

For every child,  
multiple measures

What Parents and Educators Want  
From K–12 Assessments



in cooperation with





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## For Every Child, Multiple Measures

Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA) is a not-for-profit organization committed to a child-centric education based on comprehensive and accurate data and evidence of learning. Data is a powerful tool that serves a greater purpose: giving parents and educators dynamic insight into individual student learning to help children achieve their dreams.

As part of our mission, we asked Grunwald Associates LLC to conduct this study in order to gauge the assessment needs of parents, teachers and district administrators. These key stakeholders are using assessment information every day to make a positive impact and improve results for children.

The study findings confirm that parents, teachers and district administrators in K–12 education are as interested as we are in supporting the development of each individual child—the whole child—with engaging, supportive and challenging learning. Parents, teachers and district administrators want a 360-degree perspective on individual student learning in every academic subject and on the tangible and intangible skills that signal college and career readiness. They want an in-depth portrait of each child’s progress over time and a reflection of each child’s exploration, discovery and confidence as a learner.

No one assessment can provide this breadth and depth of information. For every child, we need multiple measures of performance.

We believe that the research findings are highly relevant to the ongoing public dialogue about the role of assessment in education. The perceptions of parents, teachers and district administrators will add value to efforts under way now to develop comprehensive, meaningful and balanced assessment systems.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Matt Chapman".

Matt Chapman  
President & Chief Executive Officer

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**Parents, teachers and district administrators want different kinds of assessments throughout the school year to balance assessments at the end of the school year. They want both assessments *for learning* and assessments *of learning*.**

This report highlights the perceptions of parents, whose opinions are rarely sought and whose voices tend to be lost in decisions about how assessments are developed, administered and used. Parents are key consumers of assessment information—and, as taxpayers, they pay for assessments. Classroom teachers and district administrators have the most practical and personal experience with the day-to-day impact of assessments and accountability. Their perceptions matter.

### Zoom In and Zoom Out

The design specifications for new assessment systems could be captured in these two statements, which summarize the views of parents, teachers and district administrators on what they want K–12 education assessments to do:

- **Zoom in for a close-up view of the performance, progress and needs of each individual child.**
- **Zoom out by using a wider lens—from multiple angles, over many moments in time—to explore student achievement in a full range of subjects and skills.**

State assessments provide a useful snapshot of student performance, particularly for parents. This snapshot is not sufficient, however. Parents, teachers and district administrators want different kinds of assessments throughout the school year to balance assessments at the end of the school year. They want both assessments *for learning* and assessments *of learning*:

- Assessments *for learning* are formative and interim assessments used to track progress over time, diagnose student needs and inform everyday teaching and learning.
- Assessments *of learning* are summative assessments, such as high-stakes state assessments and end-of-course or subject exams, which measure performance at the end of an instructional sequence or timeframe.

## SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

Parents, teachers and district administrators hold similar views on their top priorities for education, on what assessments should measure, on how well different assessments meet their needs, on how assessment results could be better used and on who should make instructional decisions:

### Focus on the Child, Measure a Full Range of Subjects and Skills, Make Decisions Locally

- An overwhelming majority of parents are most interested in teaching and learning that is **centered on their child**. A majority of teachers say that individual student performance and personalized education are of paramount importance to them. Substantial percentages of district administrators cite the importance of student-centered teaching and learning.
- Parents, teachers and district administrators think it's important to **measure student performance in a full range of subjects—and in the “thinking” skills that will be critical in life**.
- Parents, teachers and district administrators agree on **local decision making** about teaching and learning.

### Formative and Interim Assessments Are Perceived as More Valuable Than Summative Assessments

- **Formative and interim assessments are highly valued and closely aligned to parent and educator priorities—and they provide a greater positive impact on instruction, parents say.**
- Teachers also believe that formative and interim assessments have a **greater positive impact on teaching and learning** than do summative assessments. District administrators are even more positive than teachers about the benefits and impact of formative and interim assessments on teaching and learning.
- For district administrators, **some formative and interim assessments are considered so valuable that they want more of them**.

### More District Administrators Than Teachers Say Common Core Assessments Will Be Useful; Many Parents Want to Compare Students

- Many district administrators believe new assessments pegged to the **Common Core State Standards** will matter to their work. Fewer teachers believe this to be the case.
- Parents are more concerned than teachers and district administrators with how well their children **compare to other students within and outside of their districts**.

## Money, Time and Stress:

### Are Assessments Worth the Costs?

- Many parents, teachers and district administrators **question the amount of time spent on assessments.**
- For parents, **assessment results begin losing their relevance within one month** after assessments are administered.
- Many parents, and most teachers and district administrators, believe **too much money** is spent on state assessments.
- Teachers and district administrators want to spend more time **discussing assessment results**, and their implications for practice, with their colleagues.
- Parents, teachers and district administrators say that assessments induce a **considerable amount of stress**, which affects both students and educators negatively.
- Teachers and district administrators report that **assessments are not equally useful and valuable for all groups of students.** “Bubble kids” (students who are close to proficiency) are cited most often as benefiting from assessments.

### Opportunities for Greater Clarity and Support

- Teachers and district administrators have **difficulty distinguishing different types of assessments.**
- Most teachers and district administrators receive training in how to interpret and use assessment results—but there is **room for improvement in making sense of the data.**
- Many parents say they **need information on how to interpret and use assessment results.**

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, NWEA offers four recommendations for assessment developers and policymakers and four recommendations for state and district leaders:

### Recommendations for Assessment Developers and Policymakers

1. Broaden the dialogue beyond summative assessments and high-stakes accountability.
2. Avoid tunnel vision and focus on more than English language arts and mathematics. Broaden the curriculum assessed and take the full measure of student learning.
3. Develop innovative ways to measure the application of thinking, learning and life skills.
4. Encourage local decision making on assessments that support learning.

### Recommendations for State and District Leaders

1. Share decision-making authority and responsibility for teaching and learning with teachers, principals and school leaders.
2. Select assessments that provide useful and timely information.
3. Establish professional learning communities and provide training and time for educators to understand different assessments and make effective use of assessment data.
4. Dare to compare student data locally and nationally.

## DEFINING TERMS

### For Parents

Assessment terms were defined as follows in the study questionnaire:

- **Formative assessments**, such as classroom observations, homework, and class quizzes and tests, occur while the content is still being taught in school. These assessments inform teachers of what students know or do not know and provide feedback, so teachers can adjust accordingly.
- **Interim/benchmark\* assessments** are administered at different intervals throughout the year to evaluate student knowledge and skills relative to a specific set of academic goals. Results are used to inform instruction and decision making at the classroom, school and district level, and can be used to measure student growth over time.
- **Summative assessments** are assessments such as state or district-wide standardized tests that measure grade-level proficiency, and end-of-year subject or course exams.

### For Teachers and District Administrators

Among other goals, this survey aimed to probe teachers’ and district administrators’ understanding of different assessment types. Therefore, they were not provided any definitions of assessments. Instead, the survey referred to assessments using the following language throughout the study questionnaire:

- Assessments for learning (including classroom assessments given in the moment and interim/benchmark\* assessments intended to measure growth)
- End-of-year state or district NCLB assessments and end-of-year subject or course exams

\* For brevity, “interim/benchmark” assessments are referred to as interim assessments throughout this report.

## A PIVOTAL MOMENT

**After a decade of high-stakes accountability assessments, what lessons can we learn from those closest to students? What's working—and what's not? What do parents, teachers and district administrators really want from assessments? What innovations should be expected of new assessments?**

The U.S. education system is a decade into the “era of accountability,” which began in 2002 with the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 as amended by the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB).

Now, policymakers are considering a new blueprint for education reform, with a stated goal of ensuring that all students are ready for college and careers when they graduate from high school. ESEA reauthorization, along with other major reform initiatives currently under way, could have significant implications for public education—and may well herald a sea change in assessments and accountability for the next decade or more.

At this pivotal moment, Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA) believes that there is an opportunity—indeed, a responsibility—to pause and reflect dispassionately on assessments and accountability, past and future. After a decade of high-stakes accountability assessments, what lessons can we learn from those closest to students? What's working—and what's not? What do parents, teachers and district administrators really want from assessments? What innovations should be expected of assessments?

To answer these questions, NWEA worked with Grunwald Associates LLC to conduct nationally representative surveys of K–12 parents, teachers and district administrators. The purpose of the study was to gauge perceptions of different assessments of learning and to discover where the opportunities are for improvement and innovation.

This report highlights the perceptions of parents, whose opinions are rarely sought and whose voices tend to be lost in decisions about how assessments are developed, administered and used. Parents are key consumers of assessment information—and, as taxpayers, they pay for assessments. Classroom teachers and district administrators have the most practical and personal experience with the day-to-day impact of assessments and accountability. Their perceptions matter.

## The Assessment and Accountability Landscape

The context for reshaping the landscape of assessments and accountability, which drive education practices, is multifaceted. NCLB has been lauded by supporters for focusing attention on underperforming students by requiring districts and schools to disaggregate and report assessment data for different categories of students, such as economically disadvantaged students, racial or ethnic minorities, disabled students and English language learners. School improvement funding increasingly hinges on turning around low-performing schools, based on their assessment data.

