

## Quick Definition

Assessments are used to measure student progress against academic standards. Assessments can take many forms -- from norm-referenced tests that compare each student's performance to that of others, to standards-based assessments that compare each student's performance to academic standards. Assessments can range from mostly multiple-choice items to short-answer questions or longer performance tasks engaging students in real-world problems. When coupled with other key indicators (e.g., graduation rates and attendance), assessments form the basis of state accountability systems.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Education Commission of the States. "Assessment." Retrieved August 19, 2011 from <http://www.ecs.org>.

## Relevancy to Georgia

Statewide assessments for Georgia’s public school students are administered and managed by the state Department of Education. The purposes of the Georgia Student Assessment Program are to measure student achievement of the state mandated curriculum, to identify students failing to achieve mastery of content, to provide teachers with diagnostic information, and to assist school systems in identifying strengths and weaknesses in order to establish priorities in planning educational programs. Georgia’s assessment program includes customized criterion-referenced tests at the elementary, middle, and high school levels; the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in grades 4, 8 and 12; and a norm-referenced test at grades 3, 5, and 8.

The logic behind such assessment systems, one of the centerpieces of the push for standards-based school improvement, has been to find a more accurate way to measure both student and school progress as well as to establish measures against which to hold schools accountable for results. According to Education Week's *Quality Counts* series of reports, all 50 states and the District of Columbia now have some statewide test in place. These assessments often take one of two forms: criterion-referenced and norm-referenced. To prepare for these exams, teachers and school districts often incorporate the use of summative and formative assessments. Table 1 provides an explanation of the various types of assessments.

Table 1. Definitions of Commonly Used Forms of Assessments

**Criterion vs. Norm-Referenced Tests**

***Criterion-referenced tests (CRT)***

Designed to measure how well students acquire, learn, and accomplish the knowledge and skills set forth in a specific curriculum or unit of instruction.

Student's performance is interpreted by comparing it with a pre-specified standard or specific content and/or skills.

*Examples:*

- Georgia Criterion-Referenced Competency Test (CRCT)
- Georgia High School Graduation Test (GHSGT)
- National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)

***Norm-referenced tests (NRT)***

Designed to measure a student's score against the scores of a group of people who have already taken the same exam, called the "norming group."

Student's performance is interpreted in relation to a state, regional, or national population of other students.

*Examples:*

- Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS)
- IQ Tests

**Summative vs. Formative Assessments**

***Summative Assessments***

Measure what students know, at a particular point in time, relative to content standards. Often used as part of the grading process or some other accountability measure.

*Examples:*

- End-of-course tests
- Chapter tests
- State assessments or benchmarks (CRCT, GHSGT, NAEP, ITBS)

***Formative Assessments***

Used as part of the instructional process to provide feedback about student understanding. Formative assessments, when used properly, help the teacher make adjustments and include students in the evaluation process. Students are not typically held accountable "in grade book fashion" as these assessments are for practice.

*Examples:*

- Observation
- Questioning strategies
- Self and peer evaluations
- Assignments (when not graded for proficiency)

Source: A+ Education Foundation. "Accountability, Assessments and Standards." Alabama Education Policy Primer: A Guide to Understanding K-12 Schools; Georgia Department of Education Office of Standards, Instruction and Assessment. Retrieved from <http://www.gadoe.org>; Garrison, C. and Ehringhaus, M. "Formative and Summative Assessments in the Classroom." National Middle School Association, 2007.

In Georgia, mandatory state assessments include:

- Criterion-Referenced Competency Tests (CRCT);
- End-of-Course Tests (EOCT);
- Georgia High School Graduation Tests (GHSGT)<sup>2</sup>;
- Georgia Alternative Assessment (GAA); and
- Georgia Writing Assessments.

Additional assessments administered to Georgia’s students include:

- Georgia Kindergarten Inventory of Developing Skills (GKIDS);
- National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP);
- Iowa Tests of Basic Skills (ITBS);
- ACCESS for English Language Learners; and
- Lexile Framework for Reading.

