

Why We Assess: Vermont's Focus on Equity in Educational Assessment

Purpose

This document was developed for supervisory unions/districts (SUs/SDs), schools and educators who may have questions or are fielding questions from students, families and caregivers, and community members about the purpose of state summative assessments and student participation in those assessments (i.e., whether they can refuse or “opt-out”).

Background

The Vermont Agency of Education (AOE) is aware of advocacy for an option to “opt out” of statewide summative assessments and is affirming its support for these assessments as important tools for supporting educational equity. Over the last two years, the AOE has witnessed the commitment that our public school system and education professionals have made to Vermont students and families. Our public school system has taken on the responsibility of ensuring continuity of learning, meal provision, health and safety, and most importantly, the necessary human connection that all of us have felt a need for during the pandemic. We honor our colleagues’ commitment and recognize that two years of the pandemic has taken its toll on the professionals and adults we have relied on, before and during the pandemic. We understand that the federally required state summative assessments feels like one more hard thing, and we also understand why “opting out” of state summative assessments feels like a solution.

Equity in Accountability

When the AOE developed Vermont’s Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) State Plan, we placed educational equity at the center of all decision-making. This was evident in the development of our [Teacher and Leader Equitable Access Plan](#), the creation of the “Historically Marginalized” group designation in an attempt to remediate suppression logic and create greater transparency, engaging in agency-wide implicit bias training and developing the [Equity Lens Tool](#) to surface, redress and prevent systemic biases in our current and future work, leading the [Supporting Educational Equity](#) project to hear directly from participants who were predominantly Black Indigenous People of Color (BIPOC) and female education professionals from the K-12 system, and co-facilitating a [New England states initiative to Diversify the Educator Workforce](#) as a few examples.

Beginning in 2015, Vermont pioneered practices in our ESSA State Plan development that now exemplify all the most lauded approaches outlined in the National Academy of Sciences’ 2020 publication [Building Educational Equity Indicator Systems: A Guidebook for States and School](#)

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[Districts](#). Vermont’s focus on equity has been so strong, that the [Alliance for Excellent Education’s](#) assessment of Vermont’s Annual Snapshot through their [ESSA Equity Dashboard](#) “stoplight” system (green, yellow, red), which assesses indicators most essential for advancing equitable educational opportunities for all students, rates us as majority “green,” with no “red” areas for the entire plan because of its careful design. ESSA state plans hinge on Statewide Summative Assessment data, meaning they are not only required, but they are a critical tool for educational equity.

Statewide summative assessments provide the necessary state-level insight to ensure that all students get the level of supports they need from their public education system. These data and this insight are necessary in the best of conditions; they are an imperative in our current pandemic conditions as we plan for recovery efforts over the next several years.

Equity of Supports

History of standardized assessment in the United States

Standardized testing was first developed for the purpose of licensure, certification, and placement. It wasn’t until the early to mid-1900s that standardized assessments such as the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), the American College Test (ACT), and the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) were developed and used widely (Poulsen & Hewson, 2014). Though advancements in measurement, including the development of new assessments, have been made for specifically defined purposes, history has demonstrated a significant pattern of misuse and misinterpretation.

The IQ test, developed by French psychologist Alfred Binet in 1904, for example, was originally developed to identify students needing additional/specialized support in school. Not long after this assessment was integrated into U.S. institutions, however, cognitive psychologists “misappropriated Binet’s idea, distorted the original use of the tests, injected their own underlying presumptions about humans and human ability, and fit their findings into the race and class politics of the United States at the turn of the 20th century” (Au, 2016, p. 44).

This misuse and misinterpretation of the IQ test and its results had significantly influenced the establishment of systems of oppression in the United States, upheld based on the idea of ranking and sorting the population based on traits such as race, ethnicity, gender, social class, and ability. Other examples of such misappropriation include the Alpha and Beta Army tests, which were used to support conclusions that country of origin could be used as an indicator of intelligence of European immigrants. Specifically, lighter skin and higher income were claimed to be related to greater intelligence (Au, 2016, p. 44).

