

Student Achievement Matters: The Future of Student Assessment Is Now

A report prepared for the Business Education Alliance of Alabama
by the Public Affairs Research Council of Alabama

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Assessing Performance:

A Cornerstone of Educational Improvement

In June 2017, the Alabama State Board of Education voted to cancel its contract with ACT for the administration of the ACT Aspire, a suite of standardized tests which, for the past four years, has served as the primary assessment tool Alabama used to gauge the annual academic progress of public school students across the state. An annual assessment of student achievement is required by federal law.

State education leaders have indicated they will use an assessment provided by a different testing company, Scantron, in 2018.

Meanwhile, a process for determining a long-term replacement has begun.

These decisions on the future of Alabama's statewide assessments are critical.

These assessments are a cornerstone of the state's education accountability system. They are required by federal law. The assessments should tell us how students, schools, and systems are performing regarding state standards and in comparison to other peers, both in Alabama and in the nation at large. The results matter to school leaders, teachers, parents, students, and the communities that support schools throughout Alabama.

This spring, as the department and state school board were considering whether to change assessments, the Business Education Alliance, A+ Education Partnership, and the Public Affairs Research Council of Alabama sent a joint letter to education leaders, urging the creation of a committee of stakeholders to gather broad input and create consensus on the future of assessments in Alabama.¹ To date, the department and the state board have not acted on that recommendation.

While the initial decision has now been made to move away from ACT Aspire, the need for such a committee remains. The State Department of Education is preparing a request for bids (RFB) that will describe the desired specifications for a new assessment for grades 3 through 8. Before that request for bids is sent out, a broad-based committee, including those with technical expertise from outside the department, should be empaneled. This committee should review the RFB to determine whether it adequately describes a replacement test that will fit the needs of the state, local districts, teachers, and students. Further, when vendors respond to the request, a thorough evaluation of the competing bids should be reviewed by the committee to determine which bid represents the best option for Alabama.

¹ Text of that letter can be found on page 20 of this report.

Without a committee comprised of teachers, school leaders, business leaders, community supporters, and technical experts, the very people who will be implementing the assessment and utilizing the results will be left out of the process.

The selection of a new assessment for Alabama will impact everyone, from students in the classroom to the legislators making budget decisions. Assessments provide the measuring stick for students and our state's aspirations, and they are as important as annual checkups at the doctor. Decisions about assessments should be made with input and evaluation from local school administrators, testing experts, teachers, parents, the Governor's Office, members of the State Legislature, and the business community.¹

Why Are Assessments Important?

Across the country, states that have successfully improved education performance have followed a basic formula in which assessments and their results are a key driver in the improvement process.² Using the standards-based reform model, states:

1. Establish rigorous state standards defining what students need to know at each grade level, standards that chart a path to college and career readiness.
2. Lay out strategies and identify resources needed to help teachers lead students to master those standards.
3. Measure progress toward those goals, using an assessment system that accurately measures student achievement.
4. Act on assessment results to address weaknesses and to replicate successes.
5. Measure again to see if the resource investments and changes to strategies are producing the intended results.

Massachusetts, now the top performing state, is often cited as a model for standards-based reform.³ Southeastern states, such as Kentucky and Florida, were also early adopters of the standards-based reform model and have since improved student performance. The federal government now asks all states to develop plans for educational improvement containing essential elements of the standards-based reform approach.

Who Uses Assessments?

Assessments provide information vital to the state, to local systems and schools, and to students and parents.

- Students and parents need to know whether Alabama children are on track to graduate from high school ready for college or career. That information should be available in the context of measurement against state standards and national norms.

² *Key Elements for Educational Accountability Models*, Marianne Perie, Center for Assessment, Judy Park, Utah, Kenneth Klau, Massachusetts.

³ For a description of Massachusetts's effort, see [Building on 20 Years of Massachusetts Education Reform](http://www.doe.mass.edu/commissioner/BuildingOnReform.pdf), <http://www.doe.mass.edu/commissioner/BuildingOnReform.pdf>

- **Teachers need this information to measure the effectiveness of their teaching and to help identify students who are struggling and students capable of more advanced work. This identification informs the instruction delivered in the classroom.**
- **Local schools and systems need these results to identify where their educational approaches and personnel are succeeding and where they're struggling. Standardized testing gives local education officials the ability to compare results with peer systems. Results should provide actionable evidence pointing to successful approaches and areas of weakness.**
- **Assessment results are needed to spotlight unequal results among different economic, racial, or gender subgroups of students, bringing focus to the need to improve outcomes for all.**
- **Policymakers need these results to judge whether the state's education system is delivering on the investment the state is making. State education officials need the results to identify schools and systems that are succeeding in order to find best practices and spread them. State officials also need the results to identify schools and systems that are struggling, so additional support can be provided. Ultimately, if poor results continue, the state can intervene in chronically underperforming schools and systems to bring about change.**

Characteristics of Quality Assessments

In 2010, Alabama adopted nationally competitive learning standards, which set higher expectations for Alabama students than previous sets of state standards. In the years since, the state and local systems have provided training for teachers so that they can guide students toward the eventual goal of graduating from high school college and career ready.

Alabama urgently needs high-quality standardized tests that measure student mastery of its nationally competitive standards.

The assessments need to be given at all schools throughout the state on an annual basis. Not only is this important in terms of transparency, it's also required by federal law. The assessments should produce results that are timely, meaningful, understandable, and actionable.

