

# Statewide Assessments in 2021

## AN ESSENTIAL LENS OR A FRUITLESS IMPOSITION?

The Every Student Succeeds Act requires states to test students in math and reading annually in grades 3-8 and once in high school, based on the premise that such testing provides a crucial window into how schools are performing and different populations of students are faring. Last spring, as Covid-19 shuttered schools and upended the nation, the U.S. Department of Education waived those testing requirements. Should Washington do the same this spring? Would testing in 2021 provide a useful glimpse into how students and schools are doing—or would it simply impose an unnecessary burden and yield untrustworthy data? And, if Covid-related disruptions and closures continue into the spring, and millions of students are learning remotely, how can states that do test ensure that assessment strategies are practical, valid, and reliable? Scott Marion, executive director of the Center for Assessment, and Lorrie Shepard, University Distinguished Professor at the School of Education, University of Colorado Boulder, argue against “testing as usual,” while Jessica Baghian, former assistant state education chief for Louisiana, urges policymakers to stay the course on statewide assessments.

**ASSESSMENT DATA  
CAN HELP US BUILD  
BACK BETTER**  
by JESSICA BAGHIAN



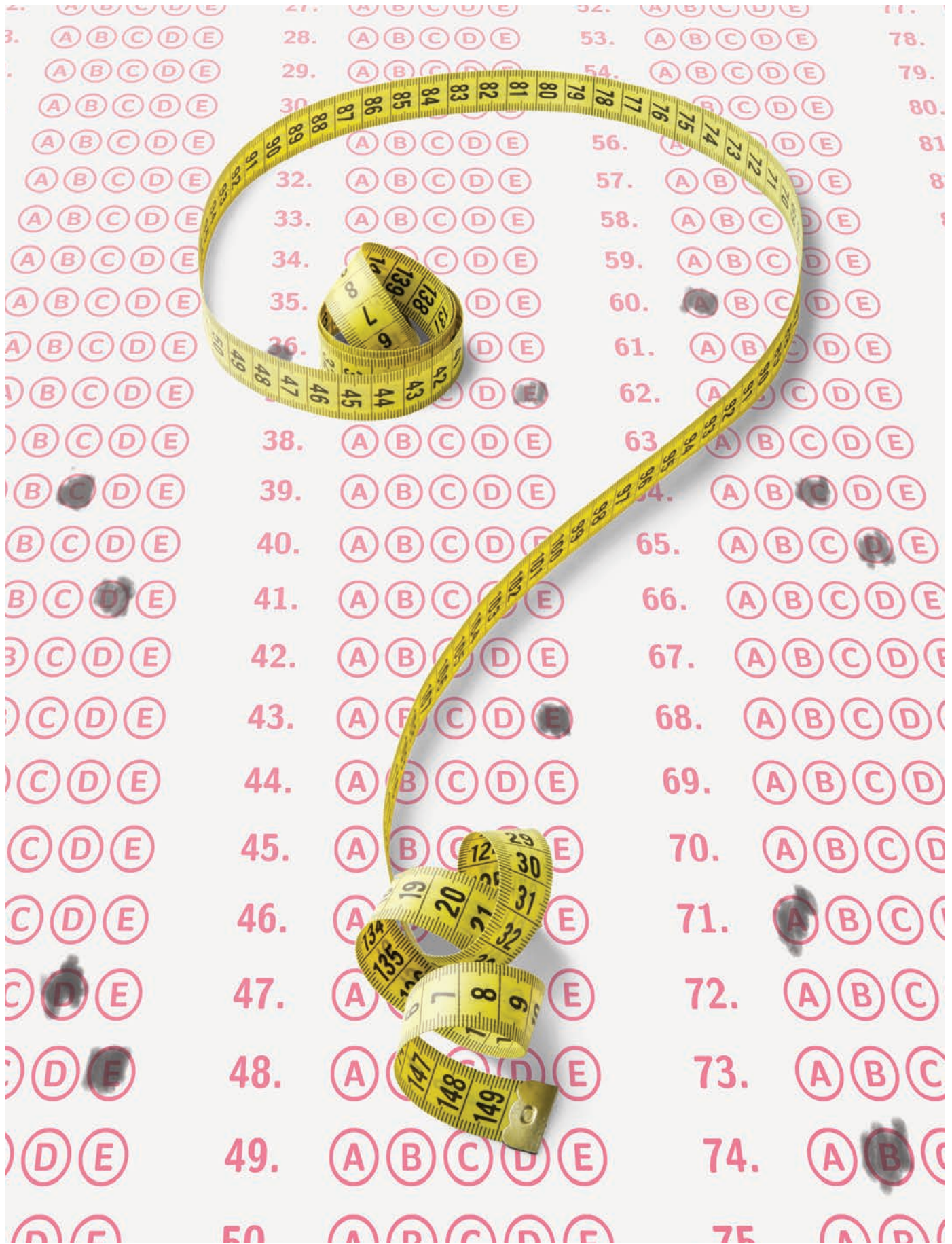
**THE BIDEN ADMINISTRATION** is committed to “building back better” in support of families. One part of building back must be assessing the challenges created by the pandemic, including the nationwide disruption to our children’s education. Families and educators have struggled through endless hours of virtual learning, and many are worried about how their children are faring.

