The background of the page features a close-up photograph of green leaves. The leaves are covered in numerous clear water droplets, which are in sharp focus. The lighting is soft, highlighting the texture of the leaves and the glistening surface of the water. The overall color palette is dominated by various shades of green, from deep forest green to bright, almost yellow-green highlights where the light hits the leaves.

Recommendations of the  
Next Generation Assessment Task Force

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# CRAFTING A BALANCED SYSTEM OF ASSESSMENT IN WISCONSIN

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# FORWARD



Much has been written about the changing American economy and the skills our students need to be successful in the 21st century.

Education, in turn, must respond to the changing needs of the state and the nation. This includes the standards to which we hold students and how we measure progress in meeting those standards.

Within this context, we convened the Next Generation Assessment Task Force to formulate Wisconsin's path forward. We listened to leaders from business and technology sectors as well as leaders from PK-12 and higher education.

In this summary we share the process, definitions, assumptions, and recommendations of the task force. Our aim is to use these findings as a blueprint for the next generation of assessment.

I believe the work of the task force will have a lasting impact. Internationally benchmarked standards working in concert with a balanced assessment system will ensure a quality education for all Wisconsin students.

*Elizabeth Burmaster*  
State Superintendent 2001–2009

Wisconsin students are being educated to compete in a global society. How we assess the performance of those students, from their primary years through high school, should also reflect our state's commitment to excellence.

As co-chairs of the Next Generation Assessment Task Force, we were pleased to work with a group of statewide leaders from education, business, and civic leaders in an examination of Wisconsin's assessment system. We heard a vigorous discussion about how that system could be improved. Members of the task force took a hard look at the status quo, reviewed best practices in other states, and embraced the notion of creating a more balanced assessment system. A balanced system of formative, benchmark, and summative assessment is necessary to inform classroom teachers, to hold schools accountable, and to effectively report back to parents, community leaders, and students.

The work of the task force is timely in several respects. It comes at a time when the national debate over assessment has been revived; when the economic recession has reinforced the need for more and better knowledge-based workers;

and when Wisconsin's content standards are being revised to reflect 21st century skills and to enhance career and college readiness.

In the near future and over the long-term, the recommendations of this task force can contribute to producing a better-educated citizenry and workforce in Wisconsin. We commend the work of the task force and look forward to seeing their ideas put into action.

*Tom Still, President,*  
*Wisconsin Technology Council*  
(Co-Chair)

*Joan Wade, Administrator,*  
*CESA 6 (Co-Chair)*

## INTRODUCTION

Our current Wisconsin Student Assessment System (WSAS) consists of two standardized assessments: the Wisconsin Knowledge & Concepts Exam (WKCE) and the Wisconsin Alternate Assessment for Students with Disabilities (WAA-SwD). These large-scale, summative assessments provide annual “snapshots” of student achievement in relation to state standards, the Wisconsin Model Academic Standards, and are required by law.

State law requires testing students in reading, mathematics, science, social studies, and language arts in Grades 4, 8, and 10. In addition, federal law requires all states to test reading and mathematics content in Grades 3-8 and once in high school. As such, these summative tests are designed to meet state and federal accountability requirements and must adhere to technical quality standards of large-scale assessment. The WSAS was one of the first in the nation to meet all of the rigorous federal standards of technical quality and alignment to state academic standards.

The focus of the assessment system, therefore, is to gauge overall academic achievement of schools and districts across Wisconsin and to provide information on the relative strengths or gaps in curriculum and instruction as they relate to the Wisconsin Model Academic Standards. Summative assessments like the WKCE are typically given annually, meant to track long-term progress of schools and districts. Information at the student level can be limited. Large-scale assessments can only provide general information vis-à-vis individual student strengths and needs within a content area.

Wisconsin educators are increasingly interested in receiving more frequent and more detailed data on the strengths and needs of their individual students. Benchmark assessments, typically given on a monthly or quarterly basis, can produce immediate information about student progress so teachers can adjust instruction to meet student needs. These assessments benchmark progress throughout a school year and often provide diagnostic information to pinpoint a student’s needs. Unlike the WKCE, such assessments yield specific information on a student’s level of progress, while providing less information about the overall progress of schools and districts.