Dr. Wayne Au (2016, p. 45), professor at the University of Washington, states that “over 100 years ago and at their very origins, standardized tests were being used to structure racial inequalities through providing “scientific” proof to notions of the inherent inferiority of Black people, specific ethnicities, and the poor, among other groups.” Today, we still observe imperfections in the development and practice of standardized assessment due to bias, misuse, misinterpretation, and underrepresentation. The task of developing and disseminating socially just, equitable assessments is one that the field of educational measurement has made progress with and certainly has more to achieve.

Standardized assessment in the U.S. today

Today we see standardized assessments developed for and implemented in PK-12 education settings, with the purpose of measuring academic proficiency and growth in a variety of content areas. These assessments are commonly implemented at the state and local level. Though there continues to be much the measurement and education communities can do to improve how we develop and use standardized assessments, fairness and equity in testing have become an increasingly greater area of focus over time. The American Educational Research Association (AERA), the American Psychological Association (APA), and the National Council on Measurement in Education (NCME) have established and revised, over many years, the *Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing* (AERA, APA, & NCME, 2014). These recommended standards for test development have introduced heavy emphasis on validity and fairness with a focus on eliminating bias. For an assessment to have sufficient evidence for validity, test developers must investigate properties of the test that may vary across students, explore rival hypotheses related to score interpretation, and investigate social consequences – positive, negative, intended, and unintended – that may result from proper use and interpretation of the assessment (AERA, APA, NCME, 2014, pg. 11-22). With respect to fairness, standardized assessments are developed and evaluated with consideration of accessibility and universal design to increase the accessibility of assessments for students who might otherwise be disadvantaged by score interpretation (e.g., interpreting a score as an indicator of reading comprehension achievement when the examinee does not read the language the test was presented in) (AERA, APA, NCME, 2014, pg. 49-62).

A Comprehensive Approach to the Vermont Comprehensive Assessment Program (VTCAP)

In the area of assessment, the AOE demonstrates a commitment to equity and social justice. Those informing assessment policies and practices within the state represent a diverse background in terms of ability, language, race/ethnicity, age, and sex. Several assessment practices reflect the AOE's commitment to continuous improvement of assessments, specifically as it relates to socially-just assessment. These following practices have been implemented to ensure greater accessibility and fairness of the VTCAP:

- English Language Arts (ELA), Math, and Science statewide summative assessments are reported using scaled scores rather than just proficiency levels so growth can be observed even within a proficiency level.
- Sensitivity and bias reviews occur for all statewide assessments:
 - Every item is created to include a range of representation that is inclusive of all student groups and is free from confusion, bias, and emotionally charged phrases and topics.
 - Items are written to reflect people in a positive light that displays strengths and abilities.
 - Items are then reviewed, by a diverse group of educators, for content accuracy, bias, and sensitivity.
 - Every item is presented to the vendor and AOE staff *and* to a committee of state educators trained in the detection of such biases. This holds true

for all test questions.

- Every educator creating and reviewing items is trained and selected from a diverse set of experiences, expertise, and backgrounds.
- The AOE collaborates with consortia member states to conceptualize potential advancements for assessments and proposes such innovations to consortia leaders and vendors.
- The AOE's assessment staff engage in professional development plans focused on diversity, equity, and inclusion, both generally and specific to assessment and measurement.
- Vermont is a member of the Interstate Learning Community which is examining how to create and implement performance assessments that are culturally responsive, assess deep learning as well as transferable skills, provide actionable data that inform instructional next steps, and clarify what all students should know, understand, and be able to do.
- The AOE initiated and is leading a collaboration with Norwich University physical education teacher education students to draft a scaffolded set of inclusive (to all abilities and bodies), student-centered, standards-based, health-related fitness performance assessments for grades 5, 7 and 9.
- The AOE is currently engaging in the procurement of vendors to execute on the next assessment contract, as our current agreements sunset in fall of 2022. The Request for Proposals and corresponding Bidder Response Form, written by the AOE's assessment staff, included specific non-functional requirements related to procuring an assessment that is developed and implemented in a way that is culturally responsive and socially just. Inclusion of advanced accessibility features, such as translation of assessments and score reports, were also included. This procurement process also required bid reviewers to evaluate vendors' proposals based on the company's demonstrated commitment to socially just operations, products, and services. Engagement from districts was requested for this process.

