



# Rethinking the Test Pile: State Assessment Audit and Assessment Literacy Efforts

February 2026



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# About The Report

This report examines past and current state efforts to conduct assessment audits and build assessment literacy, highlighting lessons learned and opportunities to strengthen state support for districts.

The report builds on Education First’s national study of district assessment systems and the state policy pressures shaping local practice. Together, the state and district analyses, along with lessons learned from assessment audits, surface opportunities for statewide efforts to better align policy, guidance, and supports. These insights are intended to spark action by identifying practical paths forward to focus assessment systems on the measures that provide the most meaningful information for students, educators, and families.

## About the Authors

Education First staff Khaled Ismail and Senna Lamba led this research and authored the report. Austin Wechter designed the report.



## About Education First

Education First is a national, mission-driven strategy and policy organization with deep expertise in education improvement. We help system leaders, advocates, funders and policymakers think bigger and work smarter to create the conditions that drive equity, coherence and excellence for all students. Our mission is to deliver exceptional ideas, experience-based solutions and results so all students—and particularly Black, Indigenous and other students of color and students living in low-income communities—are prepared for success in college, career and life.

For questions about this report or to learn more about Education First’s work on issues related to assessment and accountability, contact [Khaled Ismail](mailto:khaled.ismail@educationfirst.org).

# Introduction and Methodology



# State assessment audits and assessment literacy efforts are key tools states use to support districts in building coherent local assessment systems

## Key definitions

### **Assessment audit or inventory**

A process where states and districts catalog and evaluate the assessments students take and examine their purpose, use and time requirements. Typical goals include streamlining assessment systems, reducing redundancy and increasing coherence.

### **Assessment literacy**

The knowledge, skills and understandings necessary to design, implement and use assessments to support educational decision-making that ultimately improves student achievement. Assessment literacy encompasses data literacy, which is the ability to analyze, interpret and use assessment results/data to inform instruction and improve learning.

# State assessment audits emerged in response to public concern over over-testing, but audits consistently exposed deeper systemic issues

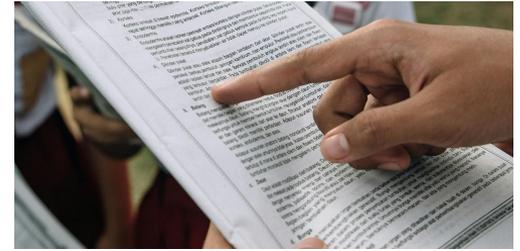
Across states, audits highlighted the same challenges reflected in our recent district and policy scans:



**Clutter from overlapping screeners, diagnostics, interim and local assessments**



**Limited evidence of quality, especially regarding instructional utility**



**Misalignment with teaching, learning and High-Quality Instructional Materials**

# Over the last decade, state approaches to audits have shifted from mandate-driven efforts to guidance and capacity-building



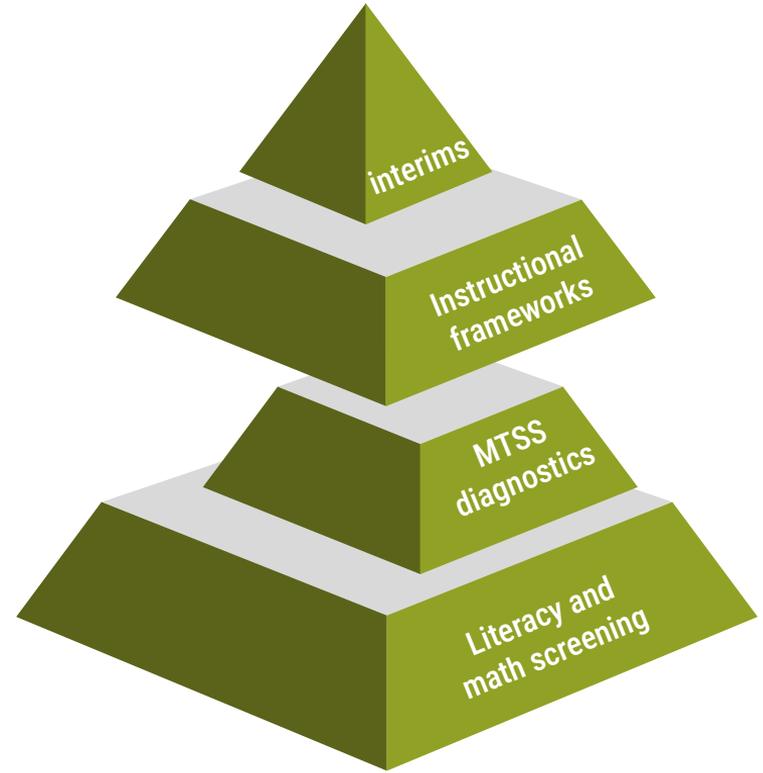
## Despite early activity, past audit efforts rarely produced lasting change and today's tools may fall short of addressing the policy-driven assessment clutter districts face