Critics have decried NCLB for inadvertently providing a perverse incentive to lower academic expectations. States determine their own academic standards, assessments and proficiency requirements, making assessment and accountability uneven at the national level. Some states set the bar low, critics say, enabling more students to pass tests and meet accountability requirements—but ultimately leave students unprepared for advanced learning in high school and beyond. NCLB also has been assailed for essentially narrowing the curriculum by making English language arts and mathematics—and, more recently, science—the only subjects tested for accountability. Some critics also charge that NCLB's punitive measures for schools and educators whose students do not meet accountability targets are misguided. Those measures include replacing principals and staff, allowing parents to choose a different school for their children, and closing schools.

Legislation to keep the best and jettison or modify the rest of ESEA has been in the works, but stalled, for half a decade. In the interim, some states are seeking federal waivers to put off meeting core and increasingly unattainable NCLB requirements, particularly the requirement for all students to achieve proficiency in English language arts and mathematics by 2014.

In the meantime, the world within and beyond K–12 education has shifted. The National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and the Council of Chief State School Officers in 2010 worked with states to release rigorous, internationally benchmarked Common Core State Standards in English language arts and mathematics. More than 40 states are moving forward with plans to implement the Common Core by 2014.

With support from the U.S. Department of Education's Race to the Top (RTT) program, two state-led consortia—the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) and the SMARTER Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC)—are developing assessments of the Common Core to succeed NCLB tests. These



assessments could include a mix of required and optional summative, interim and formative assessments, some used for accountability, some for diagnostic purposes. More than 40 states are participating in the assessment consortia.

Even before a reauthorized ESEA defines new approaches to accountability, and before the Common Core and its assessments are implemented, states and districts are exploring uncharted territory and higher stakes in accountability: the use of student assessment results as a measure of teacher and principal effectiveness. Unprecedented federal investments through the RTT and Investing in Innovation (i3) programs challenged grant seekers to develop educator evaluation systems with multiple measures of educator effectiveness, including student growth and performance.

Many states have enacted legislation to adopt the Common Core standards and assessments—and to develop evaluation systems that use assessment results and growth models, which track individual student achievement from one year to the next, to measure educator effectiveness. The push to use assessments to evaluate educators also presents what is known as “the 69 percent problem,” which refers to the estimate of teachers in content areas and grade levels who are not covered by formal state assessments.

**At this pivotal moment, Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA) believes that there is an opportunity—indeed, a responsibility—to pause and reflect dispassionately on assessments and accountability, past and future.**

Both the RTT and i3 programs signal yet another reality that factors into the future of assessments and accountability. Both programs were part of the economic stimulus packages enacted in the wake of the recession that began in December 2007. Now, both RTT and i3 are part of ongoing, federally funded programs. While the recession may be ending in economic terms, many states, districts and households are still feeling its lingering effects. Severe budget constraints for states and districts are considered “the new normal,” in the words of U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan.

At the same time, there is mounting pressure to leverage state and federal initiatives to meet changing education demands. Advocates of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) and other subjects—the arts, economics, foreign languages, geography, government and civics, history—make compelling cases that these subjects are essential, but not tested, under

the current assessment and accountability system. Likewise, there is growing recognition that higher-order skills are as important as content knowledge in a competitive global economy. Skills such as collaboration, critical thinking, problem solving and creativity now are seen to be essential for all students.

Moreover, new understandings about teaching and learning are emerging from research and best practices. Educators are engaging students with technology, social learning and collaborative projects, and learning beyond the school day. They are helping students build conceptual knowledge through immersive experiences, apply knowledge in authentic contexts, and explore interdisciplinary approaches to solving sophisticated, real-world problems. Learning outside of school—in community, work-related, informal and online experiences, for example—is increasingly valued as well. Researchers, educators and employers, among others, connect experiences beyond the classroom to improved student engagement, motivation, skills and achievement in school. Measuring these aspects of learning demands fresh approaches to evaluation.

Clearly, after a decade fraught with change and contention, the nation stands at a crossroads. As states and districts move toward new ways of measuring student achievement and educator effectiveness, the needs of parents, teachers and district administrators should anchor their decisions. Taking into account the perceptions of those closest to students will help shape assessment and accountability systems that meet both the nation’s needs and the needs of students, parents and educators.

## KEY FINDINGS

**Understanding individual student learning, progress and growth over time—and providing extra support to students who need it—are among the top priorities of parents, teachers and district administrators. Formative and interim assessments are closely aligned to these priorities.**

Parents, teachers and district administrators are on the same page about what's most important to them in educating and assessing students. Given their responses, their beliefs about many issues are so strong that these beliefs could be considered the “must haves” of any comprehensive assessment system.

Parents, teachers and district administrators want assessments to focus on the whole child, on a whole range of knowledge and skills, and on the whole school year.

### **Top Priorities in Education: Focus on the Child, Measure a Full Range of Subjects and Skills, Make Decisions Locally**

Understanding individual student learning, progress and growth over time—and providing extra support to students who need it—are among the top priorities of parents, teachers and district administrators. While some of these priorities might seem self-evident, the strength of parents' and educators' sentiments, and the marked agreement on the aspects of education they care about the most, is worth noting. This set of findings

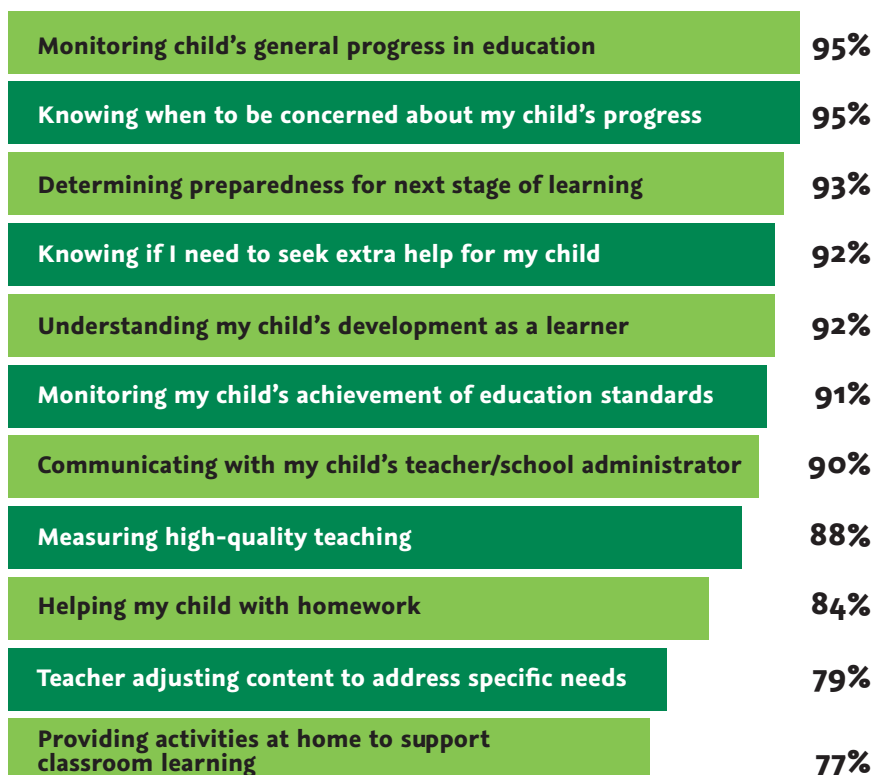
frames the examination of parents' and educators' perceptions about assessments:

**An overwhelming majority of parents are most interested in teaching and learning that is centered on their child.** At least 90 percent of parents cite the following priorities as “extremely” or “very” important to them: monitoring their child's general progress in school, knowing when to be concerned about their child's progress, determining their child's preparedness for the next stage of learning, knowing if they need to seek extra help, understanding their child's development as a learner, monitoring their child's specific achievement of education standards and communicating with their child's teacher, as shown in Figure 1.

Q Thinking about your child's education, how important to you is each of the following?

