



# POLICYMAKERS' GUIDE TO THROUGH-YEAR ASSESSMENTS

ADDRESSING ESSA PAIN POINTS

## POLICYMAKERS' GUIDE

In recent years, the number of states launching research and development initiatives focused on through-year assessments has multiplied. Proponents of through-year assessment systems believe they have the potential to be more equitable, focused and relevant for students, families and educators. In particular, these models have the potential to strengthen the connection between assessment and instruction, provide a more accurate picture of student growth and school needs to drive improvement, and address longstanding concerns related to the utility of summative tests for stakeholders who are most directly impacted by their administration. **We've created this guide to support policymakers' in considering how through-year assessments may advance the goals set forth by ESSA and address pain points experienced by stakeholders.**

### States are exploring how through-year assessments can address long-standing concerns with traditional end-of-year summative assessments

#### What are through-year assessments?

Through-year assessment models administer multiple tests throughout the school year as part of an assessment system designed to produce a single summative score meeting federal and state accountability requirements. ESSA codified into law an option for states to use "multiple statewide interim assessments that result in a single summative score that provides valid, reliable and transparent information on student achievement or growth."<sup>1</sup>

#### Why are states pursuing through-year assessments?

States hope the administration of tests throughout the year<sup>2</sup> creates opportunities to address long-standing, legitimate concerns expressed by students, families and educators about traditional end-of-year summative assessments' inability to:

- ⊕ Provide timely and accurate information to inform school improvement needs;
- ⊕ Support teaching and learning or connect to curriculum;
- ⊕ Reduce concerns about the overall footprint of summative tests.

#### Which states are pursuing various through-year models?

To date, no fully operational through-year assessment systems have undergone federal peer review, however, several states are in the process of piloting through-year models they intend to use for federal accountability. Thirteen states administer multiple assessments during the school year as part of their summative assessment system including: Alaska, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Indiana, Kansas, Louisiana, Maine, Montana, Nebraska, North Carolina, Texas and Virginia.

<sup>1</sup>Every Student Succeeds Act §1111, S.1177. (December 10, 2015). 114th Congress. Retrieved November 29, 2022, from <https://www.congress.gov/bill/114th-congress/senate-bill/1177/text>

<sup>2</sup>Marion, S. (2021) identifies three common goals through-year assessments aim to address in alignment with these concerns.

## Through-year assessments can address current ESSA pain points in four ways

### **Timely information about student progress and school needs can improve transparency, allocation of resources and support state and local school improvement planning.**

States are required to provide clear and transparent data about the quality of schools in their communities as well as data used to make school improvement decisions. Data from current summative assessments come back weeks after the end of the school year, long after when 1) parents need information to support their child, 2) schools and system leaders have decided the upcoming school year's priorities and budget, and 3) teachers need the information to inform their instruction. Through-year assessments could provide more frequent and timely reports on student progress for families and teachers, states could be better positioned to provide greater clarity and transparency for stakeholders about student achievement and school quality, and system leaders could have more timely information to make data driven decisions and target improvement.

### **Within-year growth can provide a more accurate picture of student progress and better identify needs for school improvement and support.**

Most states calculate growth using a statistical model to estimate the amount of student-level growth between the current and prior year(s) relative to similar students. These models focus on grade-level proficiency and do not always represent a clear picture of student growth or where they may start the year. They also do not account for additional factors such as summer learning loss which impacts students differently depending on their level of access to resources. Through-year assessments can provide an opportunity for states to calculate within-year growth by using the first administration as a baseline and providing a clearer picture of how students are making progress towards grade-level proficiency to target improvement and better identify and align supports and resources across the system.

### **State tests can be useful for teachers and students, and be both assessments OF learning and assessments FOR learning.**

There are long standing concerns about the utility of state assessments and the disproportionate footprint they have during the academic year with little return for the students or teachers experiencing them. Through-year assessments can provide valuable information about students' learning and in some cases create the capability to assess student learning of specific standards immediately following relevant instruction. While through-year assessments may not reduce the overall state testing time, the perspective on the value of that time may shift by providing data on student performance at multiple points during the year to support instruction in a less disruptive and more integrated approach with the teaching and learning cycle. Additionally, through-year assessments may replace the need for traditional locally administered interim or benchmark assessments thereby potentially reducing the total amount of time devoted to state and local testing each year.

### **Disaggregated, valid, reliable and comparable information on how all students are progressing towards and meeting state standards throughout the year can inform teacher, school, local and state actions to advance equity.**

A longstanding criticism of summative assessment results is that they are considered to be more strongly correlated with school demographic data rather than a useful measure of student progress or the quality of instruction in schools. Through-year models, if designed with items that are culturally sustaining and experienced by students and teachers following relevant instruction, can better connect what students are assessed on with what they've learned, rather than assessing their access to resources, background knowledge or opportunity.

### **Key trade-offs and considerations**

There are several key considerations and questions for states and policymakers considering through-year assessment models and systems.

- + Which of the models that states are exploring best addresses stakeholder pain points? How do different through-year models meet the needs, context or goals of individual states? **See [here](#) the differences between models across states.**
- + What are the enabling conditions necessary for implementation with fidelity, including considerations related to development of teachers; local control of curriculum and assessments; assessment literacy among teachers, parents and leaders; test security; and administration practices?
- + What are the trade-offs for replacing a single high-stake test at the end of the year with multiple administrations throughout the year? How might states and districts address counterproductive teaching to the test practices in light of potential perceptions of increased high-stake testing?
- + There are currently two viable paths under ESSA for a state to pursue a transition to a through-year system for the state assessment. A state may pursue an IADA waiver or a Multiple Statewide Interim Assessments system. How might different states navigate the specific path they choose, its requirements and trade-offs depending on their goals?

States that are making progress towards transitioning their systems to a through-year model are tackling these questions and considerations head on. The diversity of different approaches to through-year assessments across the country will aid in exploring whether these models have the intended impacts, what unintended consequences they create, and how to best design summative assessments systems which are more equitable, focused and relevant to students, families, educators and school leaders.