

Rethinking the Test Pile: A National Study of K–8 Academic Assessments

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OVERVIEW

Education First analyzed K–8 academic assessment systems across 67 districts in 38 states (including Montana), serving nearly 4 million students, and found:

- Students in some districts take up to 88 distinct assessments before high school.
- Students in the highest-testing districts spend an average of 128 hours on assessments across K–8.
- Assessments are frequently used in ways that exceed or conflict with their intended design.
- There is no relationship between assessment volume and student proficiency or growth.
- Districts in states that are transitioning to through-year assessments are currently administering more assessments, possibly because districts haven't yet eliminated redundant tests.

After a decade of progress on implementing high-quality instructional materials, incoherent assessments now threaten to stall the momentum

Instructional materials have come a long way.

Over the past decade, states and districts have invested heavily in High-Quality Instructional Materials (HQIM) adoption and professional learning to strengthen teaching and learning.



But assessment systems haven't kept pace.

Many school systems still rely on layered, redundant and misaligned tests that offer limited instructional value and send mixed signals about what matters for learning.



This disconnect creates noise, not insight.

Teachers and leaders are left with conflicting data from multiple sources—obscuring what students actually know and can do within the context of HQIM.

As a result, time, trust and coherence are lost.

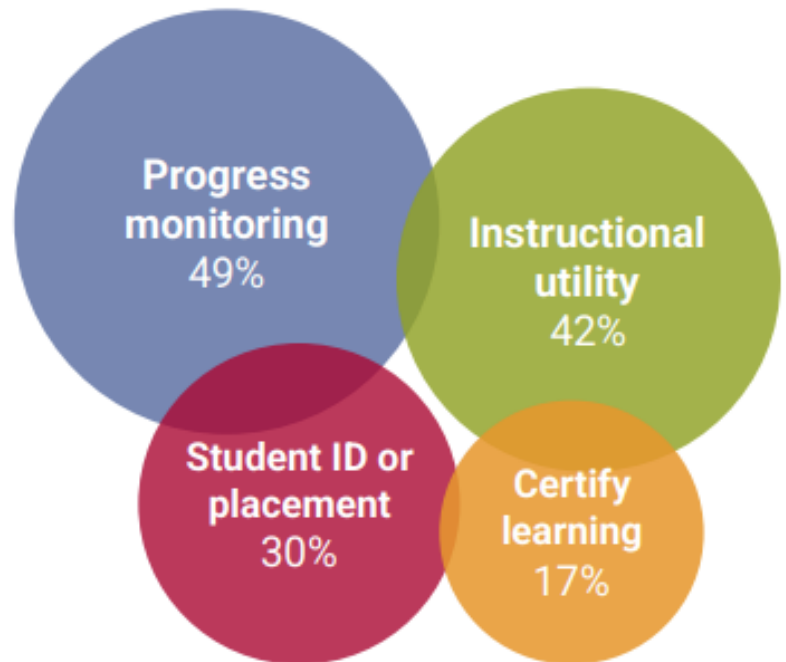
This study begins to scratch the surface of these challenges. It offers an early look at how local assessment ecosystems are evolving and where the next wave of coherence work must focus.

DISTRICT TESTING

\$2.5M

Per district
(over the past two fiscal years)

Across 20 districts of varying size and geography, average spending on assessments and implementation reached up to **\$2.5M per district** over the past two fiscal years (**\$23–46 per pupil annually**).



Percentages in this graph add up to over 100% because assessments are used for multiple purposes.

Misalignment and Overlap: Many assessments are used beyond their intended purpose (e.g., diagnostic tests for progress monitoring), creating overlapping assessments that confuse teachers, students, and families.

THROUGH-YEAR ASSESSMENTS

Through-year assessment transitions can increase testing time due to overlapping systems.

- Districts piloting or implementing through-year summative assessment systems administer ~27 extra hours of assessments per K–8 student annually compared to districts in other states.
 - Legacy assessments often continue alongside new state systems until districts trust new results.
 - Districts may struggle to retire redundant assessments or integrate new assessments into existing instructional cycles

Result: Students experience higher testing volumes without clear evidence of improved instructional or proficiency outcomes.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS

Build public will.

Translate technical policy debates into accessible messages for parents, educators and communities, building pressure on legislators and state boards to act.

Influence funding priorities.

Push philanthropy and state policymakers to tie funding and grantmaking to assessments that deliver instructional value and streamline, rather than layer, the system.

Hold vendors accountable.

Insist that states require developers to demonstrate alignment to instructional priorities, interoperability and actionable information for teachers before approving products for adoption.

Raise the bar for quality assurance.

Call for independent evaluations of evidence to support the technical quality of commercial tests and transparency from the vendor community to publish this information.

Promote transparency and clarity.

Advocate for states to publish clear assessment calendars, cost-benefit analyses and guidance on the intended uses of both state and local assessments.

Champion instructional coherence.

Push for state policies that align assessments with HQIM and grade-level standards, ensuring tests reinforce—not fragment—teaching and learning.

STUDY LINKS

[Executive Summary](#)

[Full Report](#)

[Scan of State Assessment Policies](#)

[State Assessment Audit and Assessment Literacy Efforts](#)

REFERENCES

Education First. (2026). Rethinking the test pile: a national study of K–8 academic assessments.