, don't test. That applies both to assessments of academic learning and to student and teacher surveys of social-emotional well-being and school climate and culture. "A lot of schools do surveys because they think they should," says Dave Paunesku, the founding director of PERTS, a center at Stanford University that helps educators apply insights from the psychological sciences. "One overarching question that I would want to put to a school or teacher is, 'What are you going to do differently based on what you've learned?' And if the answer is nothing, then you shouldn't do it."

Schools, districts, and states should spend this summer getting clear about the decisions they need to make for the school year and what data can inform those decisions. Then they need to put together a tactical plan. "The stronger your plan is going in, centered on your priorities, the better you'll be able to adapt quickly," says Mora Segal, chief executive officer of the Achievement Network, which works with schools and school systems to boost student learning based on data. Systems also should conduct an assessment audit to identify and eliminate any redundant assessments and those without a clear, useful purpose.

First, Focus on Student Wellness and Relationships

Schools should spend the first weeks of school building one-on-one relationships with students and creating communities in which students feel known, cared for, and respected. Creating safe and supportive schools and classrooms is associated with higher student achievement. But this step is particularly important given students' twin experiences of the pandemic and our national reckoning with systemic racism.

Students of color, in particular, may need convincing that schools are safe, relevant, trusted places to be. Students also will need to get used to new school routines in a Covid-19 environment that likely will require wearing masks, frequent handwashing, social distancing, and time spent learning in schools and at home. Even if schools wanted to formally assess students' learning during the first week or two of school, it's unlikely the results would be very accurate.

"[School districts] should refrain from doing formal assessments right at the beginning of the school year," says Michael Casserly, the executive director of the Council of Great City Schools, a consortium of urban school districts. "Wait a bit to make sure that kids are better acclimated, that their personal and social and mental health needs are met...before giving a formal, much less high-stakes assessment."

This summer or at the start of the school year, districts should conduct a needs assessment to understand what students and families have experienced during remote learning; whether they need assistance with food, housing, child care, or other social and health services; and what their views are on school reopening and support for students this coming year. Many parents have indicated in surveys that they don't intend to return their children to school until a Covid vaccine is available.² Teachers also can gather such information through virtual home visits or check-ins with families before school begins.

"If you think of Maslow's hierarchy, we want to make sure kids are safe and their basic needs are being met," says Pamela Cantor, a child and adolescent psychiatrist and the founder and senior science advisor at Turnaround for Children, which helps schools implement science-based practices to address adversity and improve school outcomes. "You can't get to instruction and the kind of work that we want kids to be able to do, unless we attend to those non-negotiable conditions."

In collaboration with its district partners, for example, the for-profit company Panorama Education has developed open-source School Reopening Surveys to gather information from families, teachers, and staff. Broward County Public Schools in Florida used the surveys to improve virtual learning experiences over the summer and to plan for the fall.

The school district found that access to technology was not a problem, but that students were finding it hard to get motivated to complete distance learning assignments and that 36 percent hadn't spoken with an adult from the school in the past week. Ninety percent of students, parents, and staff felt they had an adequate

TIMELINE FOR TESTING

JULY 2020

Conduct a district needs assessment of families' experiences of remote learning, need for assistance and attitudes on reopening.

Develop district and school tactical plans for assessments based on the information needed to improve teaching and learning.

Use a district audit to eliminate any redundant or unnecessary assessments.

Convene school teams to review prior year data to identify students who might experience barriers to learning and develop strategies to address these barriers.

Provide parents with tools to assess their child's grade-level learning.

If your district/school has not adopted standards-aligned curricula, bring together grade-level teams to design common assessment tasks and instructional supports.

supply of food, but 3,600 individuals requested to speak with a teacher, counselor, or other adult from the school about mental health and wellness supports.

This summer and during the first few weeks of school, adults in the school building also should review both qualitative and quantitative data from prior years to identify which students are likely to experience barriers to learning this fall for academic or nonacademic reasons. If needed, individual students can be referred to each school's existing Multi-Tier Systems of Support team to design plans that can quickly address their needs in collaboration with community and social service agencies.

