



# FUTURE OF ASSESSMENTS:

## Centering Equity and the Lived Experiences of Students, Families, and Educators

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### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Addressing inequities in the educational outcomes — particularly for students of color and students from low-income backgrounds — cannot happen without comparable data from statewide summative assessments. Statewide assessment results help schools and district leaders target state and local resources to the students and schools with the greatest need and track whether these resources are impacting student achievement.

Despite this, many educators, students, and families [say](#) that federal assessment and accountability policies take away from instructional time without providing actionable data.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, pandemic pauses in administering statewide assessments and changes in political dynamics at the state and federal levels have opened a window of opportunity to develop new statewide summative assessments that gauge how students are doing, highlight disparities, and show where interventions aren't measuring up to their promise and might be improved.

This paper centers the lived experiences and perspectives of students, families, educators, and district and state leaders, so that they can be used to design assessments that provide data that will enable us to promote equitable learning opportunities and improve outcomes for all students.

To better understand how directly impacted communities experience statewide assessments, we held focus groups with diverse stakeholders who are on the ground, focusing on those who are often underserved.

Our focus group discussions not only shed light on the unique challenges facing each stakeholder group, but also highlighted some common experiences and ideas for improvement that align with some of the longstanding debates around summative assessments. Across all focus groups of students, caregivers, educators, and administrators, we heard that:

- Data from multiple sources, including and not solely assessment data, is important for understanding students' opportunities and progress toward state standards for college readiness.
- Stakeholders **currently use, or want to use, summative assessments for different purposes**, and many expressed confusion or frustration about how assessments are used.
- **Assessments are only one indicator of college readiness**, and stakeholders are eager for additional information on student knowledge and skills.
- There are common recommendations for **improvement**, including the need to have **timely assessment results, remove racial and/or cultural bias** from assessments, and make **assessment results more useful** and accessible.
- All stakeholder groups said that they would like to see **better follow-through on resource allocation**. They noted that education systems often fall short when it comes to using assessment systems to allocate resources and supports to the schools that need them most.



The focus group findings led us to develop four “equity pillars,” which highlight our key values and identify criteria for improving federal assessment policy:



These equity pillars represent what we view as a framework for any forthcoming federal policy action on assessments, including the reauthorization of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), and are grounded in Ed Trust’s equity-centered values and the lived experiences of those students who are often underserved by our public school system: students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, students with disabilities, and English learners.

This framework includes recommendations for developing better and more useful assessments through new or revised federal policies. Our hope is that these equity pillars and federal policy recommendations — both for a future reauthorization of ESSA and more immediate federal action — will spur conversations and debates among students, families, educators, state and district leaders, advocates, and policymakers, so that we might work together to ensure that future assessments provide data that can help educators and policymakers identify and address longstanding educational inequities.



# INTRODUCTION

## SHINING A LIGHT ON INEQUITIES

Addressing inequities in the educational outcomes of students — particularly students of color and students from low-income backgrounds — cannot happen without comparable data from statewide summative assessments that can help state leaders implement more equitable approaches to serving students, including directing additional, targeted supports and resources where needed. While statistics showing gaps in student achievement are [now ubiquitous](#), such comparisons were not possible prior to the passage of No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), which required states — for the first time — to assess students against rigorous academic standards and report the results publicly.<sup>2</sup> More importantly, states were required to report results by student group — exposing inequities in outcomes long hidden by school and district averages, forcing schools, districts, and states to answer for the results of chronic underinvestment in students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, and students with disabilities.

The data produced by federal assessment requirements lets families see how their child is performing in comparison to grade-level standards, educators adjust curricula and instructional plans, and district and state leaders target and track investments that address inequities.

## EQUITY-FOCUSED SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

In the wake of school closures and other learning disruptions caused by the pandemic, having comparable data from statewide summative assessments is more important than ever. Thankfully, districts and schools have access to substantial federal funds to assist in recovery efforts and address the pandemic's academic, social, and mental health impacts on students. Used in context with other data, statewide summative assessment data can help state and district leaders decide how best to invest that money and target it to the students and schools with the greatest need. This data can also be used to measure the impact of that spending.

Unfortunately, reliable data from statewide assessments is harder to come by than any time since the passage of NCLB. After a necessary pause in assessment during the pandemic, states have been uneven in their resumption of annual assessments for all students. In [2021](#),<sup>3</sup> participation rates ranged from as high as 97% in Arkansas and Massachusetts to as low as 30% in Oregon, and in [2022](#),<sup>4</sup> at least five states still had participation rates below 90%, despite federal requirements to assess at least 95% of students. In the states with low participation rates, education leaders have less precise data on which to base crucial decisions about how to meet the needs of students.

As educators and state, district, and school leaders work to improve educational outcomes for all students, a wide range of data is needed to drive continuous improvement, in addition to data from statewide assessments. Data on the quality, race and ethnicity, and distribution of teachers can offer valuable insights on how to reduce inequities in access to effective, diverse educators. Details on curriculum and high-quality instructional materials can help determine whether all students have access to rigorous content, while information on rates of exclusionary discipline, including suspension and expulsion, can inform efforts to improve school climate.



But — as the only comparable data on academic achievement — statewide summative assessments are essential to school improvement. Assessment results help leaders target state and local resources to the students with the greatest needs — including students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, students with disabilities, and English learners — and determine whether those additional resources are impacting student achievement.

## THE STATE'S ROLE IN SUPPORTING THE EFFECTIVE USE OF ASSESSMENTS

Leveraging state summative assessment and other data to drive improvements in educational equity may require more capacity than many schools and districts have and necessitate support from a state's department of education. In fact, states have a key role to play in making statewide summative assessments more meaningful and actionable for district and school leaders by providing access to data and data analysis support, guidance on best practices, and clearly communicating the purposes of statewide summative assessments and other types of assessments (See sidebar, Which Assessments Are We Talking About?).

## CENTERING THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF STAKEHOLDERS

While there are specific intended purposes for statewide summative assessments, these purposes may not always be apparent to those on the ground. In fact, the way in which assessments are viewed and experienced may differ substantially from their intended purposes, with some students and families feeling that assessments limit student opportunities, rather than help address inequities. This misalignment may undermine support for assessments and their potential ability to address persistent inequities.

This paper seeks to center the lived experiences and perspectives of students, families, educators, and district and state leaders, so that they can be used to design assessments that provide data that will enable us to promote equitable learning opportunities and improve outcomes for all students.

To better understand how directly impacted communities are experiencing statewide assessments, we held focus groups with diverse stakeholders who are on the ground, focusing on students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, English learners, and those who work in a school or district in which the majority of students are members of these student groups. The focus group findings informed the creation of “equity pillars,” which highlight our key values and identify criteria for improving federal assessment policy, and our federal policy recommendations for how this vision could be achieved.



## ***Which Assessments Are We Talking About?***

Throughout this report, when we refer to assessments, unless otherwise indicated, we're discussing *statewide summative assessments*, which are year-end tests administered to all students across a state. Statewide summative assessments provide insights on the extent to which students have mastered grade-level content that is aligned to state college and career readiness academic standards. Per federal law, math and English language arts assessments are administered in grades 3-8 and once in high school; science assessments are administered once in grades 3-5, 6-9, and 10-12.

Students also take a variety of other types of assessments throughout the year, including:

- **Diagnostic assessments**, which are typically administered near the beginning of the year and are designed to assess students' skills, strengths, and weaknesses, so that educators can tailor their instruction accordingly and provide scaffolding or acceleration, as needed, to help students access grade-level content during the year. Other types of diagnostic assessments may be used to screen individual students for specific disabilities, such as dyslexia.
- **Formative assessments** are directly related to classroom content and may include exit tickets (quick, daily checks of understanding on the day's lesson), quizzes, and unit tests (which are often referred to as summative assessments). Formative assessments are developed and given by educators to students throughout the year and provide educators with feedback they can use to adjust instruction and ensure that they are meeting the needs of their students.
- **Interim assessments** are typically administered a few times per year by a school or district to determine how students are progressing toward the mastery of grade-level content that will be on statewide summative assessments, though these types of assessments may also be used to evaluate off-grade-level skills. Interim assessments are often used to identify students in need of additional academic supports and to monitor the efficacy of interventions or programming over the course of the year.

Ideally, schools and districts are using all four types of assessments to create a coherent picture of student achievement and help school and district leaders, educators, and families to support student learning, and each assessment is aligned with a high-quality curriculum and state standards, and stakeholders are empowered to use each one for its intended purpose.

Unfortunately, different assessments aren't always aligned with one another, state standards, and/or the curriculum, and families and educators may lack the information, context, or space needed to use assessment data as intended. When that happens, students, families, and educators may become frustrated with assessments that limit their ability to use assessment data to support student learning.



# THE PURPOSES OF STATEWIDE SUMMATIVE ASSESSMENTS

The effective use of summative assessment data is predicated on key stakeholders having a clear understanding about what these assessments are for and how the data gleaned from them can be leveraged to address specific needs.

## FOR STUDENTS AND FAMILIES

Statewide summative assessments provide students and families with data about how students are performing against grade-level and state standards. While class grades are useful indicators of student performance, they typically encompass more than academic achievement, and may reflect other variables, such as assignment completion, effort, and class participation. It's also difficult to compare grades between classes, much less across schools or districts, given that grading systems and academic expectations often vary greatly and are somewhat subjective.

Additionally, in-class tests and assignments may not be aligned to grade-level standards. Though developed by teachers who interact with students daily, non-standardized classroom tests and assignments aren't generally reviewed for implicit bias. This means that any unconscious bias a teacher might hold — for instance, lower expectations for students of color — may be reflected in the tests they create and administer to students. Statewide summative assessment results, therefore, can provide additional context about the skills and knowledge that students have mastered, and help highlight areas in which students might need more support.

Families can use assessment data to request or make the case for additional academic services or interventions for their child; families and students can also use assessment data to seek access to additional learning opportunities, such as advanced coursework.

## FOR EDUCATORS

In their current form, statewide summative assessment results aren't meant to be used to make instructional adjustments in real time; they're meant to help educators plan for the next school year. For example, an educator could use summative assessment results from the previous year to gain insights about incoming students' skill and knowledge levels and structure the classroom curriculum and instructional strategies accordingly. Grade- or school-level data could also be used by educators — either in planning meetings over the summer or via professional learning communities (PLCs) during the year — to make more holistic adjustments to the curriculum based on student trends.