Figure 1

### **Parents' Top Priorities for Their Child's Education**



Percentage responding **extremely** or **very** important

Source: Grunwald Associates LLC

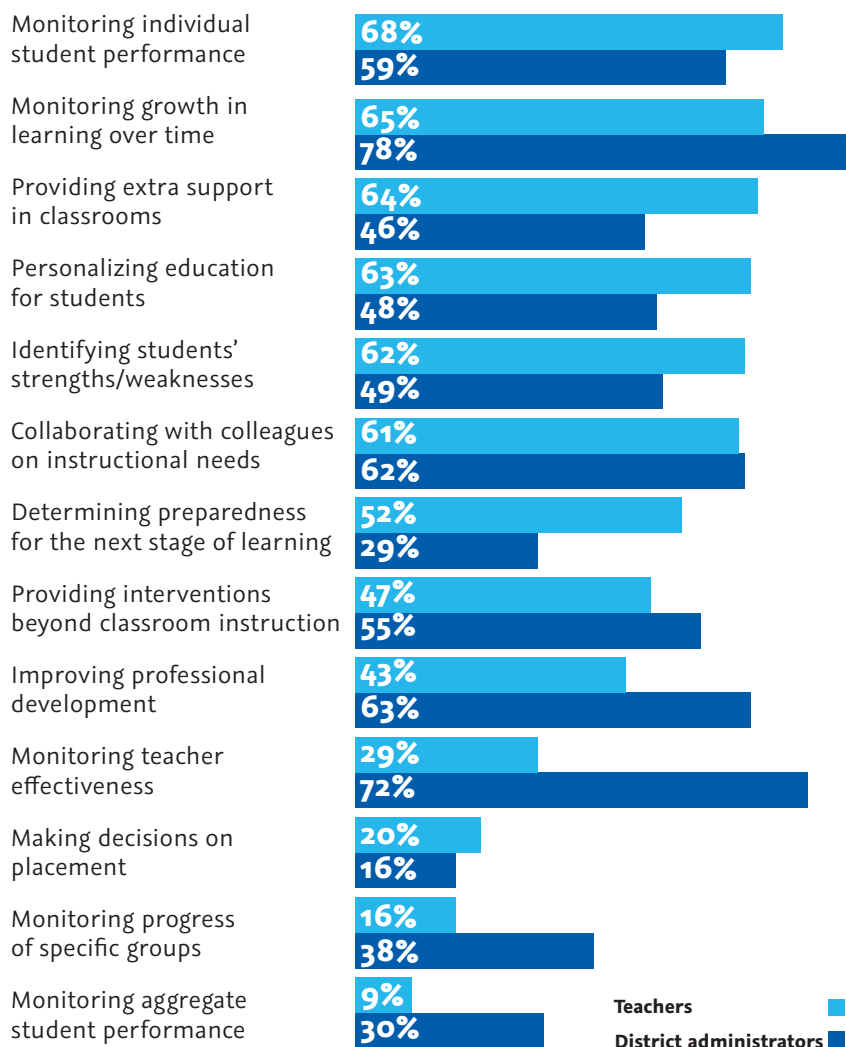
**A majority of teachers say that individual student performance and personalized education are of paramount importance to them.** At least 60 percent of teachers cite the following student-centered aspects of teaching and learning as among the most important to them: monitoring individual student performance, monitoring growth in learning over time, providing extra support in classrooms, personalizing education for each student, identifying students' strengths and weaknesses, and collaborating with colleagues on instructional needs.

**Substantial percentages of district administrators cite the importance of student-centered teaching and learning,** including monitoring student performance (59 percent), providing extra support in classrooms (46 percent), personalizing education for each student (48 percent), and identifying students' strengths and weaknesses (49 percent). District administrators are significantly more interested in monitoring growth in learning over time than are teachers (78 percent of administrators cite this aspect as one of the most important, compared to 65 percent of teachers).

Notably, district administrators place significantly more importance on monitoring teacher effectiveness than teachers do. Seventy-two percent of district administrators and 29 percent of teachers say that monitoring teacher effectiveness is important. Eighty-eight percent of parents, meanwhile, say that measuring high-quality teaching is "extremely" or "very" important to them. Figure 2 shows the comparison of teachers' and district administrators' beliefs about what is important to the success of teaching and learning.

**Q.** In education, many things are important to the success of teaching and learning. From the following list, please select the things you consider most important to you as an educator.

Figure 2  
**Teachers' and Administrators' Beliefs About What Matters for Teaching and Learning Success**



Source: Grunwald Associates LLC

Parents and educators think it's important to measure student performance in a full range of subjects—and in the higher-order thinking skills that will be critical in life. When it comes to students' overall preparation for success, overwhelming majorities of parents, teachers and district administrators believe that it is important to measure:

- Higher-order skills (e.g., problem solving, critical thinking, communication, creativity, innovation and collaboration), as shown in Figure 3
- A wide range of academic subjects (with strong support for the arts and world languages), as shown in Figure 4

Many parents, teachers and district administrators also believe that it is important to measure student competencies in specialized content areas (e.g., information, technology and media literacy; economic/business literacy; and health, civic and environmental literacy), as shown in Table 1.

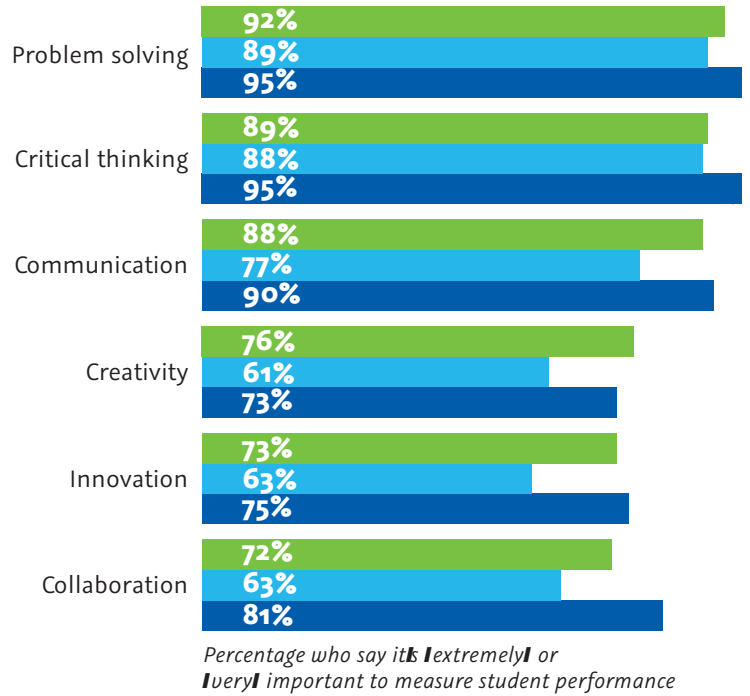
The clear message is that parents and educators think that assessments should measure more than English language arts and mathematics.

Figure 3

### Across-the-Board Support for Measuring Student Performance in Many Higher-Order Skills

**Parent Q:** How important is it to you as a parent that assessments tell you how your child is doing in each of the following content and skill areas?

**Educator Q:** How important is it that assessments measure student performance in each of these content and skill areas?



Parents ■  
 Teachers ■  
 District administrators ■

Source: Grunwald Associates LLC

Figure 4

**Across-the-Board Support for Measuring Student Performance in a Full Range of Subjects**

**Parent Q:** How important is it to you as a parent that assessments tell you how your child is doing in each of the following content and skill areas?

**Educator Q:** How important is it that assessments measure student performance in each of these content and skill areas?

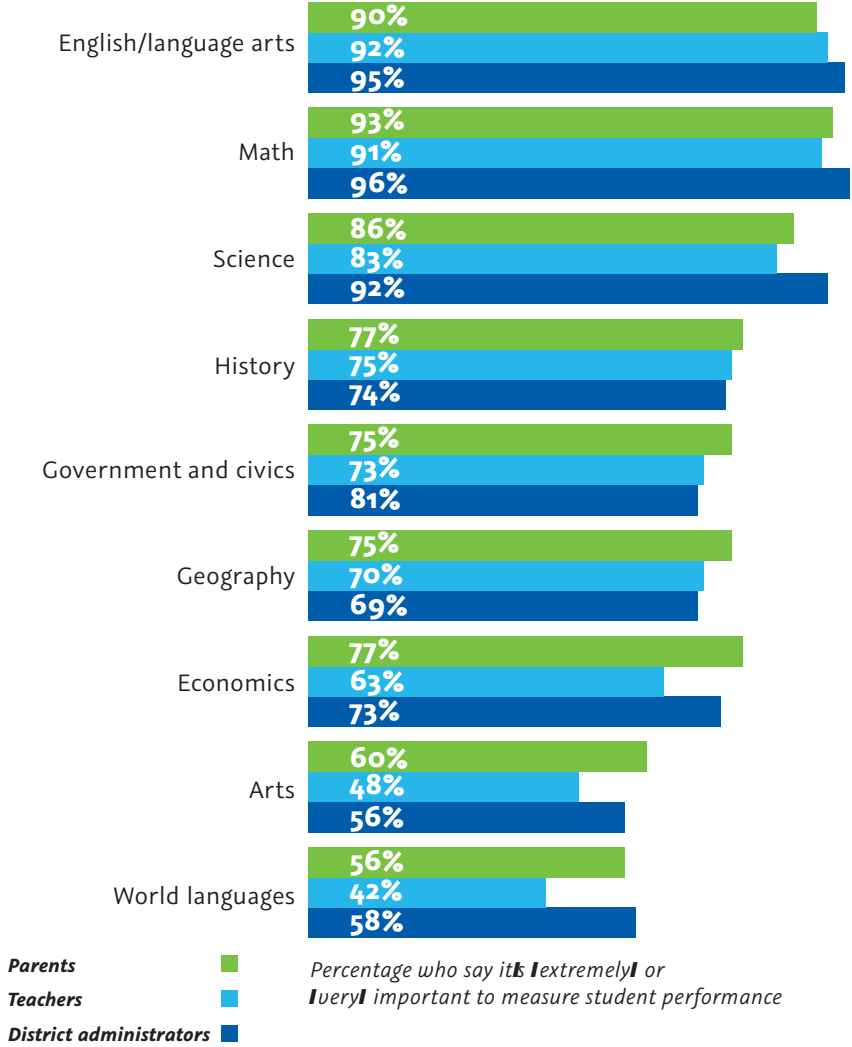


Table 1

**Strong Support for Measuring Performance in Specialized Content Areas**

	Parents	Teachers	District Administrators
Information, technology and media literacy	77%	71%	81%
Economic/business literacy	73%	58%	74%
Health literacy	70%	58%	69%
Civic literacy	66%	62%	77%
Environmental literacy	60%	52%	65%

