



Assessment 101: State and Federal Policy

Ben Erwin

The assessment landscape is varied and complex. Because assessments serve many purposes, they can take multiple forms depending on what they are measuring and how they are used. The intended purpose behind each assessment influences its design, and the design influences how assessment data can be used by students and their families, school, district and state leaders.

Assessments are administered at various stages of a student's education journey to evaluate their mastery of specific academic subjects, mastery of skills or readiness for their next step. Student assessment results are also a key part of school accountability systems as they help ensure students have access to a quality education and that resources are allocated to the schools and students with the most need. State and district policymakers have important decisions to make about when and how to gather and use assessment data across K-12 education systems, but federal policy is a key component of every state's assessment system.

Assessments in Federal Policy

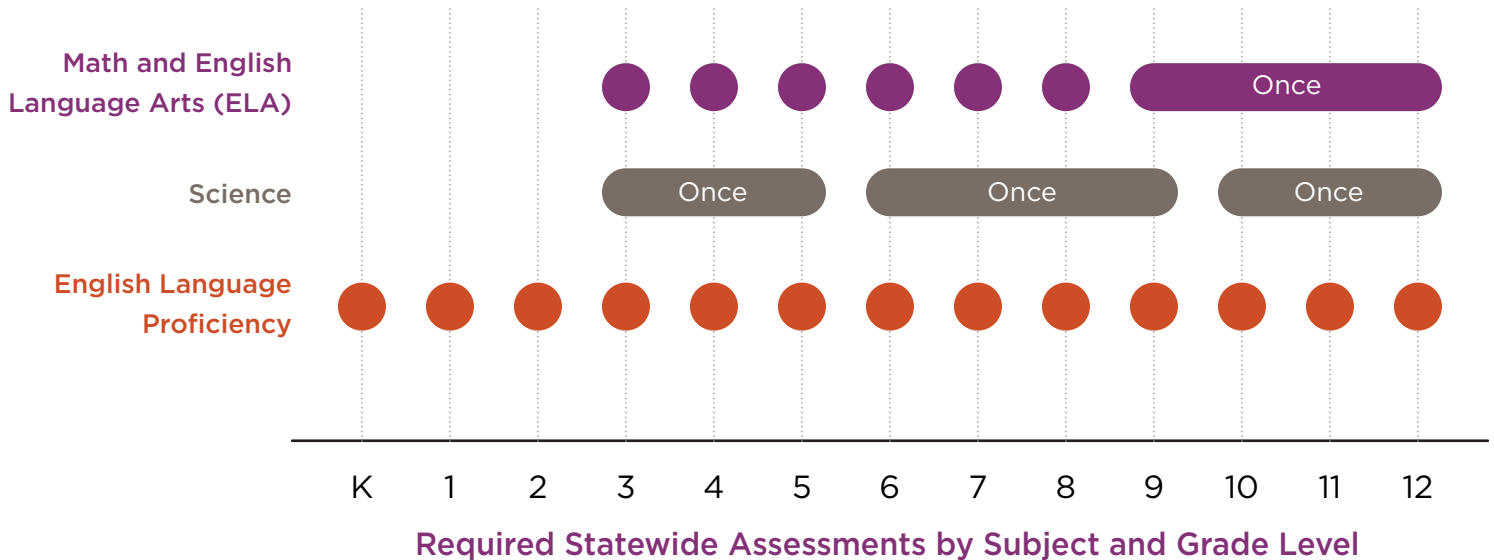
Requirements

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) lays the foundation for state summative assessment systems and requires state education agencies to implement statewide assessments.



These include:

- A math and English language arts (ELA) assessment each year between third and eighth grade and one time between ninth and 12th grade.
- A science assessment one time in each of the following grade spans: third through fifth grade, sixth through ninth grade and 10th through 12th grade.
- An English language proficiency assessment for all identified English learners each year.



Student performance on these assessments — often used to determine both achievement and growth over time — hold significant weight in [school accountability systems](#). Accountability systems can help stakeholders determine whether schools and districts are serving students adequately and equitably, [identify](#) schools for support and improvement, and inform the allocation of additional resources and supports.

ESSA also outlines a minimum participation standard for statewide assessments to ensure schools have sufficient information to measure school quality and disaggregate student achievement and growth data. The law specifies that 95% of all students and 95% of each student group must participate in state assessments or a school may be penalized in the state accountability system. ESSA enables states to administer an alternative assessment for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities, which must be capped at no more than 1% of the total number of students assessed in the state. Students with disabilities participating in the statewide summative assessment must be [provided with accommodations](#) — such as the use of assistive technology — and the assessment itself must incorporate Universal Design for Learning principles.

