

Making Assessments Work

Supporting Teaching and Learning
in the Common Core Era

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**“The essence of teaching is
assessing what students know,
where they are and bringing
them to a higher level.”**

ILLINOIS SUPERINTENDENT CHRISTOPHER KOCH
ILLINOIS STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION

A Critical Time for Illinois Public Schools

Illinois advanced landmark reforms in recent years to improve instruction for its 2 million students.

Built upon the bedrock of new, rigorous Common Core State Standards¹, Illinois education leaders stepped up student expectations, championed educator evaluations intended to provide feedback and improve instruction², redesigned school report cards to put key information in the hands of families³ and intensified efforts to improve struggling schools and the students they serve⁴.

The next step is putting in place a new generation of assessments that will measure whether students have the knowledge, skills and understanding to succeed in an ever-changing world⁵.

With input from students and educators alike, Illinois leaders will consider whether to adopt Common Core assessments, invest in the technology required to deliver them and fund diagnostic assessments that provide an early window into teaching and learning.

The Common Core represents a fundamental shift in how teachers teach and students learn. To undertake this work in a single school district would be a challenge, let alone in all of Illinois' 862 districts. As a state, we must be vigilant to ensure students, educators and schools have the resources needed – time, training, technology and otherwise – to achieve these higher expectations.

This is a new starting point for Illinois.

“If we are given the time – the time to reflect and the time to actually dig deep with students and have those conversations – then education will change.”

ANNE McKENNA, EVANSTON ELEMENTARY SCHOOL DISTRICT 65

THE COMMON CORE IS THE BEDROCK OF ILLINOIS EDUCATION

Illinois set new, rigorous standards for students – the Common Core State Standards – that are the base of the public education system.

Other improvement efforts, from strengthening educator evaluations to redesigning school report cards, build upon them.

Support all
students to achieve

Improve persistently
low-performing schools

Put key information in the hands of families

Strengthen educator evaluations to provide feedback,
along with professional development, and improve instruction

Build an information system to provide timely data about student progress

Adopt assessments to reflect the new, higher standards

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS
SET HIGHER, RELEVANT AND REAL-LIFE STANDARDS FOR STUDENTS

As Assessments Grow More Pervasive, Pressure on Students and Teachers Mounts...

Standardized assessments long have played a role in public education. For much of that time, they have been faulted as too time-consuming, too restrictive and too removed from real teaching and learning.

Such concerns deepened as assessments grew more pressure-filled and prevalent in ever-younger grades.

Much of the unease stems from the disconnect between what's taught and what's tested. Too often, students confront an alphabet soup of assessments delivered with neither coherence nor clarity about the academic purpose served. If assessments and instruction are not rooted in the same academic standards, then test prep can encroach on classroom time and interfere with authentic teaching and learning.

“If we reduce students to numbers, then we forget that they are people and they are citizens who will eventually take our places.”

NATALIE NERIS-GUERECA, CHICAGO PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Moreover, state assessments often focus on skills that are easily measured, but not the most meaningful for student success⁶. That the results arrive months later, when they serve little academic purpose, further diminishes their value.

Learning from Two Illinois School Districts

Two school districts offer examples for how this work can be done well. Schaumburg Elementary School District 54 and Township High School District 214 each created an aligned system of instruction and assessment during the past decade with teachers at the table and students at the heart of instructional decisions.

Located in the Northwest suburbs of Chicago, both districts are well-resourced with the financial ability to develop and support top-notch teachers. As a state defined by funding disparities from one district to the next, Illinois leaders should discuss the resources needed to improve instruction in the other 860 school districts statewide.

For now, Districts 54 and 214 provide lessons about how to create a common vision for instruction and assessment, provide educators with the resources – time, training and otherwise – required to achieve it, and support all students to perform at higher levels¹⁰. All means all.

“One thing that assessment can give us is a sense of, coming in the door, ‘Who are these kids?’ So the bulk of our time can be spent teaching them, not coming up with reasons why it is tough to teach them.”

PAUL KELLY, TOWNSHIP HIGH SCHOOL DISTRICT 214

Set clear expectations for student performance, empower teachers and students to achieve them, and stay the course.

Teachers need time to do this work well.

A balanced system of assessments provides a true measure of progress.

Our school, our students.

...But It Does Not Have To Be This Way

Illinois educators are rethinking how to instruct and assess students with consistency, collaboration and clarity about what matters most: helping all students succeed.

Research shows students learn deeply when challenged to think in new, complex ways. Students develop when called to handle complex material, create an argument and defend their reasoning. Such rigorous instruction prepares students to perform well on any assessment⁷. Higher scores are not the end goal, but a result of the teaching and learning that occurs day in and day out.