**Parents** (Green bar)  
**Teachers** (Blue bar)  
**District administrators** (Dark blue bar)

Source: Grunwald Associates LLC

**Parents, Teachers and District Administrators Agree on Local Decision Making**

Parents, teachers and district administrators agree that teaching and learning decisions belong at the local level. Most parents and

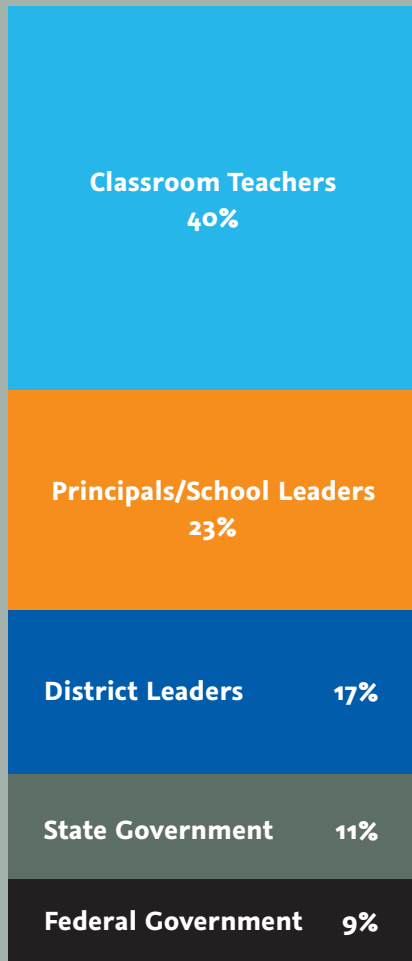
teachers believe that these decisions belong at the building level, with classroom teachers and principals and school leaders, while district administrators believe that district leaders should play a bigger role in the decision making.

Still, they all agree that decisions that impact students belong close to home, an indication that they believe those closest to students are in the best position to make effective decisions on their behalf.

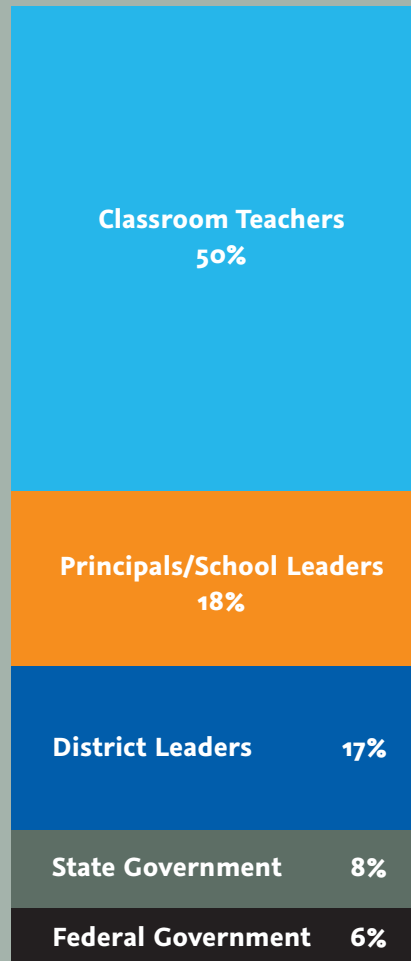
Figure 5  
**Who Should Make Decisions About What Students Are Learning?**

Q. All things considered, who should be making the majority of decisions regarding what students are learning in school?

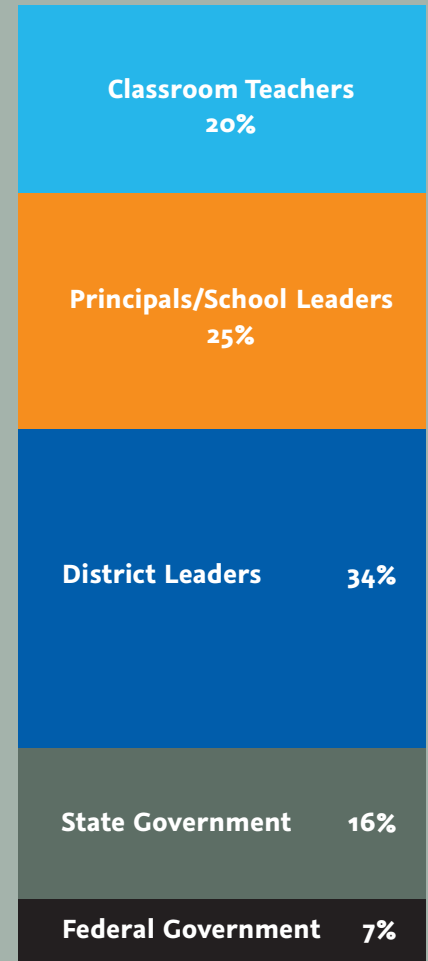
What **PARENTS** say:



What **TEACHERS** say:



What **DISTRICT ADMINISTRATORS** say:



Source: Grunwald Associates LLC

### Formative and Interim Assessments Are Perceived as More Valuable Than Summative Assessments

Parents, teachers and district administrators are largely on the same page in terms of the perceived value, positive impact and usefulness of different kinds of assessments. The findings suggest that the real test for any assessment seems to be how useful, actionable and relevant it is in meeting students' needs—and their own.

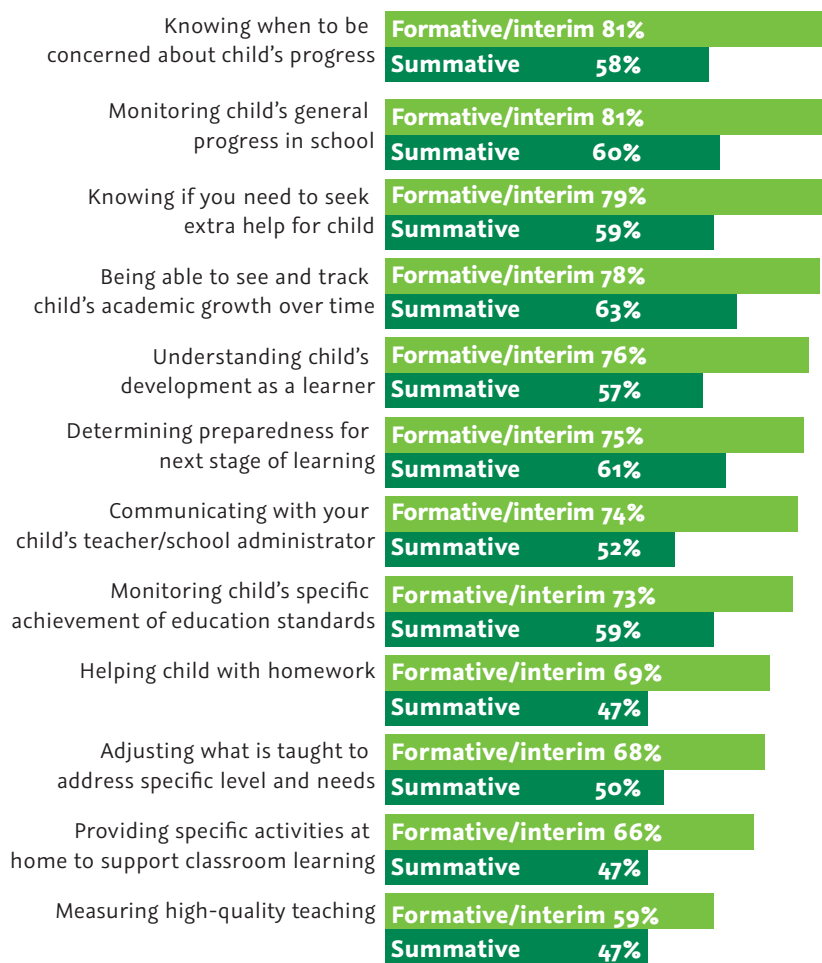
**Formative and interim assessments are highly valued and closely aligned to parents' top priorities for education.** These assessments seem to deliver more of what parents want—actionable information about their child's progress—than do summative assessments, as shown in Figure 6. Notably, parents of elementary and middle school students find significantly more benefits from formative and interim assessments than parents of high school students do.

At the same time, parents cite many benefits of summative assessments, with either a majority or a substantial minority finding value in them. In addition, parents with household incomes of under \$50,000 are more likely to see the value in summative assessments for tracking learning growth and development, for helping their child with homework and for activities to support learning at home.

Figure 6

### Formative and Interim Assessments Provide More Value, Parents Say

- Q. Based on everything you know, how helpful are classroom assessments given in the moment (e.g., teacher observations, participation, homework, quizzes, tests) and interim assessments given periodically during the year to measure growth for each of the following?
- Q. Based on everything you know, how helpful are end-of-year state or district assessments and end-of-year subject or course exams for each of the following?