Past audits surfaced the same issues we identify in our district and state policy scans: assessment clutter, weak evidence of quality, and incoherence with HQIM. Without clear expectations and sustained support, states' current approaches may struggle to counteract these structural problems.



## State policies continue to layer new assessment requirements without clarifying how they fit together

As states expand mandates in literacy and math screening, interims, MTSS diagnostics, and instructional frameworks, districts face increasing pressure to manage coherence on their own.



## Audit and assessment literacy supports represent states' attempts to help districts navigate this complexity, but without clear authority or expectations, they have limited influence

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States who have conducted audit efforts often release reports documenting assessment incoherence and making recommendations to streamline assessment systems, but have little power to mandate districts to take any action.

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Interviews reveal strong norms around maintaining local control: states aim to “equip,” not “dictate,” leaving coherence work largely at the district level.

## As a result, district leaders often shoulder the burden of diagnosing and resolving coherence challenges

In a landscape shaped by multiple state-mandated assessments and unclear guidance, local leaders are tasked with evaluating purpose, overlap and instructional value, often without adequate expertise or capacity.

- Districts must interpret overlapping state requirements and determine how tools fit into MTSS, HQIM and pacing guides.
- Variation in district capacity leads to uneven coherence, with some reducing clutter and others accumulating more assessments over time.
- Without clear expectations, coherence depends heavily on local expertise, not statewide strategy.

# We reviewed past and current state assessment audit efforts, and interviewed state leaders to understand their current strategy to reduce local assessment clutter

To deepen our understanding of this topic, we reviewed how states have mandated, encouraged or supported assessment audit and broader assessment literacy efforts over time.

## This report explores:

- How state approves to assessment audits have evolved over the past decade.
- Current approaches states are taking to strengthen assessment literacy and auditing practices.
- Implications and recommendations for future state audit and literacy efforts.

## This analysis draws on:

- Past state audit efforts (NY, CT, OH, DE, FL),
- Recent statewide audit mandates (CT 2024; OR 2022),
- State-developed tools (NY, PA, MI, CT, OR), and
- Interviews with state leaders (NY, GA, CO, OH) engaged in assessment audit and data literacy initiatives.

# We found early audit efforts raised awareness of assessment clutter but didn't yield sustained change

To interrupt this cycle, states can take a more intentional approach as they design assessment audits and literacy tools. The following recommendations outline how states can better support districts in building coherent instructional and assessment systems:



Design tools that attend to the technical and adaptive nature of this work to drive coherence between instruction and assessments



Set clear expectations and make the work manageable for districts



Pair tools with ongoing capacity-building and monitoring



Make the link between audit efforts to state policy explicit

# Past Efforts to Streamline Assessment Systems

# State efforts to improve assessment coherence have evolved significantly over the last decade



Early state efforts in the 2010s centered on **mandate-driven audits and inventories**. States across the country recommended or required districts to conduct formal assessment audits. **A number of states created one-time grants or review efforts to support assessment audit efforts**, at both the district and state level.

There has been a gradual **pivot away from requiring assessment audits towards guidance** and local discretion. While a handful of states have attempted audit efforts in recent years, current state efforts overall have **shifted towards providing tools and building districts' capacity**, both in terms of assessment audit efforts, but also general assessment literacy efforts.

## This wave of audit activity in the mid-2010s highlighted duplication and misalignment

Growing public concern over the amount of testing in the 2010s put pressure on some states to attempt assessment audit efforts.

States primarily used tools from Achieve, CCSSO, and regional centers.

