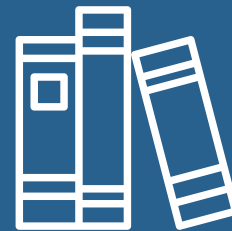


ASSESSMENT AND ACCOUNTABILITY DURING COVID-19

SUPPORTING SAFETY AND LEARNING FOR NORTH CAROLINA'S SCHOOLS AND STUDENTS



EDUCATION INSIGHTS
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THE PROBLEM

Since March 2020, COVID-19 has required the implementation of remote learning options in K-12 public schools across North Carolina, ranging from fully online classroom experiences to hybrid scenarios in which students attend school both in person and remotely. In some locales, students continue to attend school in person most of the time, but with some modifications.

As school communities continue to navigate the impacts of a global pandemic, these new learning environments have brought forth complex challenges when it comes to safely, reliably and equitably assessing student learning using statewide standardized testing. Additionally, standardized tests are used for accountability purposes, which can create scenarios where students and educators experience punitive outcomes that are potentially inaccurate due to the implementation of learning environments that are incomparable with prior years. Fortunately, there are solutions to these potential outcomes that policymakers can consider and implement expeditiously.

THE LANDSCAPE

Assessments

In North Carolina, educators rely on frequent, formative assessments throughout a school year to assess students' mastery of curricular content. The state also requires students to sit for standardized statewide assessments that measure mastery of content and provide insights into learning gains or losses. Students in grades 3-12 sit for a number of state standardized tests; for the purpose of this brief, the following state standardized tests are the most relevant to the discussion:

End of Course (EOC) Assessments: These assessments measure a student's knowledge of subject-related concepts in the subjects of Biology, English II, NC Math 1, and NC Math 3; these tests are typically taken in high school, but occasionally they are taken in middle school as well.

Career and Technical Education (CTE) Assessments: There is a Proof of Learning umbrella under which a variety of assessments can be used for CTE courses. These include a 100-question state assessment conducted via an online platform, but in-person; an industry credential assessment that is largely based on CTE course standards; or a performance-based measure (PBM) through which students have to show mastery of a certain number of items.

End of Grade (EOG) Assessments: These are standards-based achievement tests in the areas of reading and mathematics administered at the end of grades 3-8 and science administered at the end of grades 5 and 8.

Each of these assessments requires students to appear in person to sit for the exam. EOC and CTE assessments are conducted on a computer inside of a school building in January and June of each academic year. EOG assessments are completed in June. [Details for other state assessments, some of which will also be impacted by COVID-19, are found on the NC Department of Public Instruction's website.](#)

Many of these state assessments also fulfill federal requirements with regard to student assessment and statewide accountability reporting.

THE LANDSCAPE (cont.)

Accountability

In an effort to ensure students, teachers and administrators are held accountable for continuous student achievement and growth, North Carolina has employed numerous iterations of school accountability models over the past several decades. The Excellent Public Schools Act, enacted by the General Assembly in 2012, included among its provisions the framework for the latest accountability model, which is to assign school performance grades to every public school in North Carolina. These A-F School Grades, as they are commonly referenced, rely on the use of the following state assessments:

School Performance Grade Indicators

Elementary/Middle Schools

EOG Mathematics
EOG English/Language Arts/Reading
EOG Science
Math/ELA/Science EOCs (middle schools)

High Schools

Math 1/Math 3 EOC
English II EOC
Biology EOC
Graduation Rate
ACT/ACT WorkKeys

Schools Performance Grades are based on two components: a school achievement score and a school growth score. A combination of the school achievement score and the school growth score make up the overall school performance grade. Currently, 80% of the school performance grade is the school achievement score and 20% of the grade is the school growth score. Deliberations in the General Assembly have been underway for the past several years re-evaluating the weight given to each of these components. A detailed description of how these grades are calculated can be found in the [Forum's 2020 Education Policy Primer](#).

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THE LANDSCAPE (*cont.*)

Accountability

Due to COVID-19, U.S. Department of Education granted North Carolina's request to waive standardized testing requirements for the 2019-20 school year. As a result, students did not take second semester state assessments at the end of the year, and the state did not require the assignment of A-F School Grades for that academic year, as well.

Currently, there are no waivers in place for the federal assessment and accountability requirements for 2020-21. In addition, EOCs comprise 20% of a student's grade for that course, a requirement that continues to be in force. Districts do have the flexibility to determine grading scales for the EOC assessment.

State assessments also play a role in the evaluation of teachers and the compensation of principals. Educators' effectiveness are evaluated in part using measures of student growth on standardized assessments, and principal compensation packages are influenced considerably by their school's academic growth scores.