The assessments need to be designed soundly so that they can be delivered over a sustained period of time in order to track progress.

The assessments should be honest. Before the adoption of the ACT Aspire, the state's assessment system delivered results that didn't resemble national measures but instead provided an inflated measure of student proficiency. A future assessment should provide results that allow us to judge performance not just within the state compared to state standards but also on a nationally competitive basis.

Assessment results should be sophisticated enough to produce fair comparisons that take into consideration the demographic makeup of schools. In Alabama and across

the country, children in poverty, on average, don't score as well on standardized tests as nonpoverty students. Consequently, schools with a high percentage of students in poverty generally post lower rates of student proficiency than schools where the percentage of children in poverty is lower. Such demographic differences in school populations must be taken into account when judging performance. Data should be used as a flashlight, showing the path to improvement, not as a hammer for bashing schools facing academic challenges.

When high standards and rigorous assessments are embraced by schools as tools for improvement, schools and students can produce exemplary results, in spite of high poverty percentages. For one such success story, read about Pike County Schools in our 2016 report, [*Exceeding Expectations*](#).

This report is the fourth in a series of reports commissioned by the Business Education Alliance and authored by the Public Affairs Research Council of Alabama with advice and input from the A+ Education Partnership. The first report, [*Obstacles Into Opportunities*](#), described the higher expectations and better measures of student success contained in Plan 2020. The second report, [*Teachers Matter*](#), pointed to steps the state needs to make in improving support, training, and recruiting of teachers. The third report, [*Exceeding Expectations*](#), used assessment results to identify high-performing school systems and described the approaches those systems took to drive improvement.

This report lays out the recent history of assessments, what state and national assessments tell us about the performance of Alabama students, and calls attention to the steps we should take from here.

Fundamentally, the goal of the state's education plan is to produce high school graduates prepared to succeed in college and in the workplace.

In the globally competitive, technologically advanced economy of the 21st century, it is imperative that our graduates receive an education equal in quality to that received by students in other states. That is the only way our graduates can succeed, and our state can attract employers looking for qualified employees.

How Alabama Fares on National Assessments Compared to Other States

Standardized tests, identical tests given to schools across a state or the nation, are widely used to compare the quality of education systems.

We can't avoid them. We should embrace them in order to demonstrate that Alabama can deliver the same caliber of education delivered elsewhere. More importantly, we should embrace them to help us consistently improve our education system. Tests may not tell us everything we need to know about students, but they do give us meaningful information.

Results of these tests are used to compare schools and school systems. Parents often base their decisions on where to send their children to school based on test results. Companies look at test results as an indicator of where they might find an able workforce. Teachers and schools use tests to gauge the effectiveness of their instruction in comparison to peer schools.

Currently, the only national benchmark standardized test that allows a comparison of Alabama students' performance with their peers in other states is the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP).⁴

Alabama Trails Other States, Especially in Math

The most recent NAEP results, those from 2015, indicate that Alabama's education system is not succeeding in comparison to other states, particularly when it comes to mathematics.

The NAEP includes math and reading comprehension tests administered to a sample of 4th and 8th grade students in each state every two years. NAEP results form the basis of The Nation's Report Card.⁵ New NAEP results will be released in the fall of 2017 based on tests administered in February 2017.

NAEP scores are presented in two different ways.

The first is through proficiency rates. By NAEP's definition, a proficient student has "demonstrated competency over challenging subject matter, including subject matter knowledge, application of such knowledge to real-world situations, and analytical skills appropriate to the subject matter."⁶ Students well above the proficiency standard are defined as "Advanced." States strive to have their students demonstrate "Proficient" or "Advanced" levels of accomplishment.

In addition to reporting the percentage of all students proficient in the tested subject, NAEP reports the proficiency rates of different economic, ethnic, and gender subgroups of students.

The second way of looking at NAEP results is by comparing scale scores. These are the average scores obtained by students on a 500-point scale.

In 2015 on the NAEP in math,

- 26% of Alabama 4th graders were at or above proficient. Nationally, 39% of public school students scored proficient or above. The average scale score for Alabama students in 4th grade math was lower than in any other state.
- 17% of Alabama 8th graders were at or above proficient. Nationally, 32% of public school students scored proficient or above. The average scale score for

⁴ [The National Assessment of Educational Progress, https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/](https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/)

⁵ <https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/>

⁶ [National Center for Education Statistics, Achievement Levels, https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/NDEHelp/WebHelp/achievement_levels.htm](https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/NDEHelp/WebHelp/achievement_levels.htm)

Alabama 8th graders in math was lower than in any other state. Only the District of Columbia was lower.

In 2015 on the NAEP in reading,

- 29% of Alabama 4th graders were proficient. Nationally, 35% of public school students scored proficient or above. The average scale score for Alabama 4th graders was higher than in 10 other states, plus the District of Columbia.
- 26% of Alabama 8th graders were proficient in reading. Nationally, 33% of public school students scored proficient or above. The average scale score for Alabama 8th graders was higher than in four states, plus the District of Columbia.

Table 1. National Assessment of Educational Progress Results for Alabama, 2015

Subject	Grade	Percent of Students at Proficient or Above	Number of Jurisdictions With Lower Average Scale Score
Math	4	26%	0
	8	17%	1
Reading	4	29%	11
	8	26%	5

It should be understood that NAEP is a challenging test. Even in Massachusetts, a top-performing state, only about half of all students are deemed proficient by NAEP's standards across the subjects and grades tested.

