



**STUDY COMMISSION ON THE USE
OF STUDENT ASSESSMENTS
IN NEW JERSEY**

Interim Report

December 31, 2014

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Study Commission on the Use of Student Assessments in New Jersey

INTERIM REPORT

Introduction

This is the Interim Report of the Study Commission on the Use of Student Assessments in New Jersey as mandated by Executive Order No. 159, which was issued by Governor Chris Christie on July 14, 2014. The stated charge to the Study Commission was to review and make recommendations to the Governor regarding the quality and effectiveness of student assessments administered to K-12 students in New Jersey. In particular, the Study Commission was charged to consider and make recommendations on the volume, frequency, and impact of student assessments occurring throughout New Jersey school districts, as well as on the Core Curriculum Content Standards, including the Common Core State Standards. This report addresses the work of the Study Commission from its inception through December 31, 2014.

The Study Commission consists of individuals with broad backgrounds and experiences in education, higher education, and business, including practitioners and parents. Commissioner David C. Hespe was appointed chair of the Study Commission, and several members of the New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE) also participated as staff to the commission. Study Commission meetings were held at the NJDOE on November 24, 2014, and December 5, 10, 16, and 22, 2014. A complete listing of Study Commission members and staff can be found in Appendix 1 to this report, and a list of presenters is located in Appendix 2.

Assessment systems are not simply events in time, but rather they are dynamic change processes that are subject to multiple variables and forces. The State's current Standards-Based Reform Initiative, which involves both the Common Core State Standards and the Partnership for Assessment of College and Career (PARCC) assessment system, has been underway since 2010. The Initiative also includes policy and educational and operational timelines that cannot be subjected to rapid change. For this reason, the Study Commission will not be addressing immediate changes to the content, schedule, or decision to implement the PARCC assessments in New Jersey in March 2015 but anticipates reviewing the assessment after its administration.

Organization of the Interim Report

The remainder of this report is organized in four sections: Progress to Date, Work Plan (January – July 2015), Context of Federal and State Statutory and Regulatory Requirements, and Issues and Considerations Attendant to the Effective and Efficient Use of Assessments.

Progress to Date

During its initial meeting, the Study Commission was briefed by assistant commissioner and chief performance officer, Dr. Bari Erlichson, who provided an overview of federal requirements for academic content and student achievement standards in English language arts, mathematics, and science under the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* (NCLB). Dr. Erlichson also discussed to whom the federal requirements apply and the grade levels assessed. She further discussed subgroup accountability, assessment of English language proficiency, alternative assessments for students with severe disabilities, and required sample participation in the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) testing. Finally, she provided an overview of State laws and

regulations governing high school graduation and the State assessment system, as well as a brief history of testing in New Jersey (1996-2014).

Patricia Wright, executive director of the New Jersey Principals and Supervisors Association, briefed the Study Commission on the process of designing a comprehensive assessment system, which focused on assessment *of* learning, assessment *as* learning, and assessment *for* learning. She discussed the purposes of state assessments, including school improvement, accountability, monitoring statewide academic achievement, and national comparisons. She also operationally defined formative, interim, and summative assessments and discussed how school improvement is possible only when assessment systems are properly aligned with curriculum and instruction.

Dr. Diane Zaleski, project administrator for the Illinois State Board of Education, briefed the Study Commission on the Balanced Assessment Initiative currently underway in Illinois, which is part of the state's transition to the PARCC system. She also introduced and briefly discussed the state's involvement with the *Student Assessment Inventory for School Districts*. Dr. Zaleski's presentation was followed by a more in-depth briefing by Alissa Peltzman, vice president of state policy and implementation support at Achieve, Inc., an independent, nonpartisan, nonprofit education reform organization dedicated to working with states to raise academic standards and graduation requirements, improve assessments, and strengthen accountability. Ms. Peltzman's briefing focused on one of Achieve, Inc.'s core products, the *Student Assessment Inventory for School Districts*, which is a field-tested, openly licensed, and free-to-use tool that can be implemented by school district and school officials who wish to take stock of their assessments and assessment strategies.

Finally, Dr. Christopher Manno, superintendent of Burlington County Special Services School District and Institute of Technology (and formerly the superintendent of the Burlington Township Public Schools) briefed the Study Commission on the *All Students Achieving* strategic evaluation process now in effect in the Burlington Township school system. During his presentation, Dr. Manno walked the Study Commission through the strategic evaluation process, which is grounded in four major questions: "What did we do?"; "Did it work?"; "How do we know?"; and "So, now what?"

Following each presentation, the members of the Study Commission engaged in robust discussion regarding the issues presented.

Work Plan (January – July 2015)

Issues to be Explored and Discussed

The Study Commission has established a work plan specifying issues that need to be addressed to fulfill its mandate (see Table 1). Some of the issues categorized within Section I: Use of Student Performance Assessments are addressed in this Interim Report, while the remainder will be addressed in the Final Report.

Study Commission Meetings

The Study Commission expects to conduct bi-weekly meetings from January through July 2015, during which time discussions will take place regarding the issues identified in the topical outline, which follows immediately in Table 1. The Study Commission further expects to make

substantive recommendations about those issues. As part of the deliberative process, detailed meeting minutes will be developed and posted on the Commission website for public access.

