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Flexibility, Innovation Must Guide Implementation of New State Assessment Systems to Measure Mastery of Common Core State Standards

In an era in which information and learning know no geographic bounds, there is an unprecedented opportunity to utilize digital learning to transform our nation's education system so that each child can be successful, realize his or her fullest potential, and pursue his or her most daring dreams. Indeed, it is the sum of these dreams that represents the future standing and economic competitiveness of this great nation.

As states across the country move forward in implementing the common core state standards, there is a chance to create the infrastructure for innovation, improved learning outcomes, and cost-savings at scale.

Part of this infrastructure will include the adoption of next-generation assessments. If done correctly, the shift from pencil-and-paper to online assessments will build upon this opportunity to transform the nation's education system and provide a platform for new approaches to learning and schooling, not just to testing.

If done incorrectly, however, the adoption of these assessments also has the potential to lock our education system—for another decade or more—into its current factory-era model that has proved so inadequate to the task of meeting our nation's education goals in the 21st century.

States and the assessment consortia designing the next generation of assessments are doing nothing less than laying the foundation for the next era of American public education. It is imperative that they architect a model of education that will withstand the test of time.

We, the undersigned, believe that states and the assessment consortia must move with all haste to deploy an assessment system that not only explicitly accommodates emerging models of innovative schooling, but also supports them. Some schools across the country are already moving in this innovative direction, as they shift from focusing on obsolete inputs of the past like seat time to creating new, blended schooling models that combine the best of face-to-face and online learning.¹ An assessment framework stuck in the factory-era relic of its predecessors would not only be orthogonal to innovative efforts like these, but could also serve to stifle further innovation—literally cutting it off at the knees.

Given the importance of this opportunity, we make three recommendations to the states and the assessment consortia.

1. *Create a dynamic testing ecosystem, not another one-size-fits-all assessment.* Rather than a single common test, the federal-funded opportunity offers the potential to create a vibrant assessment ecosystem comprised of multiple platforms, open-item banks, and multiple testing options that encourages deeper learning. An assessment ecosystem, rather than a single common test, will give states the flexibility to take advantage of



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innovations in digital learning over time while maintaining interoperability and comparability. For instance, assessments can be aligned and trusted through the use of a common matrix-based assessment, which can be used to set the curve. NAEP or PISA is an example of a matrix-based assessment; because they are broad and deep, no one student takes the whole test. Instead, several students each take a fraction of it—and a few thousand test-takers can give an accurate picture of the results in a state.

2. *Plan for innovation.* Interest in assessment systems, not just identical year-end or end-of-course tests, is a productive direction. So-called “interim” and “through-course assessments” can be beneficial in compiling a number of achievement data points. These assessments will be most useful, however, when integrated as part of an aligned learning system. With the shift from print to digital instructional materials, an increasing number of students will benefit from the instant feedback of content-embedded and real-time, adaptive assessment. Over time, a growing number of districts and networks will use instructional systems that produce a substantial body of achievement data tied to instructional experiences. Overlaying common interim or through-course assessments on these systems must not be redundant or, even worse, misaligned.

Next-generation assessment systems should instead be designed to be interoperable and flexible to ensure that states, districts, and schools can implement complementary alternative and aligned in-course assessments and instructional materials.

3. *Adopt assessment systems that support transformation.* Education is shifting from print to digital curricula and from teaching age-cohorts to personalized learning. New assessment systems should support rather than act as a barrier to competency-based learning—in which time is variable but learning is constant for each student—and systems should shift to focus on measuring and rewarding individual student growth instead of fixed inputs. Consequently, next-generation assessments must be made available on demand when a student completes a unit or course and not at a pre-determined time on the school calendar.

Sincerely,

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The above list represents the letter's original signatories.

ⁱ See Heather Staker, "The rise of K-12 blended learning: Profiles of emerging models," Innosight Institute, May 2011, http://www.innosightinstitute.org/blended_learning_models/. The report profiles 40 operators pioneering blended-learning models of various types, several of which are moving in this bold new direction for students.