



A Public Policy Statement



The Gordon Commission
on the Future of Assessment in Education

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PREFACE

The Gordon Commission on the Future of Assessment in Education was established by Educational Testing Service in January 2011 and given a two-year tenure. The members of the Commission recognize that the future of assessment will be influenced by what the research and development (R&D) and the assessment production communities generate as instruments and procedures for the assessment in education enterprise. However, we are very much aware that equally determinative of the future will be the judgments and preferences of the policymakers who decide what will be required and what practitioners and the public will expect. In recognition of the crucial role played by policymakers, the Executive Council of the Gordon Commission has given special attention to the development of a policy statement that concludes with three recommendations directed at those who make policy concerning education and its assessment. The statement has been prepared by James Pellegrino, co-Chair of the Commission, and Lauren Resnick, member of the Executive Council, with input from Sharon Lynn Kagan, consultant to the Chair, and other members of the Executive Council — Randy Bennett, Eva Baker, Bob Mislevy, Lorrie Shepard, Louis Gomez and Edmund W. Gordon — and the assistance of Richard Colvin as writing consultant.

This Public Policy statement represents the authors' sense of recommendations that are implicit in the work of the Commission. However, it has not been vetted by the members of the Gordon Commission and thus it should not be concluded that any given member of the Commission endorses the specifics included herein.



Edmund W. Gordon
Chairperson

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Gordon Commission on the Future of Assessment in Education was created to consider the nature and content of American education during the 21st century and how assessment can be used most effectively to advance that vision by serving the educational and informational needs of students, teachers and society. The Commission's goal in issuing this brief public policy statement is to stimulate a productive national conversation about assessment and its relationship to teaching and learning at a time when developments in assessment and education in the United States present a remarkable opportunity to reconceptualize the purposes of educational assessments.

The statement advances arguments for:

1. Transforming Assessment to Support Teaching, Learning and Human Development
2. Reconsidering Assessment: Why, What and How We Assess
3. Moving Forward: The Opportunity

Recommendations

In the Realm of State Collaboration and Policy

It is recommended that states create a permanent Council on Educational Assessments modeled on the Education Commission of the States.

In the Realm of Federal Policy

It is recommended that the president and Congress build on various models to encourage experimentation with different approaches to assessment and accountability.

In the Realm of National Research and Development

It is recommended that the U.S. Department of Education, the Department of Defense, the National Science Foundation, and the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, in collaboration with the philanthropic community, not-for-profit and for-profit sectors, professional teacher organizations and universities commit to a 10-year research and development effort to strengthen the capacity of U.S. assessment.

INTRODUCTION

The Gordon Commission on the Future of Assessment in Education was created to consider the nature and content of American education during the 21st century and how assessment can be used most effectively to advance that vision by serving the educational and informational needs of students, teachers and society. The Commission's goal in issuing this brief public policy statement¹ is to stimulate a productive national conversation about assessment and its relationship to learning. The work of the Commission and this report come at a propitious time. The Common Core State Standards in Mathematics and English Language Arts adopted by 45 states and the District of Columbia, as well as Next Generation Science Standards that are under development, stress problem-solving, creativity and critical thinking over the memorization of isolated facts and decontextualized skills. Assessments meant to embody and reinforce those standards are under development and will be given for the first time in 2015. Over the next few years states will be deeply engaged in implementing the standards and preparing for the new assessments. These developments have heightened awareness among educators and state and federal policymakers of the critical relationships among more rigorous standards, curriculum, instruction and appropriate assessment, and have created an opportunity to address issues of long standing. This policy statement capitalizes on that opportunity to bring about a fundamental reconceptualization of the purposes of educational assessments.

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TRANSFORMING ASSESSMENT TO SUPPORT TEACHING, LEARNING AND HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

Although assessment, broadly construed, is a central element of education and must be aligned with both teaching and learning goals, it is not the only — or even the major — tool for improving student outcomes. Indeed, for education to be effective, schools must be designed with clear and precise teaching and learning goals in mind and supported in ways that make them likely to reach those goals; teachers must be provided with the appropriate instructional materials and professional development; and other resources including time, technology and teachers' skills must be deployed strategically.

