



Nevada State and District Assessment Focus Group Results

SUMMARY REPORT

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Executive Summary

Background and Method

Focus groups were conducted on behalf of the Nevada Department of Education (NDE) to investigate perceptions of the purpose, value, and burden of local and state assessments, and solicit suggestions for implementing a high quality assessment system in Nevada. Six focus groups were conducted with a total of 39 participants in three locations across Nevada. Participants represented a variety of stakeholder groups, including testing/assessment office staff, principals, teachers, students, union representatives, and members of the community.

District Assessment Findings

The most frequently discussed district assessment among all focus groups was the Northwest Evaluation Association™ Measures of Academic Progress® (MAP®). Participants noted that MAP® assessments are helpful for tracking individual student progress over time, as well as informing school improvement efforts. Particularly effective aspects of the MAP® assessment system were perceived to be its consistency and the ability to access and manipulate data to extract relevant information.

Benefits of District Assessments. The immediacy of results was the most commonly discussed benefit of district assessments. District assessments are used primarily by teachers to:

- guide professional learning communities and inform instruction;
- communicate with parents about student progress;
- identify struggling students and take steps to remediate;
- assess knowledge;
- monitor progress; and
- benchmark for state tests.

Concerns about District Assessments. The primary concern about district assessments was the potential for data to be misused or misinterpreted.

Suggestions for District Assessment Systems. The only consistent suggestion for district assessments was that they be useful to inform instruction. Disagreement occurred about whether district assessments should be aligned with the state assessment, be independent of the assessment, or inform how to prepare for the state assessment. There was no consensus over the frequency, scheduling, or content of district assessments.

State Assessment Findings

Focus group participants were given a list of individual tests that comprise the state assessment system, and discussions were based on this list. Five state assessments were identified by participants as particularly noteworthy. Benefits and challenges related to the American College Test (ACT), Career and Technical Education (CTE) assessments, and the WIDA English Language

Proficiency Assessment were all noted. In addition, concerns about Smarter Balanced Assessments and High School End of Course (EOC) Exams were raised.

Benefits of Current State Assessment System. Participants noted that general benefits of the state assessment system included the ability to assess student achievement, student growth over time, areas for student remediation; and school performance.

Concerns about the Current State Assessment System. Primary concerns included:

- *Timeliness of results.* State assessments were not considered useful because a number of constituents claimed that they have not seen the results, and this was frustrating;
- *Amount of testing.* The number of tests and time committed to administering them was related to a significant loss of instructional time, and adverse behavioral (e.g., disengagement) and psychological (e.g., stress, test anxiety) effects on students;
- *Logistics.* Challenges related to online administration, necessary equipment, and planning emerged; and
- *Content.* Concerns about the validity, content level, and clarity of assessments were expressed.

Suggestions for the State Assessment System. Suggestions for the state assessment system included:

- provide quick turnaround of results;
- reduce redundancy across tests;
- have shorter administration times for each test;
- communicate clear, practical purposes for assessments;
- increase funding and access to resources to support administration of assessments; and
- solicit teacher input in developing the assessments.

Additional Findings

State and District Assessment Stakeholders. Participants across focus groups were consistent in identifying who should benefit from assessment results. For both state and district assessments, the most frequently identified stakeholder groups were teachers, administrators, students, parents, district staff, legislators, and state education agency staff.

Disparate Beliefs about Assessments. Participants expressed many different beliefs about the use of assessments. Some participants believed that aggregate scores (e.g., average school and district scores) have no validity. Some participants believed that individual scores (e.g., a single student score) hold no validity. Some participants believed that individual scores can be meaningfully compared to state results. These disparate beliefs suggest that there was not a shared vision regarding the purpose of assessments among participants.