Why “Opt Out” is Not Equitable

In considering the appropriateness of opting out of statewide assessments, it is critically important to know that if Vermont does not meet 95% participation, as has been observed in other states such as Wisconsin, Colorado, California, and Oregon, the very populations that we are most concerned about closing equity gaps for – historically marginalized populations – will be the most negatively impacted. We provide the following rationale:

1. As part of our Vermont Comprehensive Assessment Program (VTCAP), we honor that local comprehensive assessment systems are critical to informing decisions about curriculum, instruction, and local investments. However, these local assessments are not consistent across the state, by design. Consequently, state work cannot be informed by local assessments because they do not establish a shared, unified way to compare conditions for our students.
2. We have no other comparable measure to use statewide than those assessments that make up our VTCAP – the state summative assessments.
3. Without state-level data that are valid and reliable, we cannot identify where additional support is needed statewide -- this includes not just the deployment of nearly \$500

million in federal grants to SU/SDs annually but also technical assistance, professional development, and policy changes and implementation. This will significantly impair the State's ability to provide systemic support.

4. Additionally, while “opt out” does not automatically mean that we will drop below 95% participation, because of our tiny size conditions, if Vermont enables “opt-out” of our Comprehensive Assessment Program, Vermont will gamble unnecessarily on what will already be a challenging endeavor.
5. For instance, Vermont has very small sample sizes, especially for populations like our English Learners. Smaller samples could lead to not being able to use statewide data because it will no longer sufficiently represent those populations.
6. This will put at risk our ability to have the necessary insight and data to plan intentionally and comprehensively to support every student and school system as we engage in recovery efforts. This is readily observable in several opt-out states such as Wisconsin, Colorado, California, and Oregon, where participation has declined below 95% at the state, district, and/or school level. The lowest participation rates occurring for historically marginalized student groups is commonly observed across opt-out states where results are available – the very students that “opt out” is promoted as best serving.
7. Finally, opting out does not support our educators, or add capacity to our schools, districts, and unions. In fact, it adds burden to them at a time when they need support. This is because a state supported opt out measure requires alternate activities to be provided to those students whose parents have “opted out” while summative assessments are taking place. This will distract and diminish our educators’ and schools’ abilities to focus on and support the needs of our students.

Why We Assess

State summative assessments are not primarily intended to measure individual student performance. They are designed to help identify where school systems need support so that their students can make progress toward proficiency.

While it would be easy to mischaracterize the adherence to state summative assessments as a sole pursuit of federal funds, it would be irresponsible and unethical for the AOE not to speak directly and openly to the concern about whether we would still receive those funds and be able to allocate them appropriately to the systems and schools that need it. That process is determined by our state summative assessments.

We have a profound obligation to speak transparently on this topic, as advocacy and proposed bills have been silent on how Vermont would replace those roughly \$500 million in federal funds that are solely dedicated to support our most vulnerable students.

If we truly care about each and every student in Vermont—not just those in our own towns or school communities – then we must ask whether Vermont is comfortable taking a gamble not just this year, but for the next several years, on potentially leaving the students and systems who need those supports most, to fend for themselves without them.

The AOE believes that to improve our assessment system and influence assessment policy overall, we must fully engage in the system. As stakeholders, we must identify and foster

opportunities to think critically about our assessment systems and policies so that they can continue to better serve all of Vermont’s learners, and therefore, our families and communities. The AOE affirms that opting out of the system will only disengage us from a process that could be greatly served by such efforts being applied to its improvement rather than its deconstruction.

References

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