Assessment audits revealed duplication, misalignment and a heavy reliance on teacher-created assessments and vendor diagnostics.

Findings mirrored today's district and policy scan issues

## In 2014-2015, several states conducted assessment audit efforts, but the lasting impacts of these efforts is unclear

Delaware, New York and Connecticut provided grants to districts to support a comprehensive review and audit of local assessment systems, with the aim of streamlining assessments. Grants helped districts review the “test pile,” but the impact and follow-through are largely undocumented.



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**Connecticut**  
***Assessment Reduction***  
***Grant Program (2015)***



- Awarded over \$425,000 in total to 48 school districts.
- Encouraged districts to use structured tools, such as Achieve's *Student Assessment Inventory for Districts* to reduce redundant or ineffective assessments, decrease testing time and improve assessment quality.
- Emphasized district self-assessment and local discretion, with limited statewide requirements for reporting outcomes.

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**New York**  
***Teaching is***  
***the Core (2014)***



- Funded through New York's Race to the Top grant.
- Awarded \$9.2 million to 25 BOCES representing 257 districts, plus two additional district consortia to support districts in improving the quality of local assessments and eliminating or modifying assessments that did not contribute to teaching and learning.
- Required participating BOCES to coordinate district efforts and share approaches.

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**Delaware**  
***Assessment Inventory***  
***Initiative (2015)***



- Dedicated over \$325,000 in grants to 11 districts to complete Achieve's *Student Assessment Inventory* process, develop action plans and engage communities.
- Published state assessment inventories on its website.

## During that same time period, Ohio and Florida also conducted an audit of assessments at the state level, with some lasting impacts

Limits on local testing time remain in place in both states.

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### Florida



In 2014–15, the state surveyed districts on: Assessments administered; Purposes and decisions informed by results; Timing and frequency of testing. Florida published a statewide summary of findings, including district-level patterns and recommendations to reduce unnecessary testing.

In 2015, Florida adopted a policy establishing a 5% cap on the share of instructional time districts may devote to testing—a limit that remains in place.

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### Ohio



In 2015, Ohio released Testing Report and Recommendations, a comprehensive review of the state's testing landscape focused on testing time. The state surveyed districts to estimate time spent taking assessments and time spent preparing for assessments. The state determined that, on average, students spent 19.8 hours testing and 15 hours preparing, totaling roughly 1–3% of the school year. Based on these findings, Ohio adopted a 2% cap on testing time and a 1% cap on test preparation time, both of which remain in effect.

## The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) created an opening for large-scale audits, but states did not use it because of the tradeoff with state formula grants

States did not take advantage of federal flexibility in ESSA to conduct state assessment audit grants.

- ESSA section §1202 - the “State Option to Conduct Assessment System Audit”- allowed the Secretary to make grants to enable states to “audit State assessment systems and ensure that local educational agencies audit local assessments.” The purpose was to understand the full scope of assessments given in the state and in local educational agencies and create a plan to improve and streamline the state’s assessment system.
- However, **this provision was never utilized**. Because ESSA §1202 did not include dedicated funding, implementing the audit provision would have required the U.S. Department of Education to set aside funds from existing state formula grants. This created a zero-sum tradeoff that reduced incentives for states to apply, as any competitive awards would shrink overall formula allocations.

**Most state activity occurred through other grants, including Race to the Top, rather than through this specific ESSA provision.**

## There is limited evidence of a lasting impact from state assessment audit efforts

- Across these states efforts in the 2010s, there is no publicly available follow-up report or update on their long-term impact. It appears that findings from district and state level audits raised awareness of overtesting but rarely drove lasting changes.
- Most state mandates/grants from the 2010s have sunsetted or it is unclear if efforts are ongoing.
- Post 2010s, there has been a general shift away from state-driven mandates or requirements for assessment audits. Few states today have current efforts related to assessment audit and inventory mandates

**While these initiatives demonstrate that states can play an active role in supporting distinct assessment audits, the absence of ongoing monitoring, sustained funding or accountability mechanisms makes it difficult to assess their lasting effects.**

# Current Approaches and Emerging Lessons

A top-down view of a desk workspace. In the foreground, a person's hands are visible; the right hand holds a black pen over a spiral notebook, while the left hand rests on the page. The desk is cluttered with various items: a black mug, a red pencil, a green highlighter, and several documents. One document features a bar chart with red bars, and another shows a map of a state. The background is slightly blurred, emphasizing the work area.