Table 2. National Assessment of Educational Progress Results for Massachusetts, 2015

Subject	Grade	Percent of Students at Proficient or Above
Math	4	54%
	8	50%
Reading	4	50%
	8	46%

While acknowledging that NAEP is a difficult test, Alabama needs to improve its performance. NAEP is difficult for all states, and Alabama should not be satisfied with being last or near last in any grade.

Alabama is not doomed to poor performance due to its demographics. Some assume that Alabama's poor showing on NAEP is attributable to the fact that Alabama public schools serve a higher proportion of students who grow up in poverty.

It is true that Alabama has a somewhat higher percentage of poverty students than the national average. In 4th grade, for example, 55% of students taking the NAEP nationwide come from poverty households, while in Alabama that percentage is 61. It is also true that both in Alabama and in the nation at large, students from poverty households achieve proficiency at a lower rate. On most measures, the gap between the proficiency rates of poverty and nonpoverty students is around 30 percentage points. However, it is not true that Alabama’s underperformance on the NAEP is attributable solely to poor performance by poverty students.

Subpar Results for Both Poverty and Nonpoverty Students

Both poverty and nonpoverty students in Alabama underperform in comparison to their peers nationally.

Table 3. Comparing Poverty and Nonpoverty Student Performance in Alabama and the U.S., NAEP 2015

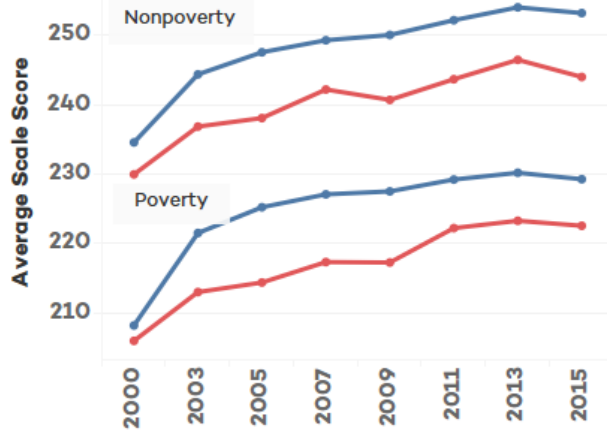
Grade/Subject	Percentage of Poverty Students at or Above Proficient	Percentage of Nonpoverty Students at or Above Proficient
4th Grade Math		
Nation (public)	24%	58%
Alabama	15%	43%
8th Grade Math		
Nation (public)	18%	48%
Alabama	7%	29%
4th Grade Reading		
Nation (public)	21%	52%
Alabama	19%	45%
8th Grade Reading		
Nation (public)	20%	47%
Alabama	17%	37%

Alabama’s results on the NAEP have been consistently subpar over time. With the notable exception of 4th grade reading, both poverty and nonpoverty students in Alabama have scored lower than students from other states.

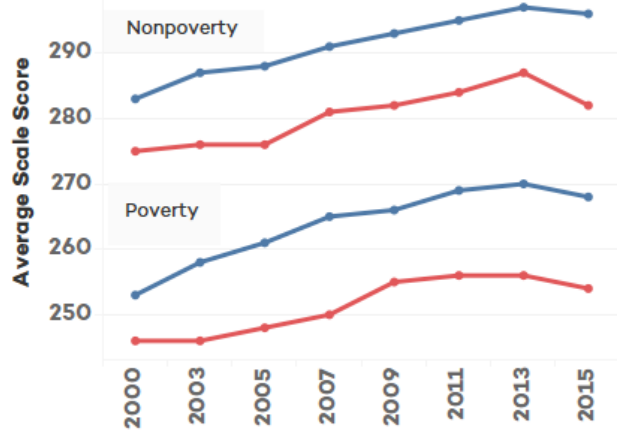
Color Key for Graphs Comparing Alabama to U.S. Average for Public Schools, NAEP 2002-2015

Alabama National public

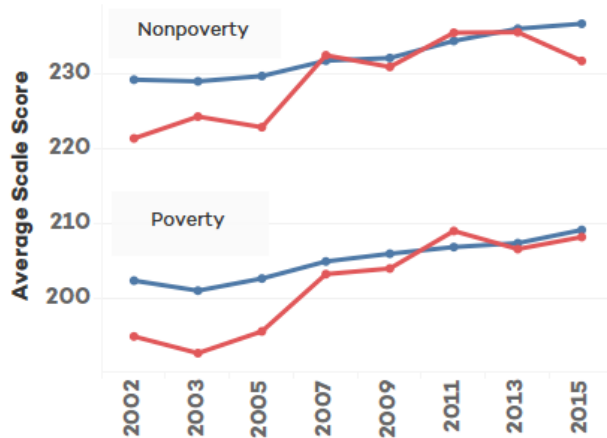
Grade 4, Math



Grade 8, Math



Grade 4, Reading



Grade 8, Reading

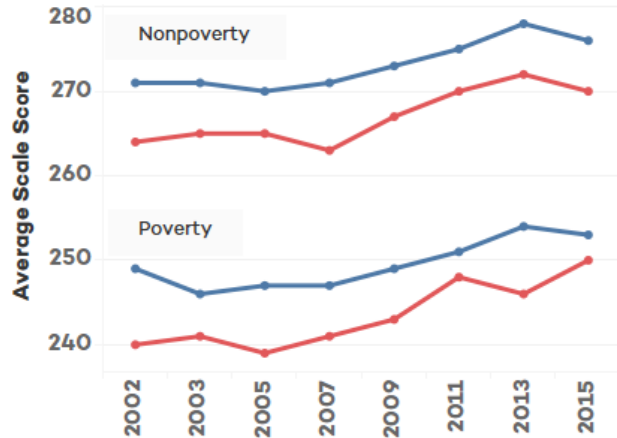


Figure 1. Poverty and Nonpoverty Performance on NAEP Over Time, U.S. vs. Alabama

It is important to face the daunting fact that we have consistently underperformed on NAEP, particularly in math.