Table 1
Topical Outline of Issues to be Explored and Discussed by the Study Commission

I. Use of Student Performance Assessments

1. Different types of tests and their uses – summative, formative, diagnostic
2. Determining the quality of various assessments
3. Commercial tests versus teacher-developed tests
4. Amount of instructional time needed to administer and prepare for tests
5. Impact of student growth objective (SGO) assessments on overall testing time
6. Efficiency in testing (using tests for many different purposes, e.g., diagnostic and instructional tools for education students and as a professional development effectiveness tool for educators)

II. State Assessments

1. Academic Standards
 - a. Requirements
 - Aligned with college- and career-readiness requirements
 - Real-world connected using higher-order thinking skills, i.e., problem solving, reasoning, fluency, synthesis (apply to new situations)
 - Age-appropriate and sequenced (progression of achievement from grade to grade)
 - Focused (greater mastery of fewer standards)
 - Coherent and clear
 - Technology aligned
 - Comparable nationally and internationally
 - b. Suitability of Common Core State Standards
 - c. Criticisms of Common Core State Standards
 - d. Other states' efforts to customize Common Core State Standards
 - e. Impact of Common Core State Standards on academic areas beyond language arts and mathematics, such as social studies or science
2. Communication of Information to Educators/Families/Communities
3. Implementation of Academic Standards
 - a. Curriculum development
 - b. Instructional alignment
 - Professional development
 - Materials/resources

- Educational technology
4. Measurement of Common Core State Standards
 - a. PARCC assessment
 - Adequacy for feedback on depth/breadth of standards
 - Students and grade levels being tested
 - Logistical issues
 - Special populations, such as disabled or English language learners
 - Criticisms of PARCC assessments
 - b. Computer administration
 - Readiness
 - Student acclimation
 - Impact on classroom instruction
 - Contingencies
 - c. Standard and proficiency setting
 - Impact on subgroups
 - d. Information reports and timelines
 - e. Testing academic areas beyond language arts and mathematics, such as biology
 5. Use of PARCC Data
 - a. Performance reports and accountability
 - College transmission
 - b. Teacher evaluation
 - c. Student graduation
 - d. Student intervention
 - e. Use for placements and outlay

III. Compliance with State/Federal Statutory and Regulatory Requirements

1. U.S. Department of Education ESEA Waiver Requirements
2. N.J. Accountability Structure
3. Student Participation

Input from the Public and Educational Community

A user-friendly website (<http://www.state.nj.us/education/studycommission>) has been created to serve as a convenient communication tool both to inform the citizens of New Jersey about the work of the Study Commission and to provide a mechanism for public input and feedback. On this website, the Study Commission has posted Governor Christie's Executive Order No. 159, which authorizes the Study Commission and describes its charge, and a press release announcing its organization. The website further identifies all of the members of the Study Commission, as well as their professional affiliations; it includes the minutes of all of the Study Commission's meetings; and it provides a page to submit public input, plus a telephone number and an email address (studycommission@doe.state.nj.us).

The Study Commission expects to conduct a minimum of three open sessions to elicit input and comment from the public. The sessions, tentatively planned for January 27, 28, and 29, 2015, will be held at accessible locations and at convenient times in the northern, central, and southern regions of the State. Each session is expected to last a minimum of three hours and will provide ample opportunity for scheduled speakers to make comments and present information.

In addition, the Study Commission further expects to conduct a series of focus groups with samples of students in the State's public schools (including public charter schools) during the spring of 2015. The information gleaned from this often unheard-from population is expected to provide interesting and significant insights into the issues of testing and assessment.

The Study Commission further recommends that a research study be conducted, which will seek to learn more about which assessments are being used in school districts, what purposes they serve, how much time students and staff spend on preparing for and implementing assessments, how school districts schedule the State-required assessments, and what impact the testing schedule has on student learning time. It is expected that this survey will include a representative sample of New Jersey school districts, stratified by variables including, but not limited to, geographic region, urbanicity, traditional vs. public charter school control, and grade span (e.g., elementary, middle, secondary). The information from this research will be extremely valuable in helping the State, education community, and parents to make informed decisions regarding a broad range of testing and assessment issues in the future.

Finally, in addition to this Interim Report, a Final Report responding to the elements within the charge will be submitted to Governor Christie not later than July 31, 2015.

Context of Federal and State Statutory and Regulatory Requirements

Federal Law

The main federal law governing academic standards and the administration of student assessments is the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), as reauthorized by the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* (NCLB). NCLB requires states to hold all public elementary and secondary school students to the same challenging academic content and student achievement standards in all subjects for which it has developed standards. Under NCLB, all students are expected to achieve at the same high levels of learning. NCLB also calls for the inclusion of *all* students, even students who may have previously been excluded or exempted from participating in state assessment programs. NCLB set the goal of 100% proficiency in English language arts and mathematics by the year 2014, with states setting incremental benchmarks.

NCLB also requires all states to have academic content and student achievement standards in English language arts and mathematics. Beginning in the 2005-06 school year, NCLB also required the same standards for science. The standards must include the knowledge and levels of achievement expected of all public school students in the state.

