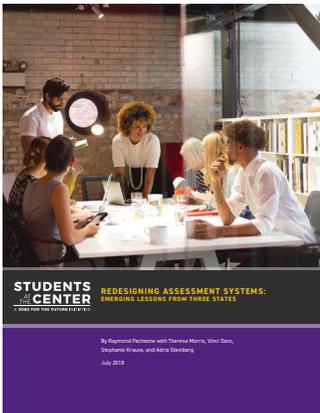


EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

REDESIGNING ASSESSMENT SYSTEMS: EMERGING LESSONS FROM THREE STATES

By Raymond Pecheone with Theresa Morris, Vinci Daro, Stephanie Krauss, and Adria Steinberg



With the passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2016, states gained an opportunity to move beyond what some education leaders had come to see as the limitations of a test-based accountability system enforced by No Child Left Behind regulations that focus narrowly on reading and mathematics. Specifically, ESSA encourages the states to make use of “competency-based assessments, instructionally embedded assessments, interim assessments, performance-based assessments” that in combination can help to determine student progress, as well as “assessments that validate when students are ready to demonstrate mastery or proficiency and allow for differentiated support based on individual learning needs” (ESSA, 2015, Section 1204(a)).

With the new law, states can exercise greater control of and responsibility for assessment and accountability systems that include teaching and measuring the deeper learning competencies necessary to college and career readiness. Placing an increased focus on the usefulness and relevance of assessments at the local level, ESSA also opens the door to local innovations—including evidence-based and place-based interventions developed by local leaders and educators. The focus on multiple data sources and the creation of a body of evidence embedded in practice to support claims of student learning lays important groundwork for change at the district and school level.

Although interest in moving beyond traditional assessments is high, state and district education leaders and practitioners face challenges in developing and

implementing such reforms. For example, the new legislation does not explicitly offer a set of underlying principles or goals. It has been left up to districts and states, with broad-based community participation, to provide a vision of what the next generation of state assessments could or should be, and to address the social, organizational, and cultural relationships that are needed to manage and sustain change—social dimensions too often absent from policy discussions and accountability decisions.

This report offers a window into how states with very different political and policy contexts are combining state leadership and bottom-up momentum to introduce new, more equitable, and learning-centered educational accountability systems aligned with the goal of all students developing the deeper learning competencies necessary for success in college and career.

Case Studies of Reform in Progress

Virginia, California, and Texas are three states where promising ideas, practices, and policies are being put in place with an emphasis on developing new systems of assessments that focus on local participation in design and development.

In Virginia, the former Governor, responding to concerns about over-testing, spearheaded changes in state policy supportive of reduced reliance on standardized tests. With his Secretary of Education, he launched the Standards of Learning Innovation Committee to review state-mandated exams and determine new ways to get Virginia students ready for college and the workforce. Encouraged by state policy changes, numerous districts are now working to change teaching, learning, and assessment practices in ways that will lead to deeper learning and reflect 21st-century skills, as is called for in the Profile of a Virginia Graduate developed by the Board of Education. With the state's recent transitions and new political leadership, the Virginia Department of Education is focusing on building out local leadership and capacity to ensure sustainability, equity, and quality.

In response to both ESSA and anticipated changes to the state accountability system, California, through its County Offices of Education, is building on nearly a decade of work by reform networks partnering with innovative districts and schools. The California story highlights the role of the Los Angeles County Office of Education in catalyzing changes in assessment practices by networking and partnering with reform organizations to provide professional development for innovative districts in their region.

The Texas reforms have grown out of the efforts of the Texas Association of School Administrators (TASA) to move beyond the one-size-fits-all standardized assessments at the core of the state accountability system and to replace it with a community-based system of accountability that respects each local context and expectations. The Performance Assessment Consortium is a group of superintendents and principals from 44 school districts throughout the state, catalyzed by a visioning process sponsored by TASA, who have come together to define the principles and actions involved in answering such questions as: What do we want to be accountable for? And what evidence do we need that the reforms are having a positive impact on learning?

