

“BEYOND BUBBLE TESTS: THE NEXT GENERATION OF ASSESSMENTS”

Prepared remarks of U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan to State Leaders at Achieve’s American Diploma Project (ADP) Leadership Team Meeting, Alexandria, Va.  
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I have looked forward to this day for a long time--and so have America’s teachers, parents, students, and school leaders. Today is the day that marks the beginning of the development of a new and much-improved generation of assessments for America’s schoolchildren. Today marks the start of Assessments 2.0. And today marks one more milestone, testifying to the transformational change now taking hold in our nation’s schools under the courageous leadership of state and district officials.

Earlier this morning, the Department announced the winners of the Race to the Top Assessment competition. I am glad to report that the 44 states and the District of Columbia that applied are all part of at least one winning grant. Two large state consortia have won awards totaling \$330 million.

As you know, the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers, or PARCC, is managed by Achieve. The PARCC consortium has 26 member states. Its proposal underwent a rigorous review by a panel of peer review experts--and came out a winner. The consortium is slated to receive a \$170 million award. The SMARTER Balanced Assessment Consortium, with 31 member states, won a \$160 million award. Congratulations to all on your hard work and accomplishment.

By the 2014-2015 school year, the assessments developed by these two winning state consortia will be in use in any state that chooses to use them. These are not pilot projects. These are not discrete tests, cobbled together. The winning consortia will be designing and implementing comprehensive assessment *systems* in math and English language arts. More than 35 million students are in public school in the states participating in the two consortia--and states not participating in a consortium are free to use the assessments.

This new generation of mathematics and English language arts assessments will cover all students in grades three through eight and be used at least once in high school in every state that chooses to use them. In addition, the PARCC consortium will develop optional performance tasks to assess literacy and mathematics knowledge and skills in kindergarten through second grade.

All English language learners and students with disabilities will take the new assessments, with the exception of the one percent of students with the most significant cognitive disabilities. Unlike existing assessments, which often retrofit mediocre accommodations into tests, the new assessment systems will be designed, from the start, to accurately assess both English learners and students with disabilities and provide appropriate accommodations. And for the one percent of students with the most significant disabilities, states will have funds to develop an alternate assessment as a result of a soon-to-be completed competition.

I am convinced that this new generation of state assessments will be an absolute game-changer in public education. For the first time, millions of schoolchildren, parents, and teachers will know if students are on-track for colleges and careers--and if they are ready to enter college without the need for remedial instruction. Yet that fundamental shift--re-orienting K-12 education to extend beyond high school graduation to college and career-readiness--will not be the only first here.

For the first time, many teachers will have the state assessments they have longed for-- tests of critical thinking skills and complex student learning that are not just fill-in-the-bubble tests of basic skills but support good teaching in the classroom.

For the first time, assessments will help set a consistent and high bar for success nationwide-- instead of misleading students, parents, and school leaders into thinking students are ready for college when they are not.

For the first time, teachers will consistently have timely, high-quality formative assessments that are instructionally useful and document student growth—rather than just relying on after-the-fact, year-end tests used for accountability purposes.

For the first time, state assessments will make widespread use of smart technology. They will provide students with realistic, complex performance tasks, immediate feedback, computer adaptive testing, and incorporate accommodations for a range of students.

And last but not least, for the first time, the new assessments will better measure the higher-order thinking skills so vital to success in the global economy of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and the future of American prosperity. To be on track today for college and careers, students need to show that they can analyze and solve complex problems, communicate clearly, synthesize information, apply knowledge, and generalize learning to other settings.

To fully appreciate this sea-change, one has to back up for a moment, pause, and look at the current state of student assessment in our public schools.

Since my appointment, I have visited 42 states to talk to teachers, parents, students, school leaders, and lawmakers about our nation's public schools. Almost everywhere I went, I heard people express concern that the curriculum had narrowed as more educators "taught to the test," especially in schools with large numbers of disadvantaged students.