Due to budgetary constraints, norm-referenced tests, the CRCT in grades 1 and 2, and the GAA in grades 1 and 2 will not be administered.<sup>3</sup>

The process of phasing in the Georgia Performance Standards (GPS) began during the 2004-2005 school year. The transition plan for the GPS includes one year of training for school districts and a second year of full implementation of the GPS in the classroom. Because the CRCT, EOCT, and GHSGT are curriculum-based assessments, the tests have been redeveloped to reflect the Georgia Performance Standards. It is during the year of full implementation that the newly aligned assessments are administered to students.

In July 2010, Georgia adopted a new set of standards, the Common Core Performance Standards for mathematics and English language arts. Teacher training begins during the 2011-12 school year followed by one year of classroom implementation. In 2014-15, Georgia expects to implement assessments for the Common Core. Georgia is part of a consortium of states developing assessments that align with the Common Core curriculum. (See [The National Perspective for more information](#)).

Georgia soon plans to use the results of student assessments in teacher evaluations. As part of its Race to the Top (RTT) grant proposal, Georgia outlines four components of its new teacher evaluation method, one of which is a value-added score. This value-added score is a measure of how much “value” a teacher adds to a student’s academic achievement during the school year. The results of all four components of the teacher evaluation will be used to make decisions for professional development, compensation,

---

<sup>2</sup> Only required for students who entered high school prior to July 2011, must pass the Georgia High School Graduation Tests (GHSGT) in four content areas as well as the Georgia High School Writing Test.

<sup>3</sup> Georgia Department of Education. “Georgia Student Assessment Program, Student Assessment Handbook 2011-2012.” August 2011.

promotion, retention, recertification, interventions, and dismissals.<sup>4</sup> Georgia will pilot the new teacher evaluation system during the 2011-12 school year.

Table 2 provides an overview of Georgia’s primary student assessments. Table 3 provides succinct information about the state’s additional student assessments.

**Table 2 Georgia’s Primary State-Level Assessments**

Assessment	History	Description	Grade Level & Subject Area		Outcome/Consequence	Used for CCRPI Determination
CRCT (Criterion Referenced Competency Tests)	Mandated by Georgia law, as amended by the A+ Education Reform Act of 2000.	Measures how well students acquire the skills and knowledge described in the Georgia Performance Standards (GPS) and the Quality Core Curriculum (QCC). Used to diagnose individual student strengths and weaknesses as related to the instruction of the GPS/QCC, and to gauge the quality of education throughout Georgia.	1-2**  3-8	Reading English/ Language Arts Mathematics  Reading English /Language Arts Mathematics Science Social Studies	CRCT results impact student retention at some levels. Student performance on 3 <sup>rd</sup> grade reading and 5 <sup>th</sup> and 8 <sup>th</sup> grades mathematics determines grade-level promotion.	Yes
EOCT (End of Course Tests)	Mandated by the A+ Education Reform Act of 2000.	Assesses specific content knowledge and skills related to core academic courses. Provides diagnostic information to help students identify strengths and areas of need in learning, therefore improving performance in all high school courses and on other assessments, such as the GHSGT. Provides data to evaluate the effectiveness of classroom instruction at the school and system levels.	9-12*	Mathematics: Algebra I Geometry Social Studies: US History Economics Science: Biology Physical Science English/ Language Arts: 9 <sup>th</sup> grade Lit/Comp American Lit/Comp	* Any student enrolled in and/or receiving credit for an EOCT course, regardless of grade level, is required to take the EOCT upon completion of that course. A student’s EOCT score is averaged in as 15% of the final course grade.	No
GHSGT (Georgia High School Graduation Test)	Mandated by 1991 Georgia law.	Measures mastery of the knowledge and skills that educators agree constitute a comprehensive high school education. Ensures that students who earn a Georgia diploma meet performance standards established for graduation.	11-12	English /Language Arts Mathematics Science Social Studies	Students seeking a Georgia high school diploma, who entered high school prior to July 2011, must pass the Georgia High School Graduation Tests (GHSGT) in	No

<sup>4</sup> Georgia Department of Education. “Race to the Top” [Presentation]. 2010. The other three components of the teacher evaluation will include: 1) qualitative, rubric-based evaluations; 2) reduction in the achievement gap at the classroom/student roster level; and 3) other quantitative measures.

