# ADDRESSING OVERTESTING:
# THE STUDENT ASSESSMENT INVENTORY IN ACTION

Achieve

Across the country, education leaders are adding their voices to the call to address the issue of overtesting in schools. Numerous studies, such as **the one recently released by the Council of the Great City Schools**, have shown that too often districts lack a coherent assessment strategy and administer too many tests that are not useful or high quality.

To address these concerns and assist districts in identifying how much testing students face, Achieve developed the *Student Assessment Inventory for School Districts*, which was released in June 2014. Designed from a student perspective, the tool can be used by education leaders to make decisions about what amount of testing is appropriate and to be more transparent with parents about the testing in schools.

School district officials have the opportunity to respond to these concerns about overtesting by leading a conversation among educators and the broader community that directly addresses the amount of testing and points the way toward a more coherent, educationally sound approach to assessment.

The Student Assessment Inventory for School Districts supports a process through which districts evaluate current assessments; determine the minimum testing necessary to serve essential diagnostic, instructional, and accountability purposes; and work to ensure that every district-mandated test is useful and high quality.

The inventory is only one element of a thoughtful longer process that both engages productively with concerns about testing and leads to real changes in time spent on testing. The process begins before the inventory with recognizing stakeholder concerns and framing the usefulness of an inventory process. It continues afterward with implementation of recommendations. Throughout the process, districts are highly encouraged to regularly communicate with key stakeholder groups and better understand their perspectives and experiences through surveys and focus groups.

The assessment inventory is free to use and adapt to best meet local contexts. The supplementary resources — including training materials; district guidance; sample teacher, parent, and student focus group and survey protocols; and considerations for assessments for English language learners and students with disabilities — have been designed in response to district requests for additional guidance and are also free to use and adapt.

## The Assessment Inventory in Action

In 2015, Achieve provided targeted support to districts and support organizations in Connecticut, Illinois, Ohio, and Tennessee to complete the inventory process, make recommendations, and take action to streamline assessment systems and ensure that they are coherent and high quality.[1] These district experiences reflect local community contexts and sometimes differed in approach. However, all districts authentically engaged multiple stakeholders in challenging but productive conversations to address overtesting concerns, and many made significant cuts to local assessments. We hope these stories will show that districts around the country can, with their local communities, proactively address the overtesting issue.

## Conducting an Assessment Inventory: Process and Results[2]

**Process.** Four sites — and a total of 15 districts — were selected in early 2015 to go through the assessment inventory process:

- Three districts in Illinois — Bensenville School District 2, Urbana School District 116, and West Aurora School District 129. The Illinois State Board of Education also provided key guidance and collaboration.

> Critical to the success of this process in a district is having an identified person on the leadership team who believes in the work and can shepherd the work across all of the schools.
> — CREC

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## ADDRESSING OVERTESTING: THE STUDENT ASSESSMENT INVENTORY IN ACTION

- Knox County Schools in Tennessee.
- The Capitol Region Education Council (CREC) in Connecticut collaborating with the Bloomfield, Branford, East Lyme, Hartford, Region #6, Tolland, and Vernon districts.
- The Educational Service Center of Central Ohio collaborating with the Buckeye Valley, Olentangy, Westerville, and Worthington districts.

Following initial site visits, state, regional, and district leads came together for a cross-site convening in April to share early lessons and work with experts around common issues, such as assessment of English language learners and students with disabilities, assessment quality, and alignment.

Participants described the context of the assessment inventory in their states, regions, and districts. Common elements included statewide summative assessment transition, the broader political climate around testing (including opt-out), teacher evaluation, stakeholder alignment, changing demographics in many districts, the difficulty in letting go of legacy assessments, local leadership transitions, "test prep," budget constraints, and technology integration with assessments. Participants also shared early lessons and challenges, consulted with experts on specific issue areas (students with disabilities, English language learner students, alignment, and assessment quality), and began to develop communications and outreach plans.

Following the convening, sites moved through the data collection and analysis phases of the assessment inventory. In August and September, sites developed recommendations and action steps to be taken by district leaders or local school boards.

**Results.** Fourteen of the 15 districts completed the assessment inventory process. The results varied across districts, but the key outcomes of the process were the reduction or elimination of assessments, increased stakeholder engagement, and identified training needs.