Since the 2005-06 school year, states also have been required to administer both English language arts and mathematics assessments in grades 3-8 and in high school. Starting in the 2007-08 academic year, states have also been required to administer a science assessment at least once in each of the following grade bands: grades 3-5, grades 6-8, and high school.

NCLB has also required states to make annual yearly progress (AYP) determinations about the achievement of each school and school district. A state's assessments in English language arts and mathematics are used to make annual determinations of how well all students in public elementary and secondary schools are learning and mastering the subject material reflected in a state's academic content and student achievement standards.

As NCLB focuses on the inclusion and achievement of *all* students, public schools (both charter and traditional schools) and their local education agency (public charter school board of trustees or school district boards of education/school districts) are held accountable for the achievement of individual subgroups, including major ethnic/racial groups, economically disadvantaged students, limited English proficient (LEP) students, and students with disabilities. Accountability decisions are based on the achievement of each subgroup, as well as overall school and local education agency (LEA) achievement.

NCLB required states to set separate, measurable annual objectives for each subgroup to ensure that each met the deadline to reach proficiency. Each subgroup of students enrolled in schools and LEAs must meet annual objectives in English language arts and mathematics for the school or LEA to make AYP.

States are permitted to use end-of-course tests to fulfill the requirements for assessments at the high school level if the following conditions are met: the end-of-course tests must be administered for high school courses that all students are required take to graduate from high school, and the end-of-course test must measure the depth and breadth of the content that the state expects all high school students to know and be able to do by the time they graduate.

Failure to comply with NCLB's assessment provisions would jeopardize more than \$800 million in federal funding for New Jersey schools. While approximately \$300 million flows to New Jersey schools via Title I formulaic calculations, every other federal program requires NJDOE to submit student assessment data in an aggregate manner so the U.S. Department of Education can monitor how effectively New Jersey is serving special populations, such as LEP students (ESEA Title III), special education students (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act or IDEA), homeless students (McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Act), and career and technical education students (Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Technical Education Act), among others.

In Fall 2010, the U.S. Department of Education provided states with the opportunity to request flexibility from certain requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 in exchange for: comprehensive plans that establish college- and career-ready expectations for all students; a system of differentiated recognition, accountability, and support for all schools in the State; implementing teacher and principal evaluation systems that support student achievement; and a process leading to the reduction of duplicative and unnecessary burdens on schools. New Jersey was granted a waiver in February 2012, which was extended for an additional year in the Fall 2014. In order to implement its commitment to these four principles, New Jersey adopted the Common Core State Standards and joined the PARCC consortium to develop assessments capable of measuring progress toward meeting the Common Core. New Jersey also adopted a teacher and principal evaluation system including the use of standardized test scores as a measure of educator effectiveness. The NJDOE also led a deregulatory initiative through the Educational Transformation Task Force.

The State's failure to adhere to the requirements of the waiver might also lead to revocation meaning the State would need to comply with the additional accountability provisions of NCLB, which could require nearly all schools to be labeled as "failing" with the need to develop and implement corrective action plans due to the failure to meet performance targets. Schools might also lose flexibility in the use of federal funds.

New Jersey Statutes and Regulations

New Jersey has been implementing a standards-based testing program since the 1980s, including a high school graduation test and an Early Warning Test in grade 8. In the 1990s, the State adopted the Core Curriculum Content Standards in numerous subjects and implemented State assessments in grades 4-8 and the High School Proficiency Assessment (HSPA) in grade 11. In the 2000s, the State implemented the New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge (NJASK) in grades 3-8 and the HSPA in grade 11; biology and algebra were assessed with end-of-course tests. In the current decade, the State adopted the Common Core State Standards in English language arts and mathematics and PARCC testing in grades 3-8, with PARCC end-of-course assessments in high school.

New Jersey has two State laws and selected State regulations that govern student assessments.

The first law, N.J.S.A. 18A:7C-1, required by July 1, 1980, the establishment of a program of high school graduation standards. The law required the program to include the development of a Statewide test in reading, writing, and computational skills to be administered to all high school students.

The second law, N.J.S.A. 18A:7C-6.2, required the development of a test to assess progress toward mastery of the State's graduation proficiency standards. The law also required the test to be administered to all grade 8 students in the 1990-1991 school year and annually thereafter. The Common Core State Standards will serve as the statutorily required standards.

State education regulations, N.J.A.C. 6A:8-4.1, also allow the Commissioner of Education to implement assessment of student achievement in New Jersey public schools in any grade(s) and by such assessments as he or she deems appropriate.

Issues and Considerations Attendant to the Effective and Efficient Use of Assessments

The Study Commission has begun, and will continue, to undertake a comprehensive examination of the issues and considerations attendant to the effective and efficient use of student performance assessments.

The Term “Assessment” Operationally Defined

The term “assessment” is often used as a synonym for “testing” or “evaluation,” which sometimes confuses the issue. For the purposes of the Study Commission’s work, the following operational definition has been developed:

Assessment is the collection, interpretation, and strategic use of information to inform educators, students, and parents/guardians about student progress in attaining the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviors to be learned or acquired in school. Assessment can be in the form of formative, interim, and summative measures of student performance (including teacher-made, commercial or state assessments, and multiple formats, e.g., forced choice, constructed response, project, etc.). (Adapted from the Illinois State Board of Education (Zaleski, 2014)).