## FOR SCHOOL AND DISTRICT LEADERS

Having the ability to compare disaggregated achievement data across classrooms, student groups, and schools is integral to the work of school and district leaders. Such data analyses inform how district leaders allocate resources — including funding, educators, school counselors, and other personnel — across schools. They can help leaders decide which specific initiatives or interventions to invest in, how best to close disparities in access to learning opportunities such as advanced coursework — including which schools and students should be targeted — and how to evaluate the success of these programs. Finally, school and district leaders can and should be using the results of statewide summative assessments — in conjunction with other data such as grades, attendance, and disciplinary data — to inform whole-child-focused interventions for individual students through multitiered systems of support (MTSS).



## FOR STATE LEADERS AND POLICYMAKERS

Statewide summative assessment results — particularly disaggregated results — allow state leaders and policymakers to compare student performance across schools and districts. Such comparisons help state leaders make data-informed decisions about how to distribute resources — including funding and supports from state departments of education that are designed to improve school and district performance. States have limited resources, so having comparable and disaggregated data allows officials to make smarter decisions about how to target funding, personnel, and other supports to the students and schools that need them most, which is the bedrock of advancing educational equity.

Additionally, statewide summative assessment results — both pertaining to performance levels and growth over time — factor heavily into how schools are rated in statewide accountability systems. While identification of schools can — understandably, given the increasingly prescriptive interventions required under NLCB — be perceived as punitive, being identified by the state as in need of improvement by law unlocks access to additional funding via required state set-asides of Title I funds and, ideally, additional state supports.

While there is often a correlation between a student's socioeconomic status and their statewide assessment results, these tests are not a measure of income or of student potential, but rather a measure of whether state and local systems are providing enough resources and learning opportunities for all students, including students from low-income backgrounds. Eliminating assessments won't erase the inequities that many students face; but it will take away a critical tool that policymakers, school leaders, and families can use to assess and advocate for equity.

## FOR ADVOCATES

Statewide summative assessment data allows advocates, in collaboration with researchers, to identify and disseminate information about critical gaps in educational outcomes to create a sense of urgency, develop best practices and innovative solutions, and build support for policies that address these gaps.

Advocates can then arm other partners, including community members and families, with this information, so they can fight for more equitable opportunities for students through school improvement efforts and targeted research-based initiatives.



# RESEARCH APPROACH & METHODOLOGY

To better understand how directly impacted communities are experiencing statewide assessments, we held focus groups with a diverse sample of stakeholders who are on the ground. Specifically, we centered the discussion on college readiness. Under federal law, states are required to establish content standards that align with entrance requirements for credit-bearing courses at higher education institutions within the state. Ed Trust asked the following questions:

1. How, if at all, are states, districts, schools, educators, students, and families experiencing statewide assessments (including results from those assessments) in a way that helps support Black & Latino students, students from low-income backgrounds, and English Learners prepare for college?
2. How can statewide assessments (including the reporting and sharing of assessment results) be made more effective in helping states, districts, schools, educators, and families to support Black and Latino students, students from low-income backgrounds, and English learners to succeed in college?
3. How will the views of focus group participants affect the next iteration of federal assessment policy?

In partnership with Teach Plus, the National Urban League, UNITE, Inc., and America's Promise Alliance, Ed Trust conducted 50 focus groups between November 2021 and April 2022 with the goal of understanding how assessments are — or are not — helping to prepare students to be college ready. Ed Trust and partners recruited eligible participants, collected survey data, and conducted virtual focus groups in five states: Illinois, Massachusetts, Tennessee, Texas, and Washington. The study was approved by an external Institutional Review Board (Solutions IRB), and all facilitators received training on conducting virtual focus groups. Our sample included 169 individuals from across the five states. A complete breakdown of participant demographics can be found in [Appendix A](#). More details on our research process can be found in [Appendix B](#).

We spoke to stakeholders who are often underserved or who work in a school or district in which the majority of students are underserved. College students were eligible to participate if they self-identified as Black or Latino students, Pell Grant recipients (which were used as a proxy for students from low-income backgrounds), or former English learners. Caregivers<sup>5</sup> of Black and Latino students, students from low-income backgrounds, and current English learners in grades 6 -12 were also eligible. Educators, including teachers and school administrators, and state and district administrators (administrators) were eligible if they worked in a public-school system in which at least 50% of the students are students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, or English learners. A complete list of eligibility criteria can be found in [Appendix C](#).

We asked these stakeholders about their current or previous experience with statewide assessments, how assessments support college readiness (if at all), and how assessments could be improved.

Sample questions include:

- *Example from our student protocol:* Think about when you were in high school. What information did you get from your school to let you know that you were ready for college?
- *Example from our parent and caregiver protocol:* Do your child's statewide assessment results match with other pieces of information about how your child is doing in school — e.g., grades, teacher feedback, etc.?
- *Example from our educator protocol:* Do statewide assessments help you to know if your students are on track to be ready for college after high school?
- *Example from our administrator protocol:* Do you think these statewide assessments can help identify the kinds of resources Black and Latino students, students from low-income backgrounds, and English learners sometimes need to be ready for college?



To guide our work and provide perspectives from a wide range of stakeholders — including civil rights groups, technical experts, policymakers, and representatives of K-12 students — we assembled an advisory group from across the country and across expertise areas to weigh in on the research development and design. For a complete list of advisory group members, see [Appendix D](#).

## KEY FINDINGS

Our focus group discussions not only shed light on the unique challenges facing each stakeholder group, but also highlighted some common experiences and ideas for improvement that align with some of the longstanding debates around summative assessments:

**Students, caregivers, educators, and administrators believe data is important for understanding student opportunities and progress.** One of the most consistent themes we heard from stakeholders was the need for data about student outcomes and the extent to which students have an opportunity to learn. We heard that data — though not necessarily data from academic tests — is needed to uncover inequities and understand the quality of student learning opportunities and access to them, especially when thinking about college readiness. We also heard that it's important to consider multiple data sources when assessing resources and challenges.

**One parent said:** *"I think helping prepare Black and Latino and other underserved children for college, isn't just about how the children score. I think it's about looking at the holistic environment of the school they're in, the school environment, the levels of equitable access to resources. There's this child opportunity index from Brandeis, which is a remarkable look at neighborhood level equity, in terms of what resources children and families have access to by zip code."*

**Students, caregivers, educators, and administrations use, or want to use, summative assessments for different purposes.** When we asked stakeholders what the purpose of assessments is and how they use assessments, we received different answers from each stakeholder group that were, at times, in tension with one another. District and state administrators said that they use statewide assessments to identify places that need additional support and then to provide additional resources (e.g., funding, staffing, coaching) to help schools and teachers to improve. Educators said that they would like to use statewide assessments to improve and change their day-to-day instructional practices, especially to better serve students who have not performed well. There was very little consensus among caregivers about statewide assessments. Some caregivers felt that assessments were helpful because the results provided information about their child's academic progress. Many students did not understand why they had to take statewide assessments in high school.

**Students, caregivers, educators, and administrators see assessments as only one indicator of college readiness:** Stakeholders said that college success goes beyond what statewide assessments can measure. Stakeholders were hungry for information on whether students had acquired additional skills that are seen as crucial for college success (e.g., critical-thinking and life skills).

**One teacher said:** *"I see a lot of students who struggled a lot with the MCAS, but if they're the students who are able to go to school every day and then go to work for eight hours, if they have that determination commitment, they're usually successful at [the] two-year community colleges in the area. They are usually able to begin careers, often in health careers like nursing and so forth ... So, even if they struggle with the academics of the MCAS, they're often successful in college and career if they have, I think, a lot of the soft skills that they need."*

**Students, caregivers, educators, and administrators had overlapping recommendations for assessment**

**improvements:** Stakeholders suggested various ways to improve statewide assessments. All stakeholder groups agreed that there is a need to get results in a timelier manner. They also strongly called for the removal of racial and/or cultural bias from assessments. All stakeholder groups recommended making assessment results more useful and accessible, especially since no actor has clear ownership over communicating assessment results to families. Individual participant groups suggested other changes. College students suggested providing better classroom preparation for assessments. Caregivers emphasized the need to ensure that assessment results are used to allocate resources. State and district leaders, who primarily view statewide assessments as a pulse check on student learning, recommended sampling — moving from testing all students to testing a representative sample of students — to limit the administrative burden of assessments.

**Stakeholder groups would like to see better follow-through on resource allocation.** Across all groups, we heard that education systems often fall short when it comes to using assessment systems to allocate resources and supports to the schools that need them most. Individual participant groups said that they either were unaware that this was an intended purpose of assessments or did not see any changes made because of assessments. In fact, some students and teachers believe — accurately or not — that schools with poor results have, actually, lost access to resources.

## FINDINGS FROM INDIVIDUAL STAKEHOLDER GROUPS

### COLLEGE STUDENTS

College students recalled feeling anxious about summative assessments when they were in high school and felt there was a misalignment between assessment results and other indicators of college readiness.

**College students felt anxious about assessments due to pressure from real or perceived consequences.** Students said that they felt great pressure to perform well on assessments. For some students, this was because they believed (sometimes accurately) that the assessments would determine whether they advanced to the next grade or graduation.<sup>6</sup> Others said that assessments were critical for college entry.