*Reduction or elimination of assessments*. In Illinois and Ohio, reductions in testing were significant, particularly for early literacy, gifted, and interim assessments. Table 1 describes the specific assessments that were reduced or eliminated.

**TABLE 1: Assessment streamlining in Illinois and Ohio districts**

| ILLINOIS | |
| --- | --- |
| Urbana | Streamlined early literacy assessments and developed communication and professional development plans and an implementation timeline for the recommendations. |
| West Aurora | Identified two assessments to eliminate — Cognitive Abilities Test (CogAT), a gifted assessment, in 4th grade and iStation, a bilingual assessment. Will also make Fountas and Pinnell, an early literacy assessment, optional. |
| **OHIO** | |
| Buckeye Valley | Eliminated several assessments, including Developmental Math Assessment (DMA), Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS), and Terra Nova; offered the option to schools to decrease the number of Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA) Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) administrations, and eliminated the NWEA MAP science assessment in grade 3. |
| Olentangy | Validated the results of an earlier assessment audit, replaced the K–3 diagnostic exams with AIMSweb, and eliminated the ACT Quality Core assessments in applicable high school courses. Eliminated the administration of Terra Nova and InView in grades 4, 5, 7, and 8 (but is continuing administration in grades 2, 3, and 6). |
| Westerville | Eliminated ACT Aspire and reduced the administration of Terra Nova and InView in grade 6 (but is continuing administration in grades 2 and 5). |
| Worthington | Eliminated the administration of NWEA MAP for Science in grades 3, 9, and 10 and the spring administration of NWEA MAP in content/grades participating in state testing. |

*Increased stakeholder engagement.* All sites reported benefits from engaging stakeholders in the process — particularly parents. CREC found that engaging stakeholders through a combination of focus groups and anonymous surveys was a better method for identifying key issues related to assessment practices in a district. While surveys alone did provide some information, the richness of the data collected through the stakeholder focus groups provided a more complete picture of the culture of assessment practices in a district.

# ADDRESSING OVERTESTING: THE STUDENT ASSESSMENT INVENTORY IN ACTION

The districts in Ohio found beginning with parent focus groups to engage in two-way dialogue about the use of assessments and their purpose was helpful. As a result, districts in Ohio concluded that engagement with parents should occur regularly and that there is a definite need for transparent communication with parents. These districts also decided to develop an assessment guide for both parents and teachers to describe the assessments, their purpose, and their use.

In Knox County, engagement of stakeholders was extensive (2,500 parent surveys; more than 1,000 teacher surveys; parent, teacher, and student focus groups; and school-by-school information on assessments used). The district conducted a "deep dive" meeting, which brought a diverse team together to discuss data and move toward recommendations. It became evident that there is a lot of misinformation as well as many misperceptions and a lack of understanding among stakeholders regarding the purpose of tests, the goals of accountability, the teacher evaluation system, and state requirements. As a result the district is working to increase communication to parents, teachers, and students on these topics.

Bensenville has been working toward a balanced assessment system over several years. Its work this time using the assessment inventory process was successful because the district included a broader range of stakeholders, including parents, bilingual staff, and school board members. Focus groups were an important part of this engagement. The district identified the need for more communication so parents and the broader community are more "in the know" about assessment best practices.

***Identified training needs.*** As a result of the assessment inventory process, many districts identified a need for training. Several districts identified the need to provide training to teachers and other staff on the purpose, administration, and retrieval and analysis of the data from specific assessments. Assessment literacy training was also identified as a priority — especially how to make informed decisions about creating and/or purchasing assessments and how to appropriately interpret the assessment results.

> Our work was more successful because this time around we included a broader range of stakeholders.
>
> — Bensenville School District 2

## Lessons Learned

**Start the process early.** For this project, districts completed the assessment inventory process during the spring and early summer. Several sites found this timeframe to be a challenge and felt that starting the process at the beginning of the school year would have benefited them by providing more opportunity to gather input, better integrate the process into the school calendar, reduce conflict with other activities, and overall improve the fidelity of the process. Despite the compressed timeline, however, most districts were able to complete the assessment inventory process and make recommendations that aligned with budget cycle timelines.