To be helpful in achieving the learning goals laid out in the Common Core, assessments must fully represent the competencies that the increasingly complex and changing world demands. The best assessments can accelerate the acquisition of these competencies if they guide the actions of teachers and enable students to gauge their progress. To do so, the tasks and activities in the assessments must be models worthy of the attention and energy of teachers and students. The Commission calls on policymakers at all levels to actively promote this badly needed transformation in current assessment practice. The first and most important step in the right direction will require a fundamental shift in thinking about the purposes of assessment. Throughout the long history of educational assessment in the United States, it has been seen by policymakers as a means of enforcing accountability for the performance of teachers and schools. For a relatively low outlay, assessments could expose academic weaknesses and make it possible to pressure schools and teachers to improve. But, as long as that remains their primary purpose, assessments will never fully realize their potential to guide and inform teaching and learning. Accountability is not the problem. The problem is that other purposes of assessment, such as providing instructionally relevant feedback to teachers and students, get lost when the sole goal of states is to use them to obtain an estimate of how much students have learned in the course of a year. It is critical that the nation's leaders recognize that there are multiple purposes of assessment and that a better balance must be struck among them. The country must invest in the development of new types of assessments that work together in synergistic ways to effectively accomplish these different purposes

— in essence, systems of assessment. Those systems must include tools that provide teachers with actionable information about their students and their practice in real time. We must also assure that, in serving accountability purposes, assessments external to the classroom will be designed and used to support high-quality education. Finally, the nation must create a demand for improved assessment practices by helping parents and educators understand the need for change.

The transformation of assessment will require a long-term commitment. There will be some who will argue that, with the work of the PARCC and Smarter Balanced state consortia to create new assessment systems not yet complete, it would be better to wait before pursuing major policy changes. The Commission disagrees and believes that because that work is unfinished, now is the time to move toward more fundamental changes. Certainly, the new assessment systems will need to be implemented and analyzed and then — based on data — revised, to be sure that they are, indeed, supportive of the standards. The fundamental reconceptualization of assessment systems that the Commission is calling for should guide those inquiries. The states leading the consortia must demand that the assessment systems be robust enough to drive the instructional changes required to meet the standards. In addition, states have to expect that the assessment systems will provide evidence of student learning that is useful to teachers. Finally, states have to demand that the systems be flexible enough to be adapted to new methods of delivery and scoring as they emerge. As of now, the funding for the consortia will run out in 2014, just as the new assessment systems are starting to be used, and the costs will likely be shifted to the states. The states will have a financial as well as educational incentive to make sure the assessment systems are working as intended.

Consistent with the above, the leadership of the Gordon Commission has developed a set of recommendations directed toward federal and state policymakers; private for-profit and nonprofit organizations related to assessment; the scholarly community; and philanthropists. As a context for these recommendations, we briefly summarize major themes that emerged from meetings that the Commission held across the country as well as reviews and syntheses of research regarding assessment history, methods, philosophy, digital technology and policy.

RECONSIDERING ASSESSMENT: WHY, WHAT AND HOW WE ASSESS

The purposes of assessment fall into two general categories: first, assessment of learning generally involves an appraisal of student achievement after a period of instruction. Such assessments can be used to judge attainment for purposes including accountability, admission to college or other opportunities, and to evaluate programs or approaches. Second, assessment for learning involves a more restricted and focused appraisal of student knowledge during a shorter period. It is designed for purposes such as adjusting and improving instruction. Although both types of assessment share certain features, they each must be tailored to their specific purpose; an assessment designed for one purpose (e.g., accountability) is seldom best suited for other purposes (e.g., instructional adjustment).

Recognizing that accountability will continue to be an important aspect of educational policy, the Gordon Commission believes that accountability must be achieved in a way that supports high-quality teaching and learning. It must be remembered that, at their core, educational assessments are statements about what educators, state policymakers and, indirectly, parents want their students to learn and — in a larger sense — become. What we choose to assess is what will end up being the focus of classroom instruction. Teachers and students will take their cues from high-stakes tests and will try to score well on them regardless of their type. So, it is critical that the tests best represent the kind of learning students will need to thrive in the world that awaits them beyond graduation.