According to scholars at Stanford University, UCLA, and the University of Illinois, the five criteria for “high quality” assessment are as follows:

1. Assessment of higher-order cognitive skills that allow students to transfer their learning to new situations and problems;
2. High fidelity assessment of critical abilities as they will be used in the real world, rather than through artificial proxies;
3. Assessments that are internationally benchmarked and evaluated against those of the leading education countries, in terms of the kinds of tasks they present as well as the level of performance they expect;
4. Use of items that are instructionally sensitive and educationally valuable. Tests should be designed so that the underlying concepts can be taught and learned, rather than depending mostly on test-taking skills or reflecting students’ out-of-school experiences. To support instruction, they should also offer good models for teaching and learning and insights into how students think as well as what they should know; and
5. Assessments that are valid, reliable, and fair should accurately evaluate students’ abilities, appropriately assess the knowledge and skills they intend to measure, be free from bias, and be designed to reduce unnecessary obstacles to performance that can undermine validity. They should also have positive consequences for the quality of instruction and the opportunities available for student learning (Darling-Hammond et al., 2013).

In summary, assessments, especially high quality assessments, contribute to the process of collecting and interpreting information that can be used to inform all education stakeholders

about students' progress in attaining the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviors to be learned or acquired in school (Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation as cited in Illinois State Board of Education, 2014).

Different Types of Assessments Used by Schools

Various types of assessments are used in schools for a variety of different purposes, including, but not limited to: diagnostic, predictive, and/or instructional uses (e.g., grouping of students); federal and/or state accountability; school district accountability; student promotion or retention; high school graduation eligibility; as factors in computing course grades; college admissions; college placement; teacher evaluation; Advanced Placement credit; International Baccalaureate programs; English language proficiency; and national and international comparisons (Illinois State Board of Education, 2014).

Assessments may be *formative*¹, which help teachers to make instructional planning decisions (including differentiation and timely interventions), to make rapid adjustments to instructional strategies, and to provide timely and meaningful feedback to students. Assessments may also be used for *interim* measurements so school districts and schools can: (a) diagnose student levels across grades, schools, and the school district; (b) monitor and track student progress over time; (c) evaluate the effectiveness of instructional and curricular resources, programs, and interventions; and (d) identify targeted professional development needs. Finally, assessments can be *summative* for purposes of school improvement, accountability to stakeholder groups, monitoring of statewide academic achievement, and for providing national comparisons (Wright, 2014).

Role of Assessments in Improving Teaching and Learning

Assessments are an essential part of the teaching and learning enterprise, and requiring students to clearly demonstrate what they know and are able to do is essential to the learning process, as it helps to determine the extent to which the goals and objectives of education are being achieved.

Assessments provide consistent measures of student growth and understanding of specific strengths and weaknesses, provide feedback on the effectiveness of instruction, and also provide meaningful learning experiences for teachers and students. When assessment works best, it also provides answers to important questions about the validity of instruction (“Are we really teaching what we think we’re teaching?”), the validity of learning (“Are students really learning what they’re supposed to be learning?”), and about student improvement (“Is there a better way to teach the content, thereby improving learning?”) (“What Works in Education,” 2014).

Over-testing: National Context

Within the last decade, the public debate regarding the issue of excessive testing (“over-testing”) has grown. Nationally, parents and teachers have related harrowing stories of the stresses and strains that their children experience in the name of “data-driven” education. Negative attitudes toward over-testing are manifested in many ways, perhaps most noticeably in the antipathy that

¹ See Appendix 3, p. 19, for the purposes, audiences, and data-driven questions regarding these assessments.

is currently being directed toward the new testing requirements (e.g., PARCC), which are aligned with the Common Core State Standards and will roll out in 2015. Many teachers and parents regard these tests as an example of over-testing.

In some states, the response to these new statewide testing requirements has been a call for parents to “opt-out” from having their children take the tests. Such movements, which many educators deem to be unwise, nevertheless reflect the disdain for the tests that is prevalent in many communities. Moreover, some states have decided to stop administering the new tests, while others have elected to undertake a careful review about whether to stop using the Common Core State Standards altogether (Salazar & Christie as cited in Lazarin, 2014).

This leads many in the education community to question whether students in classrooms throughout the country are being burdened with excessive testing, or whether such over-testing is simply a perception, unsubstantiated by the facts.

This sentiment was echoed and reinforced by the joint statement of the Council of Chief State School Officers and the Council of the Great City Schools, issued on October 14, 2014, which agreed to the following three broad principles: assessments should be high quality; assessments should be part of a coherent system; and assessments should be meaningful. In the statement, state school chiefs committed to: increase the transparency of their state assessment systems; evaluate their state’s assessment system for quality and coherence; work with educational stakeholders to eliminate redundant assessments; and partner with school districts to review their benchmark and formative assessments. Large city school districts also agreed to: review the entire array of assessments administered in their school districts to determine alignment, appropriateness, and technical quality; name and convene a special task force to review the findings from the comprehensive survey of school district testing and make recommendations for improvement; streamline or eliminate assessments that are found to be of low quality, redundant, or inappropriately used; ensure greater transparency in their portfolio of assessments and what the results mean for students and parents; improve the use of assessment results to enhance classroom instruction and curtail counterproductive “test prep” practices; and report the results of their efforts to the public.