**Pay attention to assessments for diverse learners**. Several districts learned through the inventory process that assessments for special populations — students with disabilities, gifted students, and English language learners — is a complex space that doesn't necessarily yield clear answers. Finding high-quality assessments aligned to state standards while meeting state and federal requirements can be challenging, and external expertise may be needed to navigate decisions on assessment adoption and use.

**Communicate.** Districts recommend having a clear communication strategy to inform stakeholders about the process and reasons for engaging in the work. Providing this communication early facilitates stakeholder engagement in the process. Communicating throughout the process is as important as communicating the results. Conduct the inventory process with an upfront commitment to take action, regardless of the results. Such transparency is important. Districts should pay special attention to communication with parents and others outside the school environment (e.g., business or political leaders) by making sure to receive their feedback on draft communications before they are distributed widely. The process can also provide greater transparency and strengthen communication amongst stakeholders for assessments that remain in the system, particularly around issues of public reporting.

## ADDRESSING OVERTESTING: THE STUDENT ASSESSMENT INVENTORY IN ACTION

> The perception that the assessment audit was a district-initiated activity, and having that clearly communicated, did contribute to teacher participation.
>
> — CREC

**Use the process to push conversations about quality.** Participating districts often found that the most valuable part of the inventory process were the conversations with teachers, parents, and students about assessment quality. Districts should pivot from these rich discussions to create the conditions to spur innovation.

**Provide opportunities to build assessment literacy.** There is a wide range of knowledge about assessments and their purpose, use, and interpretation within and among the various stakeholders, including teachers, school administrators, parents, and the public. The assessment inventory process can naturally lead to opportunities to build assessment literacy for stakeholders early in the process so that they are working from a common language and understanding of assessment.

**Conduct the process annually.** Districts participating in this project recognized the potential benefit of conducting the assessment inventory process on a regular basis. With the frequent changes in learning standards, state assessments, and other requirements, districts need to regularly re-examine their assessments in light of these changes and improvements in available assessments.

**Have a bias for action.** Many districts in this project reported that the assessment inventory process provided for rich, engaging discussions among stakeholders. However, those discussions did not automatically lead to making recommendations or taking action. Planning for and providing a mechanism for reaching a conclusion or action is important to making the process successful. Reaching an action point can be fostered by using a group decision-making tool such as a forced-choice exercise or setting a deadline for when recommendations must be made to the district superintendent or school board.

**Focus on what you can control.** While there are many state and/or federal requirements related to assessment, many assessments are still within the control of a school district. Assessments that are mandated by a district or school are clear cases. However, state and/or federal requirements often provide flexibility in choosing which of several possible assessments are administered. These cases provide opportunities to bring efficiency and coherence to the assessment system. For example, one district found that one assessment used for English language learners could be replaced by two other assessments that were currently being used.

# ADDRESSING OVERTESTING: THE STUDENT ASSESSMENT INVENTORY IN ACTION

## APPENDIX A: Enrollment, Demographics, and Outcomes for High Quality Assessment Project Districts

| District | Enrollment | Demographics | Outcomes of Process |
|---|---|---|---|
| **CONNECTICUT** | | | |
| **Bloomfield** | 2,107 | 74% African American<br>11% Hispanic<br>12% White<br>51% Low income<br>2% English language learners<br>13% Students with disabilities | CREC provided results and recommendations to district leadership. |
| **Branford** | 3,076 | 3% African American<br>9% Hispanic<br>79% White<br>24% Low income<br>4% English language learners<br>12% Students with disabilities | CREC provided results and recommendations to district leadership. |
| **East Lyme** | 2,833 | 2% African American<br>5% Hispanic<br>82% White<br>14% Low income<br>2% English language learners<br>14% Students with disabilities | Reduced the number of assessments at the elementary school level and presented the results of the assessment inventory to the board in October 2015. |
| **Hartford** | 21,426 | 31% African American<br>50% Hispanic<br>12% White<br>77% Low income<br>18% English language learners<br>14% Students with disabilities | Provided professional development on assessment literacy. |
| **Region #6** | 964 | 1% African American<br>3% Hispanic<br>93% White<br>15% Low income<br>1% English language learners<br>13% Students with disabilities | Revising standards-based report cards to reflect assessments given to students. |
| **Tolland** | 2,655 | 2% African American<br>3% Hispanic<br>91% White<br>8% Low income<br>1% English language learners<br>11% Students with disabilities | Will analyze assessments for alignment to the Common Core State Standards, ensure that data from one grade level are shared with other grade levels, and hold more data team analysis trainings so that teachers understand how to use data for instructional purposes. |
| **Vernon** | 3,259 | 11% African American<br>13% Hispanic<br>66% White<br>43% Low income<br>3% English language learners<br>15% Students with disabilities | Reduced the number of literacy assessments administered. |