Nevada State and District Assessment Focus Groups

Background

In April, May, and June of 2016, the Nevada Department of Education (NDE), under the guidance of the Center on Standards and Assessment Implementation and West Comprehensive Center at WestEd, conducted an audit of the Nevada State Assessment System and district-level assessments. The audit was intended to provide information to NDE about current assessments being used within the state and help to determine future direction for statewide assessment. This assessment audit utilized three methods: a local education agency assessment inventory; an online survey for district assessment directors and charter school representatives; and focus groups in three Nevada regions.

This summary presents the results of the focus groups, which asked Nevada’s District Test Directors (DTDs), district and building administrators, teachers, union representatives, School Board members, parents, and community members to provide feedback on the perceived benefits and burdens of state and district assessments.

Data Collection Process

To ensure an understanding of state testing, researchers reviewed assessments currently in place. A one-page state assessment summary chart was distributed containing the following information:

- Career and Technical Education (CTE) Assessments — Workplace Readiness Skills Assessment and End-of-Program Technical Assessments for students who complete a program course sequence.
- College and Career Readiness Assessment — The American College Test (ACT) given to high school juniors.
- English Language Proficiency Assessment (ELPA) — This test is known as WIDA Access for ELLs and measures fluency in the English language.
- High School End-of-Course Exams (EOC) — Tests taken when students complete high school courses in English/Language Arts I and II, Math I and II, and Integrated Math I and II.
- High School Proficiency Exams (HSPE) — Mathematics, English/Language Arts, and Writing assessments that measure content mastery. These tests will be administered to high school seniors for the last time in 2016. Only fifth year seniors and adults will take these exams after June 2016.
- National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP) – Students in grades 4, 8, and 12 are selected randomly to take this nationwide assessment.

- Nevada Alternate Assessment (NAA) – This is the assessment for the 1% students who are unable to take the general education summative assessment due to identified disabilities.
- Science Grades 5 and 8 – This assessment was first administered online in 2016 with field test items aligned to the Nevada Academic Content Standards and Next Generation Science Standards.
- Science Grade 10 – This assessment was administered via paper and pencil in 2016. The 2017 administration will be administered online.
- Smarter Balanced Assessments — These online assessments are aligned to the Nevada Academic Content Standards and are based on the Common Core Standards in English/Language Arts and Mathematics for students in grades 3–8. They are criterion-referenced tests.

Participants in focus groups were informed that the purpose of the discussions was to understand the combined impact of state and local assessments and capture a more comprehensive picture of current assessment practices across the state. Focus groups were facilitated in three regions (remote town, mid-sized city, and large city) to inform next steps and potential redesign of Nevada’s assessment plan.

Sample

Six focus groups were conducted with a total of 39 participants. Exhibit 1 shows the distribution of stakeholders across the sample. About a quarter were from testing or assessment offices and a quarter were teachers. The rest were union representatives (teachers), students, community members/parents, and central office staff.

EXHIBIT 1. NEVADA ASSESSMENT SYSTEM FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT CHARACTERISTICS JULY, 2016

Role	Number	Percent
Testing/Assessment Office	9	23.1
Teacher	9	23.1
Principal/Vice Principal	5	12.8
Students	4	10.3
Union Representatives	4	10.3
Community Members	3	7.7
Other Central Office	2	5.1
Parents	2	5.1
Board Members	1	2.6
TOTAL	39	100.1

Note: Percentages do not add up to 100% due to rounding.

Analysis

Qualitative data were analyzed to identify trends in response to each question, and then larger themes were extracted from these trends.

District Assessment Findings

Focus group members identified 13 different assessments collectively administered by their districts. Exhibit 2 includes a list of name, type, and estimated frequency of administration for each assessment. District assessments were administered across K-12. Assessments are predominantly formative. Participants reported that some districts in Nevada use a common assessment system while other districts do not, in which case assessments vary across schools. The content areas that participants identified for district assessments were varied.

The most commonly discussed district assessment among all focus groups was the Northwest Evaluation Association™ Measures of Academic Progress® (MAP®). Participants noted that MAP® assessments are helpful for tracking individual student progress over time, and for informing school improvement efforts. Participants identified consistency and the ability to access and manipulate data to extract relevant information as being particularly important aspects of MAP®.