Some organizations, such as Turnaround for Children and the CORE Districts in California, are piloting short wellness checks to help teachers understand each student's general feelings of well-being, including their mood, sleep, energy level, and feelings of safety. These tools are meant to help teachers build individual relationships with students, not to diagnose mental health needs or assign individual students to interventions. The latter should be left to qualified mental health professionals.

"When you start talking about identifying kids' mental health needs, that's where I get worried about doing screeners from a distance and having the information go to people who aren't necessarily trained in how to respond," says Laura Hamilton, a senior behavioral scientist at the RAND Corporation and a FutureEd research advisor. Any assessment used to diagnose specific conditions or assign students to interventions should be validated for that purpose and have a qualified professional involved in making those decisions, the CRPE panel cautions.³

Consider Student and Staff Surveys

An increasing number of schools and districts administer surveys to students and staff to better address the conditions that can support student learning and students' sense of themselves as learners. Some of these focus on the school, such as the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research 5Essentials Survey, the Tripod Survey, or the CORE District surveys of students, staff, and parents. The U.S. Department of Education, under the Obama Administration, developed a suite of free school climate surveys for schools, districts, and states (<https://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/edscls>).⁴

Other surveys focus more on the classroom learning environment created by individual teachers, such as the Tripod 7Cs Student Survey or the Copilot-Elevate surveys developed by PERTS at Stanford University, which includes practical suggestions for what teachers can do differently to create more equitable classrooms.

A number of these surveys can be administered remotely and are valuable even in a remote learning context. Many have questions focused on relationships between teachers and students or among students, and whether students perceive that adults in the school support them, care about them, and encourage them to work hard.

AUGUST 2020

(First Weeks of School)

- Focus on building relationships, rituals, and routines that help students feel physically and emotionally safe.

- Use virtual home visits or check-ins to solicit parents' observations about their children's strengths, areas for growth, and interests.

SEPTEMBER 2020

- Prioritize assessments closest to classroom learning to measure the key precursor concepts and skills students will need for the first unit or two of instruction.

SEPTEMBER - OCTOBER 2020

- Administer student social-emotional or school culture and climate surveys.

- Administer first interim assessments to measure student progress toward end-of-year standards, plan for one or two more interim assessments.

Morgan Polikoff, a FutureEd senior fellow, recently analyzed Tripod results from one Midwestern district and found that middle and high school students were struggling far more than 5th and 6th graders to navigate distance learning. Older students were less likely to report that they know whom to contact if schoolwork is hard, or whom to tell if they feel sad or nervous.⁵

If schools want to measure school climate this fall to get a handle on how things are going, it probably makes sense to wait until October, after educators have had a chance to establish relationships and routines. Giving school climate surveys too early in the year could produce unreliable readings. Quick, 5- to 10-minute surveys like the one PERTS developed could be given during the first or second week of instruction, and frequently thereafter, to provide individual teachers immediate insights into how students are experiencing instruction.

Equal Opportunity Schools, which partners with districts and schools to close gaps in AP and IB enrollment by race and income, typically administers student and staff surveys in the fall and translates student responses into a Student Insight Card—sort of like a baseball card for every student—that brings together about 40 different data points ranging from a student’s career and academic interests to whom they trust most in the building. Schools can go online and get real-time data, as soon as a student takes the survey, to help support student learning.

This summer, EOS gave a pandemic survey to about 3,400 students to gauge their perspectives about how they experienced learning during Covid-19 and what will motivate and support them once schools reopen, including questions about belonging, culturally relevant teaching and content. The organization found that, compared to their experiences prior to remote learning, 77 percent of students of color found it harder to be motivated, and the majority experienced a significant drop in meaningful interactions with their peers, counselors, teachers, and administrators. When asked what might make school more interesting in the future, students overwhelmingly indicated that schools should provide activities, assignments, and conversations that “connect to things I care about.” Sasha Rabkin, the organization’s chief strategy officer, emphasizes that the primary purpose of such surveys should be to guide adult mindsets and actions—not to label or pathologize students.