While there is no single, agreed-upon definition of the term “over-testing,” there is wide speculation among educators and the public that there is simply too much testing in today’s schools.

In addition to statewide assessments, some school districts often require many more districtwide assessments, and students must also take classroom-based tests and quizzes that are the core of the instructional process. Moreover, consider the tests that students also have to take for Advanced Placement credit, college admissions and placement, and college scholarships. Over time, individual schools and school districts may also add tests that are championed by a specific school district leader, embedded in new instructional materials, or in response to a specific need, such as evaluating teachers. The problem is that many school districts and schools function in an “additive” modality, continually adding new testing requirements without ever taking a comprehensive look at whether they are necessary or whether any of them have outlived their usefulness (Achieve, Inc., 2014).

These issues are playing out nationally. In a recent research study entitled, *Testing Overload in America's Schools* (2014), Melissa Lazarin of the Center for American Progress reported the following:

1. Despite the perception that federally mandated state testing is the root of the issue, students across all grade spans take more school district tests than state assessments. Students in K-2 are tested three times as much on school district exams as state exams, and high school students are tested twice as much. (*Note: New Jersey does not require a Statewide assessment prior to grade 3.*)
2. Students are tested as frequently as twice per month and an average of once per month. Analyses have shown that students take as many as 20 standardized assessments per year and an average of 10 tests in grades 3-8. The regularity with which testing occurs, especially in these grades, may be causing students, families, and educators to feel burdened by testing.
3. There is a culture of testing and test preparation in schools that does not put students first. A culture has arisen in some states and school districts that places a premium on testing over learning; however, it is difficult to systematically document the prevalence of these activities. Moreover, research indicates that some school districts and states may be administering tests that are duplicative or unnecessary; they may also be requiring or encouraging significant amounts of test preparation, such as taking practice tests.
4. District-level testing occurs more frequently and takes up more learning time in urban school districts than in suburban school districts. In grades K-2, urban students spend about 52% more time on district tests than on state tests. In grades 3-5 and 6-8, students in urban school districts spend approximately 80% and 73% more time, respectively, taking district-mandated standardized tests than their suburban peers. But the difference is most profound among high school students. Urban high school students spend 266% more time taking district-level exams than their suburban counterparts.
5. School districts are not transparent about testing practices or purposes. While parents may know when their children are being tested, the purposes of the tests students are taking, whether the state or school district is requiring the test, and how much time tests take may not always be clear from the information that school districts provide. Chicago Public Schools stood out among all the school districts for its transparency regarding school district assessments. Most school districts examined in the study post some type of information regarding their district-level assessments on their websites, but the information is often limited in its usefulness for parents and other stakeholders.

These findings seem to speak directly to testing and assessment in schools and the need to look carefully and comprehensively at this issue.

Over-testing as a New Jersey Issue

In discussing statewide assessment programs, it is worth noting that states have widely differing programs. In developing its Statewide assessment program and guiding the usage of the resulting data, New Jersey has taken a conservative approach. The contour of the Statewide assessment program meets the federal requirements, as New Jersey has tested only in English language arts

and mathematics and also in science at limited grade levels. Additionally, New Jersey has counseled school districts to utilize student data from their assessment programs as only one indicator among others in making student-level placement and retention decisions. While adhering to State law to hold students accountable for meeting minimum competencies in English language arts and mathematics prior to the issuance of a regular high school diploma, New Jersey since 2010 has allowed students who do not pass the Statewide assessment to demonstrate the minimum competencies through an alternative assessment or a portfolio review. The review entails the submission of student work to the NJDOE to ensure equivalency with graduation requirements.

In contrast, many states' statewide assessment programs have expanded beyond what federal regulations require, to include, for example, tests in social studies and additional sciences. A handful of states have policies that require the data to be deterministic in decisions regarding retention or summer school, most often in third grade.

In response to all of these issues, the Study Commission will look very carefully at a number of issues regarding testing and assessment, including but not limited to, how many tests are being required in schools, by what authority and for what purpose, how long such testing (including preparation) takes, and what is the impact on time for instruction and student learning.

Establishing a Coherent, Comprehensive Vision for the Role of Assessments

There are three major aspects of visionary leadership for assessment. Building upon the school district's mission and core values, the first consists of constructing a vision; that is, creating an ideal image of the role of assessment within the school district's culture. The second involves communicating the vision and developing policies that translate the image from theory to practice within the school's context and culture. Finally, the third aspect centers on the specific actions in which school district leaders engage on a one-to-one basis with school district stakeholders to support and model the vision (Sashkin as cited in Wren, 1995). This process requires a significant school district commitment, as the superintendent and the school board must commit to the process and timeline, frame the purpose and importance of the vision for the school district stakeholders (including faculty, staff, parents, students, and community), and provide the resources and support necessary to implement and sustain the vision (Illinois State Board of Education, 2014).

The assessment visioning process is part of a thoughtful, larger process that engages school district stakeholders in productive conversations regarding their concerns about school district assessments that lead to real changes in the school district's overall assessment strategy. The visioning process acknowledges all stakeholders' (educators, parents, students, community) concerns about assessment (especially those concerning over-testing), uses the concerns in framing the goals and objectives for student assessment, and continues as actions are implemented that are intended to achieve the goals and objectives (Manno, 2014).