The purpose of assessment, with all of its flaws, has always been to know—where students deserve more, where students are flourishing. *(continued on page 72)*

**FOCUS ON INSTRUCTION  
AND INTERVENTION,  
NOT TESTING, IN 2021**  
by SCOTT MARION  
and LORRIE SHEPARD



**TEACHERS AND PARENTS** have struggled to keep children on course over the past year, but the extended school closures have clearly taken their toll on learning. In light of these extraordinary circumstances, we have four recommendations for the U.S. Department of Education regarding state testing: 1) Provide states with as much flexibility as lawfully permissible to reduce or eliminate school-accountability determinations in the current school year; 2) do not require states to administer tests remotely, because these approaches threaten the valid interpretation of testing data; 3) do not require states to administer *any* statewide tests *(continued on page 73)*





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which students are most in need. And though this is not a typical school year, we are no less in need of this knowledge about our students. In fact, the need is greater. Now, more than ever, clarity and transparency are essential.

As the former chief academic policy officer for Louisiana and as a mother of a school-age child, I urge our new leaders at the federal level not to let states skip another round of assessments, as they did in 2020. Doing so would be a disservice to educators, to families, and to students. We must, instead, temporarily untether assessment from accountability, find creative solutions to the challenge of administering assessments during the pandemic wherever possible, clearly communicate results, caveats and all, and design a pandemic recovery path for every child needing support.

**What We Shouldn't Do: Accountability**

To understand the importance of administering state assessments this school year, it's vital to separate the concepts of assessment and accountability. Assessments tell us what students know and don't know. Accountability is about rewards,

Millions of children, particularly the most vulnerable ones, experienced the same disrupted learning but without the benefit of private-pay support. What is happening to the children who should have learned to read last year? To the children who were struggling academically before the pandemic? To the children who were lost—for months—from the system? How will we know what they need and how best to use our resources to help them move forward without knowing where they are academically? We need to know these answers at scale and as soon as possible. Parents shouldn't have to do what Monica's parents did; frankly, many cannot. The school system should be providing this information.

School systems cannot fully serve families and children without strong assessment systems to identify needs and build plans for addressing those needs; unfortunately, most school systems do not have such systems without state assessment. A statewide assessment will not solve our individual and collective challenges, but it will better define them and can inform an equitable, urgent plan for our children and our system moving forward.

More specifically, statewide assessment data serve numerous purposes at different altitudes, including:

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consequences, and support for the educators, often based on those assessment results. It is not uncommon for educators to conflate these two, both in theory and in practice. It's why assessment can seem unreasonable, especially at a time like the present. And I agree: accountability and punitive consequences are not helpful this year. Knowledge about how to move forward, however, absolutely is.

