



#5 IN THE SERIES

Demystifying Statewide Standardized Assessments

Making Assessments Accessible for Students With Disabilities and English Learners

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Overview

While K-12 students take many kinds of assessments (also called tests) for different purposes, the statewide standardized assessments used as part of annual federal accountability for schools often receive the greatest public scrutiny.

Statewide assessments measure what a student knows and can do. They are based on what schools are expected to teach for that grade level or content area within each state — and they can play a valuable role in improving education. Through comparable and consistent data, they allow decision-makers and educators to better understand how the education system is serving students, particularly historically marginalized students, including students of color, English learners, and students with disabilities. Test scores help educators identify students' strengths and areas of needed support to guide changes in instruction, inform large-scale instructional decisions (for example, identifying gaps in a district's curriculum), and measure how much a student has learned in a full academic year. These scores can also provide information about the effectiveness of instructional programs and other student supports to help state and district leaders and policymakers direct resources to schools and student populations.

Due to the complexity of assessment development and uncertainty around how scores are reported and can be used, statewide assessments can seem mysterious to some policymakers, educators, parents, students, and the general public. We developed six briefs to provide an overview of the test development process — from the initial stages of assessment design to the final process of scoring and reporting results — to help readers improve their understanding of how statewide assessments are developed and used. These briefs are organized by six topics:

1. What Statewide Assessments Are Designed to Measure
2. Ensuring That Assessments Accurately Measure Academic Standards
3. Developing High-Quality Assessments and Items
4. Ensuring Comparability Across Administrations
- 5. Making Assessments Accessible for Students With Disabilities and English Learners**
6. Reporting Assessment Scores

WHAT ARE SUMMATIVE ASSESSMENTS?

Different tests have different purposes. State assessments are one type of summative assessment because they are administered to measure what a student has learned relative to what students should have been taught over the course of a school year. State summative assessments also can inform large-scale instructional decisions, such as identifying gaps in a district's curriculum, and measuring how much a student has learned in a full academic year.

While these briefs focus on statewide summative assessments, we also acknowledge the importance of other types of assessments that may be included in a state's assessment system, including formative and interim assessments.¹

Note: Throughout the six briefs, we use the terms "test" and "assessment" interchangeably.

Making Assessments Accessible for Students With Disabilities and English Learners

Students with disabilities and English learners may receive changes to the test administration so they can show what they know and can do. Tests also offer universal supports that are available to all students.

Key Takeaways

- States and districts are required to provide students with disabilities and English learners appropriate accommodations on assessments.
- Accommodations are changes to the testing experience that do not interfere with what is being measured and are provided to ensure all students can show what they know and can do.
- Test developers offer universal tools (e.g., digital notepads) that are available to all students to make an assessment more accessible.

While standardizing test administration is an important component of ensuring fairness and validity of test scores,² accommodations or universal design supports are sometimes necessary to ensure that all students can show what they know and can do. In some cases, this may require alternate assessments for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities.³ However, most students with disabilities, English learners, and English learners with disabilities are able to effectively access content on tests with certain specific changes to the testing environment. For instance, a student with a vision impairment may need large print, alternate text descriptions of visual images, text to speech, tactile graphics, and/or Braille materials. A student with dyslexia may need extended testing time to decode words or text-to-speech accommodations to read content aloud. A student who is an English learner may need to have a glossary of key terms, or, in some cases, a side-by-side translation of test material.

Ensuring that students with disabilities and English learners can access standardized tests is not just good practice, it is federal law. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act requires states to “ensure that all children with disabilities are included” in statewide and districtwide testing programs.⁴ Similarly, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act and the Americans with Disabilities Act also require providing accommodations for test takers with disabilities.⁵ The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) and accompanying regulations expand the inclusion requirement to both students with disabilities and English learners, specifying that both groups should be included in assessments and provided appropriate accommodations.⁶ ESSA requires that states are responsible for ensuring that districts properly provide accommodations access. The U.S. Department of Education monitors state compliance through the assessment peer review process.⁷

What are appropriate accommodations?

The federal requirement for a permissible accommodation specifies that it must be “appropriate,” meaning that it does not change what is being measured and addresses a specific need of the individual test taker.⁸

Some examples of common accommodations for students with disabilities include:⁹

- **Assistive technology:** Allows the use of technology such as custom keyboards or pointing devices.
- **Closed captioning:** Allows students who are deaf or hard of hearing to see text of audio materials.
- **Extended time:** Offers additional time for timed tests or allows students to have until the end of the school day to complete a test unit for untimed tests.
- **Sign language interpretation of test:** A person signs test directions and students may provide responses by signing.
- **Text to speech:** Allows students to hear the text.