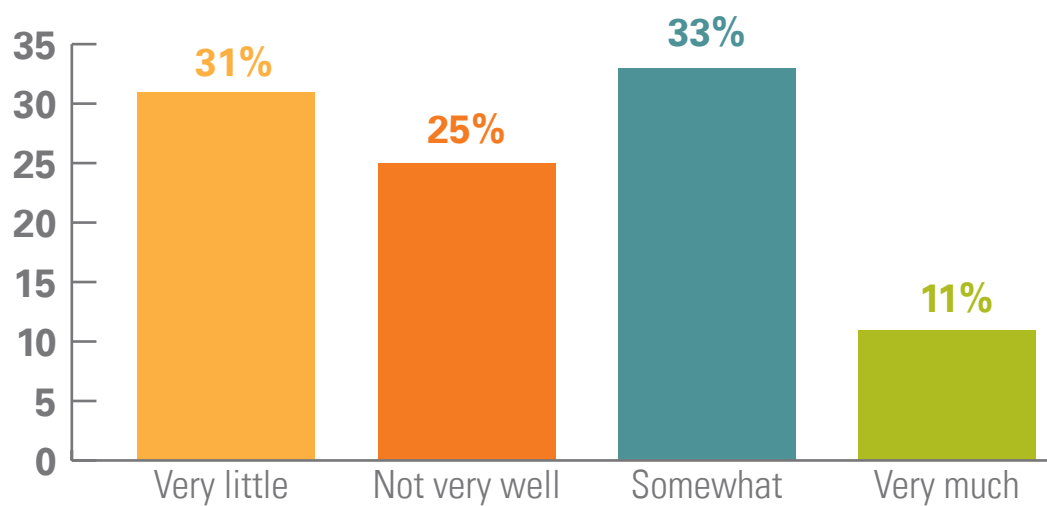
**One student from Illinois, a state that uses the SAT for its statewide assessment in high school said:** *“I feel like one of the reasons why I was so stressed is because they often stressed how it was important for you to go to college, important for your SAT and ACT scores to be high enough for you to get scholarship money to aid towards tuition. That was what was on my mind when I was entering the SAT facility and the ACT facility, and ... that’s all I could think about.”*

We also heard from students who believed that if they performed poorly, their teachers would be negatively impacted or their school might receive less funding.

**One student said:** *“I think it’s just because our teachers would tell us that these tests kind of reflect the school and have [an impact on] your future. And we’re thinking college, so college is a lot of money, and obviously, if you do good in high school, you can get scholarships and stuff. So, we were just kind of thinking, if we do bad on this test, we’re not going to have enough money to go to college, and stuff like that. So, it’s just kind of the test itself, but also what the teachers and stuff, and the stigma behind the tests would do to us.”*

**College students saw a misalignment between data from statewide assessment results, data from class, and their college readiness.** Students said that there was often a misalignment between their statewide assessment results, grades from teachers, and other indicators (e.g., class rank) of their college readiness. In our pre-focus group survey, when we asked how statewide assessment data matched other information students were receiving on their college readiness, almost 60% of students said their summative assessment results matched their assessment results not very well or very little (Figure 1).

**Figure 1:** Survey Data from College Students How much did the statewide assessments match with other pieces of information that you got about if you were ready for college – grades, teacher feedback, etc.?



Source: Education Trust survey of focus group participants, 2021-22

## CAREGIVERS

Often, caregivers do not receive assessment results or support to understand them; those who do access results find them helpful for getting information on student learning.

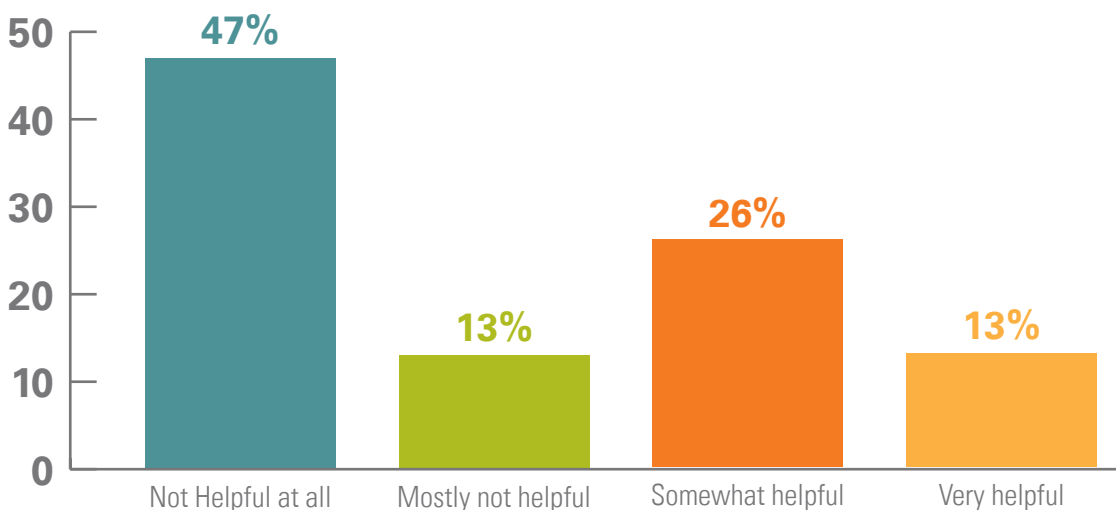
**Many caregivers neither had information about why students took assessments nor received the results.** Many caregivers did not understand why students took statewide assessments, but they said that their child was stressed and anxious about them. Many caregivers also said that they did not receive their students' statewide assessment results. Others noted that they received the assessment results but had little context about what they mean. This finding suggests that our state, district, and school leaders need to do a better job of making assessment data available, accessible, and understandable to parents and families.

**One parent said:** *"I have not been able to access my high schooler's results online ... and we have tried it a couple different times. I've tried reaching out to the help desk. So, I feel like it's not necessarily user-friendly. I have to get [the results] from reaching out to the teachers or from her IEP [Individual Education Plan] case worker."*

We also heard that assessment results sometimes did not match other information a parent or caregiver received from school. For example, a child might have high grades in math, but might score “below grade level” on the statewide assessment. Since, in general, caregivers tend to receive more information, and more comprehensive information, from their child’s teacher and school, they rely on and trust this information more than summative assessment scores.

**Some caregivers — particularly Black caregivers and caregivers of students with disabilities — found assessments helpful in getting information on their student’s academic progress.** Some caregivers said that statewide assessments were helpful because they provide information about their child’s academic progress. In comparison to Latino and White parents, Black parents said more often that assessments were generally helpful to their child and a useful tool to understand their child’s academic progress and college readiness. In our pre-focus group survey, when we asked how helpful statewide assessments were for keeping a child on track for college after high school, 40% of caregivers said they were very helpful or somewhat helpful (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2:** How helpful are the statewide assessments when it comes to helping to keep your child on track for college after high school?



Source: Education Trust survey of focus group participants, 2021-22

## EDUCATORS

Educators are frustrated by the class time they spend preparing for summative assessments and are split regarding the usefulness of assessment results.

**Educators said that the amount of time they spend preparing students for assessments varies widely.** Although many educators said that statewide assessments are aligned with their curriculum, a few teachers expressed frustration about “teaching to the test.” These teachers felt that they are expected to focus on preparing students to pass statewide assessments, which, at times, takes time away from classroom instruction or impacts the way in which they teach.

**Educators were split on how useful statewide assessments are.** They noted that assessments are a one-time snapshot and, as such, are not useful for providing the kind of information educators look for (namely information about student mastery of specific content areas). A few English language arts (ELA) teachers said that statewide assessments are good indicators of college readiness because they evaluate a student’s ability to write and analyze critically, which are skills needed in college.



**One teacher said:** *“One thing that I’m adamant about is students understanding how to properly write and understanding when they have grammatical errors and how to effectively write an essay, how to address [the] prompt that’s being discussed. I think that [statewide assessments] are helpful, not only does it help them in my English class, I believe it helps to prepare them for college.”*

Educators noted that the delay in receiving assessment results was a barrier to using them to inform lesson planning and provide targeted instruction for students in need of additional support, since, by the time the results were in, those students were already in the next grade.

**Many educators are responsible for sharing assessment results with families.** Many educators said that they, or members of their school leadership team, are responsible for sharing assessment results with families. At the same time, many also acknowledged that it was unclear whether the results were accessible to families.

**One teacher said:** *“And so I don’t think we do a really great job of communicating information. A lot of times we communicate a number, but we don’t really talk about what that number means.”*

## STATE AND DISTRICT ADMINISTRATORS

State and district administrators use assessments as one of many tools to identify schools and educators who need additional support and to allocate additional resources.

**Assessments are necessary tools for state and district leaders.** We heard clearly from administrators that they use summative assessments to identify schools and educators who need additional support and then to provide additional resources (e.g., funding, staffing, coaching) with the goal of helping schools improve. In addition, many district and state administrators said that they use statewide assessments as one of many tools to track individual student academic performance and progress toward graduation. District administrators tended to use assessments to take a closer look at individual classrooms or educators who need additional support.

**One state administrator in Illinois said:** *“The state of Illinois has 852 different districts. Each has their own designed assessments system. And, so, without a state-level assessment that’s common amongst every student in the state, our families would have no idea of really knowing how their students are doing in comparison to their peers.”*



# EQUITY PILLARS

Our focus groups made clear that while many find the results from statewide summative assessments useful — including for identifying inequities — there is substantial room for improvement in making these assessments and their results more inclusive, relevant, and actionable for all stakeholders. As we prepare for the future of federal assessment policy, both leading up to and including the reauthorization of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA),<sup>7</sup> The Education Trust is committed to keeping these experiences and perspectives at the forefront of these discussions, while maintaining the principles of equity as our north star.

To that end, we've developed a series of "equity pillars" that identify our key values and criteria — informed by stakeholders' lived experiences — that must be maintained for Ed Trust to support proposed changes to federal assessment policy. These pillars set clear priorities for what we believe should be the future of statewide assessments and we hope will be used by other advocates to assess future policy proposals.

## PILLAR 1: ENSURE CONSISTENT, HIGH EXPECTATIONS FOR STUDENT SUCCESS

**Statewide assessments must provide an accurate and comparable pulse check on how well schools are supporting each group of students' learning and growth toward grade-level expectations and developing critical academic skills for meeting entrance requirements for credit-bearing college courses, starting a career, and being an active civic participant.**

This first pillar is focused on maintaining and strengthening the core purpose of statewide summative assessments as designed by federal law. Statewide summative assessments are intended — in their current form — not to provide real-time data to inform instruction but, instead, to be a check on the system and ensure that all students have equitable access to a high-quality education. What makes these assessments an essential tool for advancing equity is that they provide comparable data. Statewide summative assessments are, in fact, the *only* assessments that let stakeholders compare results across students, student groups, schools, and districts within a state. Such comparisons enable state and district leaders to target resources to where they are needed most and advocates, families, and communities to push for more equitable policies.

Also important is what statewide summative assessments measure. For these assessments to be meaningful, they must focus on ensuring that all students are held to high standards and have access to the rigorous content required for developing the academic skills needed for being successful in both college and careers. This means that assessments should be aligned with grade-level standards and expectations, which are designed to build students' knowledge and skills for postsecondary success.