But it is also important to take pride in Alabama’s fourth-grade reading results.

Evidence That Alabama Students Can Compete

In the 2000s, Alabama, through the Alabama Reading Initiative, made a sustained investment and employed a specific strategy to improve reading in the early elementary grades. During that period, Alabama poverty and nonpoverty students climbed to and even exceeded the national averages for each subgroup, especially in 2011.

The state’s experience with the Alabama Reading Initiative suggests that Alabama teachers and students are capable. But the evidence also suggests such progress will require a well-thought-out strategy, backed by investment.

Alabama’s new state plan, *Alabama Ascending*, sets a goal for improving the state’s performance on NAEP in both reading and math.

In both subjects, the plan calls for Alabama to rank in the top half of states on NAEP by 2023. That will require a renewed commitment to proven strategies in elementary reading and innovation in instruction in upper-level reading and in math at all grade levels.

A Nationally Competitive State Assessment is Needed

With the state setting a goal of improving student performance on the NAEP to the national average, it is important to have a state-level assessment that will provide state and local educators with a clear and realistic picture of how students are currently performing.

Alabama’s test should be equivalent in rigor to the NAEP if we truly expect our students to perform at a nationally competitive level on the NAEP.

A rigorous state assessment system is not just good educational policy for the state. Such assessments are required by federal law. The current national education law, commonly known as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), requires that each state provide evidence that it “has implemented a set of high-quality student academic assessments in mathematics, reading or language arts, and science.”⁷

ESSA requires that state plans meet multiple requirements when it comes to assessments.

To meet ESSA requirements, the assessments must:

- (i) be used to measure the achievement of all public elementary school and secondary school students in the State;
- (II) be administered to all public elementary school and secondary school students in the State;
- (ii) be aligned with the state’s challenging academic standards, and provide coherent and timely information about student attainment of such standards and whether the student is performing at the student’s grade level;
- (iii) be used for purposes for which such assessments are valid and reliable, consistent with relevant, nationally recognized professional and technical

⁷ Excerpts from the text of the “Every Student Succeeds Act” or ESSA, <https://www2.ed.gov/documents/essa-act-of-1965.pdf>

testing standards, objectively measure academic achievement, knowledge, and skills ...

(iv) be of adequate technical quality for each purpose required under this Act ...

(v) in the case of mathematics and reading or language arts, be administered in each of grades 3 through 8; and at least once in grades 9 through 12; in the case of science, be administered not less than one time during grades 3 through 5; grades 6 through 9; and grades 10 through 12.

To meet Alabama’s own goals of improving performance on the NAEP and to meet the federal requirements under ESSA, the state should take care to implement a system of testing that aligns with its own education standards and measures student proficiency at a nationally competitive level.

Previous Alabama Assessments Produced Inflated Student Proficiency Levels

In the past, Alabama’s statewide assessments have not produced a nationally comparative appraisal of Alabama students’ academic proficiency, at least in comparison to our students’ results on the NAEP.

Before the adoption of the ACT Aspire, Alabama used a state-specific test called the Alabama Reading and Math Test (ARMT). Proficiency levels reported by the state on the ARMT were much higher than those reported for Alabama on the NAEP.

ARMT, as it was scored by the state, showed the vast majority of students achieving proficiency. On the NAEP, by contrast, less than one-third of students were achieving proficiency.

Table 4 compares results on the ARMT to results from the NAEP in 2013.

Table 4. Alabama NAEP vs. ARMT Measures, 2013

Subject	Grade	Percent of Students at Proficient or Above on NAEP	Percent of Students at Proficient or Above on ARMT	Percentage Point Difference Between NAEP and ARMT
Math	4	30%	82%	52
	8	20%	77%	57
Reading	4	31%	88%	57
	8	25%	80%	55

A Move Toward More Rigorous Assessments

In 2014, Alabama replaced the ARMT with the ACT Aspire, a suite of tests designed by the same national testing company that produces the commonly used college readiness exam, the ACT.

The adoption of ACT Aspire coincided with a move to new state educational standards based on the Common Core State Standards. According to ACT, the Aspire tests in math and reading were aligned with Alabama’s College and Career Ready Standards, based on the Common Core.

The Common Core State Standards were developed in a collaborative process with education leaders throughout the U.S., coordinated by the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) and the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices (NGA Center).

The Common Core established learning goals that outline what a student should know and be able to do at the end of each grade. The standards were created to ensure that all students graduate from high school with the skills and knowledge necessary to succeed in college, career, and life, regardless of where they live.⁸ The Common Core was designed to set a high bar to replace an uneven patchwork of academic standards that varied from state to state and did not agree on what students should know and be able to do at each grade level.