Given how chaotic learning was this spring, districts and schools should gather as much information as possible about which students had access to remote instruction and who logged on, attended, participated regularly, and completed assignments. Chronic absenteeism, defined as missing 10 percent or more of school days, greatly increases a student’s risk for low performance and dropping out.⁶ Yet newspaper reports this spring suggested that as schools went remote, many students logged out—and that many schools and districts did a poor job of monitoring attendance and engagement.⁷ FutureEd has collaborated with Attendance Works to produce an Attendance Playbook with updated suggestions for tracking absenteeism during distance learning.⁸

FEBRUARY - MARCH 2021

- Conduct Spring administration of interim assessments (prior to state tests).

- Conduct a second round of social-emotional or school culture and climate surveys.

MARCH - JUNE 2021

- Administer statewide summative assessments and publicly report the results.

- Do not tie results to accountability decisions, such as school ratings or teacher evaluations.

Prioritize Assessments Closest to Instruction

When it comes to assessments this fall, the most valuable measures will be those that yield actionable information that teachers can use to plan and adjust instruction. The CRPE panel suggested schools focus on what students need to know to engage in the first major unit or two of instruction in their fall grade level. That way, teachers can provide just-in-time support within that unit, rather than trying to reteach all of the knowledge and skills missed in the prior grade. “That’s tangible; that’s manageable,” says Marion of the Center for Assessment. “Once teachers get used to providing just-in-time supports within the context of grade-level instruction, it will set up the pattern for the year.”

When it comes to assessments this fall, the most valuable measures will be those that yield actionable information that teachers can use to plan and adjust instruction.

To help focus instruction this coming year, Student Achievement Partners, a nonprofit focused on improving literacy and math outcomes, has identified the priority instructional content in math and English language arts for each grade and the precursor knowledge and skills most essential for work in that grade. By focusing on priority content, says Segal of the Achievement Network, her organization was able to develop a diagnostic math assessment that’s up to 70 percent shorter than typical “to get teachers the right just-in-time information to shape instructional decision making.”

If districts or schools have adopted a high-quality, standards-aligned curriculum—such as one of those labeled green by the nonprofit organization Ed Reports, which conducts educator reviews of instructional materials, they should use the assessments embedded in those curricula.

These can range from end-of-unit tests and quizzes to checks for understanding at the end of each lesson. Curriculum providers like ZEARN Math, EL Education, and Core Knowledge Language Arts provide both embedded assessments and clear guidance to teachers about actions they can take in response to student achievement data.

“Developers built these assessments to measure the curriculum, so that automatically places them in a much-more-likely-to-be-useful category,” says Jenn Vranek, the founding partner of Education First, a consulting firm. Many developers are building tools to adjust their curriculum this fall, given Covid-related school closures. ZEARN Math, a hands-on, digital math curriculum, has published detailed information for educators about which topics or skills students are most likely to have missed this past spring.

Standards-aligned curricula are also coherent from grade to grade and classroom to classroom, providing a key advantage given the uncertainties of schooling this coming year. “If you have a high-quality [standards-based] curriculum, you have a better sense of what every teacher in the district taught,” says Mya Baker, vice president of the nonprofit TNTP, which works with school systems on instruction around the country, “and, you’re going to have more support going into this year.”

Unfortunately, surveys by the RAND Corporation have found that most teachers are not using standards-aligned curriculum, but instead rely on materials created by their districts, schools, or themselves. EdReports found only 26 percent of math materials and 16 percent of ELA materials teachers are working with are aligned to college- and career-ready standards.⁹

If a district or school hasn’t adopted high-quality instructional materials that include assessments, they shouldn’t leave it up to every teacher to design their own assessments. Districts should use the summer to bring together grade-level teams and curriculum and measurement experts to design assessment tasks and instructional supports. “Where schools should be focusing energy is on making sure teachers support students as much as possible academically, socially, and emotionally,” says Baker of TNTP, “rather than asking them to do pretty significant assessment work, which is probably not going to yield the best result for students.”

States belonging to the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC)—such as California and Washington—are recommending teachers use its integrated system of formative assessments and shorter, more targeted interim assessments. On June 9, SBAC unveiled a new online resource, Tools for Teachers, that lets educators search for formative assessment practices and instructional resources vetted by educators using key words and phrases. The Achievement Network, CenterPoint Education Solutions, and New Meridien also offer high-quality, instructionally oriented assessment items and performance tasks.