**What We Need to Do: Offer an Assessment**

I observed the need for assessment firsthand in the spring of 2020, when schools across the nation closed their doors, first temporarily and then for the remainder of the school year. An early-elementary student in Louisiana—let's call her "Monica"—was sent home without direction, and for weeks, got virtually no support for continuing her learning. While receiving no live or recorded instruction and no feedback, like millions of kids across America, Monica began to struggle behaviorally and academically. The school system provided her family with no information about what to do, even as the girl's challenges escalated, so the family obtained assessments, therapy, and tutoring at their own expense; she has since shown great improvement through a targeted, data-informed plan.

*Equipping families with the information they need and deserve.* Parents and guardians are their children's greatest advocates. At home, they often act as educators, and they deserve a reliable, timely lens, even if imperfect, into how their child is mastering grade-level skills. For many, such as Monica and her parents, assessment results can flag areas of concern or provide confirmation that students are progressing as expected. Without state tests, families are often in the dark about their children's true academic readiness, relying only on grades and local assessments, neither of which guarantee alignment to grade-level standards.

*Supporting high-quality classroom planning and instruction.* School boards, superintendents, principals, and teachers also deserve a standards-aligned, rigorous look at how their students are doing. These data help educators and system leaders better understand how to support curriculum implementation, identify where deep instructional interventions are needed, and equitably direct educator expertise to schools and classrooms in need. At the school level, the data inform the structuring of teacher teams and illuminate achievement gaps to be addressed, particularly as teachers prepare for summer school or their incoming *(continued on page 74)*

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unless almost all students have been learning in school for at least a month prior to testing; 4) even if states are able to administer tests in something close to a typical manner, we urge federal flexibility in requiring testing because of likely unintended negative consequences and because desired information on student learning needs can be gathered in other, less costly and intrusive ways. Here we present the reasoning behind our recommendations.

**School Accountability**

Among those who support testing in spring 2021, a limited number continue to push for the results to be linked to school accountability. As Jessica Baghian notes in her companion essay, though, most pro-testing advocates understand that it makes no sense to hold schools accountable for outcomes beyond the schools' control. Student performance in the spring will hinge as much upon digital access and home learning environments as it will on the efforts of educators. No amount of statistical adjustment can disentangle school performance from the cumulative and uneven effects of the

**Test Validity and Usefulness**

If state tests are to serve public-reporting or accountability purposes, they must be administered under standardized conditions that will allow officials to make valid inferences from the results. It is unlikely that all students will have returned to in-person schooling by the time of the usual testing windows in March through May. Therefore, states are left with two unsatisfying options: they can either require students to come into school buildings to take the tests on a schedule that supports social distancing, or they can administer the assessments remotely.

State and district leaders would have to tie themselves in moral knots to require students to come into schools to take the tests when they are not permitting students to enter buildings for learning. Any testing protocols that call for special cooperation from families will likely invite parents to revolt, with many keeping their children at home out of concern for their health. The recent controversy over requiring English learners to come into school to take their English language proficiency exams is evidence of this backlash. A recent survey by researchers at the University of Southern California found that 64 percent of parents support cancelling standardized tests for spring 2021.

Many certification exams for adults are administered under

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pandemic on instruction and learning. Even if a state decides to forgo accountability consequences this year, it is likely that, at least in some quarters, schools and teachers will be blamed for poor tests results.

**Statewide Summative Assessment**

Many advocacy groups and policy leaders are urging that statewide testing take place this spring because "the data are critically needed." There are competing ideas, however, about how the data will be used and whether these uses are technically defensible. There are also conflicting ideas about how tests should be administered, given that the Covid-19 crisis is likely to persist through the spring. These dilemmas come down to three main questions:

- Can statewide testing produce results that are trustworthy and useful this year?
- Even if states are able to administer tests to essentially all students, is testing the best use of resources to gauge learning progress during the pandemic?
- What should state leaders do to understand how best to address the major learning challenges and inequities exacerbated by the pandemic?