For Alabama, the move to a set of state standards based on the Common Core was particularly important, considering the state’s chronic underperformance on nationally benchmarked tests. With the new standards based on a shared set of national expectations, Alabama teachers and students were provided a road map similar to what other states use to guide students to college and career readiness. Through the successful delivery of an education matching those national standards, Alabama can demonstrate its schools and students are equally capable as those found in any other state.

Comparing Aspire and NAEP results from 2015, we see a much closer correlation between the state measure and the national measure. Aspire results still showed a higher percentage of student proficiency than NAEP, but the divergence between the results of the two tests was much less pronounced than with the ARMT.

Table 5. Alabama NAEP vs. Aspire Measures, 2015

Subject	Grade	Percent of Students at Proficient or Above on NAEP	Percent of Students at Proficient or Above on Aspire	Percentage Point Difference Between NAEP and Aspire
Math	4	26%	48%	22
	8	17%	27%	10
Reading	4	29%	38%	9
	8	26%	44%	18

⁸ [Common Core State Standards Initiative, About the Standards](#)

Achieve, a national nonprofit education organization that encourages states to make college and career readiness a priority for all students, judged Alabama in 2015 and 2016 to be among the nation’s top “Truth Tellers” — states whose assessment tests provide an honest appraisal of student performance when compared to the NAEP.⁹

The Assessment Landscape Nationally

With the advent of the Common Core, it was assumed that multiple states would take the same assessment to allow cross-state comparability of results.

Two different state cooperative organizations were formed to develop the next generation of assessments: the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (Smarter Balanced) and the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC).

Both tests have earned high marks for quality and alignment to the Common Core. For instance, the Thomas B. Fordham Institute compared the Smarter Balance and PARCC tests to the content of the Common Core State Standards and found both did a good job of testing mastery of the content.

According to [Education Week’s third annual survey of states’ tests](#) in 2017 for the 2016–17 school year, 20 states took one of the two tests.

In recent years, several states have moved away from PARCC or Smarter Balanced in favor of other options. Some states use PARCC or Smarter Balanced test questions but mix them with content generated by the state. *Education Week’s* survey found that in assessments for grades 3 through 8:

- Seven states used PARCC.
- 13 used Smarter Balanced. (New Hampshire also used Smarter Balanced in most districts.)
- Three states used a mix of state-created content and questions from Smarter Balanced or PARCC.
- The remaining states used state-developed tests, which are most often designed in cooperation with an education testing company.

Table 6. Education Week’s Survey of Assessments Given by States in 2016–2017

State	3–8 Test
Alabama	ACT Aspire
Alaska	Performance Evaluation for Alaska’s Schools (PEAKS)
Arizona	AzMERIT
Arkansas	ACT Aspire
California	Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC)

⁹ “Alabama Makes Progress towards Closing the ‘Honesty Gap’,” <http://honestygap.org/state/alabama/>.

State	3–8 Test
Colorado	Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC)
Connecticut	Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC)
Delaware	Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC)
District of Columbia	Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC)
Florida	Florida Standards Assessment (FSA)
Georgia	Georgia Milestones
Hawaii	Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC)
Idaho	Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC)
Illinois	Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC)
Indiana	Indiana Statewide Testing for Educational Progress Plus (ISTEP+)
Iowa	Iowa Assessments
Kansas	Kansas Assessment Program (KAP)
Kentucky	Kentucky Performance Rating for Educational Progress (K-PREP)
Louisiana	MIX: Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) and Louisiana Educational Assessment Program (LEAP)
Maine	Maine Educational Assessment (MEA)
Maryland	Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC)
Massachusetts	MIX: “Next Generation” Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) and Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC)
Michigan	MIX: Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) and Michigan Student Test of Educational Progress (M-STEP)
Minnesota	Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments (MCA)
Mississippi	Mississippi Assessment Program (MAP)
Missouri	Missouri Assessment Program (MAP)
Montana	Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC)
Nebraska	Nebraska State Accountability Tests (NeSA)
Nevada	Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC), end-of-course tests
New Hampshire	Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC), Performance Assessment of Competency Education (PACE)
New Jersey	Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC)

State	3–8 Test
New Mexico	Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC)
New York	New York State Assessments
North Carolina	End-of-grade tests
North Dakota	Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC)
Ohio	Ohio State Tests (OST)
Oklahoma	Oklahoma School Testing Program (OSTP)
Oregon	Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC)
Pennsylvania	Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA)
Rhode Island	Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC)
South Carolina	SCReady
South Dakota	Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC)
Tennessee	TNReady
Texas	State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR)
Utah	Student Assessment of Growth and Excellence (SAGE)
Vermont	Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC)
Virginia	Standards of Learning (SOL)
Washington	Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC)
West Virginia	Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC)
Wisconsin	Wisconsin Forward
Wyoming	Proficiency Assessments for Wyoming Students (PAWS)

Alabama’s Path to a New Assessment

For 2018

With the nonrenewal of ACT Aspire, Alabama’s State Superintendent indicated that Alabama will use an alternative assessment system provided by the education testing company Scantron for the 2017–2018 school year.

Scantron’s assessment system, commonly known by its former name of Global Scholar, has been available, courtesy of the state, to all schools in Alabama for several years. The system has been used to provide formative assessments, which are diagnostic tests given throughout the year to measure student progress.

Approximately 60 to 65% of systems in Alabama use it, according to the ALSDE.