However, our focus group participants — particularly parents and caregivers — said they were confused by the conflicting signals about college and career readiness conveyed by statewide summative assessment scores, as compared with other sources of data, including student grades. Similarly, educators and administrators were concerned that current summative assessments may be too focused on a discrete set of skills that doesn't fully capture what students should know and be able to do to be successful, especially with regard to career readiness and softer skills.

They were particularly concerned about college entrance exams (SAT/ACT), which [23 states](#) use as their statewide summative assessment in high school.<sup>8</sup> Recent research suggests that there isn't a strong correlation between college entrance exams and postsecondary success and that high school [GPAs are a better predictor of college performance](#).<sup>9</sup> Many researchers and advocates worry that these tests are biased against students of color and may function as gatekeeping mechanisms in the college admissions process. What's more, research shows that both the SAT and ACT are [only partially aligned to state standards](#), with weaker alignment to math standards than ELA standards.<sup>10</sup>



Since state assessments are intended to measure academic achievement toward state standards—which align to college and career readiness skills—states may want to consider whether end-of-course exams are a better measure of student and school system success than college entrance exams. Doing so could help address the concerns about conflicting signals of college readiness that surfaced during our focus groups and ensure stronger alignment between proficiency on state assessments and public college entrance expectations.

## PILLAR 2: ENCOURAGE INCLUSIVE, RELEVANT ASSESSMENTS

**Statewide assessment design and implementation must be innovated to address the needs of stakeholders. Assessments must be racially and culturally inclusive (not biased), and must ensure that students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, students with disabilities, and English language learners can demonstrate what they know and can do.**

While data from federal assessment requirements has enabled stakeholders to identify inequities and work to better allocate resources to address student needs, there are ways that assessments can be improved to better meet the needs of students, families, and educators.

Across focus groups, one common area for improvement was the need to make assessments racially and culturally inclusive, with content that reflects the identities of all students. Assessment vendors currently have in place robust bias review processes, which include panels of educators reviewing questions, as well as field tests to determine whether answers vary by student group and to screen items that might bias results.

Unfortunately, these processes aren't perfect, and can produce questions that default to Whiteness or whitewash history by, for instance, avoiding questions that refer to racial justice movements or ignoring that Thomas Jefferson owned enslaved people. And field tests for bias only detect differences between items, which makes them ineffective if all items are defaulting to Whiteness.

Rather than focusing on excluding biased content, inclusive assessments would aim to incorporate content that authentically reflects the backgrounds of all students and should be paired with similarly inclusive curricula and instructional materials.

In addition to racial and cultural inclusivity, many educators in our focus groups expressed a desire for statewide summative assessments to be more instructionally relevant. While, as currently designed, these assessments are not intended to be used to make real-time adjustments to instruction, given the important role that educators play in preparing students for assessments, it seems worth exploring if or how statewide summative assessments might also be used by educators in the ways they are seeking.

Many states and vendors are already developing and field-testing through-year assessments to allow educators to adjust instruction during the year in response to assessment results. Through-year assessments, in effect, combine interim and summative assessments into a single, coherent set of assessments (See sidebar, Which Assessments Are We Talking About?). Students take short assessments over the course of the year (typically 3-5 times), the results of which are either compiled into a single summative score or inform the content of a shorter year-end assessment. Educators and school leaders quickly receive the results of the assessments administered during the year, which can inform adjustments to instruction or be used to identify students for additional supports.



In some states, such as [Louisiana](#), these assessments are also directly aligned with a widely used curriculum in the state, further increasing their instructional relevance.<sup>11</sup> Additional innovation and development in this space should be encouraged to ensure that these assessments can adequately serve this instructional use, while producing valid and reliable data for state and district leaders.

### PILLAR 3: PROVIDE TIMELY, ACTIONABLE, AND EASILY ACCESSIBLE RESULTS

**Statewide assessments must quickly generate easily accessible and actionable information for key stakeholders. Results from statewide assessments must only be used for their intended purposes — including targeting support and additional resources to the schools and students who need them most and providing objective information to students, families, educators, and policymakers. Statewide assessment results should not be used to deny students opportunities.**

One of the most common criticisms of statewide annual assessment systems, including in our focus groups, is the length of time between administration and the release of results. For instance, Maryland didn't release the [final results](#) of their spring 2022 assessment until late January 2023 — nearly a year after students completed it.<sup>12</sup> While this is an especially egregious example, states routinely fail to release the results of spring assessments until well into the next school year.

Ideally, the results of statewide summative assessments would be made available to educators and school and district leaders as early as the end of the current school year, or at least over the summer. Doing so would allow them to incorporate assessment data into planning for the following school year and make grade-level curricular adjustments, re-allocate resources (including educators and other school staff) to the schools and classrooms with the greatest needs, evaluate interventions and programming, and identify students for academic supports over the summer and in the following school year.

Initial results — which typically don't vary significantly from final results — are commonly made available to state departments of education quickly, with the bulk of the delays resulting from extensive reviews of data quality. While these reviews are important, it's reasonable to allow educators and school and district officials to use the initial results while these analyses are being completed — as some states, including Massachusetts, did during the pandemic — and before the release of the final results to students, families, and the public, at the latest, early in the next school year.

It's also important to note that efforts to produce faster results are in direct tension with another goal of the next generation of statewide summative assessments: the development of test items that more deeply and authentically gauge students' skills and knowledge. Tests with these more complex items will likely take longer to score than current assessments, potentially delaying results from vendors beyond current levels. Some states might opt for summative assessments with more complex items, viewing them as a more accurate assessment of student skills, but states should carefully consider the implications for reporting timing as a part of their decision-making process.

Another concern we heard — especially from parents and caregivers — is that the results of statewide summative assessments are difficult to access and understand. Individual student reports may be shared on online portals that are difficult for families to navigate, may not be in a caregiver's native language, and may contain scale scores or percentile ranks without clear explanations about what the numbers mean or other information that puts the results in context.

To address these issues, there should be more investment and attention paid to implementing more actionable and understandable reporting. States can work with vendors — in consultation with parents and families — to develop reports that are easier to understand. States and districts can also provide guidance and professional development to educators — who are typically responsible for sharing student results with families — on how to understand and communicate assessment results.



Compounding this confusion, students and families (and, to some extent, educators) — have little understanding of how state assessments results are used by state and district officials. This stems from a persistent lack of transparency by state and district leaders about how results factor into decision-making — including the allocation of funding and other resources. This leads to misconceptions that schools with poor results lose critical resources, when, in fact, the opposite is what’s intended by federal policy.

Additionally, many students said that state assessment results are often used as gatekeeping mechanisms — including for grade retention or access to advanced coursework. This increased their anxiety — which research has shown can lower student scores — about taking the assessment. Such misapplications may be perceived by stakeholders as federally mandated uses for state assessments, but these are, in fact, state- or even district-level policy decisions.

## PILLAR 4: MAKE ASSESSMENT RESULTS MORE MEANINGFUL

**Because no single assessment can measure the totality of what a student knows or can do — or whether a school or district is providing equitable support to all students — results from statewide assessments must be appropriately shared alongside other indicators of student progress and school resources.**

A common refrain from all our focus groups and stakeholders, was that only some of the skills required for success in college are measured by statewide summative assessments. Participants were eager for additional information about student readiness. Additional data is needed to provide all stakeholders with a fuller picture of student and school performance, including crucial information about potential causes of results — which can be used to develop data-informed policies or supports to address either individual student needs or inequitable access to resources. This includes additional data points about access to experienced, in-field educators; curriculum; class grades; attendance; and discipline, but also might include additional data on students’ social and emotional learning and mental health.

For these additional data points to be meaningful, they must be presented in conjunction with statewide assessment results and in ways that make them understandable and useful. For educators and district leaders, this could mean accessing data through [statewide longitudinal data systems \(SLDS\)](#) that are connected to [multitiered systems of support \(MTSS\)](#). For families and advocates, this could mean using public dashboards that are easy to navigate and allow for easy comparisons across schools and districts. Obtaining feedback and the perspectives of the end users of this data must be integral to the process of developing and improving the presentation of data.



## *Connections to State Accountability Systems*

While this paper doesn't directly address federally required state accountability systems, they are, of course, inextricably linked to statewide summative assessments. Federal law requires — and Ed Trust supports — that results from statewide summative assessments comprise at least 50% of a school's overall "score" in state accountability systems. This includes a combination of proficiency — a static measure of student understanding — and growth — a measure of how student achievement is improving over time.

In addition to state assessment results, states are required to factor in high school graduation rates and an additional measure of school quality, such as chronic absenteeism, discipline rates, or success in advanced coursework.

Together, states use this data to identify schools as in need of improvement, according to federal requirements. Under NCLB, all schools had aggressive assessment performance goals and were subject to increasing intervention requirements if they failed to meet adequate yearly progress (AYP) toward these goals. However, these more punitive policies are no longer in effect under current law (ESSA), with school improvement plans focused just on the lowest performing schools in the state and significant state leeway in setting goals and criteria for exiting the low-performing school designation.

This is because state accountability systems are intended to be a mechanism to drive meaningful, equitable improvement for students, with key federal policy provisions designed to support these functions:

**1. States are required to side aside 7% of the state's Title I annual funding to support identified schools.** These funds are designed to target additional resources to schools that need them. In practice, though, states don't report on how this money is used to support schools, and additional funds may be inadequate to address pre-existing gaps in the adequacy and equity of state and local funding. Together, these realities obscure the purpose and promise of federal policy designed to support struggling schools, with schools and communities left feeling punished and stigmatized, rather than supported.

**2. Identified schools are required, as a part of their school improvement plans, to identify resource inequities and describe how they will be addressed as a part of school improvement.** Yet despite these requirements, struggling schools and districts often lack the resources to develop and implement these plans in a meaningful, equitable way and may not have the support they need from state departments of education, which often lack the capacity to provide customized guidance or hold schools accountable for meeting the stated goals in their plans.

**3. States are required to "periodically" review the allocation of resources to districts with a significant number of identified schools.** These allocation reviews are designed to ensure that state resources are going to schools and districts that need them most, based, in part, on the results of statewide summative assessments. However, there's little evidence that states are completing these reviews, and the US Department of Education has not meaningfully enforced this provision, leading to another undelivered promise in current federal accountability policies.