State assessments today are primarily used for accountability purposes. It is true that assessments have shined light in the last decade on achievement gaps between groups of students. But it is no secret that existing state assessments in mathematics and English often fail to capture the full spectrum of what students know and can do. Students, parents, and educators know there is more to a sound education than picking the right selection in a multiple choice question.

State assessments currently tend to focus on concepts that are easy to measure. They rely mainly on multiple choice items with fill-in-the-bubble answers. They provide time-sensitive data and results months later, when their instructional usefulness is largely past. Typically, students take a state assessment in March or April--and get the results mailed to them after school is out.

In short, most of the assessment done in schools today is after the fact and designed to indicate only whether students *have* learned. Not enough is being done to assess students' thinking *as* they learn to boost and enrich learning, and track student growth. Schools may give lots of tests, but the assessments aren't always testing important knowledge and skills in state standards in a comprehensive way or providing high-quality information about student progress. Instead of fostering a classroom culture of continuous improvement, our current assessment system often leaves teachers and parents feeling frustrated and lacking information that could help them accelerate student learning.

Yet existing assessments are only part of the problem. An assessment system and curriculum can only be as good as the academic standards to which the assessments and curriculum are pegged. We *want* teachers to teach to standards--if the standards are rigorous, globally competitive, and consistent across states. Unfortunately, in the last decade, numerous states dummed down their academic standards and assessments. In effect, they lied to parents and students. They told students they were proficient and on track to college when they were not.

The Common Core standards developed by the states, coupled with the new generation of assessments, will help put an end to the practice of establishing 50 different goalposts for educational success. In the years ahead, a child in Mississippi will be measured against the same standard of success as a child in Massachusetts. States in each consortium have agreed to set the same achievement levels or cut-scores on assessments--and we will ask the two consortia to collaborate to make results comparable across the state consortium. For the first time, it will be possible for parents and schools leaders to assess and compare in detail how students in their state are doing compared to students in other states.

It's for all these reasons that shortly after taking office, President Obama called on the nation's governors and state education chiefs "to develop standards and assessments that don't simply measure whether students can fill in a bubble on a test, but whether they possess 21<sup>st</sup> century skills like problem-solving and critical thinking and entrepreneurship and creativity."

When the president issued that challenge in March of 2009, many experts questioned whether states could work together to set rigorous, globally competitive standards or collaborate to develop assessments of 21<sup>st</sup> century skills. But resolute governors and courageous state education chiefs have proved the skeptics wrong.

To date, 35 states and the District of Columbia have chosen to adopt the Common Core standards in math and English, and additional states are considering signing on. This initiative has been a state-led, state-run effort from start to finish--and it is an absolute testament to the courage and tenacity of state leaders, who refused to lower the bar of success for students to paper over educational shortcomings and achievement gaps. They know that if young people today are to be productive adults in the knowledge economy, they need standards that truly prepare students for college and careers.

One would be hard-pressed to find a single pundit or education expert who foresaw this transformation. I've called it "the quiet revolution"--and it is a revolution being led by leaders in statehouses, state superintendents, local lawmakers, district leaders, union heads, school boards, principals, and teachers. Let me give you an example.

Many educators have lamented the persistent disconnect between what high schools expect from their students and the skills that colleges expect from incoming freshman. Yet the two state consortia that won awards in the Race to the Top assessment competition pursued and got a remarkable level of buy-in from colleges and universities.

In the 26 states in the PARCC consortium, postsecondary institutions that educate 90 percent of the students who directly matriculate to college signed memorandums of understanding.

In those MOUs, 188 public colleges and universities and 16 private ones agreed that they would work with the consortium to define what it means to be college-ready on the new high school assessments. Once students show that they are prepared for college level work, these colleges promise to place those students into college-level courses without remediation. In the second winning consortium, the SMARTER Balanced Assessment consortium, MOUs signed by institutions of higher education similarly cover three-fourths of the college students in 30 states who directly matriculate from high school.