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| District | Enrollment | Demographics | Outcomes of Process |
|---|---|---|---|
| **ILLINOIS** | | | |
| **Bensenville** | 2,157 | 3% African American<br>4% Asian<br>65% Hispanic<br>25% White<br>63% Low income<br>32% English language learners | School board voted to discontinue use of NWEA MAP based on recommendations of the assessment inventory. |
| **Urbana** | 3,983 | 35% African American<br>5% Asian<br>11% Hispanic<br>40% White<br>68% Low income<br>9% English language learners | Streamlined early literacy assessments and developed communication and professional development plans and an implementation timeline for the recommendations. |
| **West Aurora** | 12,500 | 12% African American<br>3% Asian<br>53% Hispanic<br>29% White<br>62% Low income<br>15% English language learners | Identified two assessments to eliminate — CogAT (a gifted assessment) in 4th grade and iStation (a bilingual assessment). Will also make Fountas and Pinnell (an early literacy assessment) optional. |
| **Hartford** | 21,426 | 31% African American<br>50% Hispanic<br>12% White<br>77% Low income<br>18% English language learners<br>14% Students with disabilities | Provided professional development on assessment literacy. |
| **OHIO** | | | |
| **Buckeye Valley** | 2,223 | 1% African-American<br>1% Asian<br>3% Hispanic<br>93% White<br>22% Economically disadvantaged<br>1% Limited English proficient<br>10% Students with disabilities | Eliminated several assessments, including Developmental Math Assessment (DMA), DIBELS, and Terra Nova; offered the option to schools to decrease the number of NWEA administrations; and eliminated the NWEA science assessment in grade 3. |
| **Olentangy** | 17,700 | 4% African-American<br>9% Asian<br>3% Hispanic<br>81% White<br>7% Economically disadvantaged<br>2% Limited English proficient<br>11% Students with disabilities | Validated the results of an earlier assessment audit, replaced the K–3 diagnostic exams with AIMSweb, and eliminated the ACT Quality Core assessments in applicable high school courses. Eliminated the administration of Terra Nova and InView in grades 4, 5, 7, and 8 (but is continuing administration in grades 2, 3, and 6). |
| **Westerville** | 13,899 | 23% African-American<br>3% Asian<br>6% Hispanic<br>62% White<br>35% Economically disadvantaged<br>10% Limited English proficient<br>13% Students with disabilities | Eliminated ACT Aspire and reduced the administration of Terra Nova and InView in grade 6 (but is continuing administration in grades 2 and 5). |
| **Worthington** | 9,227 | 8% African-American<br>6% Asian<br>8% Hispanic<br>71% White<br>25% Economically disadvantaged<br>6% Limited English proficient<br>13% Students with disabilities | Eliminated the administration of NWEA MAP for Science in grades 3, 9, and 10 and the spring administration of NWEA MAP in content/grades participating in state testing. |

Assessments

**ADDRESSING OVERTESTING: THE STUDENT ASSESSMENT INVENTORY IN ACTION**

| District | Enrollment | Demographics | Outcomes of Process |
|---|---|---|---|
| **TENNESSEE** | | | |
| **Knox County Schools** | 59,516 | 15% African American<br>2% Asian<br>5% Hispanic<br>78% White<br>47% Economically disadvantaged<br>3% English language learners | Increased communication to parents, teachers, and students on assessment (e.g., a new video resource, "A Guide to Being TNReady," to explain the changes in the state assessment program). Worked with external expert on analysis of district-developed end-of-course assessments in Geometry, ELA (middle school), Geography, and World History. Analysis focused on issues of item complexity. Middle school ELA assessments were redesigned and piloted, with positive initial feedback from teachers. |

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Assessments