Future federal accountability policies should be designed to address the shortfalls in current law. However, given the wide range of flexibility offered to states under ESSA, states already can address these concerns by ensuring that data is reported in a timely manner and presented in a way that is easy for multiple stakeholders to understand, builds state capacity to support and hold schools accountable for improvements, completes federally required allocation reviews, and addresses inequities in state and local funding. Additionally, states could consider more explicitly incorporating continuous improvement in school accountability ratings to foster a less punitive accountability culture, as states such as [Missouri](#) are starting to do.<sup>13</sup> As a part of all this work, school, district, and state leaders should be consistently engaging with educators, families, students, and communities to inform changes in policy and collaboratively invest in school improvement.



# FEDERAL POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

We view the aforementioned equity pillars as critical backstops for any forthcoming federal policy action on assessments — including the reauthorization of ESSA — and they are grounded in Ed Trust’s equity-centered values and the lived experiences of stakeholders closest to assessments, particularly those traditionally underserved by our public school system, such as students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, students with disabilities, and English learners. What follows are recommendations for achieving the goals outlined in the pillars through new or revised federal policies. For clarity, the recommendations are organized by pillar.

Since much of federal assessment policy is housed within ESSA, many of the recommendations focus on revisions to existing statute. However, since the timeline for reauthorization is uncertain — and unlikely to occur before the 2024 election — these recommendations also include policies that could be approved by Congress separately from reauthorization or via administrative action.

## PILLAR 1: ENSURE CONSISTENT, HIGH EXPECTATIONS FOR STUDENT SUCCESS

### **Recommendation 1.1: Maintain existing, equity-centered federal assessment policies**

**Reauthorization must maintain the fundamental provisions of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), as reauthorized under ESSA, that serve as vital civil rights protections. These include, but are not limited to, the requirement for annual statewide summative assessments that are: valid, reliable, and comparable; included with significant weight among multiple measures in the state’s accountability system; and publicly reported by disaggregated student group.**

Maintaining current requirements for annual assessments for English language arts and math in grades 3-8 and once in high school is vital to any future reauthorization of ESSA. It is also vital that these assessments align to standards of validity, reliability, and comparability and that the results are disaggregated and publicly reported. Annual assessments are critical to the ability to measure growth over time and provide consistent equity-focused checks on school systems.

Anything less frequent than annual administration of statewide assessments — including the use of disaggregated data, which is key to identifying and addressing inequities — would severely impact the ability of systems leaders to make data-informed decisions.

This data must also remain public so stakeholders outside the system — including families, advocates, and community members — can use this data to hold leaders accountable for providing all students with access to rigorous, high-quality educational opportunities that prepare them for success in college and careers.

Similarly, given that one of the main functions of schools is to prepare students academically, federal law must continue to require that assessment results — through a combination of achievement and growth — make up the majority of school system ratings on state accountability systems. While other indicators of student success and school quality should also be included — and potentially expanded or revised at states’ discretion — assessment results are central to accountability systems to ensure a focus on equitable access to content and instruction aligned to rigorous academic standards.



## **Recommendation 1.2: Strengthen assessment proficiency as a predictor of college and career readiness**

**Reauthorization should require each state to conduct a technical analysis at least every five years, or when standards are revised, of the alignment between proficiency on the state's assessments and public college entrance expectations for credit-bearing college courses, as suggested by section 1111(b)(1)(D), as well as the skills and competencies required for career success.<sup>14</sup> This analysis would need to be conducted by an entity with technical expertise; incorporate stakeholder engagement with students, families, educators, colleges, and employers; certified by the governor; and be made widely available to the public.**

Just as states regularly review and update their academic standards to ensure alignment with college and career readiness, states also need to consistently check that state assessments validly and reliably measure student performance against these standards. While current law requires alignment between state standards and assessments, no specific requirements exist for the regular review of this alignment based on changes to state standards or the skills that states — including institutions of higher education — deem necessary for success in college or careers. Alignment between these skills and standards and statewide summative assessments is crucial to ensuring these assessments remain a valid signal of college and career readiness over time. As noted earlier, it may be especially worthwhile for states to reexamine whether college admissions exams are adequately aligned with state standards.

The alignment process has traditionally heavily favored college readiness — and while this was also the main topic of our focus groups, states should also be sure to align their standards and assessments with the skills needed for other types of postsecondary credentials that lead to careers that pay a living wage. As a part of this, states should consider the forecasts for their unique future workforce needs to ensure that schools are preparing students with relevant, rather than obsolete, knowledge and skills.

To facilitate the completion and comprehensiveness of these audits, it could be worthwhile to require that they be conducted by independent agencies, rather than by a political body. This would help guarantee that stakeholders are authentically engaged and avoid delays caused by divided state governments.

## **PILLAR 2: ENCOURAGE INCLUSIVE, RELEVANT ASSESSMENTS**

### **Recommendation 2.1: Expand access to high-quality assessment content**

**Reauthorization or the appropriations process should be used to create a research and development fund through the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) to incentivize states and vendors to develop and implement resources for racially and culturally inclusive assessment practices and content that measures higher-order thinking skills and understanding, including specifically addressing the needs of students with disabilities and English learners; that are partially delivered in the form of portfolios, projects, or extended performance tasks; and that are consistent with section 1111(b)(2)(B)(vi).<sup>15</sup>**

As noted earlier, participants across all focus groups were concerned that current statewide summative assessments lack content and items that are racially or culturally inclusive, fail to fully measure higher-order critical thinking skills that are necessary for success in both college and careers, and rely too heavily on items — including multiple-choice questions — that provide limited insight into student thinking. Given the widespread concern about these aspects of statewide assessments, federal funds should be leveraged to encourage the development of new and innovative assessments and discrete items that address one or more of these concerns. This development process is both expensive and time-intensive and will not occur organically without prompting — and these funds aim to jumpstart the process of developing assessment content that can work to address these key criticisms.



As a part of this development, states could consider limiting or capping the proportion of assessments that are dedicated to multiple-choice questions, particularly those that assess lower-level skills. Texas, for instance, recently [set a cap](#) of 75% for multiple-choice items on its state assessment as state officials work to revise those tests.<sup>16</sup>

In addition to developing inclusive assessment content, states and districts should be working in collaboration with curriculum vendors, local community-based organizations, educators, families, and students to source or develop racially and culturally inclusive curricula and instructional materials in alignment with similar changes to statewide assessments.

### **Recommendation 2.2: Ensure that all state assessments are racially and culturally inclusive**

**Reauthorization or federal regulations should require that the Department's peer review process under sections 1111(a)(4) and 1111(b)(2)(B)(iii)-(iv) for evaluating the technical quality of state assessment systems specifically considers whether assessments are racially and culturally responsive and sustaining.<sup>17</sup>**

As mentioned earlier, bias controls — including removing questions that result in significant differences in scores based on student race or ethnicity — are a regular part of assessment vendor practices, but this differs substantially from the incorporation of inclusive content. The federally required, independent peer review process ensures that state assessments meet standards of validity, reliability, and comparability, as well as other federal standards for state assessments. Given the calls across stakeholder groups for racially and culturally inclusive assessments, lawmakers should provide funding for developing inclusive content and incorporate requirements to include this new content in the peer review process for state assessments.

However, [current political battles](#), particularly at the state level, around the inclusion of race-, gender-, and sexuality-based content in the classroom could stymie efforts to develop federal rules defining and regulating racially and culturally inclusive assessment content.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, federal guidance could be used to propose state standards for voluntary adoption, in lieu or in advance of federal peer review requirements.

### **Recommendation 2.3: Encourage the use of multiple assessments over the course of the school year that result in a single summative score**

**Reauthorization or the appropriations process should be used to refocus the Competitive Grants for State Assessments (CGSA) program<sup>19</sup> to narrowly address the adoption of multiple, curriculum-aligned, statewide interim assessments during the course of the academic year that result in a single summative score consistent with section 1111(b)(2)(B)(viii)(II).<sup>20</sup> (See recommendation 3.1 for the second proposed CGSA revised use.)**

Many educators in our focus groups were frustrated that results from current statewide summative assessments are not useful for making real-time adjustments to instruction that would address the needs of current students. In their current form, statewide summative assessments merely provide a systemwide check on student and school performance and a way to evaluate and inform changes to curriculum, programs, and policies.

Through-year assessments — shorter assessments that are given throughout the course of the school year and combine to create a summative score — work to keep the systems check function of summative assessments in place, while simultaneously making the assessments more instructionally relevant for educators. Educators quickly receive the results of the assessments that are administered during the year, which allows them to identify student strengths and growth opportunities and adjust instruction to ensure that students are meeting grade-level expectations. Additionally, through-year assessments result in a summative score based on multiple snapshots of student learning throughout the year. In contrast, current state assessments show only how a student performed on a single day, which was a common concern raised by educators in our focus groups.



Through-year assessments may also be more closely aligned with the curriculum — and might even include passages from materials students have already encountered in the classroom, as an assessment pilot program in Louisiana is doing. This close alignment of curriculum and assessment content has two key benefits. First, the content and results are more relevant for students and educators — allowing for higher levels of engagement with the assessment and more seamless adjustments to instruction. Second, it may lessen the impact of student background knowledge (as opposed to classroom learning) on assessment results, which in existing assessments can often be skewed if texts [default to Whiteness](#) or require background knowledge that privileges White students.<sup>21</sup>

There is one caveat, however, that has important equity implications: If all students in a state aren't using the curriculum to which the assessment is aligned, students in schools using other potentially less rigorous curricula will be at a distinct disadvantage on these assessments — and not just because they have a potentially less-rigorous curriculum, but because they will not have been exposed to the material on the tests. It's, therefore, important that states developing or adopting through-year assessments do so in conjunction with policies that incentivize the statewide adoption of an aligned curriculum.

States such as [Georgia](#),<sup>22</sup> [Louisiana](#),<sup>23</sup> [Montana](#),<sup>24</sup> [North Carolina](#),<sup>25</sup> and [Texas](#)<sup>26</sup> are currently developing through-year assessments, but — while allowable under federal law — only [Maine](#)<sup>27</sup> has adopted through-year assessments in place of a statewide summative assessment and it has yet to pass the federal peer review process. To date, there is still much work to be done to ensure that these assessments align more directly with curricula, result in valid and reliable summative scores, and can be administered without major disruptions to instruction. The goal of these CGSA grants would be to continue expansion of the innovation that is already happening in this area.

