

HOW DO ASSESSMENTS MATTER—AND FOR WHOM? MAKING SENSE OF THE HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT’S ASSESSMENT EXPERIENCE



High school students across the country take a variety of assessments for different purposes. Students in some states take high school exit exams required for graduation. Students in other states take state-developed end-of-course exams that factor into their course grades. Federal law requires that, at a minimum, states assess high school students at least once in English language arts/literacy (ELA), mathematics, and science; these results are used for school accountability. Students in some states also take an additional series of tests for college entrance or college credit, such as the ACT or SAT college admissions exams, PSAT, Advanced Placement exams, and International Baccalaureate exams — the list goes on.¹

With states’ recent transitions to new assessments and accountability systems, we wanted to know more about how these varied assessments, with varied purposes, matter for students and schools. **In March 2019, Achieve compiled a list of each state’s required 2018–19 high school assessments in mathematics, ELA, science, social studies, and career readiness.² Next, we analyzed whether and how the assessments matter for students and for schools, and whether states have assessments that matter for both students and schools. Finally, we analyzed whether states have created statewide policies that signal to students in high school whether they are ready for college-level work based on performance on a high school assessment.**

How Does the Student Assessment Experience Vary Across States?

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) requires states to assess students at least once in mathematics, ELA, and science during their high school experience. Across the country, high school assessment requirements are different from state to state. Some states assess students once in high school in ELA, mathematics, and science using an end-of-grade assessment. Some states administer discrete end-of-course exams to students as they complete a variety of courses required by the state. What matters is not the total number of assessments a state administers — particularly since end-of-course tests administered by the state may replace district, school, or teacher-developed final exams — but rather that the assessments provide necessary information to states, schools, teachers, students and their families about how the student is progressing through their high school career, whether they are on track to graduate prepared for their next steps, and how the student may need to be supported with additional interventions if not. We classified states’ high school statewide assessments into ten different types (see table 1).

The high school assessments states administer vary in design. Some states use a comprehensive (i.e., end-of-grade) assessment (or assessments) that is administered to all students in a cohort at the same time regardless of the courses the student has taken in high school. Variation exists across states in whether they administer their assessments in 9th, 10th, and/or 11th grade. Other states use an end-of-course assessment (or assessments) that students take upon completion of the requisite coursework regardless of what grade they are in. There is also great variation by state in both the subjects being assessed within content areas. Algebra I was the most common mathematics assessment, but some states assess students with Algebra I and Geometry, while others use Algebra I, Geometry, and Algebra II assessments. Finally, some states administer college admissions exams, and related early high school assessments such as the PSAT and ACT Aspire.³ For additional information on each state’s assessment details, see Achieve’s Statewide Assessments in High School Data Explorer at www.highschool.achieve.org/statewide-assessments-high-school-data-explorer.

¹ *High School Assessment in a New Era: What Policymakers Need to Know* <https://www.achieve.org/publications/high-school-assessment-new-era-what-policymakers-need-know>

² For details on each state’s high school assessments in mathematics, ELA, science, social studies, and career readiness, see <https://highschool.achieve.org/>.

³ *Ibid.*



TABLE 1: STATES' REQUIRED MATHEMATICS AND ELA HIGH SCHOOL ASSESSMENTS*

Assessment**	Number of States	States
State-developed assessment(s)	26	Alaska, Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, Nevada, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, North Dakota, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Utah***, Virginia, and Wyoming
Smarter Balanced	7	California, Hawaii, Idaho, Oregon, South Dakota, Vermont, and Washington
PARCC	2	District of Columbia and Maryland
ACT Aspire	2	Arkansas and Wisconsin
Pre ACT	2	Alabama and North Carolina
ACT	13	Alabama, Hawaii, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Montana, Nebraska, Nevada, North Carolina, North Dakota, Utah, Wisconsin, and Wyoming
PSAT 8/9	2	Illinois and Michigan
PSAT 10	5	Colorado, Delaware, Illinois, Michigan, and Rhode Island
SAT	9	Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Illinois, Maine, Michigan, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and West Virginia
ACT or SAT (district/student choice)	4	Arizona, Ohio, Oklahoma, and Tennessee

*All states are administering a state-developed assessment in science, with five exceptions: Alabama (ACT), Arkansas (ACT Aspire), Nebraska (ACT), West Virginia (SAT), and Wisconsin (ACT Aspire and ACT).