# State approaches to assessment audit and literacy efforts fall into three categories

## *Prior approach*



### **Mandate-driven**

States required districts to conduct assessment audits—either through state directives or grants - most commonly during the 2010s.

## *Current approaches*



### **Tool-provider**

States offer procurement guidance, templates or audit tools to help districts examine and improve the quality of their local assessment systems.



### **Capacity-builder**

States invest in training and professional learning to strengthen district and educator assessment literacy.

## Conversations with state leaders revealed an emphasis on local control and a shift toward capacity building and assessment literacy support—placing the burden of assessment coherence squarely on districts’ decisionmaking capacity

We spoke with state assessment leaders from four states, who emphasized the following themes:

State guidance has generally shifted from mandating districts conduct assessment audits/inventories towards providing districts with tools and capacity-building support.

A continued emphasis on local control for districts. States primarily see themselves in a support or guidance role.

A focus on helping districts think beyond assessment inventories to also support with assessment and data literacy.

## Mandate-driven approaches did little on their own to produce sustained improvements in assessment coherence

- Mandate-driven approaches in the 2010s typically involved states providing districts grants to support a comprehensive review and audit of local assessment systems. The lasting impacts of these efforts is unclear.
- While there has been a general trend away from this approach, in recent years, a few states like Connecticut and Oregon have attempted to revive audit requirements with reporting expectations.
- While states can use audit requirements to encourage coherent assessment systems, states often do not exercise their authority to require districts to make concrete changes based on audit results. However, these states' efforts to pair auditing with providing tools, professional learning and resources could help districts think about coherence between instruction and assessments more strategically.

## Recently, a few states have revived audit requirements in an attempt to streamline assessment systems

Connecticut and Oregon have both passed legislation requiring the state to conduct comprehensive audits of district-required assessments, and to report on the findings. Both states are making efforts to pair this requirements with tools and resources.

### Connecticut – *Public Act 24093 (2024)*

- Requires CDSE to conduct a comprehensive audit of district-required assessments. CDSE must issue guidance to districts for conducting an assessment inventory, development professional learning around assessment literacy and evaluate inventoried assessments with the goal of eliminating redundant tests.
- Audit launched in 2025. CDSE must submit a report by January, 2026.
- The state has also released tools and resources to help district leaders think intentionally about assessments, including a Sensible Assessment Practices guide.

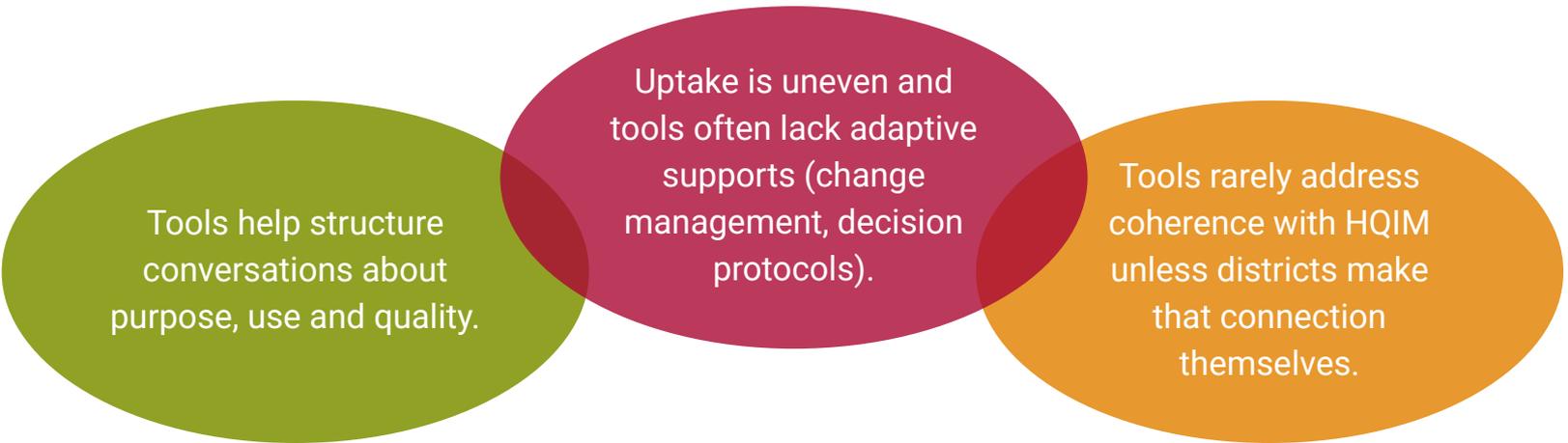
## Oregon – HB 4124 (2022)