Even more student-specific and immediate are the formative assessment strategies that teachers use on a daily basis to gauge student understanding while they move through a unit of instruction. Assessing students formatively allows teachers to immediately adjust their instruction. Often these are teacher-developed strategies and are tailored to the teacher's lesson or unit of instruction. Formative assessment strategies provide the most detailed information about a student's understanding, but the least amount of data at aggregate school/district levels.

There is increased recognition in the education community that all assessment strategies—formative, benchmark, and summative—are essential and need to work in unison to improve student achievement. Each component has its strengths and limitations; one assessment type cannot meet all needs. An assessment system must work together with curriculum and instruction to provide a coherent system of learning.

## WORK OF THE TASK FORCE

The Next Generation Assessment Task Force was convened by State Superintendent Burmaster in September 2008. The task force included a diverse group of leaders from business, technology, and education. The members met four times throughout the school year and conducted the following activities:

- Reviewed the history of Wisconsin's assessment system and education trends over time from a national perspective;
- Developed an understanding of the different types and purposes of formative, benchmark, and summative assessment;
- Considered the importance of implementing a balanced assessment system;
- Identified characteristics of positive assessment experiences and considered ways of building these characteristics into our system;
- Worked in small groups outlining key components and devising an ideal system of assessment—one that balances the three different types of assessment; and
- Considered PK-12 assessment through a systems perspective.

To gain an external perspective, task force members heard from five states with assessment systems that have innovative features: Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, Nebraska, and Oregon.

Ultimately, the task force concluded five foundational assumptions and seven recommendations were needed to implement a balanced assessment system in Wisconsin. It was agreed that Wisconsin needs an assessment system that provides timely and relevant feedback to students and teachers alike, and one that helps teachers make instructional decisions to improve student achievement. In addition, the assessment strategies must address 21st century skills, preparing Wisconsin students to be college and work-ready.

These goals cannot be accomplished with one type of assessment administered once a year. It requires a system of assessments—formative, benchmark, and summative—that work in concert to inform classroom teachers; hold schools accountable; and report back to parents, community leaders, and to students themselves.





## DEFINING A BALANCED ASSESSMENT SYSTEM

### Balanced Assessment System

**Purpose:** to provide students, educators, parents, and the public with a range of information about academic achievement and to determine the best practices and policies that will result in improvements to student learning.

**Characteristics:** includes a continuum of strategies and tools that are designed specifically to meet discrete needs—daily classroom instruction, periodic checkpoints during the year, and annual snapshots of achievement.

### Formative Strategies

**Purpose:** to inform instruction within and between lessons, for both student and teacher.

**Characteristics:** seamless integration of assessment strategies and instruction by providing immediate feedback helps teachers determine what to do next instructionally and involves students in evaluating their own learning.

- **Student:** What do I need to learn before I understand this completely?
- **Teacher:** What learning comes next for this student?

### Benchmark Assessment

**Purpose:** to diagnose student learning and/or monitor progress locally during the year.

**Characteristics:** may be teacher, school, district, state, or commercially developed; can be used multiple times during the year to make instructional adjustments for students or groups of students.

- **Are my students on track?  
How well are they progressing?**
- **How well is this program/  
instructional unit working?**