### **Recommendation 2.4: Reform the Innovative Assessment Demonstration Authority (IADA) to increase its usefulness**

**Reauthorization or the legislative/appropriations process should be used to make participation in the IADA more feasible and supportive by establishing separate planning, implementation, and sustainability phases; providing dedicated funding to participating states; and removing the initial limit on the number of participating states.<sup>28</sup> Any changes to the IADA must ensure that all participating states continue to fulfill their statutory commitment to valid, reliable, and comparable assessments.**

IADA was created under ESSA to provide states with an avenue to develop and scale innovative assessments, which exempted participating states from federal requirements that all students take the same assessment. The goal was to incentivize states to rapidly scale innovative assessments by eliminating administrative burdens, including double testing students in schools using the new assessment prior to full statewide adoption.

However, the pilot program received minimal uptake — with just five states approved (and only two others applying) since 2015 — and has been the subject of much criticism. Our recommended revisions to the program aim to directly address many of these critiques, with the goal of increasing state participation.

First, the original program did not include any federal funding for states, despite the large costs associated with developing and scaling statewide assessments. By including funds, states can invest in building the needed capacity to take on assessment innovation.

Additionally, IADA currently asks states to both develop and scale their innovative assessment statewide over the course of just five years. This is a daunting task, especially with no funding attached. The recommended revisions would allow states to apply (and then opt to reapply) for funding and approval over three stages in the development and scaling process, enabling states to do exploratory work without immediately committing to statewide adoption. These changes have the potential to allow states to learn from one another more easily or adjust during the process between development, piloting, scaling, and sustaining changes to large state assessment systems.



Although critics argue that the technical requirements for the validity, reliability, and comparability of assessments have constrained innovation in statewide testing, we believe these founding equity principles of summative assessments need to be maintained.

One place where restrictions could be loosened is in the comparability between current statewide summative assessments and new innovative assessments. While the comparability of scores between students, student groups, schools, and districts must be maintained, leaving more wiggle room on the extent to which results of new and old assessments are comparable should be examined, as some view existing comparability requirements as a substantial barrier to innovation. This is particularly true as we think about developing assessments that test students on higher-order and critical-thinking skills, as these differences in content may result in significant differences in scores, but in a way that could more accurately measure what students know and can do.

### PILLAR 3: PROVIDE TIMELY, ACTIONABLE, AND EASILY ACCESSIBLE RESULTS

#### **Recommendation 3.1: Dedicate federal funds to efforts to improve student-level score reports based on best practices**

**Reauthorization or the appropriations process should be used to refocus the CGSA program to implement faster, more actionable, and understandable reporting to students, families (including in multiple languages), and educators; disaggregate data transparency and reporting; and increase family engagement with assessment results. (See Recommendation 2.3 for the other proposed CGSA revised use.)**

As discussed earlier and reflected in our focus groups, a major criticism of summative assessments concerns the time it takes to receive statewide assessment results and the usability of reports. It routinely takes four to eight months to get results — they often arrive well into the next school year — which limits their usefulness for school and district leaders and educators.

During the pandemic, some districts and schools relied on preliminary data to inform decision-making; this shows that early results can be useful for district and school planning. That said, vendors and states must take steps to ensure that results are consistently released in a timely manner, so that they are actionable.

Timing, however, is just one piece of the puzzle. Assessment reports — particularly individual student assessment reports — can be confusing even for experienced educators, never mind families and students, who often find scale scores and percentile rankings impossible to decipher without someone walking them through the results. What's more, these reports are rarely available in languages other than English and often give little information or context about how the results could or should be used by educators or families to improve a student's outcomes.

These federal investments via CGSA would allow states to work with vendors to develop reports that are timely, understandable, and actionable. States should also engage with the end users of these reports to ensure that they are designed to be more useful for their target audience.



### **Recommendation 3.2: Increase transparency on state assessment practices to encourage better state/local decision-making**

**Reauthorization should build on the assessment system audits envisioned under section 1202<sup>29</sup> by requiring that the Department produce an annual report summarizing the dates of each state’s assessment window and aggregating data that states would be required to make publicly available each year on the date by which student score reports are provided to families; the date school report cards are made available to the public; and the total assessment time for federal-, state-, and district-required assessments (separately) in each of the state’s school districts.**

While this didn’t come up in our focus groups, there are [perennial complaints](#) about students and educators being burdened by too many assessments, with much of the blame falling on federally required statewide assessments.<sup>30</sup> A 2015 study, however, found that just [2% of the school year](#) is devoted to summative assessments — with most assessment-related time going toward interim or other district- or school-mandated assessments or test preparation.<sup>31</sup> More recent and comprehensive data on the types and number of assessments students are taking, unfortunately, doesn’t exist. But parents, educators, and school and district leaders continue to say that the delayed timing of assessment results undermines their utility.

Requiring an annual report of state and district assessment practices would provide advocates and other stakeholders with information they can use to hold states accountable for producing timely results and allow for statewide audits of assessment practices across all types of assessments (See Sidebar, Which Assessments Are We Talking About?). Based on the results of these annual reports, federal requirements could be created for the timely release of results — for instance, within three months — to ensure this data is relevant and can be used in a timely manner.

### **Recommendation 3.3: Stop improper uses of assessments that undermine confidence in state assessment and accountability systems**

**Reauthorization should further define “valid and reliable” uses of assessments that are consistent with “relevant, nationally recognized professional and technical testing standards” (section 1111(b)(2)(B)(iii))<sup>32</sup> to limit inappropriate uses of federally required assessments, such as using them as the sole measure of student retention. In addition, the Department should keep using its communication channels to discourage states and districts from using assessment results for unintended purposes (including denying opportunities to students).**

While school, district, and state leaders regularly use statewide assessment results to make data-informed decisions, we heard from both students and families that state assessments are a source of student anxiety, at least partly because of the perceived high stakes of the exam. In the case of college entrance exams, the stakes are, in fact, very high for students, but the intended purpose of statewide summative assessments is to identify and address systemic inequities in high school performance, so the misuse of these tests may exacerbate those same inequities in college access.

While state and district policies that leverage assessment results to determine student placement can help ensure access to supports or advanced opportunities for students who may be overlooked — including on account of educator bias — summative assessments are not the only measurement of what a student knows and can do, and, therefore, should not be the sole determinant of student opportunity. In other words, assessment results should be a floor to access, not a ceiling. Having an “advanced” score on a statewide assessment should be enough to place a student in an advanced class, but statewide assessment results shouldn’t be the only way to access advanced coursework opportunities. [Other measures](#), such as an expressed desire to enroll, grades in relevant prerequisite courses, and recommendations from trusted school staff, should also be used.<sup>33</sup>



Using assessment results as a criterion for access to advanced coursework opportunities can help offset educator bias, but state assessment scores shouldn't be the sole prerequisite for access to such opportunities, since these scores are only a snapshot in time and don't necessarily capture a student's full knowledge and skills. Barring exclusionary policies that use a single assessment as the sole determinate of student opportunity — via reauthorization or federal regulations — could help decrease student frustration and anxiety and reduce resistance to statewide assessments.

### **Recommendation 3.4: Promote equitable resource allocation based on students' academic needs**

**Reauthorization should strengthen the resource allocation reviews under section 1111(d)(3)(A)(ii) <sup>34</sup> by requiring public reporting, establishing review standards, and changing the reviews from “periodic” to “annual.”**

Perhaps the most important equity role for statewide summative assessments is the ability to use assessment results to target state and local resources to the students with the greatest need — including for students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, students with disabilities, and English learners — and the schools serving them. Getting additional resources to where they are most needed is key to equitable school improvement.

Yet evidence that this is happening in a systematic way remains elusive. Our focus group participants said that they either were not aware that more equitable resource allocation was the intended purpose of assessments, or that they did not see any changes being made as a result of assessments. Some students and teachers mistakenly believed that schools with poor results lose resources.

State resource allocation reviews were designed to create a formal — and public — process for assessment-informed allocations. But in its current form, the statute lacks teeth, with “periodic” in effect meaning “[never](#).” <sup>35</sup> Making this an annual requirement and empowering the US Department of Education to hold states accountable for implementing these reviews might induce more states to make more equitable funding decisions (i.e., provide additional resources to schools with low assessment results or large gaps in results by student group). And states that failed to do so would face increased public scrutiny.

## **PILLAR 4: MAKE ASSESSMENT RESULTS MORE MEANINGFUL**

### **Recommendation 4.1: Spotlight effective examples of assessment data transparency and family engagement**

**Through reauthorization or administrative action, the Department should establish a best practices clearinghouse for family reporting formats (including in multiple languages), disaggregated data transparency and reporting — including better metrics and reporting for college and career readiness and postsecondary outcomes — and family engagement with assessment results.**

Having a national clearinghouse of best practices in reporting would help ensure that innovative practices (including the assessment reporting innovations via CGSA) are not used in isolation but are widely disseminated, adopted by states, and adapted to fit local contexts.

This clearinghouse could also include best practices on state school report cards, which present assessment results alongside other key information about school quality. As they stand now, many state report cards [do not include all federally required data](#), particularly the disaggregated data critical for addressing inequities. <sup>36</sup> What's more, assessment and other data are often not presented in ways that are useful or easy to understand.



For instance, some data may only be accessed [via massive spreadsheets](#), which are potentially useful for data analysts, but not for families or advocates.<sup>37</sup> In other cases, school data may be presented in an aesthetically pleasing dashboard that's easy to read but may not allow users to make comparisons with other schools, districts, and state averages, or may lack critical contextual information for making sense of relative school quality. By highlighting and disseminating individual best practices across states, this clearinghouse could help states learn from each other and adopt more transparent actionable public reporting systems.

### **Recommendation 4.2 Provide support to increase assessment literacy**

**Reauthorization or the appropriations process should be used to provide resources for states, districts, and community-based nonprofit organizations to build capacity for greater assessment literacy among educators and families and support the use of assessment data to improve student outcomes.**

As noted previously, students and families said in our focus groups that they experienced stress and anxiety on account of perceived or real consequences of statewide assessment results, while educators felt constrained by pressure to “teach to the test” and added administrative burdens. Simultaneously, these same stakeholders said that they were unaware of the intended equity-focused purpose of statewide summative assessments or did not see any changes made as a result of assessments.

Giving states, districts, and community-based organizations the resources to provide educators and families with clear information on the purpose of assessments and clear examples of their uses can help broaden understanding of why and how assessments are used to advance equity. It can also empower families and students to use the results to hold state, district, and school leaders accountable for improving outcomes for all students and allow educators to use assessment results as intended.

