



## **Future Assessment Design Working Group Report**

**December 6, 2017**

## Introduction: Background

With the passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2015, annual testing in grades 3-8 and high school in mathematics and reading or Language Arts and grade-span testing in science is maintained. There are technical requirements that must be satisfied for any statewide assessment used for accountability. ESSA does provide an option of a district administering a nationally recognized assessment at high school. For more information about this flexibility, please review the High School Locally-Selected Nationally Recognized Assessment Work Group Report.

Over the past decade, Minnesota has implemented math and reading adaptive assessments at all grade levels and simulations in science non-adaptive assessments in grades 5, 8, and high school.

## Charge to the Future Assessment Design Working Group

As a working group commissioned by the Minnesota Department of Education, we explored how Minnesota might redesign the state's academic assessment system. These changes would be implemented as the assessments are revised to align with the revised Minnesota Academic Standards. The process would begin with science in 2019-2020 after the standards are revised in 2018-2019.

At its initial meeting, the working group was charged with reviewing our current assessment requirements in order to offer recommendations to the commissioner. During all meetings, the group considered a wide array of topics, including:

- The alignment between state and federal laws for accountability and local needs for informing instruction.
- Assessing how well the current state assessment system meets local needs.
- Determining if districts add tests in order to inform instruction.
- The impact of assessments on instructional time, financial costs, and curriculum offerings.
- The costs and feasibility of new assessments that provide what we need to accurately measure school and student performance, including the time to develop and transition to a new system.
- Using the Office of the Legislative Auditor (OLA) report released in early March 2017 to inform the group's recommendations<sup>1</sup>.
- Whether or not our assessments are redundant or misaligned.
- How state assessments might be more meaningful for educators, students, and parents.

The working group received information from MDE staff on current state standards, Elementary and Secondary Education Act federal requirements, current testing requirements, and the state accountability system. The group also heard from a representative from Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), who shared information about assessments in a national context and in relation to New Hampshire's implementation of a new assessment system. Members of the working group were also invited to present on the perspective of assessments at the state level as well as local assessment practices.

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<sup>1</sup> [Office of the Legislative Auditor \(OLA\) Report](#)

Over the course of ten months, the working group investigated and discussed in-depth the balance between assessment design and administration, instructional time, data, and appropriate use of the assessment supports and results. The members grappled with the possibilities and specifics of Minnesota’s next assessment design.

## Working Group Meetings

Members of the working group included parents, school officials, teachers, business representatives, and the public. The working group held nine working meetings beginning on January 19, 2017. The final working meeting took place on October 2, 2017, and the recommendations included with this report were adopted.

See Appendix A for the working group membership roster.

## Future Assessment Design Working Group Recommendations

Our recommendations address both specific policy changes necessary to create the desired assessment and accountability system as well as the characteristics and features of a revamped system. The working group supports the development and implementation of an assessment system for Minnesota that provides timely and effective feedback for the following stakeholders and their relevant decisions:

- Policy makers, elected officials, and administrators at the school, district, postsecondary, regional, and state levels as to the effectiveness and alignment of the system to efficiently educate our youth, with care and guidance, as they grow from early childhood to young adulthood.
- Students, teachers, and parents as to the progress students are making towards college and career readiness, the learning that needs to be achieved, and the identification by students of their individual pathways to the workforce and world that best match their talents and interests.

The working group’s five recommendations to MDE’s commissioner represent the group’s conversations and deliberations. After considering the potential impact to local-control curricular decisions and the requirements of a standardized assessment administered statewide, the group recommends a broader look at the assessment system. This expanded view includes a change to the administration of the assessments, shortening the length of the assessments, and underscoring the importance of assessment literacy and quality support for interpretation of assessment results. Continuing to ensure alignment of the statewide assessments with state academic standards remains a cornerstone to a meaningful statewide assessment system. The group strongly encourages MDE to continue, with renewed focus, their educator outreach and support. In order to set the foundation of data interpretation, educators must receive clear communication regarding the purpose and limitations of the statewide assessment. This aids in the interpretation of the statewide assessment results and underscores the need to use other sources to complete “the picture.” Although the recommendations do not include moving to an interim classroom assessment format, the group does recommend MDE develop and support a resource bank that educators can access as desired. These resources will provide another critical connection between instruction and assessments aligned to standards.

These recommendations represent majority consensus and not unanimous opinions.

## **Recommendation 1: Features of the Accountability Assessment System**

The accountability assessment system should be:

- **Transparent:** MDE will provide information regarding the method of test development, the personnel involved in the development of the assessments, how the assessments are aligned to the standards, and the purpose and validity of results. The intent is to build trust and buy-in around the accountability system.
- **Informative:** The results are clear and concise for educators, district administrative staff, students, parents, and the public.
- **Actionable:** Results provide annual evidence to support system-level decisions.

## **Recommendation 2: Alignment of the Academic Assessments**

Assessments will continue to be aligned from elementary school through high school and be consistent with Minnesota’s academic standards and aligned to career and college readiness standards.

## **Recommendation 3: Reduce Length of the Academic Assessments**

Reduce the length of the assessments to the minimum length to meet the federal requirement. MDE should request a waiver from the U.S. Department of Education that allows it to cease providing individual student strand/sub-strand scores. Depending on the simulations and details of the shortened test, MDE should continue to provide district and school-level benchmark reports. Assuming the reports are technically valid, this will satisfy the requirements of the tests administered while decreasing the test length.

Appendix B provides a letter of additional perspective received from one committee member related to this recommendation.