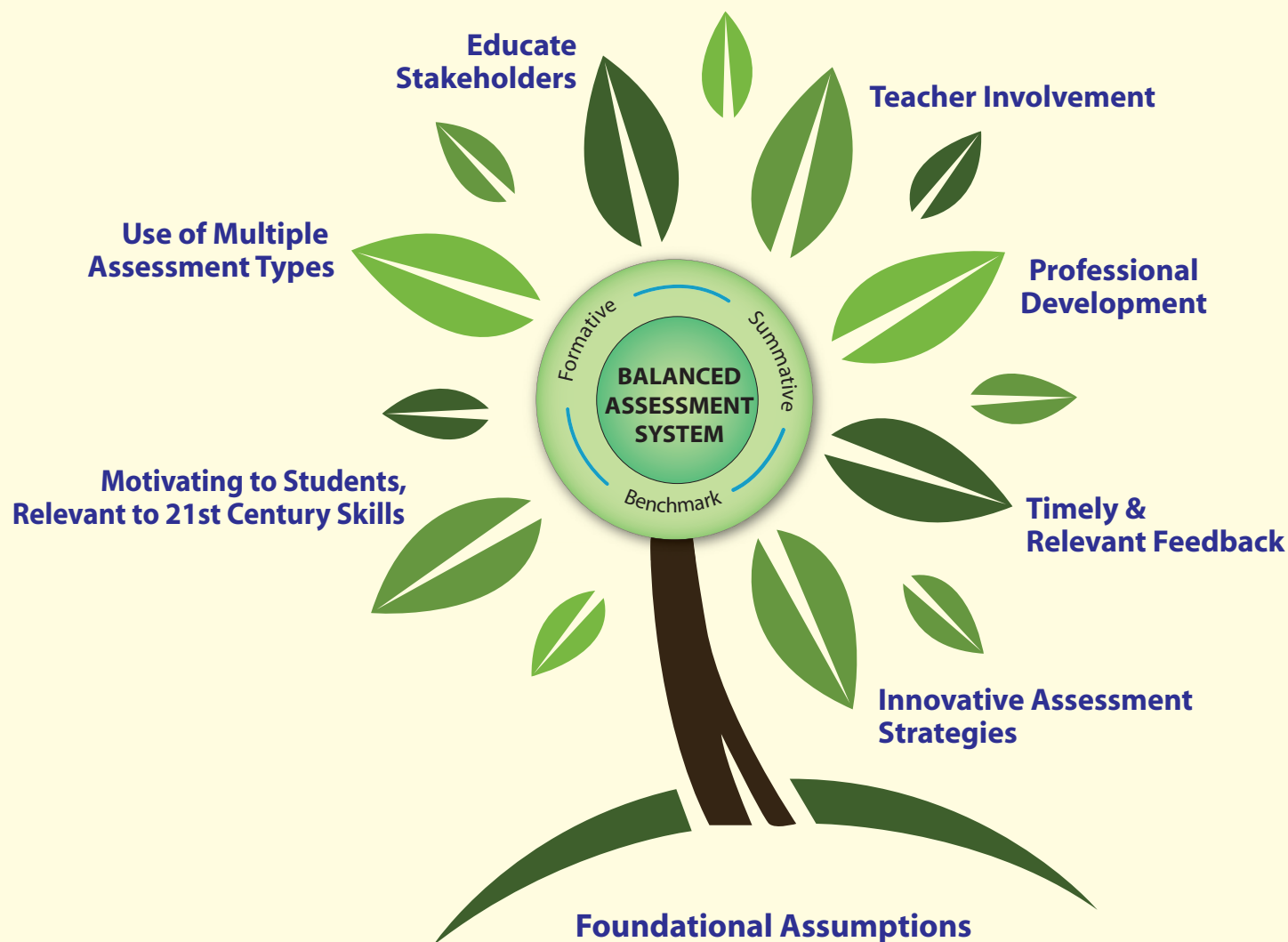
### Summative Assessment

**Purpose:** to monitor national, state, district, and school progress over time.

**Characteristics:** standardized administration annually; data is best used at the aggregate level for accountability rather than at the student level, as data is general not specific.

- **Are there any gaps in our district's curriculum and instruction?**
- **How does the achievement of districts and schools compare to one another? How do achievement levels compare over time?**





- Curriculum, instruction, and assessment must work together •
- Wisconsin must have clear, rigorous, world-class content and achievement standards •
- An effective assessment system has multiple purposes and must balance multiple components •
- Proficiency must not be an endpoint instructionally, nor the only achievement goal for our students •
- The culture and climate of schools must reflect collaboration and transparency around student achievement •

## FOUNDATIONAL ASSUMPTIONS

The task force identified the following prerequisites to the implementation of task force recommendations. These foundational assumptions need to be in place for the recommendations to be successfully implemented and to have the necessary impact.

1. **Wisconsin must have clear, rigorous, and world-class academic content and achievement standards** that reflect 21st century skills. These standards and expectations should be internationally benchmarked, grade-level specific, and clearly delineated so that students across the state are working toward common goals.
2. **The culture and climate of schools must reflect collaboration and transparency** around student achievement within and across grade levels as well as content areas. Opportunities for exploring and sharing a range of data and instructional strategies should be at the core of school organization.
3. **Curriculum, instruction, and assessment must work together** as a continuous cycle of the learning process. Assessment viewed in isolation will not improve student achievement.