**Categories are not mutually exclusive.

*** Utah's assessment is 50% ACT Aspire/50% Utah-developed items.

How Do (or Don't) Assessments Matter for All Students?

Across the U.S., states' policies range in how assessments matter for students. By “matter for students,” we mean that an assessment has consequences for individual students' end-of-course grades or graduation. Students in **30 states and DC** do not take a statewide summative assessment in high school in mathematics, ELA, or science that has stakes for the student, i.e. the assessment will not impact their course grades or that they must pass to graduate from high school. In mathematics and ELA, **20 states** administer an assessment or assessments that matters for students' graduation or grades.⁴ **Thirteen states** that administer a mathematics and ELA assessment with consequences for students also administer a science assessment or assessments that matters for students' graduation or grades.

In social studies/civics, **20 states** administer an assessment or assessments that matters for students' graduation or grades. This includes eight states (AL, AZ, AR, ID, KY, ND, UT, and WI) who solely include an assessment with consequences for students in social studies or civics — and no other subject. See maps on page 3 for which states have assessments that matter for students.

⁴ *High School Assessment in a New Era: What Policymakers Need to Know* <https://www.achieve.org/publications/high-school-assessment-new-era-what-policymakers-need-know>

HOW HIGH SCHOOL ASSESSMENTS MATTER (OR DON'T) FOR STUDENTS



Assessments do not have consequences for students related to course grades or graduation.



Students must achieve an overall minimum score across two or more assessments to graduate. Students may offset lower performance on one test with higher performance on another.

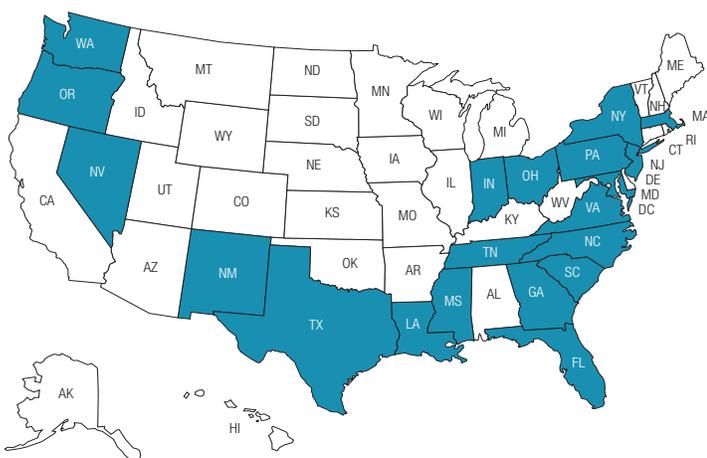


Assessment measure serves as the final exam for a course, and contributes 5-30% to the student's final course grade.

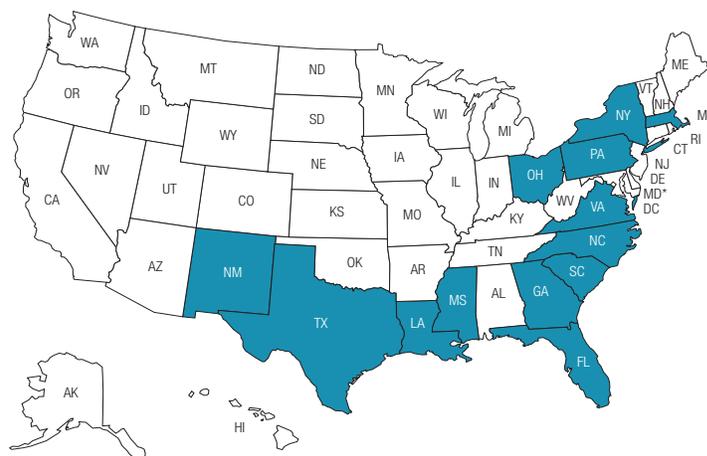


Students must pass one or more assessment(s) to graduate.

