

BRIEF #8: ALABAMA ASSESSMENT TASK FORCE

HIGH SCHOOL ASSESSMENT OPTIONS FOR ALABAMA

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The Every Student Succeeds Act, like the No Child Left Behind Act before it, requires states to administer an English language arts, mathematics, and science assessment at least once in high school. Many states have opted to administer “survey assessments” generally in grade 11. Such survey assessments attempt to sample from all of the high school standards from the respective content areas and are administered to all students in 11th grade. While such assessments provide a general picture of achievement relative to the high school standards, they are a blunt instrument given the widely varying course taking patterns of the students by the time they sit for such an assessment. Like many of the design issues discussed for other issues, high school assessment requires the consideration of many difficult tradeoffs. This brief explores several of these tradeoffs and discusses potential high school assessment options.

As we have discussed multiple times, all assessment design is a case of optimization under constraints and requirements. One of the key constraints operating in Alabama is that the ACT has rapidly become institutionalized. There is significant political and public support for having the state support having all students complete the ACT in 11th grade. A Task Force recommendation against the use of the ACT as part of the high school assessment in Alabama would not be well-received. Therefore, it seems likely that ACT must be part of the Task Force’s recommendations.

Since in all likelihood the ACT will continue to be administered in grade 11, it does not make sense for the state to consider adding another “survey test” in grade 11 even it is purportedly more aligned to the state standards than the ACT. Two similar tests administered in the same grade would likely fuel the over-testing backlash. So what are Alabama’s options? Two potential options include:

- ✓ Administer survey tests in grades 9 and/or 10 in ELA and mathematics, or
- ✓ Implement end-of-course (EOC) in a selection of high school courses.

We explore each of these in a bit more detail below.

Grades 9 and/or 10 survey tests

Many states have decided to administer grade-level tests in grades 9 and 10 tied to the state's ELA and mathematics standards. In fact, several states that have adopted this approach are also administering the ACT or SAT in grade 11. This affords the state several opportunities. The state can measure student learning of the state's own standards in these two grades and it can use these test results as the achievement indicator for high school accountability, while limiting the SAT or ACT to its validated use as a college readiness indicator. It also provides the opportunity to compute student longitudinal growth measures from middle school through grade 11. On the other hand, grade 9 and 10 survey tests suffer from some of the same challenges as a single survey test in 11th grade in that students participating in either or both the grades 9 and 10 assessments may be in very different courses, leading to motivation and interpretation challenges with these tests. This may be more of an issue in mathematics where "tracking" is quite common but it is perhaps less of an issue in early high school ELA where students often take the same core classes before moving to electives.

End-of-course testing

End-of-course (EOC) tests are common in approximately one-half of the states. As the name implies, EOC tests are tied to specific courses (e.g., Algebra 1, Biology) and are tied closely to the expected content of these course. In certain states, the EOC test results are required to be incorporated into the course grade, while in other states they are prohibited from counting toward student grades. If these are well-aligned assessments used to increase student motivation to perform well on the tests and if the tests are high-quality, then we would argue that the results should be allowed to count in the student grade, depending on the wishes of the local school leaders. A big challenge with EOC tests is determining which courses to test. Anyone who has looked at a course catalogue of a comprehensive high school recently knows that there are hundreds of courses available to students. It would be a financial and logistical nightmare to try to have an EOC testing system to cover most courses. Therefore, states have to prioritize which courses they want to include in its EOC testing system. States with EOC testing systems generally test in Algebra 1, Geometry, English 9, English 10 (or some other high-frequency course such as U.S. Literature), Life Science, and perhaps one of the physical sciences. Some states also include EOC exams in commonly-required courses like U.S. History, World History, U.S. Government, and perhaps Economics.

There are many benefits of a high-quality EOC exam system, including potentially raising and creating shared expectations across the state and ensuring that students are evaluated using exams that are generally higher-quality than those created locally. However, there are some challenges associated with an EOC exam system. The first, discussed already, is prioritizing

which courses will be tested and determining how the results should be used. The second, which is the converse of shared expectations, is that EOC tests, like what is observed with Advanced Placement (AP) exams, tend to shape course content and instruction and reduce local control. The most serious challenges though involve the cost and capacity necessary to maintain a high-quality EOC system. It costs about as much to develop a single 11th grade survey test as it does to develop only one EOC test. Therefore, every additional test employed has a direct multiplier effect on the cost of high school testing. Additionally, every test requires direct supervision by ALSDE personnel to sure that the state is getting what has been promised and at the level of quality negotiated. Therefore, more testing means more money to hire more ALSDE personnel. It goes without saying that money is far from unlimited and what is spent on high school testing could come at the cost of assessments for elementary and middle school.

Questions to Answer

We would like the Task Force to weigh in on the following questions:

1. Is the Task Force willing to endorse the use of the ACT (or other college readiness assessment) in high school?
2. Is the Task Force interested in supplementing high school testing beyond the ACT/SAT?
 - a. If so, does the Task Force recommend:
 - i. A grades 9-10 approach or
 - ii. An EOC approach?
 1. If an EOC approach, how many and which courses should be included in an EOC exam system?
3. If the Task Force wants to increase high school testing beyond the ACT, what else in the system might the Task Force be willing to give up?