					four content areas as well as the Georgia High School Writing Test.	
GAA (Georgia Alternative Assessment)	Re-designed to meet mandates of NCLB and IDEA.	Based on alternate achievement standards, allowing for the unique learning characteristics of students with significant cognitive disabilities. Consists of a portfolio of student work showing achievement and progress students have made in knowledge and skills aligned to the state's curriculum.	K-2  3-8, 11	English/ Language Arts Mathematics  English/ Language Arts Mathematics Science Social Studies	Students with significant cognitive disabilities must earn a proficient score on the high school (11th grade) GAA to receive a high school diploma.	Yes
Writing Assessments <i>*11<sup>th</sup> grade assessment is the Georgia High School Writing Test</i>	Required by Georgia law.	Performance-based assessment of a student's writing skills. Provides diagnostic feedback to teachers, students, and parents about individual performance.	3, 5, 8, and 11* *	Various writing genres at different grade levels (including narrative, informational, persuasive, and response to literature).	Students seeking high school diploma must pass 11 <sup>th</sup> grade writing assessment.	No

Source: Georgia Department of Education Office of Standards, Instruction and Assessment. Retrieved from <http://www.gadoe.org>. The CRCT in 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> grades, and the writing assessment in 3<sup>rd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grades were eliminated in the FY 2011 budget.

**Table 3. Overview of Additional Georgia Assessments**

Assessment	Description
Georgia Kindergarten Inventory of Developing Skills (GKIDS)	The Georgia Quality Basic Education Act (QBE) requires that all children enrolled in Georgia public school kindergarten programs be assessed for first-grade readiness. The Georgia Kindergarten Inventory of Developing Skills (GKIDS) became fully operational in the 2008-2009 school year and will reflect more precise mathematics standards beginning in the 2010-2011 school year. The GKIDS is a year-long, performance-based assessment serving both a summative and formative role. The test is designed to provide feedback about student progress in four GPS aligned domains: English language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies; and three additional domains: personal/social development, approaches to learning, and motor skills.
National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)	Commonly known as the “Nation’s Report Card,” NAEP is a congressionally mandated project of the U.S. Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). The purpose of the national assessment is to gather information that will aid educators, legislators, and others in improving the education experience of youth in our country. Its primary goals are to measure the current status of the educational attainments of young Americans and to report changes and long-term trends in those attainments. NAEP is administered at least once every two years in reading and mathematics in grades 4, 8, and 12. The assessment is given to statistically representative samples of students from each state.
Iowa Tests of Basic Skills (ITBS)	Georgia law mandates that a nationally norm-referenced test be administered annually to students in grades 3, 5, and 8. The law mandates that such testing include reading, mathematics, science, and social studies. The purpose of the norm-referenced test is to obtain information about how the performance of Georgia’s students compares with that of students in a national sample. The Georgia Department of Education provides the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills to meet this requirement.
ACCESS for English Language Learners (ELLs)	ACCESS for ELLs is administered annually to all English language learners in Georgia. A standards-based, criterion-referenced English language proficiency test, ACCESS measures English language learners’ social and academic proficiency in English. It assesses social and instructional English as well as the language associated with language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies within the school context across the four language domains. ACCESS for ELLs meets the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 mandate requiring states to evaluate ELL students in grades K through 12 on their progress in learning to speak English.
Lexile Framework for Reading	As part of the Georgia Department of Education’s mission to develop good readers, Lexile measures were linked to scores on the Reading Criterion-Referenced Competency Tests (CRCT) and the Language Arts Georgia High School Graduation Test (GHS GT). A Lexile is a standard score that matches a student’s reading ability with difficulty of text material. More than a test score, a Lexile measure is a tool to assist students, their parents, and teachers in selecting material that matches their students’ current reading comprehension level.
Source: Georgia Department of Education Office of Standards, Instruction and Assessment. Retrieved from <a href="http://www.gadoe.org">http://www.gadoe.org</a> .	

