



## UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

OFFICE OF ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION

September 25, 2015

Dear Chief State School Officer:

Today I am pleased to announce that the U.S. Department of Education (ED) is releasing updated guidance regarding the criteria and process for demonstrating that your statewide assessment system meets the requirements of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965* (ESEA), as amended. Over the past several years, we know that States have been working hard to refine and improve their State-developed standards and create an assessment system that supports student learning and is aligned to those standards as part of a broader strategy to ensure that all students graduate from high school prepared for college and careers. The updated guidance, along with the corresponding peer review process conducted using panels of educators and assessment experts from outside ED, will help determine whether your assessment system meets the requirements of the ESEA. The purpose of this letter is to share ED's updated guidance for the technical peer review of State assessment systems and outline key next steps.

A key purpose of Title I of the ESEA is to promote educational excellence and equity so that by the time students graduate from high school they have mastered the knowledge and skills they need to be successful in college and the workforce. Under the ESEA, a critical element of each State's work to meet this goal is the development and adoption of (1) challenging academic content standards that define what the State expects all students to know and be able to do and (2) assessments aligned with those standards to measure student achievement in meeting those expectations. A high-quality State assessment system that is aligned to State-determined standards provides data that the State, districts, principals, and teachers can use to identify the academic needs of students, target resources and supports toward students who need them most, evaluate school and program effectiveness, and close achievement gaps among subgroups of students. A high-quality assessment system also provides useful information to parents about their child's achievement.

Each State has authority in developing both its standards and its assessment system to suit its needs and purposes. In doing so, we urge you to ensure that the tests – and the time spent preparing for them – are used as a tool to improve teaching and learning and do not unnecessarily take away from important classroom instruction. We encourage each State to

400 MARYLAND AVE., SW, WASHINGTON, DC 20202  
<http://www.ed.gov/>

*The Department of Education's mission is to promote student achievement and preparation for global competitiveness by fostering educational excellence and ensuring equal access.*

consider all of the assessments that comprise its assessment system, make sure each assessment serves a clear purpose, and eliminate redundant or unnecessary tests.<sup>1</sup>

Section 1111(e) of the ESEA requires ED to establish a review by external peers of each State's assessment system to ensure technical soundness. These peers are educators and experts in assessments or academic content, many of whom have worked in State educational agencies; they are not ED staff members. Based on the recommendation of the peers, ED will determine whether the State has sufficiently documented technical quality of its assessment system or what additional information remains for the State to document its quality. If additional information is needed, ED will work with States to determine the State's plan and timeline for providing that additional information. Please know that your State will not be asked to submit its State-developed academic content standards for peer review.

In December 2012, ED suspended its 12-year-old peer assessment review process to evaluate and revise the process based on current best practices in the field, feedback from States and other stakeholders, lessons learned over the past decade, and revised professional standards in the 2014 *Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing*. ED's updated peer review process responds to these important changes in the field, such as accounting for the increased prevalence of the use of technology in the development, administration, and scoring of assessments as well as techniques for demonstrating their technical quality. While the critical elements in ED's peer review guidance have been reorganized from the 2007 version, they remain focused on ensuring that the assessments are valid and reliable and consistent with nationally recognized professional and technical standards, as required by the ESEA. In addition to updates based on the revised professional standards, revisions to the assessment peer review process reflect:

- Test security. The field has learned a lot about the importance of having strong test security measures, before, during, and after the assessments. The guidance includes sections that focus on a State's systems for protecting data integrity and privacy when gathering and providing assessment results to parents and educators to support teaching and learning.
- Alignment with State-developed standards. This remains a central aspect of demonstrating the technical quality of your State's assessment system. A State must demonstrate that its assessments are aligned with the full extent of its content standards,<sup>2</sup> including higher-order thinking skills. This includes a demonstration that a State's assessment system includes items that focus on critical and analytic thinking. It also requires that the assessment system measure a student's writing ability if writing is a component of the State's content standards.
- Alternate assessments based on alternate academic achievement standards. The revised guidance provides additional detail on how these requirements apply for

---

<sup>1</sup> Funds from ED's State Assessments grant program (section 6111 of the ESEA) may be able to support efforts in this area. For more information, see [www.ed.gov/programs/gsa/index.html](http://www.ed.gov/programs/gsa/index.html).

<sup>2</sup> Many States include speaking and listening standards in their English language arts academic content standards, but ED recognizes that measuring these skills in a large-scale summative assessment may not be feasible at this time. ED will separately provide information to States about how to request a limited waiver from including speaking and listening standards on the summative assessment.

alternate assessments based on alternate academic achievement standards for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities and expands the examples of evidence a State may provide to demonstrate the quality of such alternate assessments.

- Coordinated work across States to develop assessments. Many States have been working together to develop their assessment systems. To reduce burden for individual States and provide consistency in the review, the guidance identifies areas where States and their vendors can submit one set of documentation that covers the same assessments across States.

The updated assessment peer review guidance includes: (1) information about the revised peer review process that ED will follow to review each State's assessment system; (2) instructions for preparing evidence for submission; and (3) examples of evidence for addressing each critical element. The peer review guidance and other information to support your State can be found at [www.ed.gov/admins/lead/account/saa.html](http://www.ed.gov/admins/lead/account/saa.html).

At this time, ED's peer review will cover general assessments and alternate assessments, including the alternate assessments based on alternate academic achievement standards, in English language arts, mathematics, and science. ED realizes that many States recently adopted new science content standards and are developing new science assessments aligned to those content standards. If that is the case, the State may submit the reading/language arts and mathematics assessments and identify the timeline for submitting its science assessments in the future.

Because all States have made significant changes to their standards and assessment systems since the assessments were last peer reviewed, all States will need to participate in the updated peer review process. To give States time to prepare their submission for peer review based on this revised guidance, external peers will begin peer reviewing State assessment systems this winter. As we have done in the past, ED will offer several opportunities for your State to submit information for peer review. ED will initiate peer review sessions in late January, late March, and May 2016. Please contact your State's OSS program officer at [OSS.\[State\]@ed.gov](mailto:OSS.[State]@ed.gov) (for example, [OSS.Montana@ed.gov](mailto:OSS.Montana@ed.gov)) by **November 18, 2015**, indicating when you would like to engage in the peer review of your State's assessment system. States that will have new assessments being administered for the first time in the 2015–2016 school year or are developing new science assessments should provide that information and ED will work with you to determine the appropriate time for you to submit for peer review. As you consider when to undergo peer review, please consider that the earlier you participate in the review, the sooner you will receive feedback that can be used to strengthen and improve your assessment system.

I encourage your staff to review this letter and guidance carefully. ED will host several webinars to review the revised guidance and answer any questions. The first webinar, providing an overview of the updated guidance, will be held the week of October 5. More information will be provided shortly to State assessment directors regarding these webinars. In addition, I know that the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) has developed a plan to provide technical assistance to support you in preparing for peer review and will be providing that information to you shortly.

I hope you find that this process provides helpful feedback to inform the continuous improvement of your state assessment system so that you have valid and reliable information for holding schools and districts accountable for student achievement. ED will continue to offer tailored technical assistance to any interested State. If you have any questions or concerns, please reach out to Patrick Rooney at Patrick.Rooney@ed.gov.

Sincerely,

//s//

Ann Whalen  
Delegated the Authority to Perform the  
Functions and Duties of Assistant Secretary for  
Elementary and Secondary Education

Enclosure

cc: Chris Minnich, Council of Chief State School Officers  
State Assessment Directors  
State Title I Directors  
State Special Education Directors