- ❑ Mandated a statewide audit to identify redundant district-mandated assessments. Districts were required to complete a survey about their required preK-12 tests.
- ❑ The [Legislative report](#) found that districts use 232 distinct tests and most tests have multiple uses and purposes. The report recommends clarifying assessment purposes and goals and aligning tests with learning objectives, however, districts are not required to act upon the recommendations.
- ❑ The state also offers significant assessment literacy professional development resources on their website, and is considering creating follow-up resources to help districts act on their audit data.



## Some states do not have assessment audit mandates but offer tools and resources to help districts improve the quality of their local assessments

A number of states provide tools related to helping districts think about assessment decluttering and coherence. It is not clear how effective or widely used these tools are.



Tools help structure conversations about purpose, use and quality.

Uptake is uneven and tools often lack adaptive supports (change management, decision protocols).

Tools rarely address coherence with HQIM unless districts make that connection themselves.

# New York has created a guide to support districts in selecting high-quality assessments and get clear on assessment use

The New York State Department of Education has created a guidance document - [Selecting High-Quality District Assessments: The New York State District Assessment Procurement Guidance](#). This guidance was designed to **help district and school teams select high-quality assessment products that address their specific information needs** and outlines four key activities, including conducting an assessment inventory, getting clear on use and vision for assessments, having a clear sense of intended information, uses and users of an assessment, and engaging with assessment vendors to evaluate quality.

## Additional State Examples:

- Pennsylvania's [Guide to K-12 LEA/District Local Assessment Systems](#) and [Creating and Auditing your Assessment Map](#)
- Michigan's [District Assessment Inventory Tool](#)
- Connecticut's [Sensible Assessment Practices](#)
- Oregon's [The Right Assessment for the Right Purpose](#)

## New York's approach prioritizes equipping districts with quality tools, reflecting the state's commitment to local control and acting primarily as a supportive partner

The District Assessment Procurement Guidance aligns to the state's emphasis on local control when it comes to district assessments.

*"That's our vision for support in a way, **giving you the tools to do what you need to at the local level...** If we can equip districts with 'Hey, here's good practice that has been vetted not only by NYSED but by national and international experts' we can start to have those conversations."*

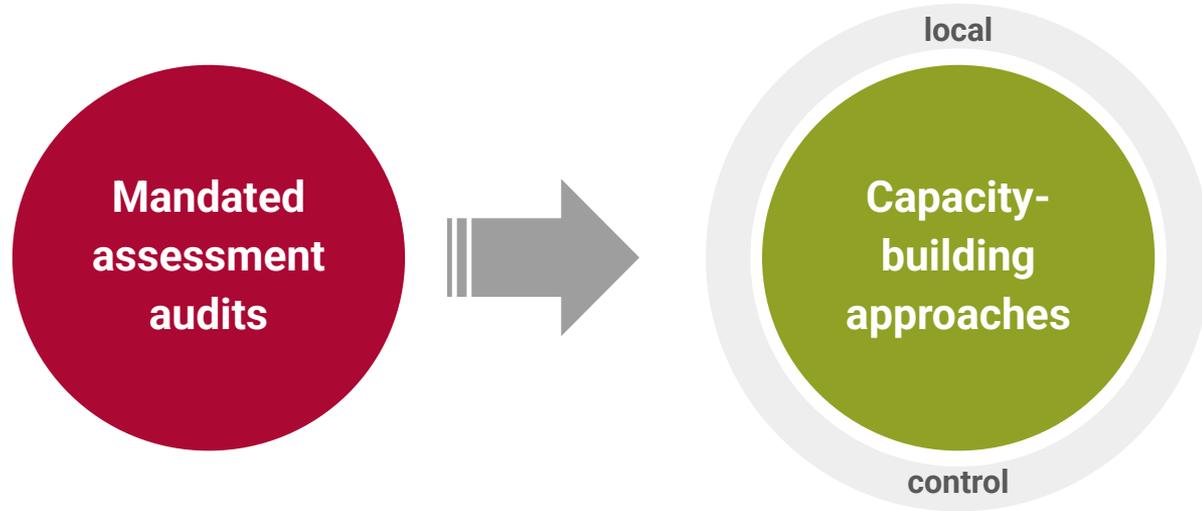
*"**Early results have been quite positive.** It's [District Assessment Procurement Guidance] only been out for less than a year, but I do know some districts have actually incorporated it into professional learning days where they did the activities."*