Some examples of common accommodations for English learners include:¹⁰

- **Bilingual dictionary:** A word-to-word dictionary between English and the student’s native language.
- **Native-language translation of directions:** The test directions are translated into the student’s native language.

Some states may also translate the entire test into the students’ native language. For instance, New York offers a Spanish-language version of its state test in math¹¹ and allows for oral translations of other state tests, except for English language arts.¹²

What are universal tools and designated supports?

As test developers have increased the types of accommodations over the years, there has been greater acknowledgment that some changes to the testing environment can benefit all students, not just students with disabilities or English learners. As a result, tests may have **universal tools** that are accessibility resources available to all students.¹³ Students decide for themselves whether or not to use the tools. For example, on paper-and-pencil tests, students can cross out answer options or use scratch paper. This makes it easier for all students to organize their thoughts and think through their responses.

A universal tool that some test developers have adopted for computer-delivered tests is a feature that allows all users to cross out answer options or use a digital notepad, just as they’d be able to do on a paper-and-pencil test. Other examples of universal tools include amplification to raise or lower volume, marking items for review, or the ability to zoom to enlarge text size.¹⁴ The option to use these tools is consistent with universal design efforts to increase access to the test for all students.¹⁵ ♦

Endnotes

- 1 Formative assessments are “a planned, ongoing process” that provide evidence of student learning to improve student outcomes. Formative assessments help educators design activities and instructional material to better align with student needs during learning. Interim assessments are another form of assessment that are administered periodically during the year and — depending on the assessment — can serve a formative function (i.e., for learning) or a summative function (i.e., to measure how much a student has learned). Formative Assessment for Students and Teachers (FAST) State Collaborative on Assessment and Student Standards, *Revising the Definition of Formative Assessment*, Council of Chief State School Officers, 2018, <https://ccsso.org/sites/default/files/2018-06/Revising%20the%20Definition%20of%20Formative%20Assessment.pdf>.
- 2 For more information, see the “Comparability Across Administrations” brief.
- 3 Martha L. Thurlow, Sheryl S. Lazarus, Erik D. Larson, Deb A. Albus, Kristi K. Liu, and Elena Kwong, *Alternate Assessments for Students With Significant Cognitive Disabilities: Participation Guidelines and Definitions*, National Center on Educational Outcomes, December 2017, <https://nceo.umn.edu/docs/OnlinePubs/NCEORreport406.pdf>.
- 4 Individuals With Disabilities Education Act, Sec 300.160, “Participation in Assessments,” <https://sites.ed.gov/idea/regs/b/b/300.160>.
- 5 See “Testing Accommodations,” U.S. Department of Justice, https://archive.ada.gov/regs2014/testing_accommodations.html; Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973; 34 C.F.R. Part 104.
- 6 20 U.S.C. § 6311; 34 C.F.R. Part 200, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2016-12-08/pdf/2016-29128.pdf>.
- 7 For more information about peer review, see the “Ensuring That Assessments Accurately Measure Academic Standards” brief.
- 8 American Educational Research Association, American Psychological Association, and National Council on Measurement in Education, eds. *Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing* (Lanham, MD: American Educational Research Association, 2014), <https://www.testingstandards.net/open-access-files.html>.
- 9 *The Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) Accessibility Manual: How to Select, Administer, and Evaluate Use of Accessibility Supports for Instruction and Assessment of All Students*, CCSSO, 2021, <https://learning.ccsso.org/council-of-chief-state-school-officers-ccsso-accessibility-manual-how-to-select-administer-and-evaluate-use-of-accessibility-supports-for-instruction-and-assessment-of-all-students>.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 New York Regents, Grades 3-8 Elementary and Intermediate Mathematics Tests Spanish Translations, <https://www.nysedregents.org/ei/spanish-math-tests.html>.
- 12 “English Language Learner and Multilingual Learner Assessment and Testing Accommodations,” New York State Department of Education, <http://www.nysed.gov/bilingual-ed/english-language-learner-and-multilingual-learner-assessment-testing-accommodations>.
- 13 CCSSO *Accessibility Manual*.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 “Universal Design of Assessments,” National Center on Educational Outcomes, https://nceo.info/Assessments/universal_design; Sandra Thompson and Martha Thurlow, *Universally Designed Assessments: Better Tests for Everyone!*, National Center on Educational Outcomes, June 2002, <https://nceo.info/Resources/publications/onlinepubs/Policy14.htm>.

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About Bellwether

Bellwether is a national nonprofit that exists to transform education to ensure systemically marginalized young people achieve outcomes that lead to fulfilling lives and flourishing communities. Founded in 2010, we work hand in hand with education leaders and organizations to accelerate their impact, inform and influence policy and program design, and share what we learn along the way. For more, visit bellwether.org.

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