Though primarily used as a formative assessment system, Scantron has a built-in component that can be used to provide summative assessments. One system in Alabama, Florence City Schools, has experimented with using the Scantron summative assessments in place of the state-required Aspire test to provide year-end proficiency tests to students. According to State Department officials, Florence’s

use of the Scantron test provides a model that can be used statewide. Florence administered Scantron Performance Series tests three times during the year: once in the fall, once at midyear, and once at the end of school. The Scantron solution for 2018 provides key advantages, state officials say. Florence and Scantron have already developed evidence that Scantron aligns with Alabama's learning standards. Scantron produces similar proficiency results to Aspire, indicating that it is suitably rigorous, department officials say. An added benefit is that since Scantron tests are given at the beginning and end of the year, the tests can be used to measure students' growth in achievement over the course of an academic year.

While this approach has been modeled in Florence, applying it statewide presents challenges. In light of the shift away from the ACT Aspire:

- The state must provide schools and systems with a clear explanation of how Scantron will be administered and how results will be used to produce valid measures of student achievement across the state.
- The state needs to provide sufficient training to local educators, particularly in systems where Scantron is not currently in use, on how to use the system and on how to interpret the results.
- The state needs to make "crosswalk" studies available, equating Scantron results with the ACT Aspire, and have them reviewed by schools and systems so they can compare Scantron results to Aspire results from previous years.
- A thorough third-party analysis of the alignment of Scantron to the Alabama standards and an evaluation of any comparability studies is needed to provide confidence to local systems. Such an alignment study may be required by federal officials, as well in the future if Scantron is used for more than one year. Without a third-party analysis, Alabama may well find itself facing similar scrutiny from the U.S. Department of Education as it faced with Aspire and its vendor-provided analysis of alignment.

For the Future: Building Consensus Around Assessment

Alabama needs to begin work now to craft a long-term solution for assessments in the context of the state's goals for building a continuously improving education system. The fact that any new assessment will likely be in place for five or more years and that Alabama will likely spend in excess of \$50 million on assessments, it is essential that Alabama get the best assessment possible.

These decisions need to be made by a broad base of stakeholders. While some input from local educators was gathered during the decision to end the contract with ACT for the Aspire, the department didn't establish a formal process for soliciting and evaluating this input.

Without an advisory committee to advise the State Board of Education on the current state of assessments and the direction that local educators would like to see the state go, the board made the decision to cancel the ACT contract in an atmosphere of incomplete information, with a shifting menu of options, and under the

pressure of time. This was not ideal. That situation should be avoided as the state moves forward with the decision-making process on a new assessment for Alabama schools and students.

Generally, states go through a deliberate and inclusive process in developing their assessment and accountability system, ensuring there is broad buy-in among stakeholders. At this point, it is not clear there has been a mechanism established to provide this input, as the state makes further decisions on a permanent replacement for the testing.

Alabama Department of Education officials are in the midst of drafting a request for bids (RFB) for a long-term solution for assessment. Both the RFB and the resulting bids from vendors need to be evaluated by a diverse group of stakeholders, including assessment experts, local education leaders, teachers, representatives of the communities the schools serve.

- **Task Force:** Other states have formed a statewide task force to study the current state of assessments while identifying needed improvements. Examples of that task force approach are described in Tennessee's [*Tennessee Task Force on Student Testing and Assessment*](#) and Wyoming's [*Recommendations from the Wyoming Assessment Task Force*](#). Both documents demonstrate the thoughtful process those states used in evaluating their assessment systems.
- **Third-Party Assistance:** Often states involve an outside party to help guide the process of designing a system for assessment. For example, the National Center for the Improvement of Educational Assessment, Inc. (Center for Assessment), a Dover, NH-based not-for-profit, 501(c)(3) corporation, has worked with 33 states in the design of assessment and accountability. The Center's publication lists 10 suggested steps in the design of a state accountability system (i). The Council of Chief State School Officers has also compiled a list of qualities that should be considered when selecting a test: [*Criteria for Procuring and Evaluating High-Quality Assessment*](#). In sum, every state has been through the process of selecting an assessment, and there is much to be learned from the experiences of other states.
- **Technical Expertise:** As the state develops a long-term approach to assessment and accountability, it will require ongoing input and evaluation by a technical advisory committee. Most states have standing technical advisory committees, composed of individuals with expertise in the design and use of educational assessments. These experts ensure that our assessments are high quality and are educationally and statistically valid. In the past, Alabama has had such a technical advisory committee. In recent years, that committee has not been active but is now in the process of being reconstituted. Such a committee would play a key role in evaluating proposals for a new assessment system and should be convened as soon as possible, along with the advisory committee.

Learning From Experience

We need a stable, accurate, honest, and aligned system of testing to gauge our progress toward our educational goals. With the move away from ACT Aspire, Alabama will lose some continuity and some helpful advantages that were built into that approach. Most notable is the loss of ability to connect Aspire results with predicted outcomes on the ACT, the most commonly used measure of college readiness in Alabama.

However, with a new testing system, we now have the opportunity to address the shortcomings that led to dissatisfaction with ACT Aspire.

Any testing system going forward will need to address the following:

Firm assurance of the technical capacity of the vendor: The administration of the Aspire generated persistent complaints of technical difficulties at the local level.

Results delivered in a timely and reliable manner: Schools need to be able to act on the results when making personnel and resource allocations for the next year. Long and often unexpected delays in the return of data from Aspire prevented this.