Percentage responding **extremely** or **very** important

Source: Grunwald Associates LLC

**Formative and interim assessments provide a greater positive impact on instruction, parents say.**

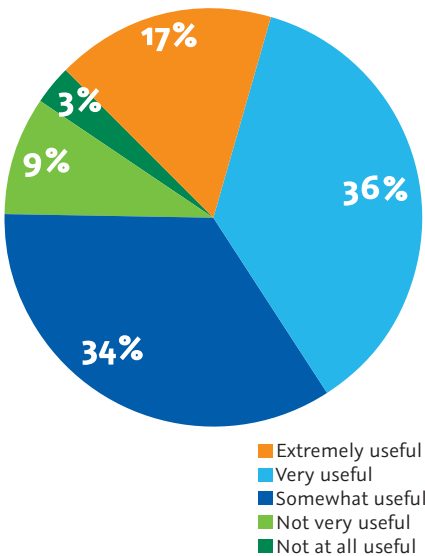
When asked about specific types of assessments, a majority of parents say that formative assessments (84 percent) and interim assessments (67 percent) are useful for instructional purposes, and a substantial minority (44 percent) say that summative assessments are useful, as shown in Figure 7. Notably, parents with annual household incomes of more than \$100,000 view formative assessments as more useful than parents with lower household incomes do. Overall, about half of parents (53 percent) find assessments “extremely” or “very” useful. More specific parent findings:

- 68 percent of parents “completely” or “somewhat” agree that formative and interim assessments provide data about **individual student growth and achievement**, compared to 42 percent for summative assessments.
- 66 percent of parents agree that formative and interim assessments help teachers **focus on the content that students need to learn**, compared to 43 percent for summative assessments.
- 60 percent of parents agree that formative and interim assessments provide teachers with the information they need to **pace instruction** for each student, and ensure that all students **learn fundamental skills**, compared to 31 percent and 41 percent, respectively, for summative assessments.
- 59 percent of parents agree that formative and interim assessments enable the **people who know students best** to guide instruction, compared to 30 percent for summative assessments.

Figure 7  
**Formative and Interim Assessments More Useful, Parents Say**

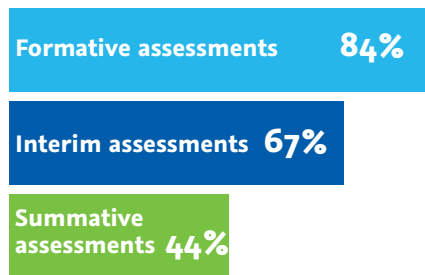
Q. Thinking about assessments overall, how useful to you, as a parent, are the assessments used in your child’s school?

**Overall Usefulness of Assessments**



Q. Considering everything you know and your experience with assessments, how useful to you, as a parent, are each of the following types of assessments?

**Usefulness of Specific Assessments**



Percentage responding extremely or very useful

Source: Grunwald Associates LLC

**For teachers, formative and interim assessments are considerably more valuable than summative assessments:**

- 67 percent of teachers say formative and interim assessments are “extremely” or “very” valuable for **differentiating instruction** based on individual needs, compared to 21 percent who say this about summative assessments.
- 67 percent of teachers say formative and interim assessments are “extremely” or “very” valuable for determining whether students have a **deep understanding of content**, compared to 25 percent for summative assessments.
- 64 percent of teachers say formative and interim assessments are “extremely” or “very” valuable for **improving teaching**, compared to 22 percent for summative assessments.
- 65 percent of teachers say formative and interim assessments are “extremely” or “very” valuable for determining whether students have the **knowledge required to advance to the next grade**, compared to 31 percent for summative assessments.
- 60 percent of teachers say formative and interim assessments are “extremely” or “very” valuable for **improving learning**, compared to 20 percent for summative assessments.

Elementary and middle school teachers find even more value in formative and interim assessments than high school teachers do.



**Teachers also believe that formative and interim assessments have a greater positive impact on teaching and learning than do summative assessments:**

- 75 percent of teachers “completely” or “somewhat” agree that formative and interim assessments help them focus on the **content that students need to learn** and provide data about **individual student growth** and achievement, compared to 32 percent and 36 percent, respectively, for summative assessments.
- 72 percent of teachers “completely” or “somewhat” agree that formative and interim assessments provide them with the information they need to **pace instruction** for each student, compared to 17 percent for summative assessments.
- 71 percent of teachers “completely” or “somewhat” agree that formative and interim assessments enable the **people who know students best** to guide instruction, compared to 15 percent for summative assessments.

**Compared to teachers, district administrators find formative and interim assessments even more valuable than summative assessments:**

- 92 percent of administrators say formative and interim assessments are “extremely” or “very” valuable for **differentiating instruction** based on individual needs, compared to 26 percent who say this about summative assessments.
- 89 percent of administrators say formative and interim assessments are “extremely” or “very” valuable for **improving teaching**, compared to 31 percent for summative assessments.
- 88 percent of administrators say formative and interim assessments are “extremely” or “very” valuable for **improving learning**, compared to 28 percent for summative assessments.
- 82 percent of administrators say formative and interim assessments are “extremely” or “very” valuable for determining whether students have a **conceptual knowledge of content**, compared to 26 percent for summative assessments.
- 71 percent of administrators say formative and interim assessments are “extremely” or “very” valuable for determining whether students have **knowledge required to advance to the next grade**, compared to 30 percent for summative assessments.

**District administrators are even more positive than teachers about the impact of formative and interim assessments on teaching and learning:**

- 93 percent of administrators “completely” or “somewhat” agree that formative and interim assessments provide data about **individual student growth and achievement**, compared to 50 percent for summative assessments.
- 89 percent of administrators “completely” or “somewhat” agree that formative and interim assessments provide teachers with the information they need to **pace instruction** for each student, compared to 18 percent for summative assessments.
- 86 percent agree that formative and interim assessments help teachers **focus on the content that students need to learn**, compared to 53 percent for summative assessments.
- 85 percent agree that formative and interim assessments enable the **people who know students best** to guide instruction, compared to 17 percent for summative assessments.

**For district administrators, some formative and interim assessments are considered so valuable that they want more of them:**

- 47 percent of administrators want more interim assessments that measure growth and 38 percent want more longitudinal data from interim assessments.
- 33 percent of administrators want more student work, portfolios and classroom observations.
- 31 percent of administrators want more diagnostic instruments.

Fewer teachers and parents say they want more assessments.

**More District Administrators Than Teachers Say Common Core Assessments Will Be Useful; Many Parents Want to Compare Students** Many district administrators believe that new assessments pegged to the Common Core State Standards will matter to their work. Fewer teachers believe this to be the case. Sixty-two percent of administrators say they expect Common Core assessments will be “extremely” or “very” useful to their work, compared to 33 percent of teachers who report this sentiment. More than one in five teachers (21 percent) say these assessments will be “not very” or “not at all” useful.

District administrators likely have more information about the Common Core than teachers do at this point—and teachers may be projecting their generally limited enthusiasm for summative assessments to the Common Core. Still, this suggests that teacher disinterest could be an impediment to implementing the Common Core standards and assessments as preparation for college and careers.

**Parents are more concerned than teachers and district administrators with how well their children compare to other students within and outside of their districts.** Forty percent of parents say it

is “very” or “extremely” important to compare their child to others within the district and almost one-third of parents (32 percent) say it is “very” or “extremely” important to compare their child to others outside the district. Summative assessments are perceived to be significantly more helpful to parents than formative and interim assessments for comparison purposes.

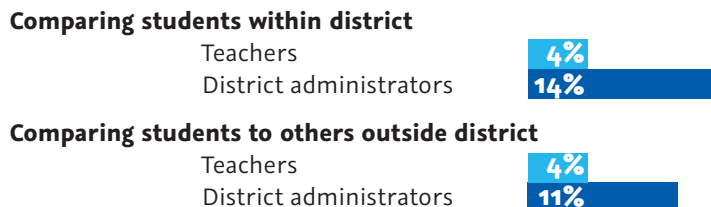
Few district administrators, and fewer teachers, are interested in how well their students compare to students outside their schools or districts, as shown in Figure 8.

Figure 8  
**Comparing Students Is More Important to Parents Than to Educators**

**Parent Q.** Thinking about your child’s education, how important to you is each of the following?



**Educator Q.** In education, many things are important to the success of teaching and learning. From the following list, please select the things you consider most important to you as an educator.

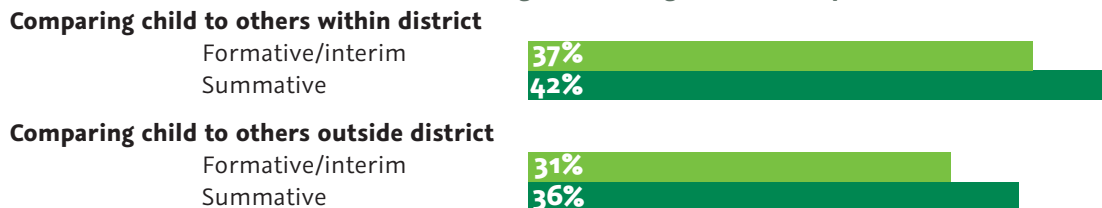


*Percentage of educators who say comparisons are important*

**Parent Q.** Based on everything you know, how helpful are classroom assessments given in the moment (e.g., teacher observations, participation, homework, quizzes, tests) and interim assessments given periodically during the year to measure growth for each of the following?

**Parent Q.** Based on everything you know, how helpful are end-of-year state or district assessments and end-of-year subject or course exams for each of the following?

**Parents Give Summative Assessments an Edge for Making Student Comparisons**



*Percentage of parents who say assessment types are **very** or **extremely** helpful*



Source: Grunwald Associates LLC

## Use of Game-Based and Adaptive Assessments Might Surprise Parents

About 60 percent of parents report that their child’s teachers use some type of alternative, technology-based assessments—the kind of assessments envisioned for greater use in the future by some assessment developers. More teachers (almost 70 percent) report that they already use such assessments.