strict remote proctoring conditions, but this controlled situation is quite different from simply administering tests remotely. In the case of K–12 education, the remote-proctoring requirements necessary to ensure secure test administration would violate most states' student-privacy rules. Early results from the major interim assessment providers (for example, Curriculum Associates, Northwest Evaluation Association, and Renaissance Learning) also suggest some questionable performance patterns under remote learning and assessment conditions, such as higher-than-usual scores for early-elementary and middle-school students. This phenomenon is likely attributable to parents helping younger students and older students using resources typically not permitted on the tests. Posing even greater concerns, though, are the significant equity issues associated with remote testing, such as bandwidth capacity, device availability, and the varied settings in which students will test (for example, in a private, quiet space versus sharing a kitchen table with siblings engaged in their own tests or lessons). Finally, most technical experts doubt that test scores from in-person testing and remote testing can be combined as if they were equivalent. Essentially all state assessment directors recently indicated their states are not planning to administer *(continued on page 75)*

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classes in fall 2021.

*Directing the use of funds to build back better.* The December 2020 stimulus bill provides critical aid for states and school systems, and there is likely more to come. As state lead-

ers and superintendents make immediate decisions about the distribution of these federal dollars, it will be critical to prioritize learning loss. This is true even as leaders rightfully grapple with how to responsibly manage long-term budgets that have been impacted by local and state budget cuts. Assessment data, among other sources, should help leaders ensure the money is spent on the children who need it most to recover.

**How to Test During a Pandemic**

Some leaders agree we need assessments, as outlined above, but contend that administration is too difficult this year and, therefore, another skip-year is necessary. Critics argue there is no secure way to administer tests, since some students are enrolled in remote-learning models, and therefore, data would not be reliable.

With a creative approach to administration, and the appropriate flexibilities granted at the state and federal levels, it's

are not part of the selected sample of testers could be given the opportunity to opt in. States may also deliver a shorter test that covers only the most critical learning standards tied to success in the next grade level to inform whether a child is on track. Massachusetts plans to use a sampling approach for students in grades 3–8, having each student take only a portion of the statewide test in each subject. States could also consider postponing the test until the beginning of the 2021–22 school year, which would be a particularly helpful adjustment.

*Use statewide interim assessments where they exist.* This is the least desirable and most challenging of the options, because interim, formative tests are designed for a different purpose than summative tests, which are meant to determine whether a child has mastered all grade-level content. Still, formative assessments could allow states to gauge students' performance and increase what families and educators know. If policymakers take this route, it would be critical that they choose formative assessments that are aligned to state standards and not an off-the-shelf product that tests skills and knowledge that differ from what teachers taught throughout the year.

*Fund parent access to assessment options.* If school closures are too extensive this spring, or the state education agency cannot

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possible to collect powerful assessment data while ensuring security and the appropriate allocation of taxpayer dollars. Among the possible approaches, education leaders could choose one or more of the following:

*Pursue "typical" testing of all students in all grades, to the extent possible and with the appropriate accommodations.* In many places, students have returned to at least partial face-to-face learning or will do so by spring 2021, making typical or near-typical testing protocols possible. State education agencies could allow school systems to test later in the year than they normally would to maximize learning time or extend testing windows to accommodate smaller groups or limited technology. Moreover, Congress could incentivize typical testing by allowing a small portion of recovery funds to support the extra efforts required.

*In lieu of typical testing, submit for approval an alternative testing plan that offers a statewide view on outcomes, as well as data on individual students to any family desiring information.* One option, for example, could be to mandate testing for only a sample of students learning in person, as is practiced by the National Assessment of Educational Progress; students who

deliver an option from its assessment team, then leaders should use dollars committed to statewide testing to allow families to select from a curated list of test-from-home options. The state would need to determine the degree of alignment between the test(s) and what children were supposed to learn, but at least this option would provide parents like Monica's with information to guide academic support.

In sum, it is not a typical school year. Some argue testing adds unnecessary, added pressure to an already stressful time. Others argue the tests won't deliver value this year, or the money spent on assessment could be channeled to services that reach students more directly.