Correlation between formative assessments given during the year and summative results at the end of the year: The testing marketplace has been evolving, and most test designers now have companion tools that offer the ability to test students earlier in the year on the same platform with which the year-end test is administered. These results of assessments taken throughout the year give teachers the ability to identify strengths and remedy weaknesses during the year. The multiple administrations also offer the possibility of measuring student growth, a useful measure when it comes to evaluating the effectiveness of instructional approaches. However, care must be taken when the formative assessments are fed into a “high stakes” evaluation of teachers and schools. Formative assessments are important classroom tools, and we must avoid creating a situation in which those assessments would be pressurized. While some systems have expressed the desire to have both formative and summative assessments from the same provider, it is also the case that some systems prefer to use formative assessments that they are already familiar with and in which they have invested time and training.

Alignment: Questions were raised about Aspire’s alignment to Alabama’s content standards. While both ACT and the state provided evidence of alignment, any new system of assessment will need an independent, third-party evaluation to prove the test adequately and faithfully measures student mastery of Alabama’s content standards.

State interaction and influence over the content of the test: Aspire was designed as a national test and thus lacked a mechanism for tailoring it to respond to Alabama’s own standards. A replacement system should have some of this flexibility, though it should retain comparability to other test takers in other states.

Release of questions: Some complained that ACT Aspire didn't provide sample questions or retired questions that would allow teachers to familiarize themselves and their students with how questions are phrased or designed. A new assessment system should include a reasonable number of such items. However, it is also true that the test questions cost money to generate and validate, and expense can become a concern in this regard.

Cost of assessments: A virtue of ACT Aspire was that it was less expensive than some others. Cost will always be a concern and must be taken into account. If a new system is more expensive, education leaders need to be able to explain to taxpayers and legislators why the increased cost is justified. At the same time, the state should not simply choose the cheapest option if it lacks important elements of quality that can help Alabama students and teachers in the long run.

Time on test: Another advertised advantage of Aspire was that it took less student time to take than competing options. Time spent on the test needs to factor in evaluating a replacement. If additional time is needed, the assessment should return higher quality results.

Understandability: ACT Aspire results could be understood in the context of a journey to college readiness. ACT results in the upper grades were designed to predict how a student would do in each subject area on the ACT, a test that determines readiness for college. ACT is one of two national tests taken by students applying for college. Scoring at or above the benchmark in a subject area on the ACT serves as a predictor of how a student would fare in a college-level course in that subject area. That gave Aspire scores a real-world anchor on a test that is important in college admissions and the pursuit of scholarships based on ACT scores. It is questionable whether that can be replicated with other testing products. Any replacement test will need to be accompanied by a thorough explanation of what the test results mean for the child.

Comparability: Initially, it was assumed that ACT Aspire would be used in several states, allowing Alabama student performance to be compared with the performance of other students in other states. That didn't turn out to be the case. In 2017, only two states, Alabama and Arkansas, administered the Aspire statewide. That severely limited comparability. Ideally, a future test should be in use in other states so that the pool of comparison includes students other than simply those in Alabama.

Conclusion

It is vital that Alabama have an honest, rigorous, enduring test if students, parents, teachers, education leaders, and the state as a whole are going to have a realistic picture of Alabama's educational system and an effective tool for gauging progress.

A comprehensive system of high-quality student assessments should be an efficient system and produce the necessary information with the least amount of assessment.

Student assessments are used to make critical decisions about instruction, interventions and support, advanced educational opportunities, and policies. High-

quality, standardized student assessments are essential for evaluating equity among schools and within them.

Most importantly, assessments should be a tool for the growth of individual students, a true measure of strengths and weakness, and a real-world appraisal of a student's position on the path to college and career readiness.

The decisions that will have to be made on the future of assessments in Alabama must be made with broad engagement and buy-in from the educational community, its citizenry, and the state's political and business leadership. Student achievement matters to us all.



May 6, 2017

The Honorable Kay Ivey, Governor
The Honorable Members of the State Board of Education
The Honorable Michael Sentance, State Superintendent of Education

Dear Gov. Ivey, Members of the Alabama State Board of Education, and Mr. Sentance,

We, the undersigned, request that the Alabama State Department of Education and the State Board of Education continue using its current statewide assessment of educational progress, the ACT Aspire, for the 2017–2018 school year to allow for adequate consideration, planning, and implementation of a new assessment system.

In June, the State Board is expected to consider whether to cancel or extend for one year its current contract with ACT for the administration and scoring of the ACT Aspire, a set of standardized tests, given to students in grades 3 through 8 and 10.

There may be valid reasons for dissatisfaction with ACT Aspire. However, rushing into a new assessment system in a compressed timeframe without adequate input from a wide range of stakeholders that includes local educators, parents, assessment experts, school administrators, and others is a recipe for confusion and dissension in both the short and the long term. Those most affected by the assessment system must have an opportunity for buy-in. Without a replacement properly vetted and identified, the state would be discarding a testing system familiar to teachers, students, and parents.

We respectfully request a committee of these stakeholders be created by the State Board of Education to make recommendations on the next generation of assessments.

Immediate cancellation of our current assessment will create a break in an established set of data, undermining the state's ability to track trends in educational performance. ACT Aspire scores can be used to indicate potential future performance on the ACT, the college readiness test taken by Alabama high school students.

The state is likely to incur additional costs for a replacement system — costs that are undetermined and are not accounted for in the fiscal year 2018 Education Trust Fund Budget.

In the same time frame that the State Board will be considering whether or not to extend the contract with ACT for Aspire testing in grades 3 through 8 and 10, the board is expected to be presented with multiple alternative proposals for a new assessment system. We understand the State Department of Education is in the process of drafting a detailed request for bids, which is expected to be over 120

pages long.