But changing the nature and quality of external accountability tests will not be enough. An equal, if not greater, investment needs to be made in new assessment resources and tools that better integrate assessment with classroom teaching and learning, and better represent current thinking on how students learn and on changes in the world at large. The globalization of the economy, advancements in technology, the development of the Internet, and the explosion of social media and other communication platforms have changed the nature of what it means to be well-educated and competent in the 21st century. Digital technologies have empowered individuals in multiple ways, enabling them to express themselves, gather information easily, make informed choices, and organize themselves into networks for a variety of purposes. New assessments — both external and internal to classroom use — must fit squarely into this landscape of the future, both signaling what is important and helping learners know they are making progress toward productive citizenry.

More specifically, assessments must advance competencies that are matched to the era in which we live. Contemporary students must be able to evaluate the validity and relevance of disparate pieces of information and draw conclusions from them. They need to use what they know to make conjectures and seek evidence to test them, come up with new ideas, and contribute productively to their networks, whether on the job or in their communities. As the world grows increasingly complex and interconnected, people need to be able to recognize patterns, make comparisons, resolve contradictions, and understand causes and effects. They need to learn to be comfortable with ambiguity and recognize that perspective shapes information and the meanings we draw from it. At the most general level, the emphasis in our educational systems needs to be on helping individuals make sense of the world and how to operate effectively within it. Finally, it also is important that assessments do more than document what students are capable of and what they know. To be as useful as possible, assessments should provide clues as to why students think the way they do and how they are learning as well as the reasons for misunderstandings.

Designing and implementing assessments that support this ambitious vision of education represents a major challenge. Historically, educational assessments have been far more narrowly focused. Assessments have been designed primarily to provide summative information about student, teacher, school and system performance. That information has been used to highlight weaknesses, direct the spending of money, choose students for additional help or advanced classes, and evaluate the effectiveness of programs or teaching methods. Present testing practices enjoy broad support among policymakers because many people accept them as defining educational accomplishment. But this emphasis on measuring student performance at a single point in time and with assessments whose primary purpose is to provide information to constituencies external to the classroom has, to a large extent, neglected the other purposes of assessment. Moreover, developing a new mindset about the contexts and purposes for assessment, as well as new approaches to accomplish it, is not only difficult, but requires an investment of resources. Presently, the federal government is absorbing the lion's share of the costs for the systems of assessment being developed by the PARCC and Smarter Balanced consortia. The conditions of that support stipulate that accountability components be the primary focus of their work. As a result, it is highly likely that the tools and resources needed to support teacher uses of assessment in the classroom will be seriously underdeveloped and in need of significant further work. When this round of federal funding ends, and the states are left with the challenges and costs associated with implementation and further development of accountability systems, there may be little money remaining to devote to formative assessment and practices.

MOVING FORWARD: THE OPPORTUNITY

Because assessments are, essentially, a claim about a student's competencies, new approaches to assessment must be treated as a process of gathering evidence to confirm or disprove particular claims. That evidence, which in a system of assessments can come from multiple sources, can be used to improve both how and what students are learning. The evidence might include activities ranging from simple to complex performance tasks pursued within classrooms as well as assessments external to regular classroom activities.

Digital technologies hold great promise for helping to bring about many of the changes in assessment that the Commission believes are necessary. Technologies available today and innovations on the immediate horizon can be used to access information, create simulations and scenarios, allow students to engage in learning games and other activities, and enable collaboration among students. Such activities make it possible to observe, document and assess students' work as they are engaged in natural activities — perhaps reducing the need to separate formal assessment for accountability from learning in the moment. Technologies certainly will make possible the greater use of formative assessment that, in turn, has been shown to significantly impact student achievement. Digital activities also may provide information about noncognitive abilities — such as persistence, creativity and teamwork — that current testing approaches cannot. Juxtaposed with the promise is the need for considerable work to be done on issues of scoring and interpretation of evidence before such embedded assessment can be useful for these varied purposes.

