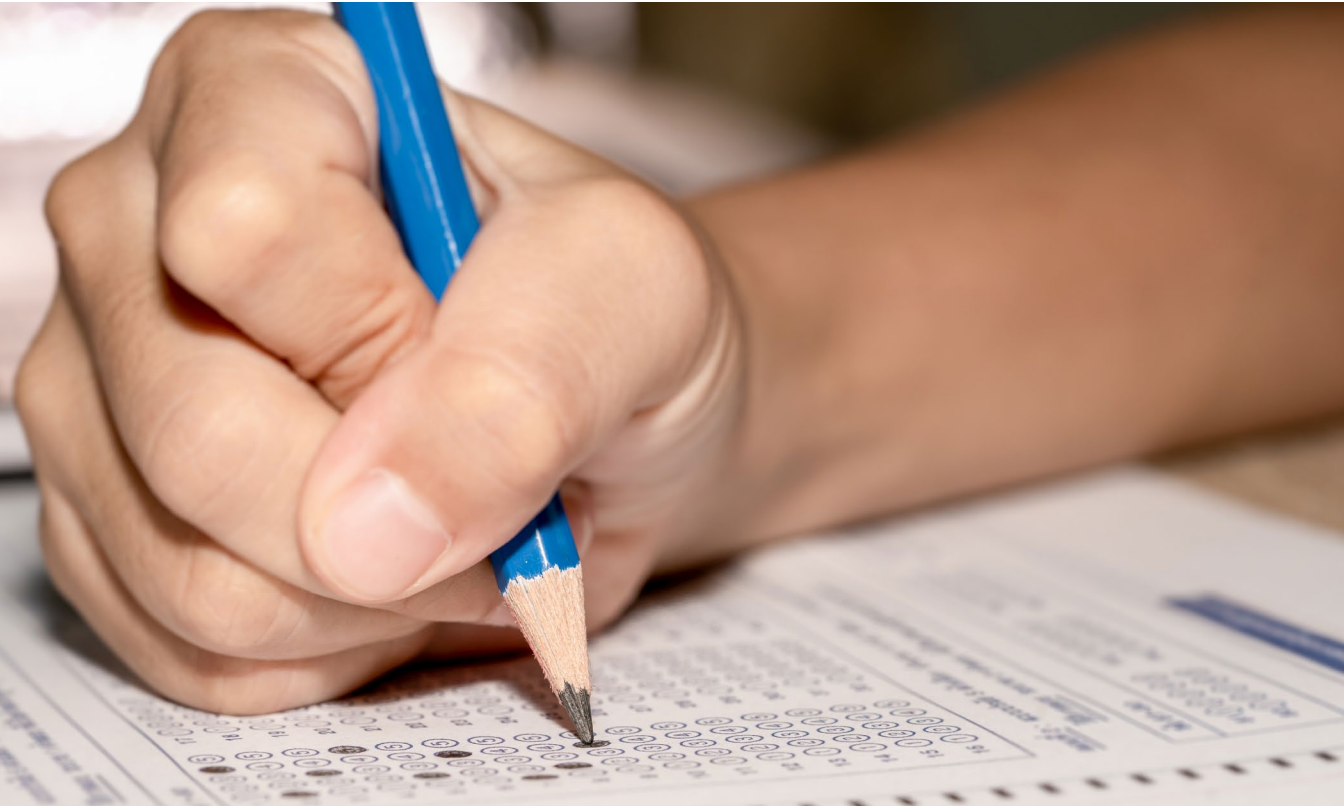


# WHAT'S NEXT

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE BUSH INSTITUTE

JANUARY 2021 · BUSHCENTER.ORG



## ASSESSMENTS



MEASURING STUDENT  
LEARNING CAN LEAD TO MORE  
EQUITABLE SCHOOLS



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# ASSESSMENTS: MEASURING STUDENT LEARNING CAN LEAD TO MORE EQUITABLE SCHOOLS

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State standardized exams help parents, educators, and policymakers understand which students are on track — and who is falling behind — so that the adults can intervene to meet the needs of all students. This information is more crucial than ever given that COVID-19 upended traditional schooling. The following recommendations for federal and state policymakers, as well as school district leaders, will maximize the power of tests to support all children through and beyond this school year.

*Our recommendations:*

- STATE OFFICIALS SHOULD ADMINISTER STATE EXAMS
- INCOMING FEDERAL OFFICIALS SHOULD CONTINUE CURRENT FEDERAL TESTING GUIDANCE TO STATES
- POLICYMAKERS AND DISTRICT LEADERS SHOULD INCLUDE TESTING IN EQUITY STRATEGIES
- DISTRICT LEADERS SHOULD INVENTORY AND ALIGN ALL TESTS
- STATE POLICYMAKERS SHOULD CREATE AN INNOVATION PATHWAY FOR NEW TESTS
- STATE AND DISTRICT LEADERS SHOULD COMMUNICATE TO INFORM AND ENGAGE PARENTS AND TEACHERS
- FEDERAL AND STATE LEADERS SHOULD STRENGTHEN THE ASSESSMENT KNOWLEDGE OF EDUCATORS

The pandemic has forced school closures, shifted millions of students into virtual classrooms, and significantly changed in-person instruction. Benchmark data from fall 2020 shows profound learning loss for many students, particularly students of color, English-language learners, and students with disabilities. Gaps are widening for our most vulnerable young people.