Use Classroom Assessments to Accelerate Learning

Schools and teachers should use the results from these classroom assessments in the coming months to accelerate student learning, with a focus on grade-level content, rather than reteaching or remediating every gap in learning from prior years. The disruption caused by the pandemic has led to estimates that students will start this school year with holes in their instruction far outstripping those in prior years. One study estimated students learned only about 40 percent to 60 percent of what they would have learned in a typical school year.¹⁰

But the risk is that testing will be used to keep students—particularly English learners and students of color—out of challenging, grade-level content and in hours of low-level remedial coursework. “If we just go back three grade levels and try to teach students material that was not designed for their maturity, not designed for their age group, I fear we’re just going to cement the existing achievement gaps,” says Baker of TNTIP.

Instead, schools will need to get innovative in response to assessment results. This might include high dosage one-on-one tutoring that is directly tied to classroom content, weeklong acceleration academies staffed with highly effective teachers, and some double math periods for students who have fallen out of typical grade range.¹¹ Other strategies include additional learning time after school; more creative use of teaching teams, potentially across grades

and classrooms; an extended school year for at least some students; and looping students with the same teacher for more than one year. Both the Cleveland Public Schools and the Kansas Department of Education plan to transition to competency-based instruction this fall, which uses students’ acquisition of key knowledge and skills rather than their grade level to organize instruction.

Assessment priorities and strategies also should vary by subject and grade level. For example, younger children who are less able to learn online are at particular risk of not mastering foundational reading skills. There are a wide variety of individually administered assessments to measure such skills, such as the Diagnostic Reading Assessment. In math, some topics build on prior knowledge, so it’s important to measure students’ understanding of precursor skills and concepts. That’s less true in English language arts, where understanding a specific text typically requires content knowledge and vocabulary that can be built into a lesson. Similarly, high school students don’t need to know all of biology to learn chemistry or all of world history to understand U.S. history. Districts and schools would be wise to focus more of their assessment efforts in foundational literacy and in mathematics, where the grasp of precursor concepts and skills is most important.

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Use Interim Assessments Primarily for School and District Decisions

Interim assessments, given periodically throughout the year, measure student progress against standards and can predict performance on state end-of-year tests. They also

enable reliable comparisons across schools and classrooms to decide where to allocate resources, adjust organizational strategies such as staffing and scheduling, and target students who need more support.

If schools or districts are already using interim assessments, such as MAP or I-Ready, two widely used examples, it makes sense to stick with what they have and what educators and students know. But that doesn't mean moving those assessments up to the start of the school year, which district leaders should not do.

Such assessments don't tell teachers a great deal about whether students have learned a particular curriculum. Nor do they provide the granular knowledge that teachers need to adjust instruction. Rather, they provide a "rough and ready thermometer" of where students stand in their learning, says David Steiner, director of the Institute for Education Policy at Johns Hopkins University.

Some have advocated giving students their prior grade's state summative, end-of-year tests as schools reopen this fall, to identify gaps in what students should have learned this past year. That's a bad idea for several reasons.

The turnaround to generate test results is often too long and the information too high-level to be useful for teachers. The tests cover end-of-year standards that many students never had the opportunity to learn, setting them up for failure. Just administering state tests is disruptive and could be anxiety-provoking for students and teachers, even if states promise not to use the information for accountability purposes. "I worry about the psychological impact on students of taking a state test they know they should have taken months before and doing even worse on it," says Steiner of Johns Hopkins. "You can say the results won't matter until the cows come home, but the very fact that you're using the same test will invite year-to-year comparisons in a very public way."

Others worry that giving state tests this fall could heighten the existing backlash against testing. "Don't people remember the opt-out movement?" asks Sandra Alberti, a senior fellow at Student Achievement Partners. "Parents are already contemplating, 'Should I send my kids back to school?' If part of that is sending my kid back to take a test for four days—no way."

