



THE MISGUIDED PUSH TO REINTRODUCE STANDARDIZED TESTING DURING THE PANDEMIC



This past spring, after schools closed to limit the spread of the coronavirus, [all 50 states](#), Puerto Rico, the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the District of Columbia were given permission by the U.S. Department of Education (ED) to suspend or cancel their K-12 accountability testing—something that hasn't happened since 1994, when federal law first started requiring annual exams.

With schools set to resume in the weeks to come, it's still not clear how many buildings will actually reopen. As of July 23rd, [more than three quarters of district leaders](#) said they planned to offer a mixture of in-person and online instruction but, [as death tolls rise](#), [more districts](#) are announcing each day that 100 percent of learning will be remote as the fall semester begins.

Amid this uncertainty, a smattering of policymakers, educators and advocates are calling for a resumption of statewide testing. In early July, for instance, Texas Education Commissioner Mike Morath [announced](#) that students would be required to take the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STARR) exams in 2020-21. [A few days later](#), Florida Department of Education chief of staff Alex Kelly told district leaders that there were no plans to seek a waiver from federal testing requirements for 2020-21. Moreover, after leaders in [Michigan, Georgia, and South Carolina](#) did request that ED grant testing waivers for 2020-21, the department's leadership indicated that [no waivers](#) will be forthcoming.

The justification for resuming during a pandemic has been that the exams are needed for diagnostic purposes. As Assistant Secretary at ED, Jim Blew, [said](#), "Accountability aside, we need to know where students are so we can address their needs." Similarly, Morath, the Texas Commissioner, [told state school board members](#), "Educators, unless they have some other robust assessment ... can't adjust our educational support of kids accordingly."

Yet statewide exams are [not appropriate](#) for diagnosing learning needs for individual teachers and students. Instead, they are designed to assess state, district and school-level efforts

to cover a broad set of state standards. In fact, teachers rarely even receive the results until their students have moved on to the next grade level.

For this reason, [education officials](#) and [advocates](#) in several states say that so-called “diagnostic assessments”—not the summative exams required by federal law—should be administered when schools resume. For example, 10 education advocacy groups led by Denver-based A+ Colorado, [called for](#) state leaders to spend federal CARES Act funds to administer a “statewide diagnostic tool” to every K-12 student in Colorado. Their letter mentions an assortment of off-the-shelf, “well-established and widely-used” “diagnostic assessments” listed in a [report](#) by [Education Reform Now](#), a nonprofit advocacy organization.

Ultimately, Colorado Education Commissioner Katy Anthes [said](#) that the state would not use a single diagnostic tool to assess student readiness when school resumes, because this approach would “distract districts from focusing on critical fall reopening priorities, result in unnecessary duplication, and not necessarily be aligned to local curricula.”

Nevertheless, the idea of using such a one-size-fits-all tool for diagnostic purposes is likely baked into school reopening plans throughout the country. For example, the School District of [Osceola County, FL](#) will administer NWEA’s MAP exam three times this school year as a “diagnostic tool” and “approach for diagnosing unfinished learning,” according to the 69,000-student district’s state-approved [reopening plan](#). And California’s 16,000-student [Cajon Valley Union School District](#) has purchased Curriculum Associate’s i-Ready virtual diagnostic tool to diagnose student learning in English/language arts and math at the beginning of the school year.

Yet National Education Policy Center Fellow and University of Colorado Distinguished Professor and Dean Emerita, [Lorrie Shepard](#), says that a single, uniform, off-the-shelf tool cannot provide the information that teachers need to meet students where they are and teach them what they need to learn.

To be truly diagnostic and useful to guide the next steps in instruction, assessments need to be closely tied to local curricula, in both content and timing, and they need to be responsive to strengths children bring from their homes and communities,

Shepard wrote in a [June letter to Colorado education officials](#). She added:

The computer-delivered test products referenced in the A+ Colorado letter provide quantitative scores about how far behind or ahead students are (one grade level or two) on broad subtest dimensions such as Number and Operations or Algebra. To permit immediate, machine scoring, these products include only multiple-choice or short-answer test questions. As a result, they do not provide insights into children’s thinking. They have not been built, as are more fine-grained diagnostic assessments, to identify students’ misconceptions.

The Colorado advocacy groups and others calling for the use of a one-size-fits-all diagnostic tool contend that equity is their goal because educators need to measure the disparate impact of remote learning on emerging bilinguals, students from lower-income families, and others who traditionally been poorly served by the educational system.

Yet Shepard writes that a set of uniform assessments would disproportionately harm these very students:

At this time of national trauma, we should not forget that tests have a long history of being the cause of inequity rather than a resource for educational opportunity. For decades, tests – first IQ tests and then achievement tests – have been used to sort children of color and English language learners into low-track classes where learning opportunities and outcomes have been worse than in regular classrooms.... Colorado can do better than to greet its most vulnerable students with tests specifically designed to quantify their deficiencies.

Although A+ Colorado and its partners do not suggest using diagnostic tests to retain students in grade, other [commentators have already proposed](#) doing so, Shepard observes. [Cumulative research results](#) suggest that retention is more harmful than helpful and that it is disproportionately used on students of color. This could compound the assessments' impact on equity.

How, then, should teachers pinpoint students' needs when school resumes either in person or online? Here's what Shepard suggests:

The sound advice of national curriculum leaders such as [Student Achievement Partners](#) has been to use prioritized content standards to scaffold students to grade-level content as quickly as possible. Such an instructional approach can best be supported through the use of open-ended instructional tasks to help identify learning needs in ways better attuned to children's social-emotional needs. Teachers can, for example, invite children to read and talk about grade-leveled texts, with particular attention to phonological awareness, vocabulary, and comprehension. In mathematics, richly scaffolded performance tasks are available as well as curriculum embedded assessments that can be used to elicit children's thinking as well as mastery of prerequisite skills. Importantly, these activities do not take time away from instruction and they place teachers in a helping role with their students at the outset of the school year, rather than in an evaluative or judgmental one. This is a more equitable and effective approach than the endless, objective-by-objective remediation that would likely follow from interim assessment results.

Shepard also wrote about these issues in a [statement](#) posted at Valerie Strauss's Answer Sheet for the *Washington Post*.

NEPC Resources on Assessment

This newsletter is made possible in part by support provided by the Great Lakes Center for Education Research and Practice: <http://www.greatlakescenter.org>

The National Education Policy Center (NEPC), a university research center housed at the University of Colorado Boulder School of Education, produces and disseminates high-quality, peer-reviewed research to inform education policy discussions. Visit us at: <http://nepc.colorado.edu>