Many issues, including some alluded to above, have been discussed and debated among educators and assessment experts for many years. As part of those discussions it is now widely recognized that large-scale standardized testing has exerted a greater and greater influence over American schooling. At the same time, it has been shown repeatedly that teachers have the largest impact on education of any in-school factor. And it is what teachers do and what they teach and how they assess in classrooms that give teachers that influence. Given that fact, it would seem appropriate to identify specific, effective instructional resources such as curricula and classroom assessments and then prepare teachers to use those resources effectively. However, the notion that education must be locally controlled is deeply engrained in our nation's culture and educational politics and that fact has meant that instructional resources must be chosen by those

closest to the classrooms, which sometimes means individual teachers. So, states have individually relied on external tests to exemplify and enforce their content standards so as to ensure some degree of consistency of quality and results across classrooms, schools and districts in their jurisdiction. External tests, then, have too often become the de facto curriculum with a range of intended and unintended outcomes, such as impoverishing the development and use of effective classroom assessments. The Common Core standards, and the rethinking of assessment that they are fostering, provide an opportunity to challenge this deeply held belief in local control.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In the Realm of State Collaboration and Policy

The constitution of every state in the nation requires it to provide a free public education to its children. That means that states have the most authority over the assessments used to monitor the quality of the education children are receiving. Although the past several decades have seen some power and authority over schooling and assessment shift to the federal government, this trend is now in the other direction. The states, acting through the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers, demonstrated that they recognized the need for better standards and assessments when they led the creation and adoption of the Common Core State Standards. Although the two assessment consortia are federally funded, they are led by the states. The states participating in the consortia have agreed to establish common progress categories. This record of collaboration is something to build upon. Most state education departments are understaffed and poorly funded. That means that taking on the additional responsibility of monitoring how well the assessments are working will be difficult for them to accomplish on their own. They will have an incentive to continue to work together on this important job.

It is recommended that states create a permanent Council on Educational Assessments modeled on the Education Commission of the States to take on this function. Funding for the Council should come from the federal government, states, and a small tax on every assessment sold.

The Council's first responsibility would be to commission an evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of such R&D initiatives as the Smarter Balanced and PARCC assessment systems and their effect on teaching and learning. The purpose of this evaluation would be to ensure that the new assessments are, indeed, driving instruction that is consistent with the educational vision embodied in the standards. As has been done before with evaluations of important assessment programs such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), such an evaluation might be conducted by an independent panel assembled under the auspices of the National Academy of Sciences or the National Academy of Education.

In addition, the Council should:

- Conduct research on how assessments are changing, help inform states so that they make good purchasing decisions, and address issues as they arise. The Council also would oversee the process of setting cross-state performance level targets.
- Mount a public education campaign targeting parents, educators, school board members and the media explaining the importance of good assessment to quality education.
- Create a Study Group on the Challenges of Equitable Assessment to explore issues related to diversity, equity and excellence.
- Commission research on policies designed to secure the privacy of assessment data while also creating protocols for making large quantities of such data available to qualified researchers.

In the Realm of Federal Policy

Significant pieces of federal educational legislation are awaiting reauthorization, including the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 2002, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, and the Higher Education Act. The reauthorization of these major pieces of legislation provides an opportunity to promote new ideas about assessment. The Obama administration has successfully used incentives built into the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, the Race to the Top competitions and the Investing in Innovation fund to bring about a variety of policy changes and innovations. For example, the Race to the Top district competition requires applicants to use “collaborative, data-based strategies and 21st-century tools” to move beyond one-size-fits-all approaches and personalize learning. This has significant implications for assessments and the type of feedback they provide for teachers and learners. The U.S. Department of Education has used its waiver powers to allow states to experiment with measuring students’ year-to-year growth rather than their status at a fixed point in time. This waiver power also was used to free states from some of the onerous accountability aspects of the No Child Left Behind act.

It is recommended that the President and Congress consider various models to encourage experimentation with different approaches to assessment and accountability. In reauthorizing ESEA, the Obama administration should press for funds to incentivize states and assessment companies to experiment with radically different forms of assessments, including challenging performance tasks that better represent the learning activities that will help students develop the competencies they will need to succeed in the 21st century.