Now, I sometimes get asked, how would a better generation of assessments really differ in practice from existing assessments? It is an excellent question—and one I especially hear from teachers, many of whom feel at times more like they are running test-prep classes in basic skills, instead of educating the whole child for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

I believe the impact of this next generation of assessments in the classroom will be dramatic—and that the new assessments will support learning and instructional practices that teachers have long hungered for themselves.

One of the biggest frustrations of teachers with existing assessments is that they fail to test higher-order reasoning and writing skills, and thus fail to show what students know and can do. One-shot, year-end bubble tests administered on a single day can lead to dummied down curriculum and instruction throughout the course of the school year.

By contrast, the new assessments will help drive the development of a rich curriculum, instruction that is tailored to student needs, and multiple opportunities throughout the school year to assess student learning.

The PARCC consortium will test students' ability to read complex text, complete research projects, excel at classroom speaking and listening assignments, and work with digital media. The SMARTER consortium will test students by using computer adaptive technology that will ask students questions pitched to their skill level based on their previous answers. And a series of interim tests during the school year will inform students, parents, and teachers about whether students are on track.

Better assessments, given earlier in the school year, can better measure what matters—growth in student learning. And teachers will be empowered to differentiate instruction in the classroom, propelling the continuous cycle of improvement in student learning that teachers treasure.

A first-rate assessment system provides data for teachers and parents on academic progress and performance. It must measure what students have learned--not just the skills that students bring with them when they arrive at the schoolhouse door.

The use of smarter technology in assessments will especially alter instruction in ways that teachers welcome. Technology enables the use of dynamic models in test questions. It makes it possible to assess students by asking them to design products of experiments, to manipulate parameters, run tests, and record data. With the benefit of technology, assessment questions can incorporate audio and video. Problems can be situated in real-world environments, where students perform tasks or include multi-stage scenarios and extended essays.

By way of example, the National Assessment of Educational Progress has experimented with asking eighth-graders to use a hot-air balloon simulation to design and conduct an experiment to determine

the relationship between payload mass and balloon altitude. As the balloon rises in the flight box, the student notes the changes in altitude, balloon volume, and time to final altitude. Unlike filling in the bubble on a score sheet, this complex simulation task takes 60 minutes to complete.

I want to stress that neither of the two state consortia will suddenly drop new, ambitious assessments in the laps of teachers in 2014-15 without preparation and training. Both consortiums recognize that involving teachers in the development, scoring, and implementation of the new assessments are essential if the assessments are going to support better teaching and learning. It is teachers who will help ensure that test items are instructionally useful. And both consortia will help their member states provide the tools and professional development needed to assist teachers' transitions to the new assessments.

PARCC, for example, will be developing curriculum frameworks and ways to share great lesson plans. The SMARTER Balanced Assessment coalition will develop instructional modules and professional learning communities to support teachers in understanding and using assessment results. They will involve teachers not just in writing and reviewing test items but in scoring assessments--especially complex performance tasks.

As I said earlier, this new generation of assessments-- combined with the unprecedented development of common college and career-ready standards--is a game-changer in K-12 education. But that doesn't mean that the implementation of college-ready standards and assessments will bring us to educational nirvana a few short years from now. As important as better assessments are, they are not a pedagogical silver bullet.

Standards and assessments are only the foundation upon which states will construct high-quality curriculum, professional development, and all the other pieces that will support teachers preparing to teach to these new standards and students learning at higher levels. While these assessments will not be ready until 2014-15, this work of transitioning to new standards should start tomorrow.

I've said repeatedly--though it sometimes goes unreported--that we should never evaluate teacher and school performance based just on test scores, or use the results of a single test on a single day as the only measure of teacher performance.

Parents, schools, districts, and states should assess the performance of teachers on multiple measures. For the press here today, let me repeat that: That's M-U-L-T-I-P-L-E measures...

