

ASSESSMENT

# Cardona Says Standardized Tests Haven't Always Met the Mark, Offers New Flexibility

By [Alyson Klein](#) — November 28, 2023 ⌚ 7 min read



Education Secretary Miguel Cardona speaks during an interview with The Associated Press in his office at the Department of Education on Sept. 20, 2023 in Washington.

— Mark Schiefelbein/AP

U.S. Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona is urging states to ditch their fill-in-the-bubble and short response tests and work to create a new breed of rich assessments by taking advantage of longstanding—but little used—federal flexibility.

In announcing changes to a program known as the Innovative Assessment testing pilot that was designed to encourage states to develop and deploy a new generation of state assessments, Cardona acknowledged that the current crop of tests has considerable limitations.

Tests can help guide instruction and steer resources to academically foundering schools, but “unfortunately, as we’ve heard too often from educators, parents, and students, our collective approach to assessment has not always met that mark,” the secretary wrote in a Nov. 20 letter to the nation’s chief state school officers .

It will be up to states to find a better way forward, and the department wants to serve as a partner in that work, he added. “We cannot expect innovation from the field of education while protecting the status quo from Washington, D.C.,” Cardona wrote.

To help invigorate that process, the department is opening up the Innovative Assessment pilot, created under the 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act, to all states rather than continuing with the current, seven-state cap, the department announced in guidance included with Cardona’s letter.

The guidance also clarified some of the requirements for participating in the pilot and established an official planning period, at the request of states.

But it’s far from certain that the pilot program’s expansion will translate into a wave of states signing up to overhaul their assessments. While the pilot program has already been open to states for more than five years, it’s had few takers.

## **‘A very strong messaging document’**

Like its predecessor, the No Child Left Behind Act, ESSA requires states to test students using the same assessment in grades 3-8 and once in high school. But it also paves the way for new types of assessments that break the fill-in-the-bubble mold,

including performance tasks, competency-based assessments, and more, through the pilot program.

Under the law, the secretary can allow states approved for the pilot to try out new kinds of tests in a select number of districts, with the goal of eventually taking them statewide.

But despite a rush of initial interest in the pilot, states have found the requirements around it costly and onerous. Just seven states—Georgia, Hawaii, Indiana, Louisiana, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and North Carolina—have applied.

Two have yet to be approved: Hawaii and Indiana. Of the five that were approved, Georgia and New Hampshire have already dropped out, leaving just three states still pursuing the flexibility: Louisiana, Massachusetts, and North Carolina.

Cardona's letter appears to be an attempt to give the pilot—and new kinds of tests more generally—a political jump start, said Lillian Pace, the vice president of policy and advocacy for KnowledgeWorks, a nonprofit organization that works to personalize learning for students.

“It feels like a very strong messaging document from the U.S. Department of Education,” she said.

She was particularly struck with the acknowledgment that the current assessment system, which was the result of a bipartisan drive for school improvement and accountability, has foundered when it comes to driving resource equity and guiding instruction.

“To me that signals, I think, a political turning point,” Pace said.

Educators at all levels, including classroom teachers, should pay close attention to

what happens with the pilot, Pace said. There's reason to be optimistic it could help fuel the creation of tests that are much more helpful for teaching and learning.

The program “opens the door for assessments to have more performance tasks,” Pace said. “It opens the door for assessments to be embedded more deeply into the curriculum, so that it doesn't feel like we stop everything, and then go and do test prep at the end of the school year. [New tests could] provide feedback more immediately so that educators and parents can act” on the data quickly.

But it's unclear whether states will give the pilot another look, even with the shift in messaging and the changes Cardona outlined, Pace added. Many of the barriers to participation are included in ESSA and could only be knocked down by Congress.

## **‘You have to do all the work, but you don't get any of the money’**

The pilot was initially appealing to states interested in moving toward new, more project- or performance-based forms of assessment. But then, states saw the big hurdles they would have to overcome.

States got no money for participating in the pilot, even though creating these new assessment systems could cost millions of dollars a year. They had to bring the new tests statewide within five years of joining the pilot, a timeline experts considered very ambitious. And even as they were working on the new tests, they would have to continue administering the old ones.

What's more, states had to show that the results of the tests were “comparable” across districts, so that a particular score or outcome meant the same thing from one district to the next. And they had to be sure that the new assessments during the pilot phase with individual districts were administered with a representative sample of students from around the state. (That means a state with a large English-learner population,

such as California, would need to be sure plenty of those students had experience with the assessment before taking it statewide.)

Cardona's letter sought to address some of those concerns. For instance, it clarifies that states can meet the pilot's requirement for comparability between a new and older test by demonstrating that the proportion of students who achieve at a particular level on each—say, “proficient” or “approaches expectations”—is about the same across both tests.

That's an easier proposition than making sure that students performing at the same level would get the same “scale score” on each test, meaning that a 77 out of 100 would mean the same thing across both assessments.

States also said that the five-year timeline—from getting approved to participate in the pilot to getting the new test in place in every district—was way too demanding. The department reminded states that ESSA allows it to grant a two-year extension and, potentially, even more time to complete the assessment transition.

The department also opened a new option, at the behest of states: An official planning period, in which states can share a short description of their ideas for new tests with the feds and get help with thinking through how to bring them to fruition before entering the pilot and triggering the law's five-year clock.

That change could prove particularly important when it comes to securing funding from state legislatures and district buy-in for new assessment plans, said Scott Marion, the executive director of the National Center for the Improvement of Educational Assessment, which has worked with some of the initial states participating in the Innovative Assessment pilot.

It provides “some credibility, back home, where [state education officials can say] ‘we're in in this official planning period,’ as opposed to ‘we're just fiddling around

until we can apply,” Marion said.

In opening the pilot to all states, the department also pledged to offer two application deadlines each calendar year. One will be on the first Friday in May, the second on the first Friday in December, beginning in May 2024 for the 2024-25 school year.

What’s more, the department’s letter acknowledged that finding funding to make the transition to new assessments has been a big problem for states.

“I always joke that this was the worst type of grant application because, you have to do all the work, but you don’t get any of the money,” Marion said.

The department might be able to help by focusing upcoming competitive grants to improve assessments on states that are part of the pilot, Cardona’s letter said, though it made no promises that new funding would be available.

Meanwhile, members of Congress have their own proposals to improve the pilot, though they have yet to gain traction. For instance, Rep. Jamaal Bowman, D-N.Y., [has introduced legislation](#) that would provide \$100 million to help finance testing changes under the program.

And Sen. Chris Murphy, D-Conn., is working on legislation to encourage more states to participate in the pilot, while also ensuring that state tests continue to help educators identify which schools or groups of students within a school are falling behind.

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