Estimates of the frequency of district assessments varied. As shown in Exhibit 2, frequency of formative assessment varied from twice a year to once every few weeks. Many focus group participants expressed a general sentiment that there was too much testing.

EXHIBIT 2. DISTRICT ASSESSMENTS IDENTIFIED BY FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS JULY, 2016

Assessment	Type	Estimated Frequency
Accelerated Reader	Formative	<i>Not estimated</i>
Acuity Assessment	Formative	3 times a year
Arizona's Instrument to Measure Standards (AIMS)	Formative	3 times a year
Common formative assessment (CFA)	Formative	Every 3 weeks
Dynamic Indicators of Basic Literacy Skills (DIBELS)	Formative	<i>Not estimated</i>
Developmental Reading Assessment, 2 nd Edition (DRA)	Formative	Twice a year
Discovery Education Assessment	Formative	<i>Not estimated</i>
Evaluate assessments	Formative	<i>Not estimated</i>
High school semester finals	Summative	2 times a year
i-Ready Adaptive Diagnostic	Formative	<i>Not estimated</i>
Measures of Academic Progress® (MAP)®	Formative	2-3 times a year
Scholastic Reading Inventory (SRI)	Formative	<i>Not estimated</i>
STAR Assessments	Formative	<i>Not estimated</i>

Estimates of the time dedicated to testing varied from several minutes to three hours. Again, many expressed a general sentiment that district assessments took too much time. Overall, the frequency and time dedicated to testing varied between districts and, in some cases, schools.

Benefits of District Assessment Systems. The most commonly discussed benefit of district assessments was the immediacy of results. Participants noted that district assessments were used primarily by teachers, and that the assessments served multiple purposes, including:

- guiding professional learning communities and informing instruction;
- communicating to parents about student progress;
- identifying struggling students;
- assessing knowledge;
- monitoring progress; and
- predicting scores on state tests.

Other benefits of district assessment systems mentioned by focus group participants varied by geographic location.

Benefits of district assessments from participants in the remote town category included:

- examining longitudinal trends;
- focusing more on what was taught (compared to state tests); and
- more accurate results since students reportedly value district assessments more than state assessments.

Benefits of district assessments from participants in the mid-sized city category included:

- examining longitudinal trends;
- comparing school performance; and
- consistency within districts.

Concerns about District Assessment Systems. The primary concern about district assessments was the possibility of data being misused or misinterpreted. Other concerns that were expressed about district assessment systems varied by geographic location. A concern about district assessments from participants in the remote town and mid-sized city category included teachers focusing too heavily on tests. Participants in the large city category were concerned about the scoring of tests (e.g., norming and cut scores) and a lack of alignment with state assessments.

Suggestions for District Assessment Systems. Participants had many different ideas about what an ideal district assessment system would look like. The only consistent suggestion for district assessments was that they be useful to inform instruction. There was widespread disagreement about the relation between state and district assessments: some participants in mid-size city and large city categories suggested that district assessments be aligned to the state assessments. Participants in the remote town category suggested that district assessments

inform state assessments. Some participants in the large city category said they should be independent of the state system. There was no consensus about the frequency, scheduling, or content of district assessments.

Other suggestions for district assessments varied by geographic location. Participants in the remote town category suggested that the district assessment system include:

- results useful to inform instruction;
- clear purpose and vision;
- collective buy-in; and
- exam results that contribute to student grades.

Participants in the mid-sized city category suggested that the district assessment system include:

- formative assessment; and
- ensuring results are useful to inform instruction.

Participants in the large city category suggested that the district assessment system include:

- formative assessment;
- clear purpose and vision;
- collective buy-in;
- alignment to standards and curriculum;
- streamlined or shortened versions; and
- the ability to make comparisons to state and national results.

State Assessment Findings

Focus group participants were given a list of individual tests that comprise the state assessment system. Benefits and challenges of the ACT, CTE, and WIDA were all noted. In addition, concerns about Smarter Balanced and EOCs were raised.