## The National Perspective

A crucial part of an accountability system, student assessments serve as the measure of whether or not students are learning the curriculum. While classroom teachers have long used various types of assessments to provide evidence of student learning, assessments have become an increasingly critical component of state and national educational systems. Policymakers are relying more than ever on large-scale tests to make high-stakes decisions about students and schools. States are using assessments to measure the progress of students and schools and to hold teachers and administrators accountable for raising achievement. Assessments are increasingly tied to high-stakes decisions about students' grade promotion and graduation. Throughout the country, parents, reporters, and educational stakeholders are scrutinizing test scores as indicators of the quality of our educational system.<sup>5</sup>

The reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in 2001, commonly known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB), increased states' focus on assessments with its requirement that states annually test students in reading and mathematics in grades 3-8 and once in high school. The law requires that states use tests aligned with their academic content standards, either by building assessments specifically designed to reflect those standards or by modifying commercially produced, off-the-shelf tests.<sup>6</sup>

As the nation awaits the next reauthorization of ESEA, the Race to the Top (RTT) initiative is pushing forth a number of reforms in public education, including the ways that schools will assess students. RTT offered competitive grants to two consortiums of states that will develop innovative assessments, particularly to align with the new Common Core Curriculum Standards in math and English language arts. The first consortium is the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC), comprised of 24 states. The second is the SMARTER Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC), comprised of 29 states. Georgia is a member of PARCC. PARCC will receive \$186 million to develop assessments for students in grades 3 through high school. Designed to prepare students for college and careers, PARCC's assessments will incorporate more performance-based assessments, and the majority of the assessments will be computer-based. Instead of relying on one test at the end of the school year, PARCC will develop a series of assessments that will be averaged into one end-of-the-year score for accountability purposes.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> Kober, N. "What Tests Can and Cannot Tell Us." Test Talk for Leaders, Center on Education Policy, October 2002.

<sup>6</sup> EdWeek Research Center. "Assessment." September 21, 2004. Retrieved from <http://www.edweek.org/rc/issues/assessment>.

<sup>7</sup> U.S. Department of Education. "U.S. Secretary of Education Duncan Announces Winners of Competition to Improve Student Assessments." September 2010. Retrieved from <http://www.ed.gov>; See also Partnership for the Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC), <http://www.parcconline.org>.

SBAC will use its \$176 million grant to design a system of computer adaptive, online assessments for students. Unlike PARCC's assessments, SBAC will use one test at the end of the school year. Optional interim tests can still be used to help gauge students' progress before taking the final assessments.<sup>8</sup> Proponents of assessments that will be developed through PARCC and SBAC are hopeful that these new assessments will give a more accurate picture of what students know and are able to do.

RTT has also pushed states to use accountability measures in teacher evaluations, including an assessment of student growth. RTT asked states to evaluate teachers based on how much they helped their students improve, also referred to as teacher value-added. The underlying premise of value-added measures is that they look at the change in a student's achievement from the beginning of the school to the end of the school year, while also accounting for factors outside of the teacher's control such as the student's background or the school's environment. Proponents argue that value-added measures provide an indication of the teacher's impact on student achievement and serve as a predictor of a teacher's future effectiveness.<sup>9</sup> Others point out that while value-added measures can assess a student's academic growth, their methodological flaws result in invalid and unreliable measures of teacher effectiveness.<sup>10</sup>

While public support for higher standards is strong, there is increasing frustration with state testing practices and the high-stakes attached to student performance on tests. Some parents, teachers, and other critics worry that schools may be spending too much instructional time preparing for tests. Critics also question the "high stakes" many states attach to tests. State assessments are being used not only to hold schools accountable for results, but also, increasingly, to determine whether students should advance to the next grade, attend summer school, or earn a high school diploma. Despite continuing debate, solid reasons for testing remain. With public schools under significant pressure to show results, testing may help to raise the expectations for schools—especially for the lowest-performing ones. Many schools, districts, and states that have seen achievement levels rise in recent years attribute their success to higher expectations for students, as embodied in state tests, and the use of tests results to improve classroom practices. Assessments provide critical data that show students' academic strengths and weaknesses and give educators the information necessary to tailor teacher training and instruction to student needs.