Notably, parents are less aware of teachers’ use of two types of alternative assessments—game-based and adaptive assessments. For example, while 43 percent of teachers say they use game-based assessments, only 21 percent of parents are aware of this use by their children’s teachers.

Figure 9

### Parent Awareness and Teachers’ Reported Use of Alternative Assessments

**Parent Q.** As far as you know, which of the following types of assessments does your child’s teacher use?

**Teacher Q.** Which of these assessments, if any, do you use in your classroom to assess students?

#### TYPES OF ASSESSMENTS

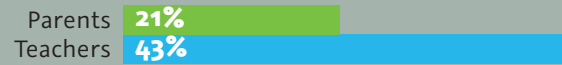
##### Assessments that are part of digital content (e.g., e-textbooks, e-books, Web resources)



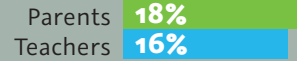
##### Adaptive (technology-based) assessments



##### Game-based assessments



##### Electronic portfolios



##### None of the above



Parents ■  
Teachers ■

Source: Grunwald Associates LLC

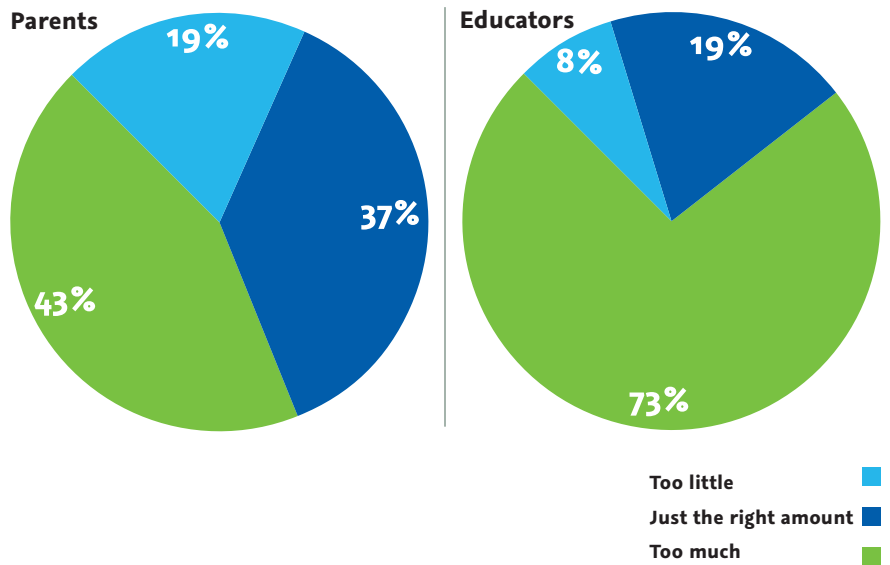
**Money, Time and Stress: Are Assessments Worth the Costs?** Many parents, and most teachers and district administrators, believe that too much money is spent on state assessments. Teachers and district administrators have much stronger sentiments about this. Seventy-three percent of teachers and district administrators, and 43 percent of parents, say too much money is spent preparing for assessments, as shown in Figure 10.

Many parents, teachers and district administrators question the amount of time spent on assessments. Parents are a bit more forgiving than teachers and district administrators when it comes to the amount of time students spend preparing for and taking assessments in class. Twenty-three percent of parents say students spend too much time on assessments, compared to 59 percent of teachers and district administrators who say this.

Figure 10  
**Parent and Educator Perceptions About Money Spent Preparing for and Administering State Assessments**

Q. How much money do schools spend on preparing for and administering state assessments?

**Money Spent Preparing for and Administering Assessments**



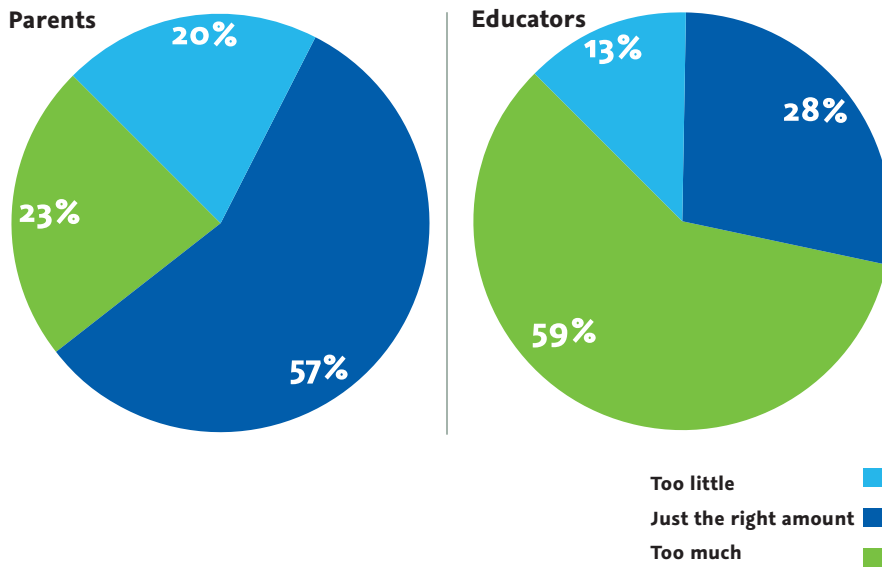
Source: Grunwald Associates LLC

Figure 11

### Parent and Educator Perceptions About Time on Assessments

Q\_ How much time do students spend preparing for and taking assessments in class?

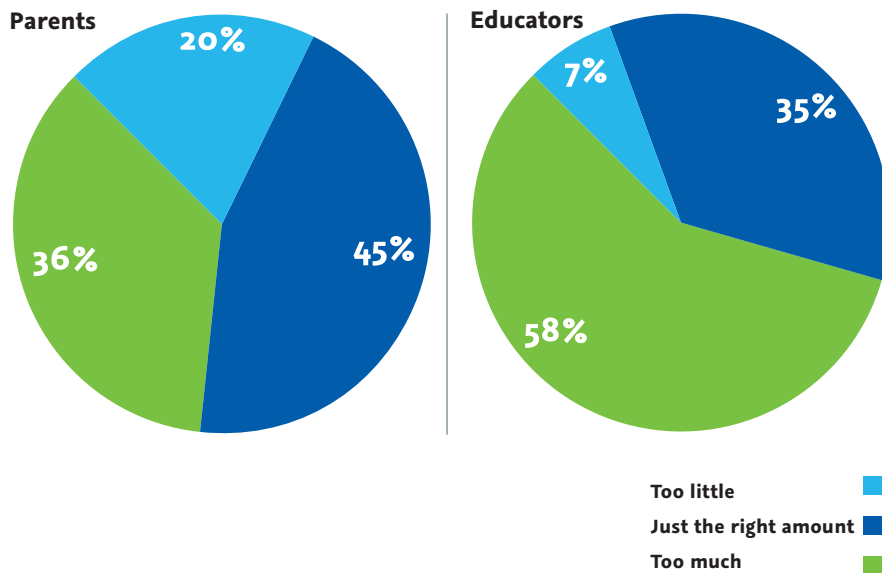
#### Time Students Spend Preparing for and Taking Assessments



Parent and district administrator Q\_ How much time do teachers spend “teaching to the test”?

Teacher Q\_ How much time do you spend “teaching to the test”?

#### Time Teachers Spend “Teaching to the Test”



Source: Grunwald Associates LLC

Similarly, more than one-third of parents (36 percent) say teachers spend too much “teaching to the test,” compared to 58 percent of teachers and district administrators who express this sentiment. District administrators, meanwhile, are more likely to say teachers spend too much time “teaching to the test” than teachers or parents are.

Figure 11 shows parent and educator (teacher and district administrator) perceptions about the amount of time spent preparing for and administering assessments.

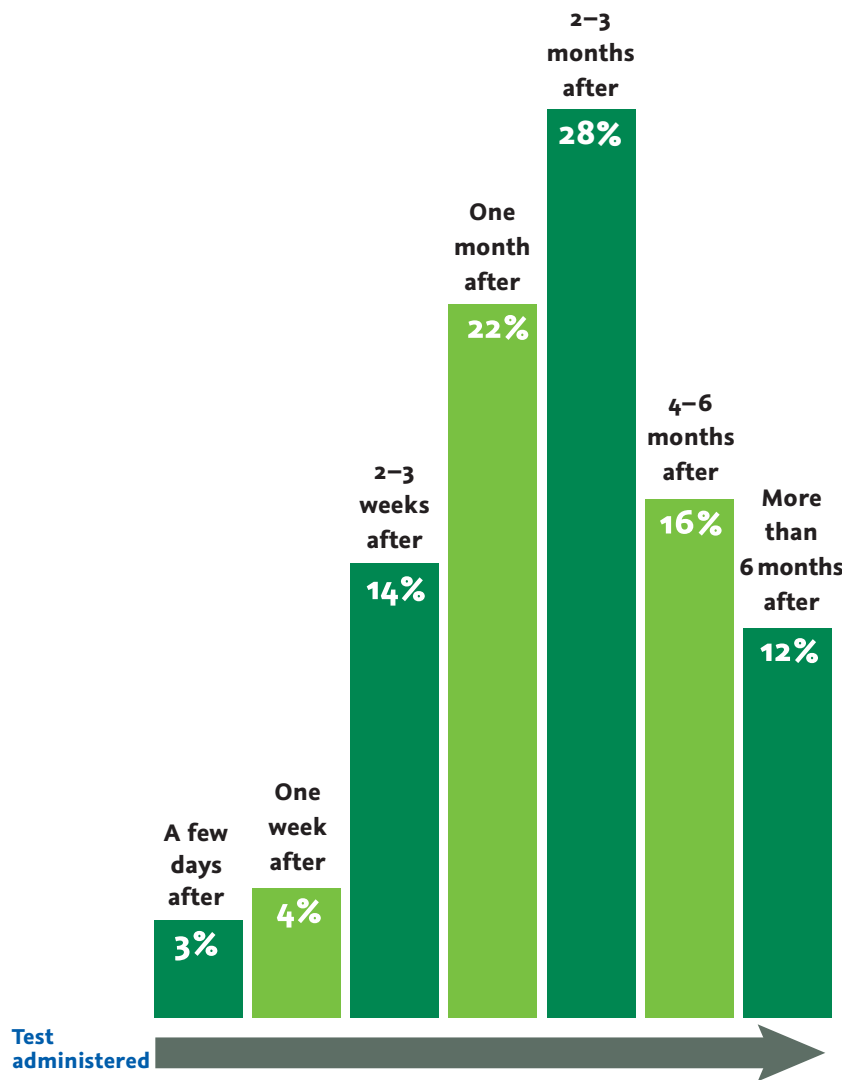
**For parents, assessment results begin losing their relevance within one month after assessments are administered,** as shown in Figure 12. Sixty-seven percent of parents “completely” or “somewhat” agree that formative and interim assessment results are delivered in a timely manner, compared to 50 percent for summative assessment results.

