



The Education Trust

TESTING 101: A GUIDE FOR POLICYMAKERS

For more than a decade, states have been required to assess all students in grades 3-8 once per year, then once again in high school. These tests have been critical in helping parents know where their children are on state standards and in making sure that schools are accountable for all of their children. Now, Congress is considering two alternatives: one would change the frequency to once every three or four years, the other would allow school districts to choose their own tests, instead of a common statewide test. Here is a comparison of the three options:

	Current Law: Annual Testing Grades 3-8 and Once in High School	Grade Span Testing: Once, Each, in Elementary, Middle, and High School	District Options: Annual Measurement Grades 3-8 and Once in High School, but Different Across Districts
Who is tested?	Every child is assessed in grades 3-8 and once in high school.	States pick one grade in each span (for example, 4th, 8th and 11th grade) and test every child in that grade level.	Every child is assessed on state standards in grades 3-8 and once in high school, but the way of doing that will vary across different districts in a state.
How often will children be tested with federally required tests?	Once every year in grades 3-8, then at least once again in high school.	Approximately every 3-4 years.	Students will have to be “measured” once every year in grades 3-8, then at least once again in high school, but not necessarily through a “test.”
Is the test the same for all children in the same grade?	Yes.	Yes.	No. It must be “comparable,” but not necessarily the same.
What kind of data will it produce to help parents choose schools?	Parents will be able to compare both performance and growth with every other school in your state. No children can be hidden, and group performance will be transparent.	Parents will only be able to see data on achievement for one grade level in a school, even though that school may serve as many as six grade levels. And parents will not be able to find out how much children grow from entrance to exit.	Because the children in each district (or charter school) may be assessed differently than those in neighboring schools or districts, it will be hard for parents to trust the data to help them choose the best school for their children.
What kind of data will it produce for accountability systems?	State policymakers will have a wide range of options for designing next-generation accountability systems. They will be able to weigh both proficiency and growth. They will be able to weight some grade levels in a school higher than others. And they will be able to track the progress of both individual students and the groups of students who have historically lagged behind.	Accountability systems will look more like those of the ‘90s than those of today. Most schools will be rated only on one grade level. And we will no longer be able to measure growth. Also, given small numbers in single grades, it will often be impossible to disaggregate performance data.	State policymakers will technically have a wide range of options for designing next-generation accountability systems, but the data used to populate those systems will be less trustworthy from district-to-district.
If children are behind, how long will it be before anyone can be sure they are back on track?	No more than one year (except in high school).	At least 3 or 4 years. In between that, parents will have to rely just on teacher grades and policymakers will have no data at all.	No more than one year, though the definition of “on track” might vary between districts or schools.
Will there be sufficient data to help districts identify and reward top-performing teachers and get help to those who aren’t effective in the classroom?	Yes.	No.	Perhaps. But there will be no assurance that what is “good” in one school or district is “good” in any other.