Early Lessons from State Innovation

In each of the states featured in this report, the catalyst to reform has been somewhat different, and different established organizational structures and networks have been engaged to carry out the work. But all three share a common vision that real change occurs at the local level and that a system of assessment must be adapted to best fit the local context and the community it serves. The states are building on a foundation of trust and social relationships to implement new performance assessments and ensure sustainability. While all are at an early stage of this work, their stories offer important lessons and ideas for other states interested in taking advantage of the current openings promised by ESSA.

State-Level Leadership and Political Capital Can Pave the Way

The boost provided by state leadership of reform is evident in all three states. The championship at high levels can bring innovation funds, policy permissions, and political support—as well as a level of credibility that helps to spread the innovation and appeals to regional and national reform funders and partners.

Bottom-Up Leadership and Local Innovation Help to Drive Progress

All three states illustrate the importance of local leaders stepping up to the plate, ready to commit to assessment reform and to providing proofs of concept. Champions at the local level are also critical to political will-building at the state level and to influence other districts and regions across the state to get educated and equipped.

Established Regional, Statewide, or National Organizations Can Help Drive and Spread Reform

In undertaking a shift to more varied and ambitious forms of assessment, states need to both encourage innovation among frontrunners and to design for sustainability and statewide scale. The three states in this report are making use of trusted organizations to build understandings and share practices that respect and honor cultural and organizational differences. These include regional service centers, a statewide organization of school administrators, and/or national reform intermediaries with high visibility. These organizations, which have over the years won the trust of schools and districts, are in turn, partnering with nonprofit intermediaries and consultants that they bring in

to help provide technical assistance, materials, and other forms of support to local pioneers. Such partnerships can help energize the human resources needed to implement new reforms by supporting the day-to-day interactions and social patterns in schools and among communities of practice.

Attention to Context and Social Dynamics Lays the Groundwork for Capacity Building

The very aspects of a new assessment system that make it more useful to teaching and learning also make it more complicated to carry out. Specifically, the transition from using one summative assessment to using a portfolio of performance assessments gives teachers more control, ownership, and choice, as well as responsibilities for scoring and reporting student progress. Capacity to execute horizontally (across the state) and vertically (local to state) is an ongoing challenge in all three of the states featured in this report.

In preparing instructional leaders and teachers for such an effort, state leaders have tried to manage risk and create a safe space to try out new approaches to curriculum and instruction, while minimizing disruption of the school culture and optimizing learning. They have established strategic partnerships that have brought together known and trusted providers (e.g., county offices, regional service centers, membership organizations for school professionals) with university centers and nonprofit partners that have specialized expertise (e.g., Stanford Center for Assessment, Learning and Equity, Envision Learning Partners, Institute for Learning, University of California-Los Angeles Center for Research Evaluation Standards and Student Testing, JFF (Jobs for the Future), ConnectEd, Assessment for Learning Project) to help create a climate in which shared experiences across school and district networks fuel optimal opportunities for sustainable impact.

Moving Ahead

The passage of ESSA in 2016 has decentralized the locus of reform from the federal government to the states. The three states featured in this paper—Virginia, California, and Texas—have all taken important steps in building the foundation for new assessment systems that include multiple measures of student academic achievement and growth gathered throughout the school year. In this context, “test prep” becomes a worthwhile endeavor in pursuit of

deeper learning. Students are expected to improve their work products until these products demonstrate that the students have developed the competencies being assessed.

As this pioneering work continues, other states will soon join them in this journey. Through the innovative assessment pilot called for in ESSA, up to seven states will test alternatives to standardized exams in selected districts and will commit to developing new statewide assessments inclusive of such alternatives. From this growing body of work, policy and practice leaders will be able to learn additional important lessons on how to iterate, enhance, and scale up this critical work.

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This report was funded by The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation.

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Suggested citation: Pecheone, Raymond, Theresa Morris, Vinci Daro, Stephanie Krauss, and Adria Steinberg. 2018. *Redesigning Assessment Systems: Emerging Lessons from Three States*. Students at the Center: Deeper Learning Research Series. Boston, MA: Jobs for the Future.