The Term "Assessment System" Operationally Defined

The foundations of an assessment system include an aligned viable curriculum; aligned assessments; assessment-literate educators/students/parents; time for collaborative team work that is focused on curriculum, instruction, and the use of assessment data to improve student learning; and a long-term vision and commitment to the work. It represents practice/process vs. compliance (Wright, 2014).

A comprehensive assessment system is an integral part of the instructional process; is inextricably linked to a viable curriculum and effective instructional practice; and uses state, formative, interim, and summative assessment tools that are tightly aligned to standards to inform curriculum, instruction, and assessment. It is used to address immediate student needs, inform ongoing instructional changes, and guide long-term educational improvement, and it provides on-going, timely, and actionable information on what students know, understand, and are able to do in relation to the standards. In a comprehensive assessment system, a comprehensive, well-planned professional development program is in place to strengthen the assessment literacy of all education stakeholders and to ensure an efficient assessment and testing program. A good example of a comprehensive assessment system can be found in Appendix 3 of this report (Wright, 2014).

Aligning an Assessment System with a School District's Strategic Goals and Change Process

It is essential that a school district's assessment system, including its plans and strategies, is rooted in and aligned with the school district's vision, mission, core values and beliefs, and strategic goals and objectives. Assessment is not simply about testing; it is about determining whether the community's educational goals and objectives are being achieved (Manno, 2014). In addition, some of the benefits of having an assessment system aligned with the school district's goals and objectives include the development of a cycle of continuous school/ school district improvement and fostering a systemic approach to collaborative job-embedded professional learning that is focused on curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Such an approach leads to meaningful and sustainable changes in practice; empowering students to take responsibility for their own learning, and improving the ability of educators to communicate with parents and community members about the purpose and benefits of meaningful assessment.

An effective tactic for ensuring the strategic assessment process is sustained and can weather the vicissitudes of time is to have the strategies and activities for the overarching assessment system documented and embedded in school district policies and procedures.

Ensuring an Assessment System in which Assessment Tools are Necessary, Purposeful, and Sufficient

A school district assessment inventory can help build a shared understanding of what purposes the assessments are designed to serve, point out gaps and redundancies overall as well as for specific populations of students, identify a lack of alignment with standards and tools of low quality, illuminate the costs of testing in the school district, and highlight which assessments provide results that are useful to teachers and students and which do not.

School district leaders can best foster conversations about the assessment strategy that is most appropriate for their own school district as they work through the visioning process. As part of that process, they can lead an assessment inventory project that can potentially result in streamlining the amount of testing required and work to ensure that the assessments in place are supported by structures and routines necessary to make sure assessment results are actually used for improvement (Achieve, Inc., 2014).

The Study Commission has examined a specific assessment inventory tool, Achieve, Inc.'s *Student Assessment Inventory for School Districts*. Achieve, Inc. developed an initial draft of its inventory tool, shared it with a broad network of state and school district leaders and experts for

feedback, and subsequently, in partnership with the Connecticut State Department of Education, piloted the inventory in eight school districts in Connecticut. Since then, the inventory tool has been adopted by school districts in seven additional states. The tool is openly licensed and free-to-use, and Achieve, Inc. is available to provide technical assistance to school districts to facilitate the adaptation or modification of the inventory tool based on a school district's unique needs. Although the Study Commission does not endorse any specific tool, we note, for informational purposes only, the work that has been done in this area by Achieve, Inc.

Achieve, Inc.'s assessment inventory is a four-stage process designed to be used by school district officials to examine their assessments and assessment strategy from a student perspective. By utilizing the tool, school districts can evaluate the assessments their students are taking, determine the minimum testing necessary to serve essential diagnostic, instructional and accountability purposes, and work to ensure every district-mandated test is of high-quality, is providing the information needed for specific school and school district purposes, and is supported by structures and routines so assessment results are used for improvement. Achieve, Inc. also encourages school district officials to discuss with parents and school board members the inventory results, what tests have been eliminated, how the remaining tests will be used, and why they are important (Achieve, Inc., 2014).

Study Commission Interim Recommendations

The Study Commission will continue to work on the responsibilities established in the Executive Order, but we are hopeful that, in the meantime, NJDOE, school district leaders, educators, and school stakeholders, including parents and community members, will use the following recommendations to effectively examine the strengths and weaknesses of State and local assessment systems:

