



A BRIDGE TO THE FUTURE OF STATE ASSESSMENT

Executive Summary

1. Why reimagine state assessment? Why now?

For over three decades, statewide assessment systems have played a vital role in U.S. education policy. They made achievement gaps visible, set minimum expectations for learning outcomes, and created public transparency around whether schools were serving all students. These are meaningful accomplishments that deserve recognition.

But the system is under strain. Its core technology—annual, standardized tests in reading and math—was built for a model of schooling that prioritized consistency and efficiency over customization and deeper learning. **Schools are now expected to deliver more than those tools were designed to measure.** At the same time, political support for large-scale standardized testing has eroded, too often leaving state leaders caught between defending an increasingly unpopular system and abandoning statewide assessment without a credible alternative.

This paper argues that neither path is viable. Instead, it lays out a **bridge strategy**: how states can preserve the essential public functions of assessment today while deliberately building toward a more modern, relevant, and effective system over the next decade. In particular, we are optimistic for new possibilities created by Artificial Intelligence (AI), but sober that realizing these possibilities will require disciplined investment and testing before being ready to scale. The task for state leaders is to **protect what matters, stop over-promising what current systems can do, and invest in what comes next.**

2. A Long-Term Vision for State Assessment

The paper proposes a clear long-term North Star for future assessment systems, anchored in four principles:

- 1. Continue to serve essential public functions – and set the guardrails.** State assessments must continue to provide transparency for the public, signal high expectations for educators, enable performance monitoring for policymakers, and support program evaluation and system improvement for system leaders. This includes a commitment to public reporting of disaggregated data across student groups and commitment to professional and technical standards for rigor, comparability, and fairness, such as bias audits and differential impact analysis for multilingual learners and students with disabilities.
- 2. Integrate instruction, assessment, and real-world application.** The future cannot be built around pausing learning for weeks each year so students can silently complete standalone testing events. Instead, the process of gathering evidence of learning should be interwoven with learning activities and real-world application. AI offers new possibilities to make approaches like portfolio and performance assessment more reliable and scalable, though significant research and development (R&D) and new statewide capacities are still required to realize these opportunities.
- 3. Assess a broader and more rigorous set of outcomes.** AI-enabled assessment holds the potential for measuring durable skills—such as critical thinking, communication, and collaboration—in tandem with core academic skills like literacy and mathematics, rather than trading one off against the other. They also open the door to measuring the quality of students' learning experiences, which are both predictors of achievement and valuable in their own right.
- 4. Encompass new governing models.** As schooling becomes more unbundled across districts, private providers, CTE centers, microschools, and hybrid models, assessment systems must evolve beyond the assumption that each student belongs to a single publicly operated school of record. States will need new technical backbones to ensure public dollars produce visible, comparable evidence of learning, and new paradigms for how to ensure comparability without forcing uniformity on very diverse models.

3. What State Leaders Should Do Now

The paper outlines five near-term actions for state leaders navigating the bridge period, including concrete examples of initiatives currently underway in states:

1. **Preserve and Strengthen What Works**
2. **Avoid Over-Promising What the Current System Can Deliver**
3. **Build R&D Capacity to Create What Comes Next**
4. **Create Space for Innovation**
5. **Protect Public Trust at Every Step**



1. **Preserve and strengthen what works:** Maintain statewide, comparable assessments; align cut scores to rigorous benchmarks (*ideally NAEP*); release data faster; offer students multiple opportunities to demonstrate mastery by retaking exams; and use data for system change, not just compliance.
2. **Avoid over-promising on what current systems can deliver:** Be explicit about what state assessments are designed to do and what they are not; stop trying to turn them into instructional tools by layering on mandatory through-year assessments. Instead, support districts to reduce redundant local testing and encourage adoption of high quality instructional materials (HQIM) with embedded assessment tools designed specifically to inform instruction.
3. **Invest in assessment R&D:** Build durable R&D capacity inside state government, including dedicated staff, recurring funding, and clear authority to test and learn in partnership with districts and schools. Align with R&D leaders in the federal government, philanthropy, universities, intermediaries, and other states to build shared research agendas and infrastructure. Run disciplined, time-bound pilots of promising approaches like assessments for durable skills, integrating AI-powered assessment into coherent instructional models, or modular and check-point style assessments.

- 4. Create space for innovation:** Seek federal waivers to create targeted, time-limited flexibility such as piloting alternate-year testing and allowing above- and below-grade assessment with safeguards against student tracking. Streamline waiver requests from districts and protect innovators from sanctions during pilots.
- 5. Protect public trust at every step:** Prioritize inclusive processes and decision-making, even at the cost of speed. As AI enters assessment systems, communicate clearly, consistently, and conservatively about its role, emphasizing human oversight and data privacy. Successfully bridging to new systems requires building trust with educators and families, not just sound technical design.

The task before state leaders is to safeguard the essential purposes of statewide assessment while deliberately investing in what could come next. In a moment defined by polarization and uncertainty, the country is hungry for state policymakers with the courage, discipline, and vision to step into leadership of this work.



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