ACT. Participants reported that the ACT was particularly useful for college-bound students to assess their readiness and identify areas where students need improvement. However, participants were also concerned about the lack of usefulness for non-college bound students, and noted that the assessment was a burden on students.

CTE. Participants reported that students received their CTE results quickly, and so could use them to assess their own progress. They thought that having the tests for alternative classes was positive because it provided standards and a benchmark of progress. However, some participants indicated that other benchmarks of mastery, such as industry certifications, would be more useful in the areas CTEs are designed to assess.

WIDA. Participants said that the WIDA test for English language proficiency was helpful for assessing language acquisition, so they could determine services and placement for individual

students. Participants also noted that the results could be used to inform training. However, participants also remarked that the test placed a high emphasis on vocabulary, and was very time-consuming to administer.

Smarter Balanced. Participants noted that Smarter Balanced offered a “snapshot in time,” but they were skeptical about the reliability of the test. Some participants believed the test results could be difficult to understand, that the testing window was too long, and that the directions for administration were not communicated in a timely manner.

EOCs. Participants thought that EOCs represented a duplication of assessments already given by teachers as part of their grading systems. They questioned the alignment of curriculum and teaching with the standards in EOCs. Participants also questioned state plans for re-testing. There also appeared to be some confusion about EOCs: participants reported that students did not always take EOCs immediately after completing the course. Participants also mentioned High School Proficiency Exams (HSPEs), suggesting that they may not be aware of the transition from HSPEs to EOCs.

Benefits of the Current State Assessment System. Benefits of the state assessment system included the ability to assess student achievement and growth over time, identify areas for remediation, and assess school performance.

Other benefits of the state assessment system varied by geographic location. Participants in the mid-size and large city categories indicated that benefits of the state assessment system included:

- promotion of the alignment of curriculum to state standards;
- the ability of staff to use assessments to inform instruction;
- consistency across districts; and
- comparison of individual schools to state and national performance.

Concerns about the Current State Assessment System. The most common concern that participants raised with respect to state assessments was the timeliness of results. In every focus group, participants reported that they have not received test results, and therefore could not use the results for any purpose. Many participants said they have not received results for multiple years for some tests; others noted that even when results are provided, the data come after the school year ends, too late to inform instruction. The lack of results appeared to be a particular area of frustration given the amount of time and energy that went into the testing process. Some participants were under the impression that online administration of the test would lead to more timely results, and so were disappointed that this was not the case. Participants strongly believed that a key feature of an ideal assessment system would be the timely delivery of results.

Participants consistently reported that there were too many state assessments that took too long to administer. Participants in every focus group believed that there were redundancies

within the state assessment system that should be eliminated, resulting in fewer tests. They expressed a desire for shorter administration periods for tests.

Participants identified a number of ways that assessment negatively impacted the educational system. The most common concern was loss of instructional time; estimates of the instructional time lost directly to test administration ranged from four days for one set of students to one month for all tests in a school. Participants also noted that instruction is negatively impacted due to pressures to “teach to the test” and imposes time constraints on instruction. Participants identified ways that state assessments indirectly affected instructional time through accommodations made to school schedules. For example, participants reported that their schools had to alter their schedule in the spring, that computer labs would not be available for regular use, and that some schools instructed students to stay home on days they were not being tested to accommodate test administration. Participants were also concerned about the effects on students, noting that the frequency and duration of the state assessment system led to adverse behavioral outcomes (e.g., disengagement in the classroom, not trying hard on tests, test fatigue, missing classes) and adverse psychological outcomes (e.g., test anxiety, stress, malaise, etc.).

Participants noted a number of logistical concerns about administration of state assessments, including the capacity to administer the test online (e.g., bandwidth issues); equipment (e.g., sufficient number of computers for testing days); scheduling and accommodating restricted testing windows; and preparation for administration. A lack of communication about test administration and lack of support for trouble-shooting from the DOE were also noted by participants in the large city category.