1. The State and NJDOE should communicate clearly and effectively its vision for educational improvement and how student assessments should be used to accomplish the vision.
2. Each school district should establish its own comprehensive vision for school district testing and how each test relates to an important learning or strategic objective.
3. In order to better understand the nature and scope of student assessments in New Jersey, the State and NJDOE should conduct a carefully designed study to learn more about a number of issues, including, but not limited to: which assessments are being used locally, what purposes they serve, how much time students and staff spend preparing for and implementing the assessments, how State-required assessments are scheduled, and what impact the testing schedule has on instructional and student learning time.
4. Each school district should conduct a thorough inventory and analysis of its local assessment system: (a) to determine which tests and assessments are being administered to students; (b) to determine the minimum testing necessary to serve diagnostic, instructional, and accountability purposes; (c) to ensure every test and assessment is of high quality; (d) to ensure every test and assessment is providing the information needed for specific school district and school purposes; and (e) to ensure every test and assessment is supported by structures and routines so that assessment results are effectively used to improve student learning.
5. Consistent with the vision, mission, goals, and objectives of the school district and in order to maximize transparency in testing, each school should engage its parents and community members at least annually in a conversation about the school district's plan for student assessment, including which tests and assessment instruments are administered to their children at the school district, school, and classroom levels; what purposes they will serve; how often they will be administered; and how much time the implementation of the instruments (including practice time) will be expended.
6. In order to implement the above-mentioned recommendation (see #4 immediately above) and create a better system of meaningful assessment in New Jersey, a consistent level of awareness and understanding of assessment purposes and strategies by practitioners, such as teachers and principals, is essential. This can only be achieved through a commitment by all New Jersey education and stakeholder groups to communicate a unified Statewide vision of effective assessment. Moreover, these groups should also commit to providing professional learning opportunities to school district and school stakeholders in assessment purposes and strategies.

APPENDIX 1

Study Commission on the Use of Student Assessments in New Jersey

David C. Hesse, Chair

Commissioner of Education

Dana Egreczky

Senior Vice President, New Jersey Chamber of Commerce

Dr. Lawrence S. Feinsod

Executive Director, New Jersey School Boards Association

Catherine M. Lindenbaum

Parent Association Representative

Dr. Marcia Lyles

Superintendent, Jersey City Public Schools

Nicole Moore

Principal, Shamong Twp. Schools

Matthew Stagliano

Educator, Camden County Technical Schools

Dr. Raymond A. Yannuzzi

President, Camden County College

Tracie Yostpille

Educator, Freehold Township Schools

Staff to the Study Commission

Kimberley Harrington, NJDOE, Chief Academic Officer

Dr. Bari Erlichson, NJDOE, Chief Performance Officer

Peter Schulman, NJDOE, Chief Talent Officer

Beth Auerswald, NJDOE, State Board Office

Dr. Thomas C. Monahan, Consultant to the Study Commission

APPENDIX 2

Presenters to the Study Commission

- November 24, 2014 **Bari Erlichson, Ph.D.**
Assistant Commissioner and Chief Performance Officer, NJDOE
Topic: NCLB: Requirements and Standards, NJ Statutory and Regulatory Requirements for Student Testing and Assessment, Brief History of Student assessments in New Jersey (1996-2014)
- December 5, 2014 **Patricia Wright**
Executive Director, New Jersey Principals and Supervisors Association
Topic: Designing a Comprehensive Assessment “System”
- December 10, 2014 **Diana J. Zaleski, Ph.D.**
Project Administrator, Illinois State Board of Education
Topic: Balanced Assessment Initiative in Illinois
- Alissa Peltzman**
Vice President of State Policy and Implementation Support, Achieve, Inc.
Topic: Student Assessment Inventory for School Districts
- Christopher Manno, Ed.D.**
Superintendent, Burlington County Special Services School District and Institute of Technology
Topic: The *All Students Achieving* strategic evaluation process in the Burlington Township school system

APPENDIX 3

A COMPREHENSIVE ASSESSMENT SYSTEM

	FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT <i>Assessment as and for learning</i>	END OF UNIT ASSESSMENT <i>Assessment of and for learning</i>	INTERIM (DISTRICT-TWIDE) <i>Assessment of learning</i>	STATE ASSESSMENT <i>Assessment of learning</i>
PURPOSE	Occurs on a daily basis within and between lessons to: (1) adjust instruction instantly; (2) drive instructional planning decisions including differentiation and timely interventions (remediation and enrichment); (3) provide meaningful feedback to students.	Occurs at the end of an instructional unit to: (1) monitor student progress; (2) to evaluate and revise the curriculum unit as needed (including strategies, interventions, resources, and assessments); (3) identify targeted professional learning needs.	Occurs periodically as determined by the district/school to: (1) diagnose student levels across grades, schools, district; (2) monitor/back student progress over time via multiple data points throughout the year; (3) evaluate effectiveness of instructional and curricular resources, programs, and interventions; (4) identify targeted professional learning needs.	Occurs annually for purposes of: (1) school improvement; (2) accountability to stakeholder groups; (3) monitoring of statewide academic achievement; (4) providing national comparisons
AUDIENCE	Students Teachers PLCs	Students Teachers PLCs Parents	Students Teachers PLCs Parents Schools Districts	State Federal District School Teachers PLCs Students Parents
DATA DRIVEN CONVERSATIONS	<p>Is the assessment aligned to the standards and student learning objectives?</p> <p>Does the assessment effectively measure student achievement of the student learning objectives?</p> <p>How should instruction be differentiated?</p> <p>What interventions are needed for students scoring below proficient?</p> <p>What interventions are needed for students scoring at the advanced level?</p> <p>What additional professional resources are needed to meet the learning needs of all students?</p>	<p>Is the assessment aligned to the standards and student learning objectives?</p> <p>Does the assessment effectively measure student achievement of the student learning objectives?</p> <p>What interventions were used throughout the unit? Based on the assessment data, to what extent were these interventions effective?</p> <p>Have students mastered the prerequisite skills needed for future units?</p> <p>How will we continue to provide proper interventions to address areas of concern?</p> <p>What other teachers need this information?</p> <p>What does the data tell us about our instruction? What strategies, activities, resources and assessments should remain in our unit? What needs to change?</p> <p>What additional professional resources are needed to meet the learning needs of all students?</p>	<p>Is the assessment aligned to the standards and student learning objectives?</p> <p>Across the grade, school, and/or district, what progress have the students made? What are their strengths and weaknesses?</p> <p>Do the results align with what we have seen in our other assessments?</p> <p>Based on the data, what strengths and gaps exist in curriculum and instruction?</p> <p>How can this data inform conversations across the grade levels?</p> <p>What additional professional resources are needed to meet the learning needs of all students?</p>	<p>How are our students progressing?</p> <p>How do our students compare?</p> <p>What trends or patterns can be discerned from the data?</p> <p>Across the grade, school, and/or district, what progress have the students made? What are their strengths and weaknesses?</p> <p>Do the results align with what we have seen in our district assessments?</p> <p>Based on the data, what strengths and gaps exist in curriculum and instruction?</p> <p>How can this data inform the conversations of our PLCs?</p> <p>What additional professional resources are needed to meet the learning needs of all students?</p>