In the Realm of National Research and Development

The assessments that we will need in the future do not yet exist. The progress made by the PARCC and Smarter Balanced consortia in assessment development, while significant, will be far from what is ultimately needed for either accountability or classroom instructional improvement purposes. This is not a criticism of the Consortia per se but a realistic appraisal of the design constraints and timelines imposed upon their work from the outset. While America certainly can profit from the consortia's work, the U.S. Department of Education, the Department of Defense, the National Science Foundation, and the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, in collaboration with the philanthropic community, should commit to a 10-year research and development effort to strengthen the capacity of the U.S. assessment enterprise to broaden the range of behaviors, characteristics and manifestations of achievement and related development that are the targets of assessment in education. This effort should be a partnership between not-for-profit organizations (existing or newly created), the for-profit sector, professional teacher organizations and universities. There are multiple models for this type of public-private research and development effort in bio-medicine, defense and other fields.

As discussed earlier, one goal of this effort should be the creation of assessment tasks that exemplify the type of learning that we want to occur in classrooms. Today, teaching to the test is seen as a negative consequence of accountability testing. With the proper assessment tools, it will be easier to encourage teaching to the underlying competencies as standard practice. In order to be practical, new ways of delivering and scoring such assessments will have to be developed. Technologies for presenting rich and varied materials and for capturing and automating the scoring of written responses and other student behaviors currently exist and show promise. But they will need to continue to improve and be adapted for a variety of subjects in order for these new assessments to be widely used for a range of assessment purposes.

This expanded view of assessment will require the training and employment of broadly educated specialists in learning, cognition, measurement and assessment. It is recommended that the government and private philanthropies increase the number of pre- and post-doctoral scholars dedicated to the development of this expertise.

ABOUT THE GORDON COMMISSION ON THE FUTURE OF ASSESSMENT IN EDUCATION

Conceptions of what it means to educate and to be an educated person are changing. Notions of and demands on practice in the teaching and learning enterprise are broadening and expanding. And the concern with accountability forces this dynamic and eclectic enterprise to constrict and, in the worst of instances, to compromise in the interest of meeting certain accountability criteria. These realities, coupled with changes in epistemology, cognitive and learning sciences, as well as in the pedagogical technologies that inform teaching and learning, are narrowing — possibly even stifling — creativity and flexibility in teaching and learning transactions. These are among the perceived problems that led to the creation of the Gordon Commission on the Future of Assessment in Education by Educational Testing Service in January 2011.

Although these immediate issues were foundational in the establishment of the Gordon Commission, a second more compelling contextual problem helps to drive its mission. Changing conceptions of and practices in educational assessment are making many of the capabilities of traditional conceptions and practices in educational assessment obsolete. The work of the Commission rests on the assumption that assessment in education can inform and improve teaching and learning processes and outcomes.

Mission of the Commission

The Gordon Commission was created with the mission to study the best of educational assessment policy, practice and technology; consider the best estimates of what education will become and what will be needed from educational measurement during the 21st century; and to generate recommendations on educational assessment design and application that meet and/or exceed the demands and needs of education — present and predicted.

Given the mission of the Gordon Commission, a number of goals were outlined that focused the work of the Commission. The goals of the Gordon Commission are to:

- Inform the field and the public about the need and possibilities for change in education, as well as change in the functions, practices and roles of assessment in education;
- Increase public awareness and knowledge about assessment as an integral component of education and the possibilities for change in assessment practice;
- Encourage the field of educational assessment to strengthen its capacity to factor into measurement practice attention to the influence of human attributes, social contexts and personal identities on human performance;
- Balance emphasis on prediction, selection and accountability with equal concern for informing and improving teaching and learning processes and outcomes; and
- Inform long-term planning and product development in the field of psychometrics.

Commission Members

The Gordon Commission consists of 30 members. The scholars, policymakers and practitioners who comprise the Commission have identified critical issues concerning educational assessment, investigated those issues, and developed position and review papers that informed the Commission's recommendations for policy and practice in educational assessment.

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The Gordon Commission was established by ETS to investigate and advise
on the nature and use of educational testing in the 21st century. 21876

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