Among teachers and district administrators, 67 percent “completely” or “somewhat” agree that formative and interim assessment results are delivered in a timely manner—with district administrators (83 percent) expressing this agreement to a greater extent. Only 32 percent of teachers and district administrators “completely” or “somewhat” agree that summative assessment results are delivered in a timely manner.

Figure 12

**For Parents, Test Results Begin to Lose Relevance Within One Month**

Q. As you know, it often takes a while for you to receive your child’s state assessment results. At what point do assessment results become so old that they are no longer useful or relevant to you and your child?



Source: Grunwald Associates LLC

**Teachers and district administrators want to spend more time discussing assessment results, and their implications for practice,** with their colleagues. Teachers and district administrators are especially interested in spending more time talking about formative and interim assessments administered throughout the school year and collaborating with their colleagues on students' instructional needs:

- 45 percent of educators (teachers and district administrators) say that they spent too little time over the past year discussing formative assessments in staff meetings or in conversations with colleagues.
- 29 percent of educators say too little time was spent discussing interim assessments.
- 50 percent of educators say that they spent too much time discussing federally mandated state or district assessments.
- 61 percent of educators believe that collaborating with their colleagues on instructional needs is important to teaching and learning.

This finding suggests an opportunity to make greater use of professional learning communities for teachers and administrators in districts and schools to dig into the data, and make strategic and tactical plans on how best to use it to benefit students. Professional learning communities and communities of practice for educators also offer forums for peer-to-peer collaboration around assessment data, professional learning and improved instructional practices.

### Stressed Out

Parents, teachers and district administrators say that assessments induce a considerable amount of stress, which affects both students and educators negatively. More than one-third of parents say that assessment-related stress has a negative effect on their child's motivation to learn.

Figure 13

### Parent, Teacher and District Administrator Perceptions of Assessment-Related Stress

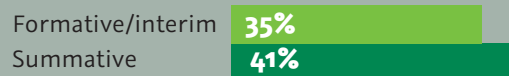
**Parent Q.** How much do you agree or disagree with these statements about classroom assessments given in the moment (e.g., teacher observations, participation, homework, quizzes, tests) and interim assessments given periodically during the year to measure?

**Parent Q.** How much do you agree or disagree with these statements about end-of-year state or district assessments and end-of-year subject or course exams?

My child is negatively affected by the stress associated with assessments



Assessments cause my child stress that negatively affects motivation to learn



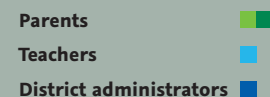
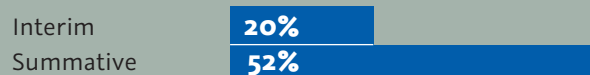
**Educator Q.** How much do you agree or disagree with this statement about interim assessments that measure growth over time?

**Educator Q.** How much do you agree or disagree with this statement about end-of-year state or district NCLB assessments and end-of-year subject or course exams?

I am negatively affected by the stress associated with assessments



I am negatively affected by the stress associated with assessments



Source: Grunwald Associates LLC

### “Bubble Kids” Cited Most Often as Benefiting From Assessments

Teachers and district administrators report that assessments are not equally useful and valuable for all groups of students. Students who are performing just below proficiency, a group often referred to as “bubble kids,” are the one group cited most often by district administrators (80 percent) and teachers (61 percent) as benefiting more from assessments.

Compared to teachers, district administrators believe that assessments are more useful and valuable for all student populations, including students performing at grade level, underperforming students, English language learners, and special needs students. For high-achieving students, the difference in perceptions between teachers and administrators is not statistically significant.

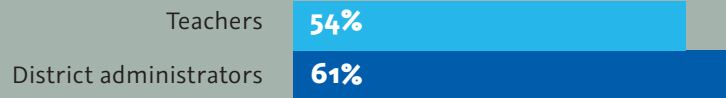
Figure 14  
**Teachers’ and District Administrators’ Views on the Students Who Benefit More From Assessments**

Q. For which student populations are assessments most useful and valuable?

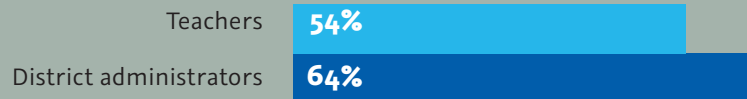
#### Students performing just below proficiency (i.e., “bubble kids”)



#### High-achieving students



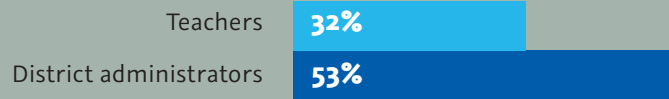
#### Students performing at grade level



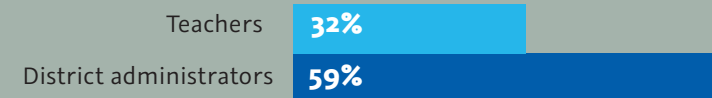
#### Underperforming students



#### English language learners



#### Special needs students



Source: Grunwald Associates LLC



### Opportunities for Greater Clarity and Support

A decade into the era of accountability and assessments, many teachers and district administrators are confused about different types of assessments. Parents, teachers and district administrators need help interpreting and using assessment results.

Teachers and district administrators have difficulty distinguishing between different types of assessments. There is little clarity among teachers and district administrators about standard types and purposes of different

assessments. Presented with scenarios of assessments typically administered and used in schools, no more than 60 percent of teachers and district administrators correctly classified any one scenario. Table 2 shows some of these scenarios and the variability in their responses.

This finding presents an interesting counterpoint to teachers' and district administrators' views on different assessment types. The series of survey questions that provided these scenarios was not intended to be a "gotcha" exercise for teachers and district administra-

Table 2

### Teacher and District Administrator Perceptions of Assessment Types, Uses Vary

ASSESSMENT SCENARIOS	Educators' Classifications of Assessment Scenarios					
	Summative		Interim		Formative	
	Teachers	Administrators	Teachers	Administrators	Teachers	Administrators
A high school science teacher uses student results from a student's chapter test to determine whether that student needs supplemental tutoring on a particular topic.	30%	16%	19%	20%	51%	65%
A middle school history teacher gives a pop quiz and learns that 20% of her students did not master a key topic. She decides to spend an extra day in class reviewing this topic area.	23%	11%	21%	14%	55%	76%
Data from a mid-year assessment that was given to all fourth graders in an elementary school are aggregated and used to help set growth targets for the following year.	25%	36%	45%	46%	29%	19%
District-mandated quarterly assessments for grades 3–12 are used to predict assessment results.	25%	23%	54%	60%	21%	18%
During class, the teacher asks all students to "plot and label the following coordinates on your white board."	28%	14%	21%	12%	50%	75%

Source: Grunwald Associates LLC

tors, but rather a gauge of how different assessments are actually used to inform decisions about teaching and learning. Their responses indicate that teachers and district administrators are all over the map in terms of their understanding of the best uses of different types of assessments.

The variability in their responses raises important questions. How timely, informative and actionable are assessment results to teachers and district administrators? How much time do they have to really explore them, discuss them with their colleagues and with parents, and plan an informed course of action for teaching and learning that responds to identified student needs? Do teachers and district administrators have the knowledge and skills they need to put different assessments to their best use? Are teachers involved in mining assessment data—and do they have a voice in decision making? The answers to these questions have huge implications for the drive to create a data culture and make evidence-based decisions, especially high-stakes decisions.

**Most teachers and district administrators receive training in how to interpret and use assessment results—but there is room for improvement in making sense of the data.** Sixty-five percent of all teachers and district administrators report that they currently receive this kind of training, but a substantial minority (35 percent, and higher percentages of high school teachers) does not currently receive training. Within that 35 percent, about half (51 percent) say they don't need training and about half (49 percent) say they do.