As we focus on safety, there is also a new urgency for federal, state, and local policymakers to use high-quality assessments to precisely determine the academic

trajectory of districts, schools, and students. Reliable, valid, and comparable exams will give policymakers the disaggregated data they need to understand and then address the disproportionate academic fallout from the pandemic, as a [recent Bush Institute series](#) revealed. Parents and caregivers deserve this data as well to help them advocate for their students.

## STATE OFFICIALS SHOULD ADMINISTER STATE EXAMS

It is critical that state education agencies administer their annual state summative exams this spring. These tests produce disaggregated results, comparable from district to district and campus to campus, that will inform policymakers about student learning during the 2020-2021 school year. By using this testing data, officials can direct resources to the students with the most need. Disaggregated data from the exams will ensure that decision making is done through an equity lens.

## INCOMING FEDERAL OFFICIALS SHOULD CONTINUE CURRENT FEDERAL TESTING GUIDANCE TO STATES

The U.S. Department of Education indicated that it would not approve waivers for state assessment in the 2020-2021 school year, and the incoming Biden administration should keep that policy in place. COVID-19-related learning loss is growing at a devastating clip as students struggle through subpar virtual instruction, technology limitations, and limited adult support. The data from state tests helps to inform stakeholders – parents, educators, and policymakers – which students are on track and who has fallen behind. Decisions about resources and interventions should be based on the needs illuminated by comparable student achievement data.

## POLICYMAKERS AND DISTRICT LEADERS SHOULD INCLUDE TESTING IN EQUITY STRATEGIES

Policymakers, superintendents, school board trustees, and principals should ensure that any effort to more equitably serve students uses valid and reliable student academic measurement as a barometer of success. If a proposed strategy does not lead to improved student academic outcomes, where is the equity of opportunity for kids? How will students of color access opportunity in higher education and high wage employment if their academic progress is permanently disrupted in the COVID-19 era?

## DISTRICT LEADERS SHOULD INVENTORY AND ALIGN ALL TESTS

District leaders and school principals should ensure that the purpose and use of each test given in a classroom is clear and distinct. We recommend district leaders conduct a regular inventory of all assessments given to students and identify the objectives and use of each test. District and campus leaders should eliminate tests without a clear and distinct purpose, and leaders should prioritize strong instruction and curriculum over time spent on test prep.

When teachers and parents complain about over testing, the blame is often placed on the once-per-year state standardized testing and test prep. But testing inventories often reveal that the significant majority of tests originate at the campus or district level.

## STATE POLICYMAKERS SHOULD CREATE AN INNOVATION PATHWAY FOR NEW TESTS

State education chiefs should emphasize greater innovation in the development of their state's standardized assessments. Currently, state agencies are limited to a small group of test vendors with the capital and capacity to proffer a test under typically fast timelines.

Co-development is used widely in other industries — including pharmaceuticals, aerospace, and aviation — to facilitate innovation in large scale science-based projects that take time to build. The detailed and rigorous development of standardized tests should be no different, and states would benefit from a similar approach that allows a state team to partner with a vendor to develop next-generation assessments.

## STATE AND DISTRICT LEADERS SHOULD COMMUNICATE TO INFORM AND ENGAGE PARENTS AND TEACHERS

State education leaders and school superintendents need to clearly communicate the purpose and use of tests to teachers, parents, and students so that they understand the need for each assessment and how states, districts, and campuses will use the data. This includes stopping the practice of educators unnecessarily panicking students about state standardized tests.

Administrators should create clear online resources to explain the design, scoring, and sample questions for standardized tests. They also should establish an easily accessible and user-friendly hub for all student academic progress data for use by teachers, parents, and students. Report cards, district exams, state exams, and MAP (Measure of Academic Progress) test data should be housed together so that parents can see their child's full spectrum of academic results in one place. In a [recent series](#) published by the Bush Institute, mom and co-founder of the National Parent Union Keri Rodrigues shared that testing data helps her ensure her children are on the right track.

## FEDERAL AND STATE LEADERS SHOULD STRENGTHEN THE ASSESSMENT KNOWLEDGE OF EDUCATORS

State education leaders should ensure that teacher preparation programs and ongoing professional support offer updated content to help teachers and principals understand, use, and advocate for high-quality tests. Too many educators have gaps in their understanding of assessment design, the roles of formative and summative tests, and how standardized test data informs strategies to more equitably serve students.

State education chiefs should also involve teachers in creating standardized exams. The expertise of classroom educators strengthens and refines exam questions — and their involvement helps demystify the tests for teachers, key stakeholders in the process.

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The current pandemic has blown apart the public education system as we knew it — simultaneously exacerbating vulnerabilities for many children and forcing rapid innovation to meet this instructional moment. The adults in this system must now focus on two things in response: The first is safety for kids and educators. The second is accelerating academic progress for all kids, regardless of race, ethnicity, or disability. The work now is to organize the rest of the system to support those outcomes, and high-quality tests are an important tool in that worthy effort.



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