

The Guide to ASSESSMENTS (FOR NON-ASSESSMENT EXPERTS)

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No matter who you are, assessments are part of your life. Whether you're taking a driver's license exam, a postsecondary or graduate studies entrance exam like the SAT or GRE, or a licensing exam that is specific to your career path, the reality is that you'll encounter assessments.

In K–12 education, assessments provide leaders, researchers, educators, and parents with information about student progress. But different people use test results for different purposes, so the assessments aren't one size fits all. Leaders and researchers may use test results to analyze trends and understand what's working and for whom. Teachers and parents may use test results to identify the best ways to support learning both throughout the school year and from year to year. To ensure that those closest to students have the data they need to identify systemic inequities, understand how programs affect student learning, inform classroom practices, and support individual learning, there are many types of assessments.

While assessments are part of our lives, exactly what these assessments are and why they are necessary is often less clear. What do they measure? When and why are they administered? Who uses them? What questions do they answer that allow them to be useful for all these purposes?

Assessment conversations can be confusing. There are tradeoffs associated with using each kind of assessment, making all types of assessments necessary and not interchangeable. But in education, a smartly designed assessment system includes three main types of assessments—formative, interim, and summative. The following guide breaks down each of these types of tests and dives deeper into the different ways people use these tools to evaluate and support student learning so that stakeholders of all types can better engage in conversations about data use and assessment policy.

What are standardized tests?

Any assessment conversation inevitably includes the phrase “standardized tests.” But a standardized test is simply any assessment that (1) asks all test takers to answer the same questions, or a selection of questions from a common question bank, in the same way and (2) is scored in a “standard” or consistent manner. These conditions make comparing the performance of individual students or groups of students possible.



Formative Assessments

PROVIDING INFORMATION IN REAL TIME



Formative assessments are not specific tests; they are part of an ongoing process. Formative assessments provide immediately actionable, student-level insights that are used to check understanding and adjust instruction as needed. Formative assessments are short and happen often, so they are best for providing in-the-moment feedback.

What are some examples of formative assessments?

Educators use a wide variety of formal and informal tools for formative assessments, including tests, quizzes, entry and exit tickets, student self-evaluations, interviews, or other games or activities that gather data on student learning. These tools may be teacher-created materials, off-the-shelf products created by a testing company, or a combination (e.g., teachers may use items from a commercial test question bank in a classroom quiz).

Who uses formative assessments and why?

- ▶ **Educators** use formative assessments to see if each student is mastering key content, adjust instruction to meet individual student needs, and evaluate their own teaching to inform conversations with students and parents.
- ▶ **Students** use formative assessments to check their own learning and adjust as needed.

What questions can be answered by formative assessments?

- ▶ Did everyone in the class understand today's lesson?
- ▶ Did Maria's understanding of fractions improve over the last two months?

What are diagnostic assessments?

A diagnostic assessment is a test that measures student knowledge prior to instruction—otherwise known as a pretest. Educators use diagnostic assessment tools to understand what students already know about a topic, identify strengths and areas for growth, and plan instruction accordingly. Some people see diagnostic assessments as a distinct category of test, while others position them as a part of the formative assessment program.

Every type of assessment has value—and how you use assessment results matters. Following are things that formative assessment results generally do and do not do:



DO

- ✓ Provide immediately actionable, student-level insights.
- ✓ Guide classroom instruction.
- ✓ Help educators refine their teaching practice.



DO NOT

- ✗ Measure student knowledge against formal standards.
- ✗ Provide comparable performance data across schools.

Interim Assessments

MEASURING PROGRESS TOWARD GOALS



Interim assessments—sometimes called benchmark assessments—measure student learning at certain intervals to track progress toward goals or standards. Interim assessments are given at set times throughout the year (e.g., fall, winter, spring). These assessments are more formal and happen less frequently than formative assessments. Importantly, these assessments are also comparable across districts and states, so leaders can compare results and strategies with other schools, districts, and states, especially for standardized interim assessments.

What are some examples of interim assessments?

When people talk about interim assessments, they are generally referring to the formal assessments given by districts or states. Many districts and states work with test vendors on these assessments, including the NWEA Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) exam, the Curriculum Associates i-Ready exam, and the Renaissance STAR exam. Some states, such as [Texas](#), administer their own interim assessments as part of their statewide assessment system.

Who uses interim assessments and why?

- ▶ **Educators** use interim assessment results to evaluate student progress, see where improvements can be made, and identify students who need extra support.
- ▶ **Students** use interim assessment results to see where they stand relative to larger learning goals.
- ▶ **Education leaders and policymakers** use this information to compare progress across schools, guide teaching strategies, and evaluate lesson programming.