## Some states go beyond providing tools and are investing more broadly in assessment literacy effort to build districts' capacity when it comes to assessment quality

**Some states are providing support around assessment and data literacy more generally, rather than focusing solely on assessment audits.** These efforts would ideally influence districts' thinking about how to declutter assessments and coherence between assessments and instruction.

- State capacity-building efforts include professional learning and training on both assessment and data literacy.
- Capacity-building helps shift district culture towards intentional assessment use.
- Most efforts are early efforts with no evidence of impact on local assessment systems documented yet.
- These supports do not explicitly tackle assessment clutter or alignment to HQIM unless framed by the state.

The shift away from mandated assessment audits toward capacity-building approaches reflects an emphasis on local control, signaling that states increasingly expect districts to diagnose and manage assessment coherence themselves



States leaders we interviewed **see their primary role in assessment as managing the state assessment system, and largely believe in leaving decisions about formative and interim assessment tools to local districts**

*“Districts have a range of decision making, it’s a local control state, so they can do what they want.”*

*“I want them to be able to consider their local ecosystem and say what works for us?”*

*“Our intent at the department has been to minimize the footprint of high stakes summative testing to the extent we can, and then leaving more time for formative assessment related to instructional supports and things of that nature. **We don’t dictate what districts have to use in terms of interims or anything like that, that is a local decision.** We do provide a free resource to districts.”*

*“Our role is to serve our districts to help guide them with understanding what some of the best practices are... but not necessarily to dictate what a local system design should look like.”*

## New York and Colorado are focused on helping districts think about the quality, purpose and uses of assessments, and how to build a more coherent assessment system

### New York

- NYSED has developed an educational assessment strategy that **outlines the purposes and uses of different types of assessments** and focuses on collecting information from multiple sources to understand students' learning. It outlines the questions that each type of assessment results can help to answer, with **the aim of encouraging districts to think intentionally about what data they are getting from each assessment.**
- The state is using BOCES (regional oversight districts) to roll out its assessment strategy and support districts with understanding the strategy. BOCES work with districts on questions like *"What should I be doing at my local level once I understand the state assessment strategy?"*

## Colorado

- Colorado established the [Assessment Literacy Program](#) to **help districts build more coherent assessment systems and focus on classroom practices**. The project provides districts with optional tools and resources to support assessment practices. The state shared, *“We want to emphasize that assessment is part of instruction and provides ongoing feedback to guide teaching and learning...”* ***The Assessment Literacy Program allows districts to look at their own systems and take an asset-based approach to determining what to do next.”***
- The head of assessments for the state has noticed an improvement in districts’ data practices since the start of the program over a decade ago. She described how in the past, a district lead may have asked her to provide training on the difference between a summative and interim assessment, but now, districts ask for support with tasks like helping teachers connect their instructional and assessment practices in the classroom to a school improvement plan.

***“The Assessment Literacy Program allows districts to look at their own systems and take an asset-based approach to determining what to do next.”***

# Ohio and Georgia are focused on helping districts think about how to use the data from assessments to support student learning

Georgia recognized that districts need support with responding to data from mandated universal literacy screening in K-3 and is actively working to support districts in this area.

*"We're working to provide some additional resources for schools after screening when they need to dig a little deeper into the specific areas of need. **A lot of schools and teachers need support with determining the specific skill area that needs to be addressed with a child.** And so that's an area where our folks have asked for support and we're working to provide that for them at this point."*

Ohio has made significant long-term investments in helping districts use data well by hiring regional data leads, educators who work on state support teams and are trained on using assessment data. These leads build district capacity to understand what high-quality data looks like and how to support school improvement.

