



# Everything You Ever Wanted To Know About Assessment

*(But Didn't Want To Ask)*



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Ask educators how they feel about assessments and they are likely to fall into two camps: those who consider them just one more task on an overflowing plate, and those who embrace them for their power to identify and mitigate learning gaps. If you or your staff are in the first category, it may be because you are frustrated with assessments that provide disconnected information from different platforms, which makes it challenging to unlock student potential. That can change now.

While educators have long heard about the importance of a balanced assessment system, schools and districts are evaluating whether this model goes far enough to synthesize the wide range of assessment data collected throughout the year and use it to improve student outcomes. Data is only actionable when it has context, which is why many schools and districts are turning to **a comprehensive and cohesive assessment system** that improves the effectiveness of an educator's decision-making by considering the whole child.

Is now the time to evaluate your assessment program to ensure it meets the needs of today's students and families? Here's what to consider.

# Moving Your Assessment System From “Balanced” to “Comprehensive and Cohesive”

Education has a rich vocabulary all its own, and the world of assessments is part of that specialized language. Understanding the key differences between assessment types can ensure you’re making the most of each one.

What is a balanced assessment program?

A balanced assessment program is designed to “balance” the attention on summative assessment for accountability with the benefits of classroom and interim assessment intended to give an ongoing measure of student achievement. In combination, these three measures should work together to support the various decisions and uses for which each is designed.

The specific features and uses for these three assessment types are:

**Classroom assessments** are aligned to scope and sequence and inform day-to-day instructional plans targeting specific areas. Their goal is to help educators address learning gaps early on by improving students’ abilities to learn the content and, more broadly, by allowing students to take ownership of the process of learning itself. In this way, classroom assessments are also referred to as assessments *for* learning.

While classroom assessment can include tools such as test questions, it could also happen by observing a sample of a student’s work and through student discussions. “The goal is to facilitate teachers’ immediate feedback directly to the student, to use information from observations or test results for reteaching or grouping to help students thoroughly understand,” explains Pearson Senior Research Scientist Melinda Montgomery.

**Interim assessments** are touch points designed to periodically measure progress. These assessments are most often used to predict performance on summative assessments, measure student growth or evaluate programs, such as curriculum implementation. They typically provide aggregated results to support school and district administrator decisions, such as where to allocate resources, but they may also support teacher-level instructional decisions. Therefore, depending on the design and uses, interim assessments may be assessments *for* learning or assessments *of* learning.

“Interim assessments might include results that project the student’s trajectory toward meeting end-of-year proficiency goals,” says Amy Reilly, Vice

President of Innovative Assessment Solutions at Pearson. “Taking this measurement periodically during the school year provides opportunities to intervene and make adjustments to elevate students to where they need to be by the end of the year.”

**Summative assessments** happen at the end of a larger block of instruction, including at the end of a school year, and they are designed to measure how much has been learned as an assessment *of* learning. “They serve a very important purpose in ensuring that students are receiving an equitable education,” Montgomery says, adding that they are necessary to fulfill state and district requirements for federal funding.



# How can comprehensive and cohesive assessments improve balanced assessment goals?

An assessment's value is not the score itself but rather how educators interpret the results and apply them to the classroom. While a balanced assessment program is vital to student success, the biggest downfall of the current approach is that many schools and districts use disparate assessments and assessment platforms that don't connect data points to tell a consistent story.

"One of the cornerstones of good assessment practice is to triangulate across measures to inform decision-making. When assessments aren't designed as part of a coherent system — for example, they aren't aligned to the state standards — it can be very

challenging to piece it all together," says Trent Workman, Senior Vice President of School Assessment at Pearson.

That's why it's important for schools to evaluate their individual assessments in the context of a larger cohesive system that accounts for more than scores and includes design features and intended uses of the individual assessments, as well as other important information available for students. Using multiple inputs, including data around absences and social/emotional learning (SEL) surveys, can provide the context necessary to understand student progress. "Just as a doctor wouldn't make a diagnosis based on one measurement like your blood pressure,

uniting all these pieces of information allows schools to make more effective decisions for students,” Workman says.