### **Recommendation 4.3: Ensure that state report cards provide understandable and valuable information**

**Reauthorization should require the Department to conduct an annual and publicly released audit of state report cards to determine whether the requirements of section 1111(h)(1) are being met, and to issue updated guidance with best practices. This recommendation can also be fulfilled by administrative action pending reauthorization.<sup>38</sup>**

The department has an essential enforcement role — which to date it has failed to fully embrace — to ensure that states are complying with all aspects of federal reporting requirements. For instance, [according to the Data Quality Campaign](#), 22 states currently don't disaggregate assessment data by all federally required groups.<sup>39</sup>

Having this data is essential for driving equitable decision-making, while also providing families, community members, and advocates with the tools they need to advocate for more equitable practices in their schools, districts, and states. While the department does, on occasion, publicly notify individual states when they don't meet federal reporting, assessment, and/or accountability requirements, the department doesn't currently issue a comprehensive national report, which is arguably needed to hold states accountable to the public for failing to follow these critical requirements.

Additionally, the department should encourage (and potentially incentivize) states to go beyond basic compliance and adopt best practices, such as those contained in the national clearinghouse recommendation (4.1).



# APPENDIX A: PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS

## Focus Group Participant Summary

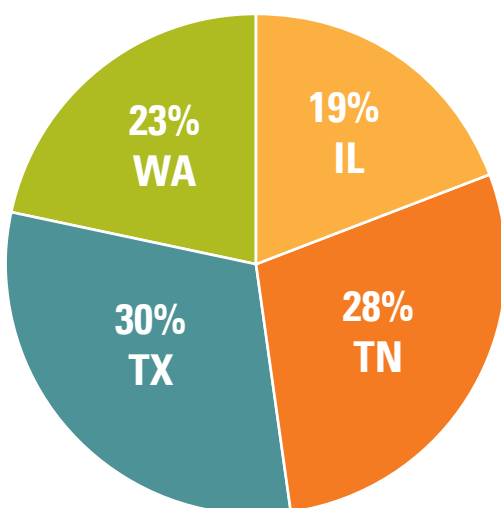
	College Students	Parents/ Caregivers of 6th-12th Graders	3rd-12th Grade Staff	District/State Administrators	Total
MA	0	3	9	9 state staff 6 district staff	27 participants in MA
TN	14	3	6	0 state staff 5 district staff	28 participants in TN
TX	13	10	15	0 state staff 10 district staff	48 participants in TX
IL	9	13	15	7 state staff 3 district staff	47 participants in IL
WA	11	4	0	2 state staff 2 district staff	19 participants in WA
<b>Total # of Participants</b>	<b>47 people (13 groups)</b>	<b>33 people (9 groups)</b>	<b>45 people (14 groups)</b>	<b>44 people (14 groups)</b>	<b>169 participants (50 groups)</b>



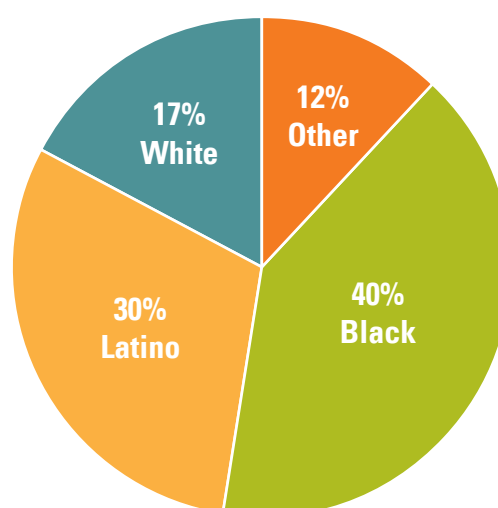
## COLLEGE STUDENT DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Overall, 47 college students participated in focus groups. 75% of college student participants come from low-income backgrounds. 45% of college student participants identified as English language learners at some point in K-12.

Participants by State



Participants by Race and Ethnicity

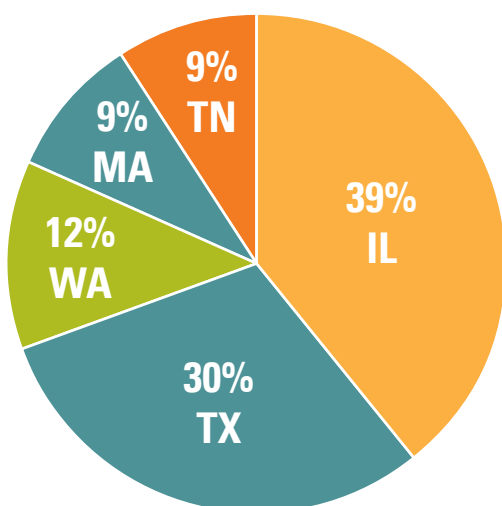


Some figures may not equal 100% due to rounding.

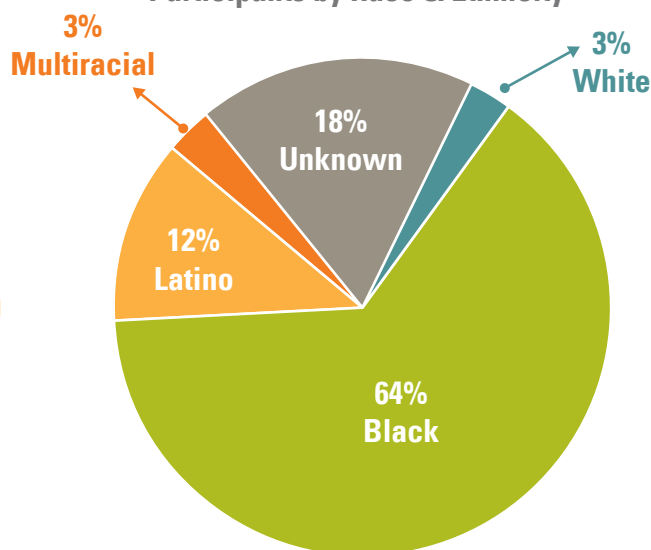
## PARENT & CAREGIVER DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Overall, 33 parents or caregivers participated in focus groups. 66% come from low-income backgrounds. 24% of parents and caregivers have a student who identifies as an English language learner.

Participants by State



Participants by Race & Ethnicity



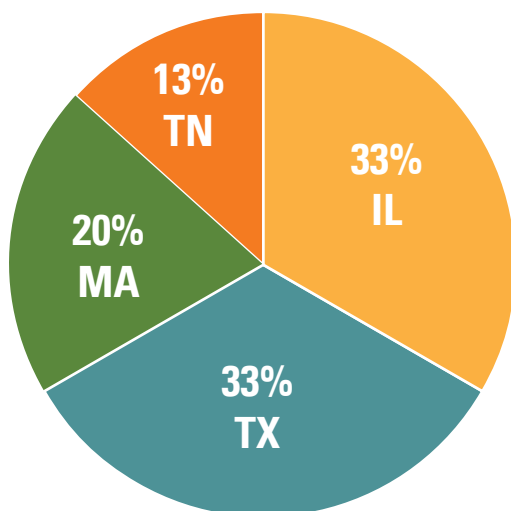
Source for both graphics: Education Trust survey of focus group participants, 2021-22

Some figures may not equal 100% due to rounding.

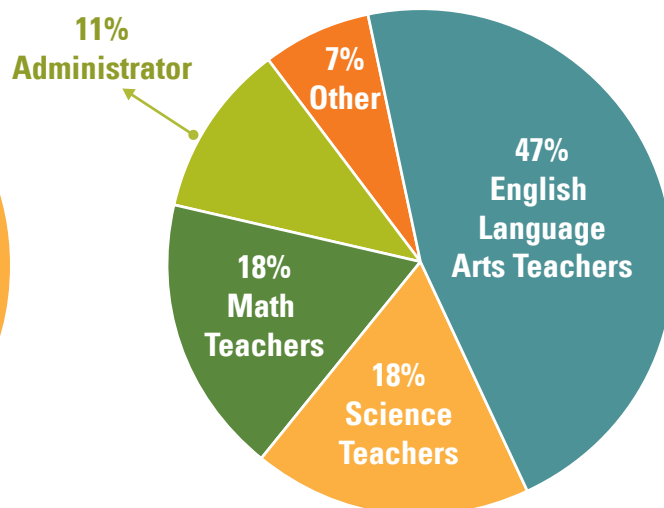


## EDUCATOR DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Participants by State



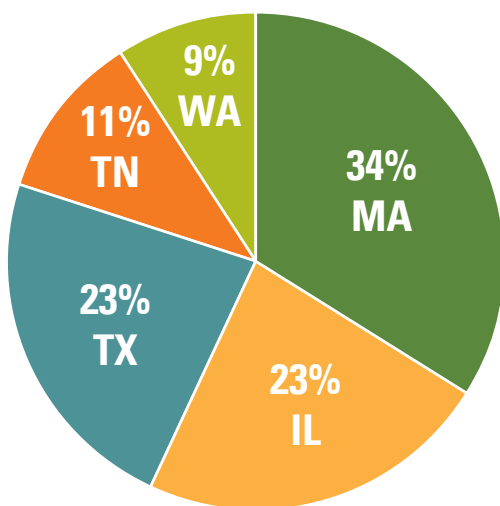
Participants by Subject Area



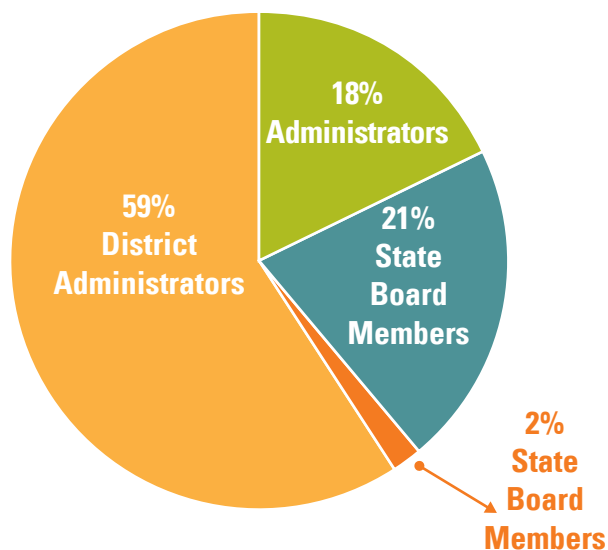
Notes: "Other" includes college coaches and school counselors;  
"Administrator" includes principals and assistant principals.  
Some figures may not equal 100% due to rounding.