Flexibility

ESSA provides flexibility and support for innovative approaches to student assessment in several ways, including through the option to administer the following as the statewide summative assessment:

- **Multiple interim assessments or performance tasks** to inform a single summative score.
- **Nationally recognized assessments** — such as the ACT or SAT — for high school accountability.

The law also establishes two avenues for states to pursue innovative assessments that aim to better meet their unique needs. These avenues grant states federal support and afford them some additional latitude as they develop innovative assessments.

Innovative Assessment Demonstration Authority

The [Innovative Assessment Demonstration Authority](#) (IADA) permits approved state education agencies to establish, operate and evaluate an innovative assessment system. This authority is now open to all states and includes use in the statewide accountability system. Once states develop and pilot their innovative assessment, states who receive approval may scale it statewide. Thus far, states have used the flexibility to develop interim, competency-based and instructionally embedded assessments. As of publication, no states have completed the demonstration period and received approval to scale statewide.

Competitive Grants for State Assessments

The [Competitive Grants for State Assessments](#) (CGSA) provides states with funding designed to increase the quality of assessment systems. Twenty-one states have received funding through the program since ESSA's enactment with award amounts typically ranging from \$2 million to \$5 million. States have leveraged funds to develop, pilot and scale through-year assessments, performance-based assessments, and instructionally embedded assessments that are aligned to high-quality curriculum materials.

Assessments in State Policy

In addition to federal compliance requirements, states may use assessment data in separate state accountability systems or opt to administer certain assessments to better inform policymaking and priorities. States may develop their own assessments or leverage existing assessment instruments to measure areas including:



Kindergarten readiness. [Kindergarten entrance assessments](#) evaluate student mastery of pre-K developmental milestones and academic and social and emotional development to determine student readiness for kindergarten, identify learning gaps and target interventions to support student success in kindergarten and beyond.



Literacy. States may use [K-2 literacy assessments](#) to monitor student progress and/or third grade summative ELA assessments to identify students for promotion, [retention](#) or [literacy intervention](#) in addition to school accountability to ensure students develop foundational literacy skills.



End-of-course proficiency. End-of-course exams assess student mastery of standards in state-determined high school courses including algebra, English language arts, biology and U.S. history, among others, to prioritize proficiency of key academic content. End-of-course exams may be used as the statewide summative assessment for school accountability purposes, factored into a student's final course grade or be used as a prerequisite for graduation.



Civics. States may require [civics exams](#) — which may include portions of the U.S. Naturalization Test — as a graduation or accountability requirement to measure student understanding of key civics concepts and U.S. history to ensure students are prepared for civic engagement.



College and career readiness. A growing number of states require students to demonstrate [college and career readiness](#) to earn a high school diploma or as an additional measure in their school accountability system. States typically offer a range of assessments as options for students to demonstrate their readiness. For instance, career and job assessments can be used to fulfill requirements associated with completing a course

sequence aligned to a career cluster or pathway or achieving cut scores on college entrance exams. Either instead of or in addition to these assessments, states may require students to demonstrate readiness by completing early postsecondary opportunities, engaging in career-connected experiences or completing performance-based options such as capstone projects or student portfolios.



Arts. States may measure or require schools and districts to measure student mastery of arts standards and competencies through locally developed or state-approved assessment instruments.



Graduation. Eight states require a graduation test or high school exit exam as a condition for receiving a diploma. Graduation tests are standardized assessments measuring the student mastery of state academic standards across core subject areas. The prevalence of exit exams has significantly declined in recent years as opponents argue they create an unnecessary barrier to graduation and postsecondary enrollment with a disproportionate impact on students classified as English learners and those that qualify for special education services, while proponents maintain they set common expectations for student readiness.

Local Assessment Decisions

While state leaders play a role in building out an assessment system, school and district officials have significant authority to develop their own assessment landscapes. Schools and districts may adopt interim assessments to evaluate student progress on specific priorities or content areas, curriculum-relevant or instructionally embedded assessments to evaluate student learning and improve instruction, or specialized assessments for specific student groups. The number and type of assessments district and school leaders choose to implement — and the related supports they provide — can play a larger role in how assessments and their utility are viewed by educators, students, students' families and community members.

Final Thoughts

State policymakers play a vital role in the development of student assessment systems and have several important decisions to make that impact how often students are assessed, what knowledge and skills are assessed, and how the information is used. Understanding federal requirements and flexibilities supports state leaders in developing an assessment system aligned with state priorities.



About the Author

Ben Erwin



As a senior policy analyst, Ben works on tracking legislation, answering information requests and contributing to other Policy Team projects. Prior to joining Education Commission of the States, he taught high school social studies in Kentucky and worked in education policy at the National Conference of State Legislatures. He earned a master's degree in education policy from the University of Colorado Boulder and a bachelor's degree in history and education from Transylvania University. Contact Ben at berwin@ecs.org.