Pearson’s District Assessment Solutions address the need for a more robust suite of assessment tools designed coherently while providing wraparound professional development support. “Assessment literacy is a challenge because of the nuances across assessment purposes. We advise our district partners to dig deep into the specific purpose and validity evidence of assessment products they’re exploring,” Workman says. “Our goal is to create individual measures that have clear purposes, claims and uses designed to

work together in a way that provides a full picture for the district, schools, educators and families.”

Besides assessing core academic measures, our assessment solutions will include nontraditional measures for evaluating other skills needed for lifelong success, including factors that contribute to SEL, such as relationship-building and self-awareness, Workman says. These comprehensive and cohesive assessments also will undergo bias and sensitivity reviews and ensure students can see themselves through diverse and inclusive assessment content.

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Trent Workman, Senior Vice President of School Assessment at Pearson



# Why It's Time To Prioritize Assessments *for* Learning

All three assessment types — classroom, interim and summative — are crucial for a well-rounded assessment program. Yet stakeholders often focus on the assessment of learning that takes place at the end of the school year.

If educators don't devote sufficient time to the classroom and interim tools — the assessments *for* learning that can continually help move the needle — they can miss opportunities to support student progress. Embedding assessments at all stages of instruction will encourage educators to use classroom tools as checkpoints to assess student competency based on what they're currently teaching in the classroom, then use the immediate

feedback to confirm that their daily instruction is suitable to keeping students on track or getting them where they need to be.

Here's what you need to know about these two types of complementary tools.

Assessments *for* learning and assessments *of* learning defined

While it might seem small, a preposition can make a big difference. Here is how these types of assessments differ:

**Assessments of learning** are administered at the end of a major unit of instruction, such as state summative assessments for meeting federal accountability requirements. These

45% of school and district leaders don't trust data from the state summative assessment to make instructional decisions

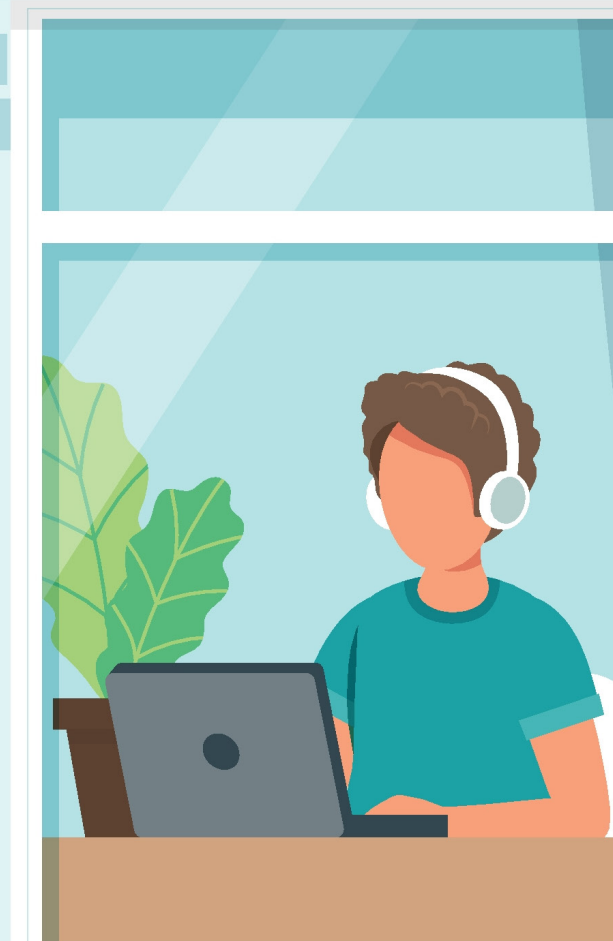
*Pearson survey of educators and district administrators*

assessments often include standardized administration procedures, such as testing during a specific timeframe to support making comparisons across groups of students. For statewide summative assessments, in particular, the assessment content goes through a rigorous development process, which often includes educator input and psychometric procedures to provide confidence that the data from these assessments is valid and reliable and to support the higher-stakes decisions that are made.

