



**AMERICAN
PSYCHOLOGICAL
ASSOCIATION**
SERVICES, INC.

Standardized Assessment and Testing in PreK-12 Education¹

Assessment continues to be a central focus for policymakers, district leaders and community members seeking to understand school performance, academic success, and the pathway from early childhood to adult independence and success. This is especially true as we continue to learn about the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on students' social, emotional, and academic development, including historic declines in math and reading scores.

Policy discussions about assessment often include challenging questions—when should it be required, what kind of information should be gathered, how should that information be analyzed and with whom should information be shared? Psychological science has much to contribute to this conversation, and to the ultimate goal of maximizing the use of public resources to promote student success.

Value and Limitations of Assessment

Academic assessment gives teachers important information on student performance, as well as the effectiveness of teaching methods, and curriculum, providing the opportunity to adjust instructional methods for individual students. They are

1. Drafted in collaboration with the American Psychological Association's Committee on Psychological Tests and Assessment (CPTA) and Janice C. C. Lepore, Psy.D.

among the most objective ways to measure student performance. However, when they are used as a singular measure of performance, they provide a limited window into student achievement, and may not reflect a holistic view of student development over a longer period of time. Additionally, some student groups, such as racial and ethnic minority students, students with disabilities, and students with limited English proficiency may be systematically disadvantaged by some forms of standardized assessment and testing.ⁱ

It is important to understand that quality assessment, particularly in high-stakes circumstances, does not rely solely on the measures, methods, or instruments used. Strong assessment practices requires thinking about assessment as a process that produces valuable information and can be a powerful tool to implement positive change. Data from assessment can drive critical decisions about what methods or interventions are likely to be most successful, how to best allocate resources, and how to prioritize different areas of need. However, decisions made using assessment information can also be damaging when data sources and methods are not carefully selected, improperly implemented, interpreted without context and expertise, or inappropriately applied.^{i, ii}

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Development and Interpretation of Assessment Tools

The development, selection, use, and interpretation of assessment measures is within the specific expertise of psychological scientists, particularly as it relates to child development, learning, and academic and social-emotional support. Including psychologists in discussions regarding assessment in PreK-12 education would provide invaluable context to support the decisions that policymakers and district leaders make on behalf of community members and students.

Fairness in testing begins at the initial stages of assessment development, and continues in the process of gathering, analyzing, interpreting and applying different types of information, in context, for a specific purpose.^{ii, iii} During the development of an assessment process, planners must consider key factors including how to best define the information of interest, determine whether students in all demographics have had an opportunity to master that information, select instruments and methods that measure that information consistently and accurately, and plan for the reduction or elimination of other factors that can impact accuracy, including bias.^{ii, iii, iv}

It is critical that students are tested on curriculum they have had a fair opportunity to learn; and that testing is sound, scored properly, and used appropriately. Educational institutions have varying resources and instruction. This context must be considered during test selection and administration in order to ensure that the results will genuinely reflect student achievement.^v In addition, groups of students such as those from low socioeconomic status backgrounds, racial and ethnic minority students, students with disabilities, and students with limited English proficiency may require special consideration to identify and minimize potential negative consequences that can result from inappropriately applied testing.ⁱ

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Finally, a foundational principle of good assessment practice is that it should benefit, and to the greatest extent possible avoid harming, the individuals and groups who participate.^{ii, iii} This requires expert interpretation of findings, as well as clear communication with participants and community members.^{iv}

Recommended Considerations for Assessment Policy

- **Code of Fair Testing Practices** – When developing and administering tests, schools and districts should consult the Code of Fair Testing Practices in Education, developed by the Joint Committee on Testing Practices (JCTP).
- **Clearly Defined Question and Scope** – The first necessary step for a strong assessment process is a clear set of definitions – what questions need to be answered, for what groups, and to what purpose?^{ii, iii, iv} This core information drives the selection of tests and methods within the assessment process.
- **Evidence-Based Sources and Tools** – Tests, methods, and other assessment tools must demonstrate strong psychometric properties – including reliability and validity – and must be shown to be appropriate for the question(s) being asked as well as the participating population(s).^{ii, iii, iv} This is particularly critical for tools used in high-stakes decision making (e.g., graduation requirements, funding decisions).ⁱ Methods should be developed in such a way as to reduce the risk of bias, including gathering information from multiple sources, using multiple approaches, and ^{ii, vi} addressing questions of equity, to ensure that processes do not introduce bias based on race, culture, degree of English language proficiency, socioeconomic status, disability, social-emotional health, or other factors.^{ii, iii}
- **Informed Consent and Fairness** – Processes should be put in place to ensure that the individuals participating in or providing assessment information understand how that information will be gathered, stored, and applied, any risks that may be associated with participation, and what options they may have to decline or engage in an alternate process.^{ii, vi} In some cases, special accommodations may be required to obtain valid test scores; particularly for students with disabilities or students with limited English proficiency. Differences related to socioeconomic status and racial and ethnically diverse backgrounds should also be taken into consideration.^v
- **Expert Interpretation, Actionable Results** – Assessment planning should include expert interpretation of findings, as well as appropriate normative or comparison group data as a reference. Information should be communicated to the public in a clear and understandable manner.^{ii, iv} The data should be disaggregated by various subgroups such as sex, race/ethnicity, income level, disability status/type, and degree of English proficiency; a discussion about how results can or cannot be applied; and actionable next steps, whenever possible. Any decision based on academic assessment should not be the result of a single test, but rather should include other relevant information. Test results must be monitored to observe the impact of testing processes on students, particularly on students who may be vulnerable to increased testing stresses, such as those from low socioeconomic status backgrounds, racial and ethnic minority students, students with disabilities, and students with limited English proficiency, and to identify and minimize negative consequences.^v
- **Support for Continued Research** – Further research is needed to expand our understanding about the benefits and potential risks of assessment use within and across educational settings, to evaluate assessment processes so as to maintain pace with changing needs, populations and technologies, and to continually develop improved methods and tools to promote student and community success.^{i, ii, iii} If assessment is to be used in high-stakes decisions such as which students will advance and what subjects will be taught, it is vital that we understand how to measure student learning and how the use of this assessment will impact drop-out rates, graduation rates, instructional content, levels of student stress, and teaching practices.ⁱ
- **Institutional Resources** – More resources must be provided to educational institutions to provide quality educational opportunities and attain real student growth and learning, rather than “teaching to the test” skills acquisition.ⁱ

References

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- ii. American Educational Research Association, American Psychological Association, & National Council on Measurement in Education. (2014). *Standards for educational and psychological testing*. Washington, D.C.: American Educational Research Association.
- iii. American Psychological Association. (2013). Guidelines for the practice of telepsychology. *American Psychologist*, 68(9), 791-800. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0035001>.
- iv. American Psychological Association. (2015). *Top 20 Principles from Psychology for PreK-12 Teaching and Learning*. Retrieved from <http://www.apa.org/ed/schools/cpse/top-twenty-principles.pdf>.
- v. *Code of Fair Testing Practices in Education*. (2004). Washington, DC: Joint Committee on Testing Practices. <https://www.apa.org/science/programs/testing/fair-testing.pdf>.
- vi. Data Quality Campaign. (September 23, 2022). Education Data 101 – A Briefing Book for Policymakers. <https://dataqualitycampaign.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/DQC-EducationData101-031821.pdf>.