

**Building Tests To Support
Instruction and Accountability**
A Guide for Policymakers

Prepared By

The Commission on Instructionally Supportive Assessment

Convened By

American Association of School Administrators
National Association of Elementary School Principals
National Association of Secondary School Principals
National Education Association
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

State-mandated accountability tests must be useful to educators concerned about improving the instruction of children.

The Commission on Instructionally Supportive Assessment, in support of this assertion, presents nine requirements for a new generation of statewide achievement tests. The Commission believes that tests written to these requirements will benefit students by providing educators with information they can use to improve the quality of instruction. At the same time, the tests will provide states with information to hold educators, schools, and school districts accountable for student performance.

Clearly, state policymakers who pass accountability legislation have in mind this dual outcome of assessing and improving student performance. But, all too often, while state-administered achievement tests measure performance, they have little value for instruction. This minimizes their usefulness in an accountability system that assumes information from tests will result in appropriate changes in instruction.

To address this problem, the Commission calls for states to use the nine requirements as steps to create responsible state assessment systems, including tests that improve both learning and accountability. Each requirement is supported by reasons for its importance.

The nine requirements are:

Requirement 1: A state's content standards must be prioritized to support effective instruction and assessment.

- Requirement 2: A state's high-priority content standards must be clearly and thoroughly described so that the knowledge and skills students need to demonstrate competence are evident.
- Requirement 3: The results of a state's assessment of high-priority content standards should be reported standard-by-standard for each student, school, and district.
- Requirement 4: The state must provide educators with optional classroom assessment procedures that can measure students' progress in attaining content standards not assessed by state tests.
- Requirement 5: A state must monitor the breadth of the curriculum to ensure that instructional attention is given to all content standards and subject areas, including those that are not assessed by state tests.
- Requirement 6: A state must ensure that all students have the opportunity to demonstrate their achievement of state standards; consequently, it must provide well-designed assessments appropriate for a broad range of students, with accommodations and alternate methods of assessment available for students who need them.
- Requirement 7: A state must generally allow test developers a minimum of three years to produce statewide tests that satisfy *Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing* and similar test-quality guidelines.
- Requirement 8: A state must ensure that educators receive professional development focused on how to optimize children's learning based on the results of instructionally supportive assessments.
- Requirement 9: A state should secure evidence that supports the ongoing improvement of its state assessments to ensure those assessments are (a) appropriate for the accountability purposes for which they are used, (b) appropriate for determining whether students have attained state standards, (c) appropriate for enhancing instruction, and (d) not the cause of negative consequences.

The Commission of nationally recognized experts in assessment, curriculum, and instruction was convened by five national associations representing administrators and teachers: American Association of School Administrators, National Association of Elementary School Principals, National Association of Secondary School Principals, National Education Association, and National Middle School Association.

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PREFACE

The individuals who prepared this report were asked to recommend ways that state-administered achievement tests could not only satisfy public demands for accountability, but also improve the instruction of children. I had the privilege of selecting the Commission's members from a list of nominees submitted by a coalition of administrator and teacher organizations. I used two criteria. First, I wanted different perspectives represented. Second, I wanted individuals who possessed recognized expertise in assessment and/or instruction. As a Commission, we functioned with complete autonomy. Members of the commission received no remuneration for their work, other than reimbursement for travel expenses. We appreciate the opportunity to consider independently this important educational issue.

W. James Popham
Commission Chair

FOREWORD

Educators who assume the tremendous responsibility of ensuring a quality education for all children can be effective only with the support and encouragement of the larger society. State-mandated standards are a form of encouragement. They signal to educators that the public supports educational improvement for every child, regardless of his or her background. Teachers and administrators agree that, when done well, state standards can increase academic rigor, strengthen curricula, and encourage student learning. But when the standards are linked to state tests, particularly those with high-stakes consequences, educators have understandable concerns.

All too often educators' legitimate concerns about state assessment are not heard by reform-minded policymakers. Worried that they'll be accused of running from accountability, teachers, principals, and superintendents publicly embrace state assessments while they fret privately about their negative impact on sound teaching and learning.