**Assessments for learning** serve as a practice to reinforce what students are learning and can help educators ensure they course-correct as needed to improve student learning outcomes. They can include a short set of test questions that measure a student on a particular skill, such as multiplying two-digit numbers. When evaluating assessments for learning products, educators should consider three key questions:

- 1 Are the assessment results provided quickly so instructional adjustments can be made as soon as possible?
- 2 Do the assessments cover standards or topics that are relevant to what has just been taught?
- 3 Are the assessments of a “grain size” that allows teachers to make actionable decisions to address student misconceptions or misunderstandings?

While the need was growing pre-pandemic, the disparate effects of COVID-19 on educational progress accelerated the urgency of identifying learning gaps. “Assessment for learning is key to how we address the post-pandemic needs of students and







educators and position assessments in a more meaningful way going forward,” Workman says. “However, we argue that not all assessments for learning are created equally. The quality of a teacher’s decision will be vastly improved by the quality of the data and the assessment instrument.”

“Pearson is highly regarded for providing milestone assessments of learning, following rigorous assessment development processes to support the types of decisions that are made from those assessments. As we create assessments for learning, we’re leveraging that expertise to create high-quality assessments that are more directly related to improving instruction.”

Amy Reilly, Vice President of Innovative Assessment Solutions at Pearson

The goal of a balanced assessment system that is also comprehensive and coherent is to give educators a whole-child perspective of each student in a way that supports the interpretation of multiple pieces of information to inform decisions. The best way to do that is by using both assessments of learning and assessments for learning to support and measure student progress.

Interim assessments can be a valuable tool in that regard, Reilly says. “Depending on the assessment design and its intended uses, interims can be assessments for learning to support broader instructional decisions for teachers, but they can also be assessments of learning because they allow administrators, instructional coaches and other stakeholders to know how groups of students are performing after receiving a larger unit of instruction.”

# Engaging Families and Caregivers as a Key Constituent

While assessments are vital to helping teachers fine-tune their lesson plans and personalize instruction to help close individual learning gaps, another group of people needs a clearer picture of where their students are: parents and caregivers.

"We see they are more anxious than ever for information about where their students are throughout the instructional year," Montgomery says. "They want to know the implications of any school disruptions and confirm their student is on track. When so many students were learning at home last year, parents got more insight into the classroom and now want to continue informed discussions with their teachers."

That includes knowing more about assessment results. "In our research and discussions, we find families don't always understand what their student spends time on and why it matters," Workman says. "But once the caregiver sees what was gleaned from the assessment, they feel more confident about the time devoted to these important markers."

78% of respondents want data visualizations of student results for improved interpretation

*Pearson survey of educators and district administrators*



Expediency and communication are paramount. Pearson's assessment solutions make results available to families and caregivers through a personalized video developed in their home language and embedded in the platform. That kind of outreach can provide much-needed context while taking some of the burden off teachers to ensure families are aware

of their student's progress. "Just seeing a number on a score report isn't meaningful," Reilly says. "Parents want to engage and know what questions they should ask, and these reports offer insight that spurs more productive conversations with their child's teacher and enables them to better support their student at home."

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Trent Workman, Senior Vice President of School Assessment at Pearson

# Are You Ready To Take Your Assessments to the Next Level?

The pandemic revealed great discrepancies in terms of equity that can't be alleviated without a clear picture of what learning gaps might exist. At the same time, teachers' jobs have gotten a lot harder. "At Pearson, we believe we need to step up and think through how we can support today's educators as they seek to improve student learning outcomes," Montgomery says. "Our goal is to create a suite of products that work in tandem to meet the needs of districts, teachers, students and families."

Visit [pearsonassessments.com/districts](https://pearsonassessments.com/districts) to learn more about how Pearson can help your school or district create an assessment system that keeps the whole child at the center.



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