What questions can be answered by interim assessments?

- ▶ Which students in this classroom are reading on grade level?
- ▶ Are students in this district on track to meet state standards for math?
- ▶ What subject areas require additional attention next quarter to make sure students keep making progress toward their grade-level standards?

Every type of assessment has value—and how you use assessment results matters. Following are things that interim assessment results generally do and do not do:



DO

- ✓ Provide detailed insights into the academic growth and performance of students, especially as compared to academic standards and over time.
- ✓ Enable leaders to make decisions about where to direct resources and programs.



DO NOT

- ✗ Directly guide classroom instruction.
- ✗ Inform school-, district-, or state-level decisionmaking.
- ✗ Allow state leaders to calculate student growth and year-to-year progress.

Summative Assessments

ENABLING COMPARISON



A summative assessment is any test given at the end of instruction, including end-of-course and Advanced Placement exams; however, the term is most commonly associated with the annual statewide assessments required under state or federal law. These standardized tests are given in every school in the state at the end of each year and measure student learning progress toward grade-level standards. Although these assessments are often the kind that people think of first, summative assessments are actually administered less frequently than formative or interim assessments. Educators and leaders use summative exams to compare student outcomes across schools or districts, evaluate instruction, and inform decisionmaking.

What are some examples of summative assessments?

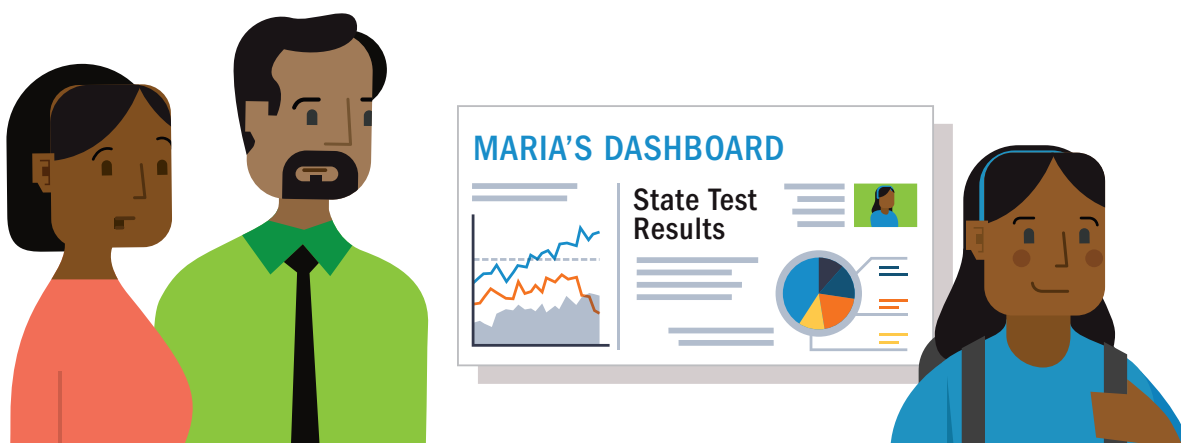
States use different summative assessments to measure student performance against state standards. Some states use their own assessments, while others participate in assessment consortia that use a common test, such as the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) or Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium. The National Assessment of Educational Progress is another example of a summative assessment; administered annually to a sample of 4th-, 8th-, and 12th-grade students across the country, this test provides a snapshot of educational outcomes nationally and serves as the “nation’s report card.”

Who uses summative assessments and why?

- ▶ **Educators and school leaders** use summative assessments to see if individual students met grade-level standards and evaluate students’ year-to-year progress (otherwise known as student academic growth).
- ▶ Some **district and state leaders** use summative assessments for grade promotion or graduation requirements or in teacher evaluation systems.
- ▶ **Policymakers and state leaders** use this information to compare outcomes across districts and between student groups and to identify areas where they can focus support.
- ▶ **State leaders** use data from annual summative assessments in accountability and reporting systems, as required by the federal Every Student Succeeds Act.

What questions can be answered by summative assessments?

- ▶ Are Black and white students being served equally well by schools in this state?
- ▶ Have students met learning goals across core subjects?
- ▶ Are students showing a better grasp of subject competency after a new curriculum was introduced?
- ▶ How much has Joey learned compared to peers at his level?