APPENDIX 4

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APPENDIX 5

Executive Order No. 159

WHEREAS, the State of New Jersey (“State”) is committed to improving the quality of education for all new Jersey children; and

WHEREAS, my Administration believes that the educational success of each child depends upon rigorous standards, excellent educators, and high quality student assessments that measure the progress of student learning and the effectiveness of classroom instruction; and

WHEREAS, in June 2010, the New Jersey State Board of Education amended the Core Curriculum Content Standards to include the Common Core State Standards in Mathematics and English Language Arts to provide clear guidelines for teachers and their pupils; and

WHEREAS, since 1990, the federal government has required the assessment of students and, beginning in 2015, the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (“PARCC”) assessment will replace the current State assessments; and

WHEREAS, in August 2012, with unanimous bipartisan support from the Legislature, I signed into law the Teacher Effectiveness and Accountability for the Children of New Jersey (“TEACHNJ”) Act, which is designed to raise student achievement by improving instruction through constructive feedback, evaluations, and professional support of teachers and school leaders; and

WHEREAS, the U.S. Department of Education, as part of the flexibility available under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, requires the State to use student growth data as a significant factor in the evaluation of teaching staff; and

WHEREAS, once implemented, the PARCC assessment will measure student learning and its results will be considered as one component, among others, as required in the evaluation of teaching staff under the TEACHNJ Act; and

WHEREAS, in order to determine if the Core Curriculum Content Standards and the PARCC assessment are appropriate to be implemented by school districts through New Jersey, a Study Commission composed of a broad range of education practitioners and experts should be established to review and make recommendations on the quality and effectiveness of all student assessments administered to K-12 students by the State, school districts, and individual schools, including those administered for college admission, college credit, and career pathways; and

NOW, THEREFORE, I, CHRIS CHRISTIE, Governor of the State of New Jersey, by virtue of the authority vested in me by the Constitution and by the Statutes of this State, do hereby Order and DIRECT:

1. There is hereby created a Study Commission on the Use of Student Assessments in New Jersey (the “Study Commission”).

2. The Study Commission shall consist of up to nine (9) members appointed by the Governor who shall serve at his pleasure. The Governor shall select a chairperson from among

the members of the Study Commission. The Study Commission shall consist of individuals who have practical experience, knowledge, or expertise in the areas of education policy or administration. All members of the Study Commission shall serve without compensation. The Study Commission shall organize as soon as practicable after the appointment of its members.

3. The Study Commission is charged with presenting recommendations to the Governor regarding the quality and effectiveness of student assessments administered to K-12 students. In particular, the Study Commission shall consider and make recommendations on the volume, frequency, and impact of student assessments occurring throughout New Jersey school districts, and on the Core Curriculum Content Standards, including the Common Core State Standards.

4. The Department of Education shall provide staff support to the Study Commission. The Study Commission shall be authorized to call upon any department, office, division, or agency of this State to supply it with any information, personnel, or other assistance available as the Study Commission deems necessary to discharge its duties under this Order. Each department, office, division, and agency of this State is hereby required, to the extent not inconsistent with law, to cooperate fully with the Study Commission within the limits of its statutory authority and to furnish the Study Commission with such assistance on as timely a basis as is necessary to accomplish the purposes of the Order. The Study Commission may consult with education stakeholders, practitioners, experts, or other knowledgeable individuals in the public or private sector on any aspect of its mission.

5. The Study Commission shall issue an initial report containing its recommendations to the Governor no later than December 31, 2014. The Study Commission shall issue a final report to the Governor by July 31, 2015. The Study Commission shall expire upon the Governor's receipt of a report containing their final recommendations pursuant to this Executive Order.

6. The final report of the Study Commission shall be provided to the Legislature and shall be made available to the public.

7. This Order shall take effect immediately.

GIVEN, under my hand and seal this 14th day of July,
Two Thousand and Fourteen, and of the
Independence of the United States, the Two
Hundred and Thirty-Ninth.

[seal]

/s/ Chris Christie
Governor

Attest:

/s/ Christopher S. Porrino
Chief Counsel to the Governor