## **Recommendation 4: Revisions to State Legislation**

Minnesota state legislation should be revised to eliminate the specificity that assessments include:

- Career and College readiness trajectory reporting for grades 3-8 (Consistent with OLA Report, pages 70 and 71).
- Above and below grade level additional items (See OLA Report, pages 80 and 81).
- Requirement to provide student-level diagnostic information.
  - In order to provide technically valid and meaningful student-level diagnostic information, an assessment must be of sufficient length and designed as a diagnostic assessment.

This recommendation is in an effort, consistent with Recommendation 1, to be forthright and transparent regarding the limitations of a single test and, consistent with Recommendation 3, to reduce test length.

## Recommendation 5: Educator Support and Professional Learning

MDE Statewide Testing will improve educator support by:

- Improving communication with districts in a variety of modes (including, but not limited to, face-to-face trainings, webinars, online videos, and data review protocols).
- Providing an assessment item bank, aligned to benchmark and Depth of Knowledge (DOK), with some items matching the format and style experienced on the MCA.
  - Educators will have open online access to the resources.
  - MDE will provide example rubrics where appropriate, and MDE will not be responsible for grading or scoring.
  - MDE will facilitate development of the resources and rubrics to ensure quality, accuracy, and validity.
  - Volunteer districts may share results with MDE to be used to guide edits in the item bank.
- Encourage and facilitate a District Assessment Coordinator mentoring and network program.

## Appendix A

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## Appendix B

### Letter of Additional Information

November 15, 2017

Jennifer Dugan, Director  
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Dear Director Dugan:

We are writing for two purposes. First, we're submitting this letter as a minority report to one of the Future Assessment Design Working Group's recommendations. Second, we'd like to thank you for your leadership in coordinating the Group and responding to our requests for additional information.

When considering state student assessment policies it's important to recognize that Minnesota has developed some of the nation's best career and college-readiness standards. These standards, like the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments (MCAs), have been developed with Minnesota educators, and students who are able to meet our standards are more likely to pursue a post-secondary education, without need for remedial coursework<sup>2</sup>.

The role of state assessments, and the MCAs in particular, is to measure student learning relative to our standards, and provide information about student progress to students, families, educators and the public.

Are the MCAs meeting the goal of providing useful information?

Clearly, the answer is "yes" - given 87 percent of principals and 81 percent of teachers reported that MCA scores are useful in determining if students are meeting our standards<sup>3</sup>.

Rather than backtracking and reducing the amount of information student MCA results provide, as the Working Group recommends, we'd like to highlight two areas for improvement that can be addressed by expanding professional development to help educators:

- i. implement our state standards – only 16% of schools have fully implemented the state's English language arts standards<sup>4</sup>; and
- ii. interpret MCA results and adjust instructional practices – only 57% of teachers feel prepared to interpret MCA scores<sup>5</sup>.

With this as background, we'd like to express our concerns with the Working Group's third recommendation:

- seek a federal waiver to reduce the number of questions in the MCAs – and the amount of information MCA results provide.

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<sup>2</sup> Minnesota Office of Higher Education, Getting Prepared 2016 Report, page 40.

<sup>3</sup> Office of the Legislative Auditor, 2017 report on standardized student testing, page 77.

<sup>4</sup> MDE, 2016 Minnesota English Language Arts Standards & Multi-Tiered System of Supports Implementation Survey.

<sup>5</sup> Office of the Legislative Auditor, 2017 report on standardized student testing, page 83.

Reducing the amount of information students, families and educators get from MCA results is the last thing we should be doing.

When just over half of our teachers feel prepared to interpret and make better use of MCA results, it may be easier to disregard information that can help our students, but the real benefit comes from working with teachers (and families) to help them understand MCA results – and what we can do differently to support students.

We also question the need for this recommendation, if the concern is MCAs take too long for students to take. Students spend less time taking the MCAs than anticipated by the Minnesota Department of Education, and the medium time spent taking two MCA exams is just over three hours (e.g. fourth grade student, reading and math MCAs)<sup>6</sup>.

Before the state considers reducing the information made available by the MCAs we should:

- i. understand how school districts have complied with the law limiting student time taking locally adopted tests (120B.301); and
- ii. understand how much time schools spend preparing students to take the MCAs, and why.

If schools spend too much time on “test prep” because the MCAs are part of Minnesota’s accountability system, the Working Group’s recommendation doesn’t address this issue – the MCAs are still required, we’ll just get less information from them.

Rather than pursuing the Working Group’s recommendation to reduce information made available by MCA results, we believe students, families and educators would benefit more if we focused on improving professional development for educators in the areas of:

- i. understanding the state’s academic standards and benchmarks and how teachers can incorporate them into their curriculum (only 16% of schools have fully implemented state English standards<sup>7</sup>; and
- ii. assessment literacy - understanding test results, how to adjust instruction based on test results and talking with families about MCA results and how they can help.

Minnesota has developed a strong framework of standards and assessments to guide students toward meeting career and college-readiness expectations. We look forward to working with the Department, legislators, educators and families to build our schools’ capacity around this framework to help all students succeed.

Thank you,

Jim Bartholomew  
Minnesota Business Partnership

Daniel Sellers  
Ed Allies

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<sup>6</sup> Office of the Legislative Auditor, 2017 report on standardized student testing, pages 49 and 51.

<sup>7</sup> MDE, 2016 Minnesota English Language Arts Standards & Multi-Tiered System of Supports Implementation Survey.