This dilemma brought together five associations that serve the needs of classroom teachers, school principals, and district superintendents. Our associations acknowledged that those who mandate state tests frequently believe our ties to our respective memberships negate the impartiality of our concerns. We then agreed that it would take an independent group of nationally recognized experts in assessment, curriculum, and instruction to attract the attention of state policymakers and urge them to reexamine their assessment systems. Only then, we concluded, would assessment systems be improved so that everyone—educators, policymakers, parents, and the public at large—could be confident that accountability requirements are linked to sound teaching and learning.

W. James Popham, noted research scholar and professor emeritus of the University of California, Los Angeles, was tapped to convene the Commission and serve as its chair.

Commission members include nationally recognized authorities in assessment, curriculum, and instruction, who have brought a wide breadth of knowledge and experience to this effort.

The five associations enthusiastically embrace the result of the Commission's deliberations and applaud its bold assertion that a state's assessment system must meet nine requirements to be seen as credible. We recognize that the Commission makes no mention of what it might cost states to implement truly effective assessment systems. The costs will vary across states, of course. Some have already made major investments in their systems; others have a long way to go. But without an adequate assessment system, neither educators, parents, policymakers, nor the public will know if their expectations for educational quality are being met.

We thank Dr. Popham and the other Commissioners for their hard work and we appreciate their clearly written report. We urge our respective memberships to read the Commission's report. And then we ask them to use it together to begin anew the dialogue with state policymakers about the efficacy of their assessment systems.

Teachers, principals, and district superintendents will readily embrace accountability measures if they are tied to effective assessment systems designed and implemented to improve classroom instruction. Our hope is that policymakers will too.

Finally, we acknowledge our association colleagues who made this collaborative activity possible. Particular thanks go to Marcella Dianda of NEA for her leadership role. Others involved from inception through completion were Gail Gross of NAESP, John Nori of NASSP, and Cynthia Prince and Joe Schneider of AASA.

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INTRODUCTION

This report evolved in response to the question: Why shouldn't state-mandated accountability tests also be useful to educators concerned about improving the instruction of children? Simply put, why can't state tests be designed so that the results are useful to educators as they revamp instruction to improve student achievement? Clearly, the policymakers who pass such legislation have this dual outcome in mind. But, all too often, federally mandated and state-administered tests seem to have little instructional utility, thus bringing into question their usefulness in an accountability system that assumes that information obtained from tests will result in appropriate changes in instruction.

The Commission on Instructionally Supportive Assessment was convened at the request of a coalition of administrator and teacher organizations. We accepted the coalition's request for assistance because we believe the current focus on educational testing offers an exceptional opportunity to create assessments that can help the nation's children learn better. If tests help teachers do a better job in the classroom, then they will truly be *instructionally supportive*. Moreover, we believe that such assessments can provide policymakers with the kind of meaningful evidence needed to satisfy today's educational accountability demands. Consequently, we have written this report specifically for state policymakers to help them establish educational policies that will lead to the development of tests supportive of both instruction and accountability.

We do not believe that the results of a single test should ever be used to make significant decisions that affect schools or students. The tests we recommend will, however, provide one important source of evidence for key educational decisions.

Our report contains nine requirements that must be met to ensure *a responsible educational assessment system for the improvement of learning*. Certainly, policymakers

might satisfy these requirements in various ways. One approach would be to draw on the capabilities of state agencies, such as a state's department of education, to carry out certain of the required activities. Another would be to have the state issue a competitive request for proposals (RFP) to firms and individuals capable of carrying out one or more of the Commission-required activities.

The Commission has issued a separate report to assist state authorities who choose to rely on RFPs and external contractors to obtain necessary products and/or services. That report provides illustrative language that might be incorporated into RFPs to satisfy any of the Commission's nine requirements. (See *Illustrative Language for an RFP To Build Tests To Support Instruction and Accountability*, 2001, available online from each convening association.)

The Commission recognizes that most states have intended to create assessment systems aimed at improving instructional quality. This document is an effort to help ensure that such a goal is reached.

**Requirements for the Development
of Instructionally Supportive Assessments**

The Commission believes that states will create responsible assessments for the improvement of students' learning if they implement the nine requirements we describe on the following pages.

Requirement 1

A state's content standards must be prioritized to support effective instruction and assessment.