Other concerns about the state assessments included the observation that the content was too advanced, and online administration relied on irrelevant skills, particularly for younger students. Teacher stress related to testing was also mentioned, along with concerns regarding political and media misuse of assessment results.

Other concerns identified by focus group participants about the state assessment system varied by geographic location. Concerns from participants in the remote town category included the following:

- tests do not accurately assess student knowledge;
- state assessments are not sensitive to individuality, including student issues like IEP status, and district issues like region, location, or funding;
- the number of parents who choose to opt-out for their students is increasing;
- inconsistency in what assessments are used at state level from year to year;
- purpose of assessments being unclear;
- lack of financial resources to support assessment;
- inadequacy of state tests to accurately represent what a school is accomplishing;
- negative atmosphere adversely affecting teacher recruitment;
- lack of relevance to instructional practices; and

- students blaming teachers for poor performance because tested material was not covered.

Concerns from participants in the mid-sized city category included observations that:

- teachers do not have enough information to prepare students, but the results are being used for their evaluations;
- inconsistency in what assessments are used at state level from year to year;
- purpose of assessments is unclear; and
- lack of financial resources to support assessment.

Concerns from participants in the large city category included observations that:

- teachers do not have enough information to prepare students, but the results are being used for their evaluations;
- tests do not accurately assess student knowledge;
- state assessments are not sensitive to individuality, including student issues like IEP status, and district issues like region, location, or funding;
- increasing number of parents choosing to opt-out for their students; and
- timing of tests for 9- versus 12-month schools is unfair due to available instructional time before tests.

Suggestions for the State Assessment System. Participants suggested that the state assessment system include:

- quick turnaround of results;
- fewer redundancies across tests;
- briefer administration times for each test;
- communication of a clear, practical purpose for assessments;
- increased funding and access to resources to support administration of assessments; and
- teacher input in developing the assessments.

Other suggestions for the state assessment system varied by geographic location. Participants in the remote town category suggested that the state assessment system include:

- alignment to standards and curriculum;
- alternative assessments, such as portfolios and capstone projects;
- options for test administration that account for disabilities; and
- ability to assess growth.

Participants in the mid-sized city category suggested that the state assessment system include:

- alignment to standards and curriculum;
- alternative assessments, such as portfolios and capstone projects;
- options for test administration that account for disabilities;
- professional development to prepare teachers for the state assessments;
- frequent and clear communication about administration of assessments;

- long-term stability (i.e., tests that are used consistently over time); and
- high quality tests (e.g., developmentally appropriate, valid, reliable, and equitable).

Participants in the large city category suggested that the state assessment system include:

- professional development to prepare teachers for the state assessments;
- frequent and clear communication about administration of assessments;
- long-term stability (i.e., tests that are used consistently over time);
- a review of state policy and practice;
- research based assessments; and
- no graduation requirement.

There was no consensus among participants about the content of state assessment systems. Some participants wanted to focus on reading, writing, and math, while others wanted a focus on workplace readiness. Others wanted to focus on areas like social studies and civics.

Additional Findings

State and District Assessment Stakeholders. Participants across focus groups were consistent in identifying who should benefit from assessment results. For both state and district assessments, the most frequently identified stakeholder groups were teachers, administrators, students, parents, district staff, legislators, and state education agency staff.

Disparate Beliefs about Assessments. Participants expressed many different beliefs about the use of assessments. Some participants believed that aggregate scores (e.g., average school and district scores) have no validity. Some participants believed that individual scores (e.g., a single student score) have no validity. Some participants believed that individual scores can be meaningfully compared to state results. These disparate beliefs suggest that there was not a shared vision regarding the purpose of assessments among participants.

Confusion Regarding State Assessments. Participants occasionally appeared confused about the difference between state and district assessments. Further, participants from the remote town category were confused about the difference between state and district assessments and current versus old tests (e.g., discussing the old CRT and the new Smarter Balanced), the high stakes nature of tests, outcomes, and norming years.