But it isn't about perfection or ease; it is about building back better for our children. Yes, the tests may look different. Sure, administration will present challenges. No, the tests may not be directly comparable with past years' results. Yet students, families, educators, taxpayers, and policymakers deserve to know where we are, as education leaders guide how we move forward. Just as managing the spread of Covid-19 requires robust, trusted data, so does our response to the pandemic's educational fallout. ■

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tests remotely. That would appear to leave in-person administration as the only option if testing is to proceed.

Some have suggested administering the state summative test in the fall, when we hope essentially all

students will be back in school. However, tests are designed and validated for specific purposes and uses. End-of-year state summative tests are designed to evaluate the degree to which students have learned the knowledge and skills for the grade or subject they just completed. While the tests from the previous year could be administered in the fall, it would make no sense to do so. Such testing would take time and would not confer any instructional benefit. State tests cover an entire year's worth of content, but at best teachers would only be able to respond to one or two curricular units, which would not be the same for all students. Further, because tests would be administered at a different time of year, it would be difficult to compare the results to prior years' scores for the district as a whole.

**Assessing Pandemic-Related Learning Needs**

On balance, we believe the challenges of testing in 2021 outweigh any potential benefits. Even in the unlikely event

data will only be an approximation (owing to a reduced pool of test-takers and non-comparable administration conditions), other data sources could be just as good or better, depending on the intended use.

For instance, federal and state policymakers may want large-scale test data so they can estimate how much children have learned, which they think will in turn motivate investment in structural interventions such as summer school and one-on-one tutoring (a tenuous assumption). If this is the intended purpose, then aggregation of already administered interim assessment data—exemplified by recent Renaissance Learning and NWEA studies—would meet that goal. Policymakers should capitalize on the interim tests already being administered this year, because we doubt that state testing will yield incrementally more-useful information, given the obstacles to obtaining valid results. (This does not mean we support replacing state tests with multiple-choice interim assessments after the pandemic has passed.)

If the goal is to allocate additional resources to the students and schools that suffered the greatest inequities during the school shutdowns, then education leaders could obtain more-direct information through measures of “opportunity-to-learn.” While opportunity-to-learn usually refers to high-quality indicators such as challenging curriculum, well prepared teachers, and

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that essentially all students are back in school early this spring, we do not think states should be required to administer the statewide assessment as if this were a typical school year.

State assessments cost a lot of money and time—generally worth the benefit in normal years. However, the challenges associated with appropriately interpreting test results this year shift the equation. Interpretation of individual test scores will be challenging enough, but interpreting aggregate scores (for example, by school or subgroup), with shifting participation rates from 2019, will be almost impossible. An even more serious concern is that devoting time to standardized testing will mean a loss of precious instructional time, leading to a considerable opportunity cost if students have only returned to in-school learning a few weeks prior to testing.