**Many parents say they need information on how to interpret and use assessment results.** Only about half (53 percent) of parents say they currently receive information on how to interpret and use assessment results. More than one-third of parents (38 percent, and higher percentages of middle school parents) say they need this information.

## CONCLUSION

The views of parents, teachers and district administrators are particularly relevant as states and districts move forward with new assessment systems for students and consider using these measures for accountability, including evaluating teacher and principal effectiveness. Their perceptions matter.

The surveys of parents, teachers and district administrators reveal their interest in multiple measures of student performance. These key stakeholders want assessments to zoom in for a close-up view of each individual child's performance, progress and needs. They want assessments to capture more than a snapshot of each child's performance at a single moment in time, in a limited number of subjects and grade levels. They want assessments to zoom out and use a wider lens to track progress over time, throughout the school year, and cover a wide range of subjects and skills.

Equally important, parents, teachers and district administrators want assessments to give them timely, useful and actionable information. They want more time to talk about assessments throughout the school year, which they believe will help them better understand assessment results and better support student learning at home and in school. They want decisions about what students are learning to be made at the local level, by those closest to students.

Clearly, no single type of assessment can meet all of these expectations.

Now is a prime opportunity, then, for education decision makers to create sensible, balanced and comprehensive assessment systems—using multiple measures of performance that are closely connected to the needs of students and those closest to them. The views of parents, teachers and district administrators should serve as a starting point for innovation in assessment.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

**Based on the findings of this study, NWEA offers four recommendations for policymakers and assessment developers and four recommendations for state and district leaders. These recommendations take into consideration the current assessment landscape and the expressed priorities, perceptions and needs of parents, teachers and district administrators.**

### Recommendations for Policymakers and Assessment Developers

- 1. Broaden the dialogue beyond summative assessments and high-stakes accountability.** The national dialogue on assessments is narrowly framed around summative assessments that track grade-level and end-of-year subject or course proficiency in English language arts and mathematics. Yet parents, teachers and district administrators view formative and interim assessments that monitor individual student performance and growth over time as most useful for teaching and learning. Parents and educators want assessments to focus on the whole child over the whole school year.
- 2. Avoid tunnel vision and focus on more than English language arts and mathematics.** Broaden the curriculum assessed and take the full measure of student learning. The current focus on these two subjects (and, more recently, on science) effectively downgrades the rest of the curriculum. Yet parents, teachers and district administrators strongly cite the importance of assessing the full range of academic subjects.
- 3. Develop innovative ways to measure thinking, learning and life skills.** At a time when knowledge and information are constantly changing, higher-order skills are the currency of modern life. Assessing critical thinking, collaboration, creativity and innovation demand new approaches to evaluation that go beyond “fill in the bubble” tests. Developing ways to measure these skills could require research and attention to student learning in activities outside of school and beyond the school day and school year. Many teachers are already using alternative, technology-based assessments, which suggests that they are receptive to innovative assessments.
- 4. Encourage local decision making on assessments that support learning.** Parents and educators concur that decisions about teaching and learning are best

made at the classroom, school and district level. Policymakers should support local education decisions and be responsive to the needs and preferences of families as they look to create sound assessment systems.

### Recommendations for State and District Leaders

- 1. Share decision-making authority and responsibility for teaching and learning with teachers, principals and school leaders.** Educators who are closest to students and know them best should have a strong voice in teaching and learning decisions. Their work should be supported with comprehensive and timely assessment information—and with time and training to use this information effectively. Teachers and building-level school leaders should be empowered to strengthen the connection between assessments and improved student achievement.
- 2. Select assessments that provide useful and timely information.** A comprehensive assessment system should provide data on individual student growth and achievement. Assessment data should help school leaders and teachers focus on the content and skills students need. Assessments also should provide information necessary for teachers to pace instruction for individual students and ensure that all students learn fundamental content and skills.
- 3. Establish professional learning communities and provide training and time for educators to understand different assessments and make effective use of assessment data.** Teachers and district administrators have trouble classifying different assessment types and many don't seem to understand their most appropriate uses. Educators aren't getting full value from the assessment information they have now—and aren't prepared for new kinds of assessment data in the future. They also need time to discuss assessment results, collaborate to develop a plan of action for addressing them and improve their instructional practices.
- 4. Dare to compare student data locally and nationally.** Many parents are interested in how well their child is doing compared to students within and beyond their district. At a minimum, once the Common Core assessment data is available, states and districts should provide information on how well each student ranks nationally on meeting the college and career readiness standards. Schools also should measure student growth independent of grade level to make accurate comparisons possible and ensure that parents, students and educators know, before it is too late, whether students are on track to achieve their dreams.

## ABOUT THIS STUDY

This study is based on the responses to three 20-minute surveys conducted online. The surveys used nationally representative U.S. samples of:

- 1,024 K–12 classroom teachers
- 1,009 parents of K–12 students
- 200 district administrators

Respondents from both public and private schools were included.

## Sample and Recruitment

### K–12 Teachers

Classroom teachers were recruited from a large, nationally representative online panel. Loose quotas were set for teachers to ensure that they represent the national teacher composition in terms of grades taught, years of experience, district sizes, geographic region and gender.

### Teacher Sample Composition

<b>Grade</b>	
Elementary	54%
Middle	23%
High	23%
<b>Experience</b>	
< 5 years	11%
5 to 10 years	37%
11 to 20 years	32%
21+ years	19%
<b>Gender</b>	
Male	19%
Female	81%
<b>District Size</b>	
< 5,000	41%
5,000 to < 25,000	32%
25,000 or more	27%
<b>Metro Status</b>	
Suburban	51%
Urban	28%
Rural	20%
<b>Region</b>	
South	37%
Midwest	23%
Northeast	22%
West	18%

## Parents

The parent sample was also recruited from a large, nationally representative online panel. Parents were evenly divided between parents of elementary, middle and high school students.

### Parent Sample Composition

<b>Child's Grade Level</b>	
Elementary (grades 1–5)	34%
Middle (grades 6–8)	31%
High (grades 9–12)	34%
<b>Parent's Education</b>	
High school/trade school/less	54%
College/bachelor's degree	34%
Graduate school	12%
<b>Parent's Household Income</b>	
Less than \$50,000	40%
\$50,000 to \$99,999	40%
\$100,000 or more	20%
<b>Parent's Ethnicity</b>	
Caucasian or white	75%
African American or black	14%
Hispanic or Latin American	8%
Asian or Pacific Islander	5%
American Indian, Eskimo or Aleut	1%
Other ethnic background	1%
<b>Region</b>	
South	36%
Midwest	22%
West	21%
Northeast	20%

### District Administrators

District administrators were recruited online from a leading education database. We sent administrators an e-mail invitation to the survey, screened them and, if they qualified, invited them to complete the full online survey.

To qualify, district administrators were required to be at least somewhat involved in academic testing in their district.

### District Administrator Composition

<b>Experience</b>	
< 5 years	10%
5 to 10 years	50%
11 to 20 Years	30%
21 or more years	10%
<b>Gender</b>	
Male	33%
Female	67%
<b>District Size</b>	
< 5,000	54%
5,000 to < 25,000	33%
25,000 or more	14%
<b>Metro Status</b>	
Suburban	43%
Urban	19%
Rural	39%
<b>Region</b>	
South	37%
Midwest	29%
Northeast	23%
West	12%

### Methodology and Analysis

To understand perceptions of, satisfaction with and needs regarding assessment, we covered related topics with similar, but targeted questions for parents, teachers and administrators. All respondents were recruited and completed their surveys online, and were incentivized for their participation.

Given the potential for confusion surrounding assessment terminology, the terms formative, interim/

benchmark, and summative were defined for parents in the questionnaire (see “Defining Terms” on page 3).

Data from the three target groups were analyzed independently. When possible, results were compared across groups to identify similarities and differences. Analysis also investigated possible subgroup differences (e.g., child’s grade level, parent’s education level, household income).

### About NWEA

NWEA is a global not-for-profit educational services organization headquartered in Portland, Oregon. We partner with educational organizations worldwide to provide computer-based assessment suites, professional development and research services. We are passionate about our mission: Partnering to help all kids learn.

Our Measures of Academic Progress® (MAP®) adaptive assessments leverage over 30 years of research into student growth and yield unparalleled data that informs decision making at every level, from classroom to boardroom. We continue to expand curriculum, instruction and assessment offerings all in a unified system. Our professional development offerings help educators use data to transform outcomes. The Kingsbury Center at NWEA, our research arm, uses our Growth Research Database to drive original research with universities, foundations and policymakers.

[www.nwea.org](http://www.nwea.org)

### About Grunwald Associates LLC

Grunwald Associates is a full-service research and consulting firm whose work has informed the debate on a range of national policy issues. Grunwald offers an in-depth understanding of education and innovation, combined with mastery of state-of-the-art research methodologies. The firm specializes in challenging public and proprietary assignments for nonprofit, corporate and government clients. Services include sophisticated quantitative and qualitative research, including pricing simulation and product configuration, social media and community development, and messaging and strategic counsel.

Grunwald has a reputation for research integrity and creativity and has garnered the trust of key national education associations, policymakers and educators.

[www.grunwald.com](http://www.grunwald.com)

*Writing and design by Vockley•Lang*

NOTES

Lined area for notes, consisting of 20 horizontal lines.







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