---

<sup>8</sup> U.S. Department of Education. "U.S. Secretary of Education Duncan Announces Winners of Competition to Improve Student Assessments." September 2010. Retrieved from <http://www.ed.gov>; See also The SMARTER Balanced Assessment Consortium, <http://www.k12.wa.us/SMARTER>.

<sup>9</sup> The Brookings Brown Center Task Group on Teacher Quality. "Passing Muster: Evaluating Teacher Evaluation Systems." April 2011.

<sup>10</sup> McCaffrey, D. F., Lockwood, J. R., Koretz, D. M., & Hamilton, L. S. "Evaluating Value-Added Models for Teacher Accountability." RAND Corporation, 2003.

## Research Tells Us

Standardized test scores are a relatively efficient way to compare students who attend a variety of schools and are held to different grading standards. Many researchers caution that high-stakes decisions about individual students should not be based on the results of a single test, particularly in light of the numerous concerns about the validity of many standardized assessments.

Much of this cautionary research insists that the design of a standardized test matches its purpose. A test used to compare national achievement scores in a given subject area, for instance, should not also be used to make decisions about promotion or retention for an individual student.<sup>11</sup> Researchers also caution that tests that were designed to measure student achievement are not necessarily valid measures of teacher effectiveness. The more uses that one attempts to glean from a single test, the less valid it is.

With disaggregated data at the national and state-levels showing disparities in the performance of different student populations, many critics have raised concerns regarding the fairness of standardized assessments. While African-Americans and students from most other minority groups have shown both relative and absolute gains in standardized-test scores over the past several decades, they still score much lower than white students as a group. Some educators believe that many standardized tests are culturally biased, drawing primarily upon the experiences of middle-class white students.

Initial attempts to measure the connection between student achievement and teacher effectiveness have used performance pay as an incentive. The first scientific study of performance pay found that the incentive, in the absence of any other professional development support, does not lead to any overall improvements in student achievement.<sup>12</sup> A subsequent study of performance pay in New York had similar findings.<sup>13</sup> While there is no question that teachers impact the quality of education that a student receives in a classroom, performance pay has little impact on the connection between teacher effectiveness and student performance on standardized tests. In time, we will be able to gauge the impact of other reforms, such as new methods of teacher evaluation and innovative assessments developed through PARCC and SBAC, on the results of student assessments.

---

<sup>11</sup> The National Research Council. "Lessons Learned About Testing." 2007.

<sup>12</sup> Springer, M. G., Ballou, D., Hamilton, L., Le, V., Lockwood, J. R., McCaffrey, D., Pepper, M., & Stecher, B. "Teacher Pay for Performance: Experimental Evidence from the Project on Incentives in Teaching." National Center on Performance Incentives at Vanderbilt University, 2010.

<sup>13</sup> Marsh, J. A., Springer, M. G., McCaffrey, D. F., Yuan, K., Epstein, S., Koppich, J., Kalra, N., DiMartino, C., Peng, A. "A Big Apple for Educators: New York City's Experiment with Schoolwide Performance Bonuses." RAND Corporation, 2011.

## For More Information

Georgia Department of Education, Office of Standards, Instruction and Assessment  
[www.gadoe.org](http://www.gadoe.org).

The Georgia Department of Education oversees assessment for public schools. Within the Department's Office of Standards, Instruction and Assessment are a wealth of resources about the state assessment system that are accessible on the website, including the comprehensive *Georgia Student Assessment Program: Student Assessment Handbook 2009-2010*.

The Center for Assessment  
[www.nciea.org](http://www.nciea.org)

For in-depth research and technical assistance regarding assessments, visit the website of the National Center for the Improvement of Educational Assessment, Inc. (commonly referred to as the Center for Assessment). This organization produces timely publications and offers consulting services in many areas related to assessment and accountability.

SERVE Center  
[www.serve.org](http://www.serve.org)

Based at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, the SERVE Center operates the Regional Educational Laboratory for the Southeast (REL-SE). REL-SE is one of 10 laboratories funded by the U.S. Department of Education to conduct research servicing its respective region. SERVE's website has a number of resources, including extensive information on classroom assessment.