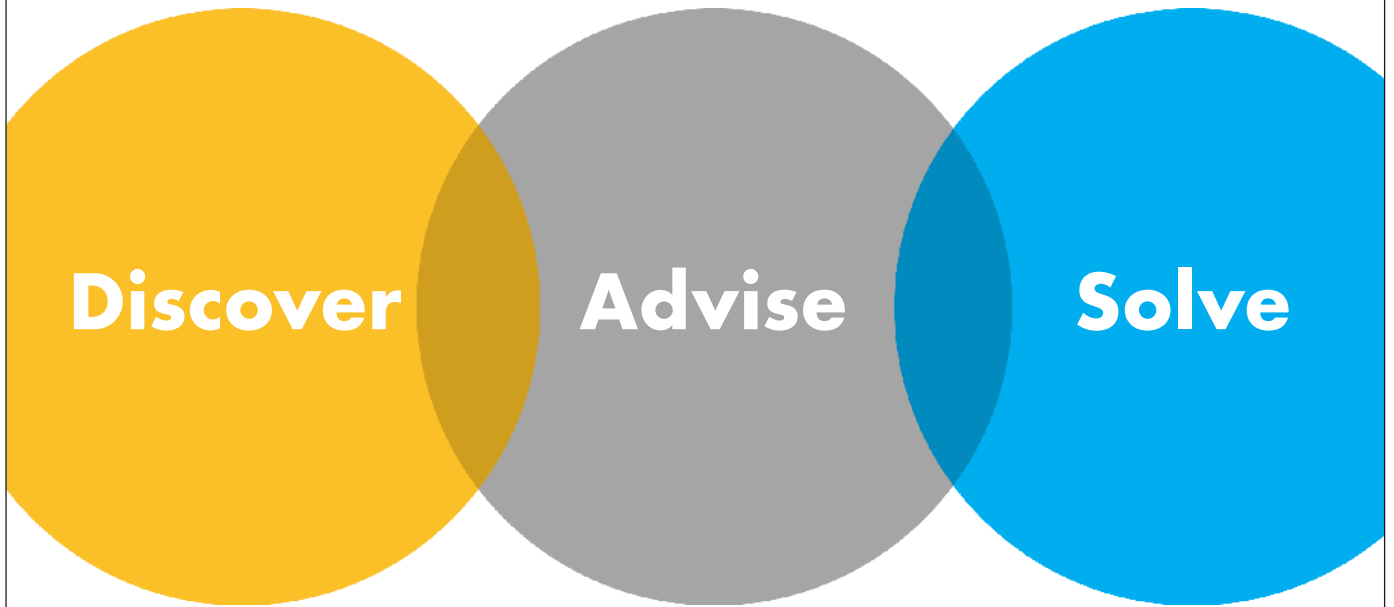
**Addressing Learning Challenges and Inequities**

We recognize that documenting the impact of Covid-19 on student learning is one of the main arguments for testing this year. But a generic claim about “equity” being the reason for testing does not ensure that the best data will be gathered and used to support that stated purpose. Because 2021 state test

the like, in Covid-19 circumstances, students with the gravest learning needs are those who lacked device and Internet access, who experienced the greatest proportion of remote-learning time, or who suffered extensive absences due to family circumstances. Districts already have data on most of these factors.

If policymakers are intent on gathering data on as broad a sample of the state's students as possible, they might consider using a reduced-testing design, such as using a sample (subset) of test questions for each student (as the National Assessment of Educational Progress does), testing a sample of students from all grades, or testing as many students as possible from selected grades (for example, grades 4, 8, and 11). Several of these alternatives would require flexibility from the U.S. Department of Education. Employing any of them is practical if the state and its assessment provider have already engaged in substantial redesign work and *only* if essentially all students can test in schools in somewhat normal conditions.

End-of-year state tests have never provided instructionally useful information for individual students. Knowing that a student is performing below proficiency does not provide any substantive information about what *(continued on page 77)*



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a student does or does not understand. Assessments embedded in a school's current high-quality curriculum are the best tools for teachers in planning instruction and sharing information with parents.

Districts that do not have such assessments in place could identify key assignments that reflect grade-level expectations and could share examples of student work to help parents

to their students to be able to understand the nuances and context of the assessment results.

In sum, given the uncertainty around vaccine distribution and the current explosion of Covid cases, we recommend that the U.S. Department of Education provide considerable flexibility to states regarding summative-assessment requirements this year unless essentially all students are able to test in school and have been learning in school for some time prior to testing. We are not against testing, in fact, quite

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understand how their students are performing relative to standards. Some might wonder if the same concerns about opportunity-to-learn and equity apply to these curriculum-embedded assessments. They do not. Curriculum-embedded assessments can be given under non-standardized conditions on a unit-by-unit basis so teachers can respond instructionally to individual student needs before moving on to the next unit. This is very different from state tests that cover a year's worth of curriculum all at once. Further, teachers are close enough

the opposite, but we already have enough evidence that the pandemic interruptions have taken a huge toll on learning, especially for poor children and children of color. Rather than arguing about testing, we urge devoting energy and money to substantial instructional opportunities during the summer, such as extended summer-school offerings and other significant interventions. The learning shortfalls already being reported are too serious to address via the usual tinkering around the edges. ■

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