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THE BARRIERS

Students, families and educators are concerned that traditional testing protocols continue to be largely in place, even though COVID presents barriers to both the logistics of administering these tests and students' ability to learn the necessary content on which these tests are based. Most assessments require students to enter a school building and take these exams in person regardless of whether a student is currently engaged in remote, hybrid, or in-person learning.

While many groups have worked quickly and with substantial resources to connect North Carolinians across our state to high-speed internet -- and have made good progress -- we know that many populations across North Carolina continue to experience significant challenges with regard to accessing remote learning platforms. Many rural parts of our state still do not have access to high-speed broadband internet connections, inhibiting students' ability to access remote learning content. And many low-income households struggle with affording the cost of high-speed broadband internet — an equally large challenge. [For more on the broadband access challenge, [read our brief here.](#)]

Because assessment measures are also used for accountability purposes, they have the potential to be unproductively punitive during this year in which our traditional methods of delivering educational instruction have been turned upside down. The evaluation of teachers' performance, as well as compensation packages for principals, both rest in part on student performance on standardized assessments. As mentioned above, A-F School Performance Grades reflect student performance on standardized assessments as well, and these grades, have an impact on parental decision-making when it comes to choosing where to send their children to school.

Finally, the mental health of our students, staff and families is an important consideration. Testing anxiety is a significant hurdle, compounded by fears around physical safety and the capacity to perform at a high standard during a time when the consistency of instruction and reliability of access to learning platforms have greatly restricted students' access to a sound basic education this year.

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THE SOLUTIONS



Apply for federal waivers for assessment and accountability requirements. The federal government requires that 95% of all public school students participate in EOC and CTE assessments. Given the barriers that COVID presents to that level of participation, North Carolina should seek a federal waiver to this rule if it becomes available in the spring. The federal government also requires state assessments count toward federal accountability reporting requirements. North Carolina should also seek a federal waiver for this rule, should it become available this spring.



Encourage use of expanded testing windows for state assessments. The State Board of Education has indicated that local school districts have the flexibility to expand the testing windows for fall, spring and summer EOC and CTE assessments so that schools are able to ensure proper social distancing measures. With this option, districts may delay all of these assessments until as late as June 2021, when a safer environment – thanks to a vaccine – may be available to us.



Suspend A-F School Grades for 2020-21. This action, which was taken by the NC General Assembly for the 2019-20 school year, should be repeated for this year as well. Widespread concern has been expressed by educators that utilizing standardized assessments for accountability purposes is not likely to be valid or reliable given all of the uncertain elements thrown into the testing process this year. Those elements range from testing some students on curricular concepts that were learned remotely when they may have had inconsistent access to learning materials, to students experiencing extraordinary test anxiety thanks to concerns for their physical safety as well as performance on a high stakes test for which they may feel unprepared.

THE SOLUTIONS (cont.)

Additionally, the [FY 2021 Leandro Short-Term Action Plan](#) requires North Carolina to implement an assessment and accountability system that reliably assesses multiple measures of student performance. Among other required actions, it identifies the NC General Assembly, along with the State Board of Education and the Department of Public Instruction as responsible parties for revising the current weighting between student proficiency and student growth for the School Performance Grades. COVID-19 presents many challenges at this time, but in this case it also presents an opportunity for our education leaders to reimagine and redesign the school accountability framework for the benefit of all students.



Pause rule that EOCs must count for 20% of a student's grade.

Currently, students face added pressure to take EOC exams because they account for 20% of a student's final course grade. In an effort to ensure students and families do not take actions that they feel jeopardize their emotional and physical health, this requirement should be temporarily suspended for the 2020-21 school year. Additionally, districts should be aware that the state offers them the flexibility to determine the grading scale for EOC exams. Some districts have already taken advantage of this flexibility, including Durham, which has set the grading floor at 90%, thus alleviating pressure on students to perform at a level that may not be achievable given the barriers every student and educator has faced this academic year.



Remove student performance on standardized tests from the evaluation process for teachers and from compensation packages for principals.

Our teachers and principals are serving our children under extraordinarily difficult circumstances, and they need our support. Standardized testing this year is not likely to offer us the student achievement and growth data that can meaningfully and appropriately inform how teachers and principals have performed during these unprecedented times. For 2020-21, it is imperative these measures, which could be unjustifiably punitive, be removed from these equations.

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FURTHER READING + RESOURCES

EdNC: [New testing guidance raises concerns from some education leaders](#)

NC DPI: [Testing and School Accountability Information](#)

Joint Report to the Court on Sound Basic Education for All: [Fiscal Year 2021 Action Plan for North Carolina](#).