



ASSESSMENTS: TESTING THE WATERS

Issue Overview

Passionate debates have been raging in Georgia and across the country for years about the role tests and assessments play in the education system. What should we test and how often? How should we use the results? Should we focus on summative or formative assessments? Norm-referenced or standardized? What do those words even mean? In short, why do we test?

One reason why states administer assessments is because the federal government requires them to do so to gauge student learning in exchange for federal funding. Beyond that, however, most educators recognize that good assessments can provide critical data that show students' academic strengths and weaknesses and provide information necessary to address the instructional needs of the students.

With the new flexibility offered under ESSA, all states, including Georgia, are rethinking the role of assessments within their education system. They are trying to find the proper balance between using assessments as a means of holding educators accountable and as a tool to inform instruction and support personalized learning.

Significance for Georgia

When Georgia decided to improve its standards in 2009, it assumed responsibility for creating a corresponding assessment system to measure student learning, now called the Georgia Milestones Assessment System (Milestones). The Milestones were first administered during the 2014–2015 school year, used not only to monitor student-learning progress but also to evaluate teacher performance in the classroom and school leader performance. They are also a significant component of Georgia's accountability system, the College and Career Ready Performance Index (CCRPI).

The federal law ESSA, passed in 2015, made specific changes to the previous No Child Left Behind federal legislation, including changes to the federal requirements regarding state assessments. Under ESSA, states must continue to assess all students enrolled in public schools in grades three through eight and high school, but they're allowed to work with local school districts to review testing requirements and needs.

By using the flexibility provided by the federal law under ESSA, Georgia is taking steps to change the focus of assessments away from just being used for high-stakes purposes that drive instruction to formative assessments that help inform instruction and allow for greater personalization. The aim of the flexibility being sought is to allow districts to use assessments to meet the particular needs of their students and educators while trying to limit the amount of time students spend taking tests.

Action Steps

Georgia is continuing to strive to find the proper balance between an effective assessment system that supports its educational goals for students and holds the educational system accountable for serving those students. For public education to function optimally, it requires an instructional system that makes the acquisition of knowledge and skills efficient, effective, and appealing. The EdQuest Georgia best-practice research tells us that top-performing states and education systems have well-developed, coherent instructional systems that incorporate standards, curricula, and assessments that allow for the personalization of instruction and appropriate methods of teaching. Combined, this coherent instructional system helps all students reach their goals.