*"They [regional data leads] work with districts and talk about what data they have, if it's high quality, and we don't train them to say, 'Hey, you should drop this assessment and do this assessment' because that's not what we're trying to do. **We're trying to get them to understand what is high quality data, what is going to help you inform instruction and lead to school improvement ultimately.**"*

*"**How do we support districts and how do we help them make good choices and ensure that kids aren't overtested?**"*

## There are several key implications for state policy that could anchor states' future efforts

Audit tools alone are insufficient to counter policy-driven clutter.

Monitoring and incentives matter: Without them, districts have little reason to revisit their systems.

Local coherence depends on state clarity and follow through: Clear expectations, definitions, capacity building and shared purpose reduce burden on districts.

Investments in assessment literacy should explicitly support HQIM implementation and not operate separately from academic strategy.

States need to articulate a coherent assessment strategy aligning screeners, diagnostics, interims and instructional frameworks.

# Recommendations



## Early audit efforts raised awareness of assessment clutter but didn't yield sustained change - future state efforts should pair tools with capacity-building, incentives and monitoring to break this cycle

As states design and develop assessment audit and literacy tools and support, they should consider the following recommendations to help districts create coherent instructional and assessment systems:



Design tools that attend to the technical and adaptive nature of this work to drive coherence between instruction and assessments



Set clear expectations and make the work manageable for districts



Pair tools with ongoing capacity-building and monitoring



Make the link between audit efforts to state policy explicit

## RECOMMENDATION #1

# Design tools that attend to the technical and adaptive nature of this work to drive coherence between instruction and assessments

Tools should make the work actionable - not overwhelming- for districts and should address both technical tasks and adaptive work. States should:

- **Technical:** Offer inventory templates, survey instruments, data-collection protocols and procurement supports (sample RFPs, vendor rubrics) that help districts align assessments with instructional goals.
- **Adaptive:** In tools, attend to project and change management aspects, include protocols for decision-making, and operational changes to create coherence between assessments and instruction.
- Include guidance to help districts analyze purpose/use (why the assessment exists, what decisions it supports, who uses the results etc.), instructional value, users, and overlap-ensuring a focus on streamlining assessments.

## Set clear expectations and make the work manageable for districts

States should articulate what districts are expected to do, why, and by when- and provide a shared vision for what high-quality assessments and coherent local assessment systems look like. Clear policies help ensure consistency across districts. State can consider the following:

- Require districts to conduct an assessment inventory on a set cadence, with the goal of reducing redundant assessments and streamlining systems.
- Require districts to document each assessment purpose, intended use, user and potential redundancy, with the goal of increasing the instructional utility of assessments.
- Publish a statewide assessment strategy that defines the roles, uses and purposes and different assessment types (e.g. screener, interims, summatives).
- Emphasize making tools actionable, not overwhelming and consider incentives (funding, grants, partnerships with technical assistant providers) to support districts.

## RECOMMENDATION #3

# Pair tools with ongoing capacity-building and monitoring to ensure districts have the training and support to align assessment systems

Tools alone are insufficient unless paired with meaningful professional learning and support to districts. States can:

- Offer training modules, webinars and professional learning on assessment purpose, use, alignment, data interpretation and coherence.
- Provide sample completed inventories, action plans and implementation tools.
- Leverage regional education centers or regional teams to deliver ongoing coaching and support to districts in using assessment data.
- Support district and regional assessment leads through targeted training and professional networks.
- Emphasize that assessment auditing is an ongoing process - encouraging districts to revisit and refine their systems.

## RECOMMENDATION #4

# Make the link between audit efforts to state policy explicit

The responsibility for making sense of often fragmented or contradictory policies across state offices typically falls to districts. States can better support coherence by ensuring that any assessment audit efforts are clearly aligned with existing state policy:

- Use audit and literacy efforts to help districts navigate and streamline state-required assessments.
- Align all tools with state terminology, goals and assessment purposes.
- Align expectations across assessment, academic and school-improvement divisions to reinforce a coherent statewide vision.
- Offer guidance on how state test results should be used and how statewide assessments fit into a balanced local system.



# Rethinking the Test Pile: State Assessment Audit and Assessment Literacy Efforts

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