Instruction and assessment must stem from a common set of academic standards that make clear what is expected of students and educators at every step from kindergarten through high school, and what knowledge and skills are foundational for student progress. The Common Core provides this starting point.

“We really do believe that good instruction is the only way to do well on any assessment.”

CHERYL WATKINS, CHICAGO PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Studies suggest the Common Core is more challenging than Illinois’ previous standards in math and English Language Arts⁸. Adopted by Illinois and more than 40 other states, the Common Core describes what students must know and when they must know it if they are to be ready for an ever-changing world⁹.

With the standards clear and expectations set, school leaders now must empower and support teachers and students to achieve them.

Consistency is vital. So, too, is communication about why and how assessments will be used.

Districts 54 and 214 created three ambitious goals for student performance that targeted raising student performance and narrowing the achievement gap; the districts did not change their expectations for more than five years¹¹. This enabled district leaders, principals and teachers to create instruction and assessments aimed at achieving the goals.

The Common Core requires new levels of collaboration among educators if they are to help students achieve deeper levels of understanding. This is complex work, and requires continuous professional development and support.

District 54 and District 214 alike dedicate time during the school day for teachers to collaboratively develop instruction and assessments aligned to the district goals for student performance. District 214 calls this “sacred” time. The time spent in professional learning communities provides a means to achieve the district expectations.

Such an assessment system must align with the teaching and learning that happens every day in classrooms. When used well, assessments can inform how teachers teach, in an effort to bring all students to a higher level of understanding.

Both districts create an assessment system that includes a mix of standardized assessment – for District 54, the Measures of Academic Progress and for District 214, the assessment suite aligned with the college-entrance ACT – and teacher-created formative assessments. The combination provides a window into teaching and learning. The results are shared with transparency to drive decisions at the classroom, school and district level. This fosters shared ownership.

When assessment and instruction are done *with* students – rather than *to* students – children play an active role in their own learning. With an understanding of what good instruction looks like, an expectation that all students experience rigorous curriculum and an awareness of how learning will be measured, educators can support all students to improve.

Educators in both District 54 and District 214 describe how a shared vision for student performance lays the groundwork for educators to pull in a common direction. Educators across disciplines and departments understand what is needed to help students succeed.

Illinois Faces Key Decisions as the Next Generation of Assessments Emerges

Illinois confronts challenges that must be resolved if the promise of the new assessments is to be realized.

These determinations are best made with transparency and thought to the realities of classrooms from Alton to Zion. The Illinois P-20 Council plans to convene focus groups statewide during the coming months to inform the deliberations. This bodes well for the caliber and care of the decisions. The scale of this shift to new standards and assessments, and the scope of the challenges that exist, require continued support and attention if Illinois is to meet the needs of all students.

For now, we offer key principles to frame the conversation.

Implement the Common Core in classrooms statewide – with sustained support for educators – as this is the best approach to perform well on any state assessment.

The instructional shift to the new standards must be buttressed with time, resources and professional development. The magnitude of this change, and the challenges to meet it, require sustained support.

Provide a balanced assessment system that more fully measures students' higher-order thinking¹².

High-quality assessments reward high-quality classwork. Illinois needs a summative assessment that provides a comparative view of student performance. Illinois teachers also need diagnostic and mid-year assessments to inform instruction and help all students improve.

Upgrade technology to support a 21st century education and the computer-based assessments that come with it.

Technology can improve instruction and assessment, recognizing the savvy and skills students will need in an increasingly complex world. School districts need the classroom infrastructure to support both.

Place educators in a leading role with the creation of new Common Core assessments and their ongoing development.

PARCC, the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers, continues to engage educators in analyzing sample questions and creating an aligned assessment system that supports instruction. Ongoing outreach is vital as Illinois strives to gather feedback needed to continuously improve assessments. (*See back page for more about PARCC.*)

Administer the ACT while state leaders determine how best to implement new, aligned assessments across the K-12 system.

For more than a decade, Illinois has required that high school juniors take the college-entrance ACT¹³. This effectively opens the door for all Illinois students to consider college. Implementing an aligned assessment system that spans K-12 should be a priority for Illinois. Yet, at the same time, the state should ensure that every student continues to take a college entrance exam even if this results in double-testing while the state considers how best to implement and support the new, aligned assessment system.

Create a process to ensure the continuous improvement of new assessments and their thoughtful implementation.