We think the initial work of the representative committee charged with developing the best assessment plan possible for Alabama should be completed before an RFB is released. The committee can then help evaluate those bids once they are returned.

All states are required by federal law to give an annual summative assessment so that school performance can be measured and progress tracked toward goals for educational improvement. If the State Board chooses to pursue the development of a new Alabama-specific test, the time frame for developing aligned and valid tests would be time-consuming.

Some have suggested the state ask the U.S. Department of Education for a one-year waiver in testing to allow for the transition to a new assessment. This is not desirable because there is no certainty such a waiver would be granted, potentially leading to the hasty implementation in 2018 of a test unfamiliar to educators.

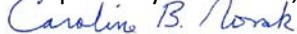
Further, Alabama schools need an annual assessment of academic quality to evaluate progress. School systems need a measuring stick to know whether their improvement efforts are effective. Without a test, we would lose a year of information that can help highlight best practices in schools that are closing achievement gaps.

According to *Education Week*, across the nation in the 2016–2017 school year:

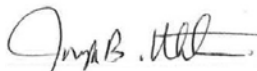
- 27 states are using tests they purchased or designed in collaboration with a vendor. This includes Alabama.
- 20 states and the District of Columbia administered PARCC or Smarter Balanced tests. These tests were developed through multi-state collaboration to reflect the Common Core State Standards.
- Three states give tests that are a blend of their own, home-designed questions and items from PARCC or Smarter Balanced.

The decision of a new assessment is of great consequence and should be made with the advice of a comprehensive committee. Assessments are a cornerstone of an improvement and accountability plan. It is vital that we get this decision right. The decision should be made with broad consensus about how we measure academic performance and what educational goals we, as a state, are pursuing. We are in no way trying to persuade the State Superintendent or State Board to choose one assessment pathway over another. However, we do believe the best pathway on assessments will be easier to see with the guidance of a well-balanced committee. We urge the appointment of a committee as soon as possible to give them ample time to work and report back to the Superintendent and State Board with options.

Respectfully submitted,



Caroline Novak
President
A+ Education Partnership



Joe Morton
Chairman
Business Education Alliance



Ryan Hankins
Executive Director
Public Affairs Research Council

ⁱ In February of 2016, the National Center for the Improvement of Educational Assessment published advice for states on redesigning state accountability systems to meet the requirements of the Every Student Succeeds Act. While the paper contemplates a complete reevaluation of a state’s scheme for setting educational goals, measuring progress toward those goals, and formulating strategies for reaching those goals, the advice is worth considering in Alabama’s current situation. Standardized tests are key components of any accountability system, and some form of the same recommended deliberative process should apply.

What follows is an excerpt from that document that described recommended steps:

A Sketch of a State Design Process
(From Considerations for State Leaders in the Design of School Accountability Systems Under the
Every Student Succeeds Act

“It is important to get started on this work quickly, but since accountability systems are designed to instantiate stakeholder values, it is critical to avoid shortcutting opportunities for key stakeholders to provide meaningful input.

However, accountability systems cannot be designed by hundreds of people, so what follows is a very high-level sketch of a process designed to include all relevant stakeholders, but to do so efficiently.

- 1. There must be an internal state department of education (DOE) group, operating on behalf of the state chief, that can make critical policy decisions. Similarly, there must be a DOE person who is the responsible point person for this work. A technical consultant, if used, would work directly with this point person and the internal leadership group.**
- 2. Early meetings should be convened with leaders of key stakeholder groups, such as the various associations, state board members, gubernatorial representation, and legislative leadership. These meetings will be designed to ensure that representatives understand the constraints, requirements, and opportunities available under ESSA and to ensure that the representatives understand and, to the extent possible, buy into the proposed design process. This document, for example, can serve as the foundation for these meetings. These groups should be informed of the progress on a regular basis (e.g., two to three months), with groups such as the district superintendents informed more regularly.**
- 3. The DOE leadership and key stakeholders should be clear regarding the degree to which it wants to build on an existing accountability system in the state or start with a blank slate.**
- 4. A working group—something like an “accountability task force” — should be charged with serving as advisers to the smaller group of system designers. The membership of this group may need to be expanded to ensure that key stakeholders are appropriately represented. This group will need to meet monthly, at a minimum, to reflect on design work and to help weigh in on key value and practical decisions. This group should be convened as soon as possible because of the need to get to work. There is no need to wait for all of the meetings described in #2 to begin working with the task force.**
- 5. The advisory group, along with other key stakeholders, will first have to explicitly articulate goals for the system. This foundation will be an important touchstone for creating a theory of action to guide the design of the full system.**

-
6. The lead DOE representative(s), along with the technical consultant if used, will be responsible for bringing design proposals to the advisory group and reflecting the advisory group's input in subsequent meetings.
 7. Once the goals are agreed upon, the advisory group will turn to identifying appropriate indicators and approaches for measuring the indicators that fit with the theory of action.
 8. The DOE and technical consultant will model the various indicators and work with the advisory group to determine how best to aggregate and combine (or not) the various measures to make overall determinations.

Full text of *Considerations for State Leaders in the Design of School Accountability Systems Under the Every Student Succeeds Act*, Scott Marion, National Center for the Improvement of Educational Assessment, February 19, 2016, is available at http://www.nciea.org/sites/default/files/publications/ESSA-Accountability-Design-Considerations_021916.pdf

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