4. **An effective assessment system has multiple components and balances strategies** that meet varied purposes and stakeholder needs. One assessment cannot meet all purposes. The information needs for all stakeholders—from parents to policymakers—must be reflected in the assessment system.
5. Proficiency, as defined in the assessments used for federal accountability, **must not be an end-point instructionally**, nor the only achievement goal for our students.





## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPLEMENTATION

1. **Professional development is critical if assessment is to be effectively used** together with curriculum and instruction to improve student learning. Partnering with higher education and Wisconsin educational organizations to develop assessment literacy, specifically understanding the framework of balanced assessment systems, in teacher preparation programs, graduate programs, and ongoing professional development must be a priority.

2. **Teachers should be deeply involved** in assessment development throughout all parts of the assessment system. Formative classroom strategies should be developed and shared

by teachers. Benchmark assessment should be teacher-driven, district-facilitated, and state-supported. Summative assessment should involve teachers in creating assessment strategies, test items, and scoring criteria.

3. The assessment system should have both formative and benchmark components that **provide timely, relevant feedback** about student achievement to be used throughout the year, to identify student needs, and to make changes as needed to instructional programs. Students should have **multiple opportunities** to demonstrate their learning throughout the school year. These should not be tied to state or federal accountability, but rather used on a local and optional basis to inform teachers, parents, and students throughout the learning cycle.

4. All students should be **motivated by relevant, engaging assessments** that are linked to 21st century skills, including high school assessments linked to career/college readiness.

5. **Innovative assessment strategies** should be pursued that would allow for varied demonstrations of student learning. Innovative strategies should offer opportunities for students to demonstrate learning in multiple ways, and need not be limited by traditional testing protocols.



6. **Summative assessment used for federal and state accountability** should document trends over time. Efficient summative assessment strategies should be considered. Other assessments, such as high-quality **benchmark and formative strategies, are more appropriately used to inform instruction throughout the school year**, and to meet information needs at the classroom, school, and local level.

7. **Educating stakeholders on the meaning and importance of balanced assessment systems** is key. Developing assessment literacy among school boards, district and school administrators, teachers, parents, students, policymakers, and the media must be broad and ongoing.



The work of this task force concludes at an opportune time for Wisconsin. Our state is well positioned to bring to scale all the components of a statewide system of learning:

- World-class standards that sharpen our expectations for students
- Rich instructional units that engage and challenge students
- A comprehensive assessment system that provides timely and targeted feedback on student, school, and district performance
- A statewide longitudinal data system linking state and local data that allows us to track performance and identify best practices

This system of learning will allow educators to measure student success, identify areas that require targeted interventions, and can facilitate improvement planning for schools and districts alike. A comprehensive system of learning not only reinforces the connections among the critical elements of standards, curriculum, instruction, and assessment—but ensures that Wisconsin students are well-prepared for their futures in a global society.

*Tony Evers*  
State Superintendent

## MOVING FORWARD

These recommendations are critical for decision-making around the future of Wisconsin's state assessment system. Assessment needs to be viewed together with content standards, curriculum, instruction, and intervention to form a complete system of learning designed to improve student achievement. Assessment by itself cannot lead to improvements in student learning. Only when results are used in conjunction with other data that affect changes in programs and practices will student achievement improve.

As state and federal opportunities are made available, these recommendations will help the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) map a course for changes to Wisconsin's assessment system. Rather than focusing only on large-scale, summative assessments used for federal and state accountability, DPI will use these

recommendations to seek grants and write requests for proposals for future assessment contracts that take a more balanced approach to assessment at the state, district, school, and classroom levels.

Additionally, these recommendations can inform professional development planned by districts, Cooperative Educational Service Agencies (CESAs), professional organizations, and teacher education programs. Professional development that promotes a balanced approach to assessment can help classroom professionals, and training that targets pre-service teachers will benefit our future educators. Principals, administrators, and school boards will also benefit from a focus on balanced assessment, and these audiences should be taken into consideration when delivering professional development around the next generation of assessment.

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