MATHEMATICS AND ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS/LITERACY ASSESSMENTS MATTER FOR STUDENTS



SCIENCE ASSESSMENTS MATTER FOR STUDENTS

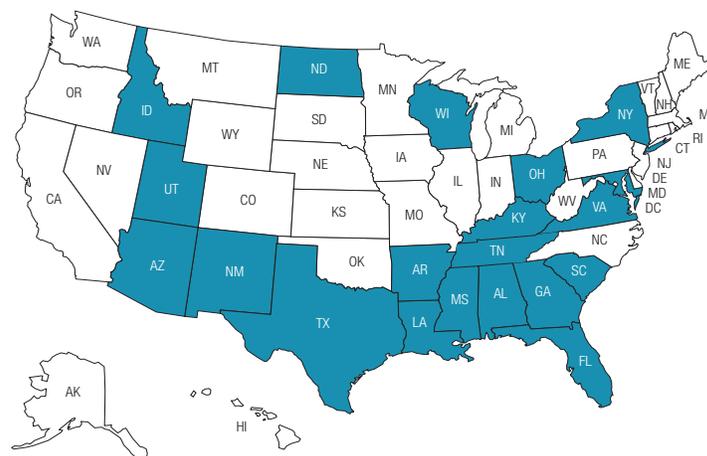


**Beginning in school year 2019–2020, students will be required to pass the HS MISA to fulfill the science graduation assessment requirement.*

Assessments that Matter for Some Students after High School

In 2018–19, 26 states administered the ACT or SAT statewide to students in high school (see Table 1 for specifics). These states have not attached consequences for students as defined for this analysis — students' results do not count towards a final course grade nor must a student attain a certain benchmark to graduate from high school — but these assessments may be meaningful for students' college admissions and/or placement into credit-bearing (non-remedial) courses in college. A number of additional states (California, Hawaii, Minnesota, Oregon, South Dakota, Texas, and Washington) with state-developed assessments have created statewide higher education placement policies based on their assessments. More details on page 5 of the brief.

SOCIAL STUDIES/CIVICS ASSESSMENTS MATTER FOR STUDENTS



How Do Assessments Matter for Schools?

The passage of ESSA gave states an opportunity to rethink high school assessments and the signals they send to districts and schools about where to focus their efforts beyond mathematics and ELA proficiency. Statutory requirements of ESSA provide a framework of four high-level indicators for accountability that states must include in their high school accountability systems: 1) Academic Achievement, 2) Graduation Rate, 3) Progress Toward Achieving English Language Proficiency, and 4) School Quality or Student Success (SQSS). States had the option to include growth indicators in their systems as well.

Achieve analyzed how states were including high school assessments in their accountability systems in three critical ways:

Subject	Academic Achievement, Growth, and/or SQSS
Mathematics	50 states
English Language Arts	50 states
Science	26 states
Social Studies	10 states

- Academic Achievement: States' accountability determinations for schools must rely, in part, on assessment(s) of students' proficiency in mathematics and ELA.
- Academic Growth: States determine whether and how to include measures of growth on mathematics and ELA assessments, as well as whether to include measures of science and social studies growth.
- School Quality or Student Success (SQSS): States determine whether and how to include assessments as part of their SQSS measure.

As is required by law, all **50 states** include mathematics and ELA assessments in their high school accountability systems. **Twenty-six states** elected to include a measure based on science performance in their accountability systems. And **ten states** include a measure based on social studies performance in their accountability systems. For additional specifics of how each state is holding schools accountable for student performance on high school assessments, see Achieve's Statewide Assessments in High School Data Explorer at www.highschool.achieve.org/statewide-assessments-high-school-data-explorer.

Aligned Incentives: Which States Administer Assessments that Matter for Students AND Schools?