The state should create an advisory group to gather feedback, drive improvement and ensure new assessments serve the needs of students and teachers. This should address how new assessments will be integrated into the accountability system for educators and schools. Developing the right approach will require continued attention, collaboration and time.

“We need a world of problem-solvers. Assessment prompts that allow students to express their ability to be creative, to take information and process it, to make an argument and back it up...those are the kinds of skills that I think are most needed in the world.”

JAKE GOURLEY, THORNTON FRACTIONAL HIGH SCHOOL DISTRICT 215

The Next Generation of Assessments Must Support Teaching and Learning

With the new, rigorous Common Core in place, the state must adopt assessments that measure whether students have the knowledge to achieve the higher standards¹⁴.

Initial analysis suggests that most questions on the Common Core assessments will measure higher-order thinking through performance tasks and open-ended prompts that delve deeper than fill-in-the-bubble tests. By comparison, current state assessments do not often measure higher-order thinking, with just 0 percent of math questions and 16 percent of reading questions gauging students' conceptual understanding and analysis¹⁵.

Illinois joins 18 other states in developing the new set of assessments called PARCC, the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers¹⁶. By 2014-15, PARCC aims to provide performance-based assessments as well as year-end summative assessments¹⁷. Diagnostic assessments that offer an early window into teaching and learning will follow in 2015-16. Such assessments should reflect student progress at all performance levels, with the results provided within weeks, not months. PARCC will cover math and English Language Arts in grades three through 11; a formative assessment for kindergarten through second grade also will be offered¹⁸.

The work is ongoing. Much rides on the ultimate quality of the endeavor.

NEW ASSESSMENTS AIM TO MEASURE DEEPER LEARNING

Current state assessments rarely measure students' depth of knowledge. Questions typically focus on basic comprehension and information recall rather than conceptual understanding and analysis across disciplines. The new assessments aim to change that by gauging students' higher-order thinking.

TODAY



0% of students are assessed on deeper learning in **MATH**.



3% of students are assessed on deeper learning in **WRITING**.



16% of students are assessed on deeper learning in **READING**.

TOMORROW



100% of students should be assessed on deeper learning with the next generation of assessments.

SOURCE: RAND Corporation, "Estimating the Percentage of Students Who Were Tested On Cognitively Demanding Items Through the State Achievement Tests," 2012. National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards and Student Testing, "On the Road to Assessing Deeper Learning: The Status of Smarter Balanced and PARCC Assessment Consortia," 2013. **NOTE:** Researchers defined a state assessment as measuring students' deeper learning if at least 5 percent of questions required conceptual understanding or analysis.

¹ Illinois State Board of Education, ISBE adopts new, more rigorous learning standards to better prepare students for college and the workplace, 2010.

² Illinois Public Act 096-0861.

³ Illinois Public Act 97-0671.

⁴ Illinois State Board of Education, ISBE launches Center for School Improvement, 2010; School Improvement Grant Resources, 2012.

⁵ Illinois State Board of Education, Fact Sheet: Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers, 2013.

⁶ Gordon Commission on the Future of Assessment in Education, "Assessment Teaching and Learning," 2012; Education Week, "Today's Tests Seen As Bar to Better Assessment," 2012.

⁷ Consortium on Chicago School Research, "Authentic Intellectual Work and Standardized Tests: Conflict or Coexistence?" 2001.

⁸ Thomas B. Fordham Institute, "The State of State Standards and the Common Core in 2010," 2010.

⁹ The Common Core State Standards Initiative, www.corestandards.org.

¹⁰ Schaumburg Elementary School District 54's Implementation of the Common Core State Standards, Presentation to the Illinois State Board of Education, 2013.

¹¹ Township High School District 214 Board of Education, Board Policy, Section 6, Instruction, 2013; Schaumburg Community Consolidated School District 54 Board of Education, Mission, Vision, Commitments and Goals, 2013.

¹² Illinois State Board of Education, "A Balanced Assessment System: Preparing Our Students for College and Career Readiness," 2013.

¹³ ACT, "Statewide Administration of the ACT: A Key Component In Improving Student Access to College and Work," 2009.

¹⁴ National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards and Student Testing, "On the Road to Assessing Deeper Learning: The Status of Smarter Balanced and PARCC Assessment Consortia," 2013.

¹⁵ RAND Corporation, "Estimating the Percentage of Students Who Were Tested On Cognitively Demanding Items Through the State Achievement Tests," 2012.

¹⁶ Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers, "A New Vision of Assessment," 2013.

¹⁷ Illinois State Board of Education, "Fact Sheet: Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers," 2013.

¹⁸ Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers, "Non-Summative Assessments," 2013.