I tease in part. But teachers really do deserve multiple observations against clear standards by trained observers and principals when they are evaluated. And school performance should not be assessed based solely on year-end test scores. Student growth, attendance rates, graduation rates, matriculation to college, school safety, participation in AP and IB classes, narrowing achievement gaps--those are just some of the measures that should factor in school performance.

For now, the new assessments implemented in the 2014-15 school year will be limited to math and English language arts. There is no disagreement that math, reading, and writing are vital core components of a good education in today's knowledge economy. But so is the study of science, history, foreign languages, civics, and the arts. President Obama and I absolutely reject the notion that these other subjects are ornamental offerings that can or should be cut from schools during a fiscal crunch. In the information age, a well-rounded curriculum is not a luxury but a necessity.

Our commitment to STEM education and a well-rounded curriculum is not rhetorical. The administration has proposed to spend more than a billion dollars to support a well-rounded education in high-need schools—including \$265 million in grants to strengthen teaching and learning in the arts, foreign languages, history, civics, and financial literacy.

Our proposal to reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act also would allow states to include subjects other than math and English language arts in their accountability system because we specifically want to foster the teaching of a well-rounded curriculum. The reauthorization blueprint includes millions for the research, development, and improvement of additional high-quality assessments—which could include science, history, and foreign language tests.

I've spoken at some length today for a simple reason: The least-appreciated elements of President Obama's education reform agenda are his determination to prevent a narrowing of the curriculum and to move beyond bubble tests in assessing student learning. And while this day marks a landmark in the development of the next generation of assessments, significant challenges lie ahead.

It is the department's hope that the comprehensive math and English language assessments developed by the state consortia will lay the groundwork for future efforts by states to collaborate on high-quality assessments in other core subjects, including science. Science education is critical for all students. But until a set of common college- and career-ready science standards exists, the department believes it would be premature to fund the development of comprehensive science assessments.

Similarly, the new assessments do not currently include English Language Proficiency assessments. States that have adopted the Common Core State Standards will need to adapt the standards they use to gauge English Language Proficiency. It is our plan to set aside funds in the fiscal 2011 budget to support the development of such assessments. But again, much of that depends on states making progress in developing common standards for English Language Proficiency.

As state consortia develop new assessments for full-scale implementation over the next four years, they will inevitably make adjustments to these ambitious and unprecedented assessments. That is to be expected. But I encourage state leaders to persevere in maintaining the core integrity of their proposals and to resist diluting them over time.

The determination and commitment to collaboration that state leaders have shown in pushing for rigorous, common standards in math and English needs to be maintained in designing new assessments that measure college and career-readiness. Collaboration empowered states to move rapidly—and at less cost—to design new assessments than if states had worked alone. And the department will work closely with the consortia to support their success and convene a technical advisory committee to assist in those efforts.

The two consortia receiving awards today share important similarities in the design of their assessment systems. But while there are important similarities between the assessment systems of the two consortia, they also differ in their design. We welcome that variety. The truth is that there is still much to learn about developing valid and reliable assessments that will truly foster better teacher and college and career readiness—and much that states in different consortiums will be able to teach and share with each other.

One of the biggest challenges facing the consortia is to ensure that new assessments are crafted in a way that allows teachers, families, and the community to understand and act on the results. Everyone needs to know exactly how their students and children are doing--and how well their schools are serving them.

The need is not only for a better assessment system but one that is also transparent, intelligible, and consumer-friendly. If the new generation of assessments comes up short on those counts, everything else the consortia are trying to accomplish will be much, much harder.

Real challenges lie ahead. But I would like to celebrate this moment, the dawn of Assessments 2.0. The collaboration, the courage, and the commitment of state leaders to transformational reform have been nothing short of phenomenal.

In the end, the imperative here is clear. If America is to have a public school system second to none, each state needs a first-rate assessment system to measure progress, guide instruction, and prepare students for college and careers. Thanks largely to your determination, the nation's schoolchildren took one giant step closer today to fulfilling that dream--and the American promise of education as the great equalizer.