## STATE & DISTRICT LEADER DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Participants by State



Participants by Role



Source for both graphics: Education Trust survey of focus group participants, 2021-22  
Some figures may not equal 100% due to rounding.



## APPENDIX B: RESEARCH PROCESS

### STEP 1

#### **IRB Approval**

Ed Trust and partners (America's Promise Alliance, Teach Plus, UNITE, Inc., and the National Urban League) received IRB approval to collect participant data and conduct focus groups.

### STEP 2

#### **Participant Recruitment**

Ed Trust and partners recruited participants in Illinois, Massachusetts, Tennessee, Texas and Washington via fliers, social media, emails, word of mouth, and phone outreach.

### STEP 3

#### **Screener**

After expressing interest, potential participants completed a screener that evaluated their eligibility to participate.

### STEP 4

#### **Questionnaire**

Approved participants completed a pre-focus group questionnaire.

### STEP 5

#### **Focus Group**

Participants participated in a 50-minute focus group. Focus groups were comprised of participants from the same state and stakeholder group. Participants received a gift for their participation.



# APPENDIX C: ELIGIBLE PARTICIPANT CRITERIA

## PARTICIPANT CRITERIA

### COLLEGE STUDENTS

- Black or Latino student from any income background; White student from low-income background; student who is eligible for Pell Grants; or was an English learner (while they were taking assessments between grades 3-12) from any income background
- Student attended in-state public middle and high schools, is in sophomore/second year or junior year/ third year of college **and** one of the following: (1) Student is at an in-state public four-year college/ university **OR** (2) student is at an in-state community college but intends to transfer to an in-state public four-year college/university (must have completed one semester of college beyond COVID-19-impacted years) **OR** (3) student is at an in-state HBCU or MSI

### PARENTS & CAREGIVERS

- Parent of student(s) of color (e.g., Black, Latino, Asian, Pacific Islander, Native American, etc.), English learners, and/or students from a low-income background
- Has a child in grades 6-12 at an in-state public school

### EDUCATORS

- Has at least 4 years of experience working in the same state (accounting for COVID-19's impact on assessment)
- Serves students in grades 3-12
- Serves in a public primary or secondary school in which at least 50% of the students are students of color (e.g., Black, Latino, Asian, Pacific Islander, Native American, etc.), students from low-income backgrounds, and/or students who are English learners
- Serves in an official capacity related to college readiness (e.g., school leader, school counselor, college coach, ELA teacher, math teacher, science teacher, etc.)

### STATE & DISTRICT LEADERS

#### DISTRICT ADMINISTRATORS:

- Serves in a public school district in which at least 50% of the students are students of color (e.g., Black, Latino, Asian, Pacific Islander, Native American, etc.), students from low-income backgrounds, and/or students who are English learners
- Serves in an official capacity related to statewide assessment and college readiness (e.g., superintendent, chief academic officer, director of special education, director of Title III/English learners)

#### STATE ADMINISTRATORS:

- Serves in an official capacity related to statewide assessment and college readiness (e.g., state superintendents, state board members, deputy superintendents, chief performance officer, state director of special education, state director of Title III/English learners)

## APPENDIX D: PARTNERS AND ADVISORY BOARD MEMBERS

*“To help guide our work and provide perspectives from a wide range of stakeholders, including civil rights groups, technical experts, policymakers, and representatives of K-12 students, we assembled an advisory group from across the country and across expertise areas to weigh in on the research development and design. Members of this group also provided feedback on the equity pillars and policy recommendations. **Their inclusion on this list does not reflect personal or organizational endorsement of the policy positions in this paper.**”*

### Our complete list of members includes:

#### **Project Partners**

America’s Promise Alliance  
National Urban League  
Teach Plus  
UNITE, Inc.

#### **Advisory Board Members**

Dr. Maria Armstrong, Association of Latino Administrators and Superintendents  
Kyle Butler, U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation  
Amalia Chamorro, UnidosUS  
Caitlin Codella, U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation  
Sharif El-Mekki, Center for Black Educator Development  
Hanseul Kang, The Broad Center at the Yale School of Management  
Lindsay Kubatzky, National Center for Learning Disabilities  
Dr. Jennifer Randall, Center for Measurement Justice  
Elizabeth Rorick, National PTA  
Mohan Sivaloganathan, Our Turn  
Emma Vadehra  
Dr. Marty West, Harvard Graduate School of Education

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## Endnotes

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2. See Strauss, V. (2021, June 19). Perspective | No systemic racism? Look at student achievement gaps in reading. Washington Post. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2021/06/19/systemic-racism-reading-scores/> and Reardon, S. F., Greenberg, E. H., Kalogrides, D., Shores, K. A., & Valentino, R. A. (2013). Left Behind? The Effect of No Child Left Behind on Academic Achievement Gaps. <https://cepa.stanford.edu/content/left-behind-effect-no-child-left-behind-academic-achievement-gaps>
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4. Saslow, R., Liow, Y., & Barone, C. (2022, November 29). 2022 Statewide Data Update: Too Many States Falling Short on Full Data Transparency. Education Reform Now. <https://edreformnow.org/2022/11/29/2022-state-wide-assessments-update/>
5. We define caregivers as the adults who are directly responsible for taking care of a child, including parents, grandparents, etc.
6. Massachusetts requires students to earn a passing score on the grade 10 Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) tests in ELA and math, and one of the high school Science and Technology/Engineering tests to graduate. Tennessee factors student performance on end-of-course (EOC) assessments into the semester grade for the relevant course. Texas students are required to pass EOC exams to earn a diploma from a public high school.
7. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) was signed into law on December 10, 2015, by President Barack Obama. ESSA is the newest installment of the federal government's largest K-12 law, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, which took immediate effect in 1965, and includes federal requirements for assessments and accountability, and provides substantial education funding to states and districts, including via Title I.
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9. See Allensworth, E. M., & Clark, K. (2020). High School GPAs and ACT Scores as Predictors of College Completion: Examining Assumptions About Consistency Across High Schools. *Educational Researcher*, 49(3), 198–211. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X20902110>; Systemwide Academic Senate. (2020). Report of the UC Academic Council Standardized Testing Task Force (STTF). University of California. <https://senate.universityofcalifornia.edu/files/underreview/sttf-report.pdf>; and College Board. (2019). National SAT® Validity Study An Overview for Admissions and Enrollment Leaders. <https://satsuite.collegeboard.org/media/pdf/national-sat-validity-study-overview-admissions-enrollment-leaders.pdf>
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11. Munyan-Penney, N. & Barone, C. (2020). Innovative Assessment Pilot: Louisiana's LEAP 2025 Humanities Assessment. Education Reform Now. <http://www.edreformnow.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Louisiana-LADA-LEAP-2025-Humanities.pdf>
12. Maryland Department of Education. (2023, January 24). Maryland State Department of Education Provides Update to Statewide Spring 2022 Maryland Comprehensive Assessment Program (MCAP) Results. <https://news.maryland.gov/msde/maryland-state-department-of-education-provides-update-to-statewide-spring-2022-maryland-comprehensive-assessment-program-mcap-results/>
13. MO School Improvement Program. (n.d.). Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. <https://dese.mo.gov/quality-schools/mo-school-improvement-program>
14. Under ESSA, each state must ensure that their state standards are both academically rigorous and aligned with the credit-bearing coursework that is required for base-level understanding and success in a public postsecondary institution.
15. This section within ESSA outlines the basic requirements for state assessments and also notes that student achievement may be *partially* measured via portfolios, projects, or extended performance tasks.
16. Texas Education Agency. (2023, February 17). STAAR Redesign. Texas Education Agency. <https://tea.texas.gov/student-assessment/assessment-initiatives/hb-3906/taar-redesign>



17. These provisions require that assessments are valid and reliable, consistent with current national professional and technical testing standards, and hold no bias in terms of personal beliefs or attitudes about nonobjective issues and that these requirements be validated by a panel of experts via a peer-review process.
18. Terry Ellis, N. (2021, July 14). Critical race theory has become a social and political lightning rod. CNN. <https://www.cnn.com/2021/07/14/us/critical-race-theory-what-is-it/index.html>
19. The Competitive Grants for State Assessments (CGSA) program is meant to increase the quality of assessment systems and tools to help states measure their students' academic success and is funded annually via state assessment grants under ESSA. ESSA sets a minimum amount that the federal government must appropriate to require states to administer federal assessments. Any amount over this "trigger" amount is automatically appropriated for CGSA. The most recent grants were awarded in August 2022.
20. From ESSA, this section states that federal assessments can be administered through a multitude of interim assessments throughout the course of the academic school year. By the end of the year, a summative score should be provided that is valid, reliable, and easily accessible to share students' growth within a given area.
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28. IADA can be found in ESSA Section 1204 and exempts states from testing students on existing assessments in districts using the piloting assessment, as they work to scale their innovative assessments over the course of five years.
29. This ESSA provision requires states to audit their assessment systems and create plans for how that audit will be conducted.
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31. Hart, R., Casserly, M., Uzzell, R., Palacios, M., Corcoran, A., & Spurgeon, L. (2015). Student Testing in America's Great City Schools: An Inventory and Preliminary Analysis. Council of the Great City Schools. <https://www.cgcs.org/cms/lib/DC00001581/Centricity/Domain/87/Testing%20Report.pdf>
32. Within the (iii) portion of this ESSA section, the bill stipulates that assessment requirements are valid and reliable, consistent with current national professional and technical testing standards, and hold no bias in terms of personal beliefs or attitudes about nonobjective issues.
33. See Ed Trust. (2019, December 9). 5 Things to Advance Equity in Access to and Success in Advanced Coursework. The Education Trust. <https://edtrust.org/resource/5-things-to-advance-equity-in-access-to-and-success-in-advanced-coursework/> and Patrick, K., Davis, J., & Socol, A. R. (2022, April 21). Why Are Black and Latino Students Shut Out of AP STEM Courses? The Education Trust. <https://edtrust.org/resource/why-are-black-and-latino-students-shut-out-of-ap-stem-courses/>
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38. This ESSA section calls for an annual state report card that includes things such as graduation rates, test scores, etc.
39. Data Quality Campaign. Show Me the Data 2022.