Achieve looked at whether states that have created consequences for students have also built performance on these measures into their accountability system for high schools. With one exception, states' mathematics, ELA, and science assessments that matter for students also matter for schools. However, the same cannot be said about social studies and civics assessments; states are less likely to include social studies performance in their high school accountability system despite

Subject	Matters for Students	Matters for Schools
Mathematics and ELA	20 states	20 states
Science	13 states	12 states
Social Studies/Civics	20 states	7 states

attaching consequences for students based on these assessments. The flip side of this analysis is that there are 30 states administering high school assessments in mathematics and ELA and holding schools accountable for the results but where students are not affected in terms of grades or graduation. Some assessments in these states may hold value for some students, particularly those intending to pursue higher education (see page 3).

How Do Assessments Signal Students' Readiness for Postsecondary Success?

Achieve next analyzed which states have created statewide policies to use student results on a high school assessment to admit or place graduates into credit-bearing courses at 2-year and 4-year colleges and universities. When high school assessments open doors to postsecondary opportunities, students and their families view them as relevant to their



futures. Done well, these assessments signal to students the level of performance necessary for postsecondary success. This type of signal also provides more opportunities for districts and schools to offer additional guidance and support to students who have yet to achieve a college- or career-ready level of performance in their final year(s) of high school. Students and their families also receive better information earlier and identify resources to take action.

The number of states that have adopted statewide policies to use high school assessments to place students into credit-bearing (non-remedial) coursework in postsecondary institutions has more than doubled since 2013. According to Achieve’s research, **17 states** now administer statewide ELA and mathematics assessments in high school that measure the advanced knowledge and skills valued by postsecondary institutions and employers and are used by higher education to make judgments about college admissions or placing students in first-year, credit-bearing courses.⁵

Then—2013 ¹	Now—2019
Three states administered high school end-of-grade or end-of-course assessments developed by K–12 and higher education leaders and had a statewide postsecondary policy for placing students into first year, credit-bearing courses based on these assessments: California, Florida, and Georgia	Seven states administer high school end-of-grade or end-of-course assessments developed by K–12 and higher education leaders and have a statewide postsecondary policy for placing students into first year, credit-bearing courses based on these assessments: California, Hawaii, Minnesota, Oregon, South Dakota, Texas and Washington
Three states that administered ACT or SAT to all students had a statewide postsecondary policy for placing students into first year, credit-bearing courses: Hawaii, Kentucky, and Louisiana	Ten states that administer ACT or SAT to all students have a statewide postsecondary policy for placing students into first year, credit-bearing courses: Colorado, Illinois, Maine, West Virginia (SAT); Kentucky, Louisiana, Nevada (ACT); Ohio, Oklahoma, Tennessee (ACT or SAT)

¹ *Closing the Expectations Gap: 2013 Annual Report on the Alignment of State K-12 Policies and Practice with the Demands of College and Careers.* (Achieve). Retrieved from <https://www.achieve.org/publications/closing-expectations-gap>.

The Path Forward

The goal for states should be a coherent set of policies where all assessments have meaning for schools and students. Historically, the assessments that mattered for students — the ones that have currency in higher education and with employers — rarely factored into school accountability, and the ones that mattered for schools often did not matter to students. States have made strides in improving the coherence of some of their policies; today students rarely take an assessment that matters for them that doesn’t matter for schools. Students in a third of states take statewide assessments in high school that signal their readiness for placement them into credit-bearing courses in college. Still, students in many states take a variety of assessments that do not have such a value. They take assessments that matter for schools but do not signal meaning for students.

Systems aligned: Two states — Oregon and Washington — both of whom administer the Smarter Balanced assessments to their high school students in mathematics and ELA — stand out for having as assessment and accountability system that uses the same high school assessments that matter for students, schools, and for postsecondary placement.

⁵ *The analysis is focused on states that administer an assessment statewide that is used for placement. Some states have statewide placement policies for assessments such as the ACT or SAT, but do not assess all students in high school using this assessment. These states are not included in this analysis.*