Because —

- *educators in many states cannot adequately address within the amount of time available for instruction the large number of content standards that are supposedly measured by state tests;*
- *state tests often do not adequately assess all of the content standards, and frequently center on standards that are easiest to assess; and*
- *state tests rarely provide educators with the kind of information they need to improve instruction.*

Nearly every state has developed two kinds of standards. Content standards focus on knowledge and skills educators are expected to teach. Performance standards focus on students' proficiency in demonstrating the knowledge and skills described in the content standards. The Commission's requirements address content standards. Requirement 1 obliges a state to review and rank-order its content standards using a process open to all relevant stakeholders—for instance, educators, parents, and other concerned citizens. This will result in a set of high-priority content standards that will assist educators and guide test developers by directing their attention to a limited, manageable set of standards.

The purpose of this prioritization is to identify a small number of content standards, suitable for large-scale assessment, that represent the most important or enduring skills and knowledge students need to learn in school. Standards that focus on discrete skills and knowledge may first need to be subsumed or grouped under larger conceptions of what students should know and be able to do, so that a smaller number of key content standards can be prioritized.

At the same time, the Commission recognizes that even the most thoughtful prioritization of content standards could inadvertently lead to a narrowed curriculum in which attention focuses on the high priority content standards to the exclusion of other standards. Requirements 4 and 5 are designed to counter this adverse consequence.

Requirement 2

A state's high-priority content standards must be clearly and thoroughly described so that the knowledge and skills students need to demonstrate competence are evident.

Because —

- *a state's high-priority content standards will be measured by state tests;*
- *educators must understand what each of these content standards calls for from students; and*
- *many content standards are not worded with sufficient clarity for rigorous instructional planning and assessment design.*

Members of the Commission regard it as self-evident that better teaching and better testing are more likely if educators understand clearly where they need to focus their efforts and test-developers understand clearly what they are supposed to test. Therefore, we recommend that states analyze their high-priority content standards to identify what students must do and understand to demonstrate they have achieved the standards.

This analysis should result in relatively brief, educator-friendly descriptions of each high-priority content standard's meaning by identifying the skills and knowledge that should be the focus of instruction. To be most useful, the standards and descriptions need to be articulated across grade levels. That is, they should identify age- or grade-appropriate skills and knowledge that build from grade to grade so students learn all the requisites to attain the state's high-priority standards.

Requirement 3

The results of a state’s assessment of high-priority content standards should be reported standard-by-standard for each student, school, and district.

Because —

- *students, parents, educators, and policymakers need information about which content standards students are and are not attaining; and*
- *educators can do little to improve students’ achievement without information about their performance on each high-priority content standard.*

The Commission believes that standard-by-standard reporting of students’ performance on state tests is critical to the success of standards-based educational reform. We recognize, however, that if states are to provide adequate information about students’ skills and knowledge on a per-standard basis, students typically will need to answer several test items for each content standard that is assessed. And this means, of course, that fewer content standards can be assessed by state tests given typical time constraints. This is one reason the Commission calls for states to prioritize their content standards (see Requirement 1). We recognize that, for school accountability, it may be necessary in some instances to aggregate results across standards.

Standard-by-standard reports provide educators and parents with important information they currently do not have regarding each content standard. Having this information will enable educators to evaluate the effectiveness of instruction related to each standard, and then improve instruction where needed. Standard-by-standard reports also will provide parents with more specific information about what their children are learning in school.

Of course, it is also necessary to alert educators to measurement issues that arise when information is based on only one source and on potentially few assessment items, especially for individual students. This information is likely to be less than reliable, and

may be a less than accurate measure of a student's true knowledge and skills. Teachers, especially, must bring additional sources of classroom-based information to their evaluation and intervention decisions for individual students.

The Commission also recognizes that focusing state tests on a smaller number of high-priority content standards creates the possibility that educators will attend so much to these standards that other standards and subject areas will receive reduced attention. We address this issue in Requirements 4 and 5.

progress in meeting state standards. We also believe it is critically important for states to make sure that the results of these classroom assessments have a legitimate role in accountability systems. States need to let educators know how results from classroom assessments can be reported, alongside results from state tests, to provide parents and policymakers with a complete picture of students' achievement on all the state's content standards.