Every type of assessment has value—and how you use assessment results matters. Following are things that summative assessment results generally do and do not do:



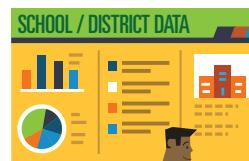
DO

- ✓ Provide insight into student progress toward state-level standards for both individual students and groups of students.
- ✓ Allow state leaders to calculate student growth and evaluate year-to-year progress.
- ✓ Enable leaders to make comparisons across districts and between student groups and to direct resources and support where they are needed most.
- ✓ Inform state-, district-, and school-level decisionmaking.

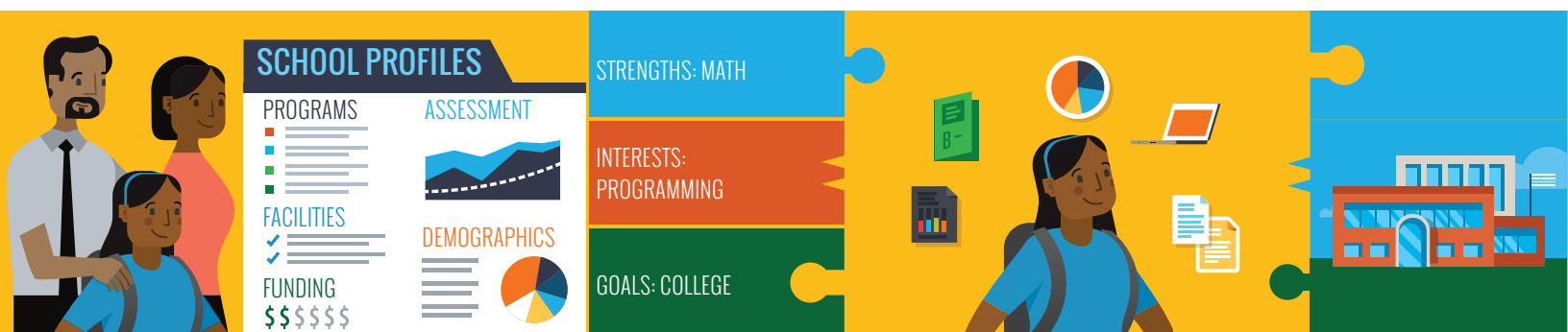


DO NOT

- ✗ Provide educators and education leaders with immediate, in-the-moment feedback.
- ✗ Produce concrete insights into specific skills.



No one type of assessment will meet every type of need; each assessment provides unique insight into an issue that matters for students. When leaders, educators, and parents have the information they need about what students are learning, they can better support all students on their pathways through education and beyond.



Quick Guide to ASSESSMENTS



Assessment data is one piece of the puzzle that gives leaders, researchers, educators, and parents a more complete picture of students' academic success. But you shouldn't have to be an assessment expert to understand the different kinds of assessments and what they tell you.



FOR PARENTS, TEACHERS, AND COMMUNITY MEMBERS

Assessments provide those closest to students with information about student progress. But they aren't one size fits all. There are many types of assessments used for different purposes by different people.

STANDARDIZED TESTS: Any assessment that asks all test takers to answer the same questions and is scored the same way for all students.

FORMATIVE ASSESSMENTS: Tests, quizzes, and any other methods that teachers use frequently to check for understanding in the classroom and provide in-the-moment feedback on student progress. Formative assessments are usually developed locally and often teacher written.

INTERIM ASSESSMENTS: Tests that measure student learning at certain intervals to track progress toward goals or standards. Interim assessments are usually standardized and developed outside of the school system.

SUMMATIVE ASSESSMENTS: Any test given at the end of instruction, including annual statewide assessments required under state or federal law, end-of-course exams, and Advanced Placement exams.



FOR SCHOOL LEADERS AND OTHER DECISIONMAKERS

Above and beyond understanding assessments and the roles they play, it's important for decisionmakers to consider the following when engaging with assessments:

- 1. BE CLEAR ABOUT WHY.** While schools administer tests, many of the tests are designed/scored by external partners, and decisions about what the exam is and how the data will be used are often made by agencies with school oversight. It is critical to be clear why schools are administering each assessment and how the adults in the school and district will understand and use the results.
- 2. MAKE SURE THE DATA IS TIMELY.** Assessments result in data. To be useful, that data must be delivered to educators and families as soon as possible, and appropriate training must be in place for educators and administrators to ensure that it is used to support students.
- 3. TRANSPARENCY IS KEY.** Being transparent about why an assessment is needed and how the data will be used is critical so educators, families, and communities can ensure that data is handled appropriately. Aggregate assessment data should be not only shared publicly but also presented alongside other data to provide context for the results. For example, data on indicators like chronic absence and graduation rates has always been essential context for student performance.