In contrast, some states are providing optional, interim assessments aligned with state standards for district use. The Tennessee Department of Education, for example, is providing districts, schools, and teachers with a suite of free, optional assessment supports. At the start of the school year, districts can use math and ELA assessments developed from actual state test items to see if students have learned the most essential content from the prior year to progress in their current grade or high school course. An online item bank will enable teachers to create their own standards-based, formative assessments. Districts also can choose to give full-length "mock" interim assessments that mirror the state summative tests as mid-year or spring checkpoints. To support instruction, the state will release each item with a full analysis to help educators pinpoint student misconceptions of the standards.

Macke Raymond, director of the Center for Research on Education Outcomes at Stanford University, says it's important that interim assessments be able to provide comparable data on students' performance regardless of the grade in which they are enrolled. That's because "we're going to see a much wider spread of existing knowledge when kids come back than we've ever seen before," she says, "and I don't think people are talking about that very much." One strategy to address this challenge is to use more adaptive assessments, such as MAP, a computer-adaptive test that adjusts the difficulty of test items based on a student's prior responses.

But if districts aren't already using an interim assessment, they should think carefully before buying off-the-shelf products, which vary sharply in quality. Many testing experts were surprised this spring when the advocacy organization Education Reform Now released a table of 15 different assessments from six providers and urged states to pick one or more and have all their school districts administer them, in order to yield comparable results.¹² "I completely understand the desire, given the learning loss that we know is out there, to know where a student is," says Vranek of Education First. "My concern is that people will use what's available, spend a lot of money, and it turns out it won't be that useful."

Laura Slover, chief executive officer of CenterPoint Education Solutions, a nonprofit that works with districts and schools on assessment and practice solutions that deepen students' learning, warns that any test should be aligned with a district's curriculum scope and sequence: "At this moment, alignment has never mattered more. If you test kids on things they haven't learned, or on things that aren't in the curriculum or might be in the curriculum but later in the year, the data you get is going to be either wrong or, at best, hard to interpret." If a district doesn't have a coherent-, standards-aligned curriculum, it might seriously consider investing in one this fall, along with professional development to support its use, before making any testing decisions.

Make Test Results Available to Parents

Surveys suggest that after spending months on at-home schooling, parents will expect better school communication and engagement this fall. A nationally representative survey by Learning Heroes, a nonprofit focused on parent engagement, as well as state surveys in California, New York, Texas, and Washington State by Education Trust, found that many parents are worried about their children losing ground academically and socially as a result of school closures. About nine in 10 want regular communication with their child's teacher but less than half are getting it now.¹³ Given the likelihood of periodic school closures and some combination of in-person and online instruction this fall, it's more important than ever to engage parents as partners in their children's learning.

That means giving parents access to whatever assessment results schools are using as they reopen, in parent-friendly formats that are easy to understand. Learning Heroes has created a district-level protocol to help teachers share beginning-of-the-year expectations and test results with parents and solicit their observations about their children's strengths, interests, and areas for growth. The organization has also developed a Readiness Check, a set of short activities that parents can do with their children to get a sense of whether they have learned the most important standards from the prior grade. CenterPoint Education Solutions also is working on parent-facing, short diagnostic tests that parents

could use to get a sense of where their child is in grade-level learning.

"I think there's a way that data and assessment can really be a bridge between schools and families, especially during Covid-related closures," says Molly Depasquales, vice president of system advising at the Achievement Network, which works with schools to support instruction. But that will require prioritizing communication with parents much more so than in the past, she adds.

Administer State Tests in Spring 2021, Without High Stakes

If at all possible, states should plan to administer statewide summative tests in the spring of 2021 on schedule. A clear picture of statewide performance will encourage state policymakers and appropriators to help schools through what is likely to be a very difficult period. States need the information to drive planning and resource allocations. Comparable data, disaggregated by race, income, geographical region and other student subgroups, is more important than ever given the disparate impact of school closures on students. And parents and the public deserve to know where student learning stands.

"We should mount an effort at a census survey of what kids know and are able to do at some point over the next academic year because there's nothing like hard data to ring an alarm bell that's louder than the one that's currently ringing," says Ho of Harvard. "Actual evidence of how much kids have declined, potentially, on average, and how much gaps have grown from previous years needs to be understood and not just guessed at." Such data could drive additional, badly needed investments in education.

