

Progress Report on Testing Innovation

A New Era of Skills-Based Assessments?

by Lynn Olson

State testing programs largely focus on measuring students' ability to do the work expected at their grade level. But students learn at different paces, and their progress may vary across subjects. Young people also learn both in and out of school, in formal and informal settings. Competency- or skills-based assessments permit students to progress at their own pace based on demonstrated mastery and can measure a wider variety of the skills that parents, educators, and employers hope to see.

In 2023, the Educational Testing Service (ETS) teamed up with the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (CFAT) to build a new suite of skills-based assessments that will measure such skills and habits of mind as creativity, digital literacy, communications, and perseverance. The Skills for the Future Initiative, initially focused on secondary students, is part of a larger effort by Carnegie to dismantle one of its signature creations, the Carnegie Unit. Since 1906, the Carnegie Unit has helped cement the relationship between learning and seat time in American schools by defining how many hours students must spend in a given course over a calendar year to earn credit.

The initiative has identified high-priority skills shared across a dozen existing frameworks for defining and measuring the cognitive, affective, and behavioral skills needed for success in education and the 21st century economy.¹ The two organizations plan to partner with about five states and with students, parents, educators, and employers to operationally define an initial set of these skills and design and pilot prototypes to measure them.

The prototypes could include both innovative tasks and ways to gather data from students' out-of-school experiences. "Learning is happening all over. How do we capture that in valid ways that are reliable, that people trust, so you can build this bigger vision and continuum of learning?" says Laura Slover, ETS's managing director of the Skills for the Future Initiative. "This is about really changing the paradigm not just of assessment but of learning."

For now, the measures will be used only for low- or no-stakes purposes, such as to inform instruction, and will not be used for accountability purposes. "We understand that for any state to implement an entirely new assessment system it may take five to seven years, so our goal at this point is not to supplant the existing accountability system but to use the new assessment in more of a white space to create a proof point and gather insights," says Lydia Liu, an associate vice president at ETS. The initiative also anticipates investing heavily in teacher training

and in working closely with a cohort of teachers to develop resources that could help shift instruction toward a competency-based model.

Ways to measure students' social-emotional development and well-being have also been a focus of interest. Studies have found that some of these measures may predict students' success post-high school better than more traditional measures. Investing in Adolescents, a study by University of Chicago researchers, found that students' reported sense of well-being and self-reports on whether they had developed strong work habits were better predictors of changed learning trajectories than test scores.² Other studies have found that grade-point averages better predict college success than standardized test results.³

But many existing measures of students social-emotional skills and well-being rely on self-reported surveys of students, teachers, and parents, who could be tempted to skew their responses if school ratings were on the line. For that reason, such measures in the main have not been included in accountability systems. Instead, they've provided information to teachers and schools to improve their practice.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Ou Lydia Liu, et al., "A New Vision for Skills-Based Assessment," 2023, Princeton, N.J.: Educational Testing Service.
- 2 Shanette C. Porter, C. Kirabo Jackson, Sebastián Kiguel and John Q. Easton, "Investing in Adolescents: High School Climate and Organizational Context Shape Student Development and Educational Attainment," April 2023, Chicago: University of Chicago Consortium on School Research, <https://consortium.uchicago.edu/publications/investing-in-adolescents>.
- 3 The To & Through Project, "What Does UChicago Consortium Research Say About Why Grades Matter?" 2023, To & Through Issue Brief, Chicago: The University of Chicago, <https://toandthrough.uchicago.edu/sites/default/files/uploads/documents/To%26Through%20Issue%20Brief%20-%20Grades.pdf#>.