For an accurate comparison to prior years, or across districts, schools, and classrooms, students must take their assessments under comparable conditions. That could be a problem if many students have to take the tests online at home. States need to work with their testing vendors and prepare for such contingencies.

Though states should administer summative tests this spring and make the results public, they should not make accountability decisions about schools and teachers based on the results. Given the disruptions this past spring and how different and uncertain schooling may be this coming year, it will be almost impossible to attribute changes in test scores to the specific actions of schools or educators.

Comparable data, disaggregated by race, income, geographical region and other student subgroups, is more important than ever given the disparate impact of school closures on students.

“Whatever test you use in the spring you’re going to see depressed numbers because I don’t think the 2020-21 school year is going to be typical at all,” cautions Raymond of Stanford. “I think it’s going to be an extremely disrupted year. So, I personally wouldn’t make any recommendations to hold schools accountable.”

Agrees Ho, “We should be extremely cautious about holding teachers and schools accountable for relative measures of progress, because we don’t know what typical growth is like in this unprecedented health and economic disaster, not to mention educational disaster. I believe we can and should measure growth, but I do not expect us to be able to attribute that growth to teachers and schools in any way that can un-confound educational contributions from health and physical and emotional contexts.”

As a way to increase the value of high school degrees, some states require students to pass statewide tests in order to graduate. Those states suspended the testing components of their 2020 graduation requirements when they suspended high school tests this spring. They would be wise to do so again for 2021, since the quality of instruction is likely to vary substantially from school to school during the coming

year. To encourage schools and students to work hard in the coming school year, states could use other metrics to certify student proficiency in high schools, as Massachusetts did for its 2020 graduating seniors.

One important improvement under the federal Every Student Succeeds Act was to focus accountability systems on how schools contribute to the growth of individual students, not just on meeting a performance target. But because schooling will look so different this school year, the baselines for setting those growth targets will likely need to be reset—another important reason for giving state tests this spring.

“I think we’ve rightly moved in the direction of trying to measure school performance based more on individual students’ growth and on schools’ aggregate progress over time, rather than their performance relative to some utopian target, as under NCLB,” says West. “And the longer we wait to begin to produce the information that serves as the starting point for that type of consideration of school performance, the longer it will be until we can have measures of school performance that deserve to have stakes attached to them.”

Delaying the restart of statewide testing would also play into the hands of accountability averse teacher unions and their allies, who have seized on the suspension of state testing in 2020 as an opportunity to expand recent reductions in testing. In Massachusetts, where the Massachusetts State Teachers Association has advocated the elimination of state testing entirely, several legislative bills have surfaced to suspend testing through 2023-24. Michigan has already requested a federal waiver to suspend state testing next spring. Educators and legislators in other states, including Georgia, Oklahoma, South Carolina, and Texas, have indicated they may follow.

But restarting testing doesn’t preclude states from modifying their testing regimes in ways that reduce testing demands on schools and students. Some have suggested testing a representative sample of students rather than every student. A second suggestion is matrix sampling, in which each student takes only a portion of the entire test. While both approaches could reduce the testing burden, they would not yield results for individual students and could make it harder to measure subgroup performance at the school level, particularly in small schools. These changes also cannot be done under

existing federal law. Some states, such as Georgia, Louisiana, Nebraska, and North Carolina, also are piloting efforts to roll up a series of shorter, more frequent tests into an end-of-year summative score.

“States need to know how institutions are doing,” says Gene Wilhoit, executive director of the Center for Innovation in Education and the former director of the Council of Chief State School Officers. “You can do that, though, in less intrusive ways than we have to this point. If we removed the individual student accountability and if we did it less frequently, by sampling, then we could take away the accountability pressure.”

But the Covid crisis shouldn't provide an excuse to abandon standardized testing entirely. There is a tremendous need to grasp the magnitude of learning loss in recent months, help schools get students back on track, and decipher system-wide trends. That requires student achievement data. As the nation's struggle with the coronavirus has made clear, failing to gather information about a problem doesn't make it go away. It makes it worse.

ENDNOTES

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