

The Challenges and Opportunities of Balanced Systems of Assessment

District and classroom assessments that are selected or administered without careful consideration as to how they will work together to inform teaching, learning, and educational decision making can lead to inefficiency, incoherence, and over-testing, which constrain rather than support student learning and performance.

A balanced system of assessments is one in which assessments at all levels work together in a system that is comprehensive, coherent, continuous, and efficient.¹



Comprehensive when they allow students to demonstrate their understanding in a variety of ways and reflect the breadth and depth of the state content standards.



Coherent when they promote deeper and more meaningful learning for students and are compatible with the underlying model of learning. Assessment systems can be vertically coherent or horizontally coherent. Assessment systems are considered vertically coherent when there is compatibility among the models of student learning underlying the system's various assessments. They are considered horizontally coherent when there is alignment among curriculum, instruction, and assessment based on the same theory of learning.²



Continuous when they document student progress over time.



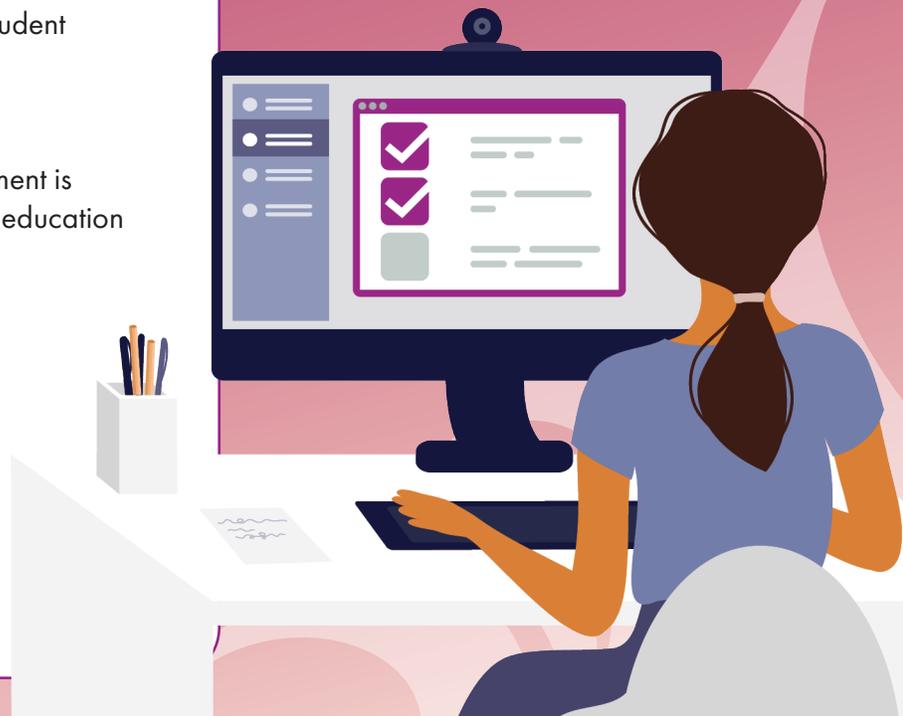
Efficient when no individual assessment is redundant, and all are used to make education decisions.



Useful when they provide the necessary information for decision making to inform the specific instruction or education programs that they were intended to support.

A Balanced System of Assessment³

- Is a compilation of formative, interim, and summative tools and practices that account for the varied needs of stakeholders at different levels of the education system.
- Is unified by common, targeted goals for student learning.
- Promotes the flow of information across state, district, school, and classroom level assessments in an efficient, intentional manner that informs education decisions.
- Requires high-quality assessments and appropriate use of results.



Summative, interim, and formative assessments can each provide coherent and relevant information at the classroom, school, district, and state levels.⁴

Assessment Type	Formative	Interim	Summative
Primary Purpose	Inform and assist instruction	Measure student achievement	Evaluate education programs
Level Administered	Individual student/classroom	Grade level, department, school	School, district, state
Proximity to Learning	Integrated	Middle-distance	Distant
Frequency of Administration	Frequently, during instruction	Between calendar periods	End of year/course
Examples	Content quizzes, class polls	Unit tests, quarterly subject tests	Annual state or district tests

Having one of each type of assessment, however, doesn't necessarily create a balanced system. Each assessment must be selected based on its purposes, intended uses, and what it adds to an existing system of assessments.⁵ Knowing which types of assessments are designed for different purposes can help make it easier to select assessments.

To guide design and interpretation of assessments, each assessment within a system must be carefully described in terms of:⁶



What content is covered.



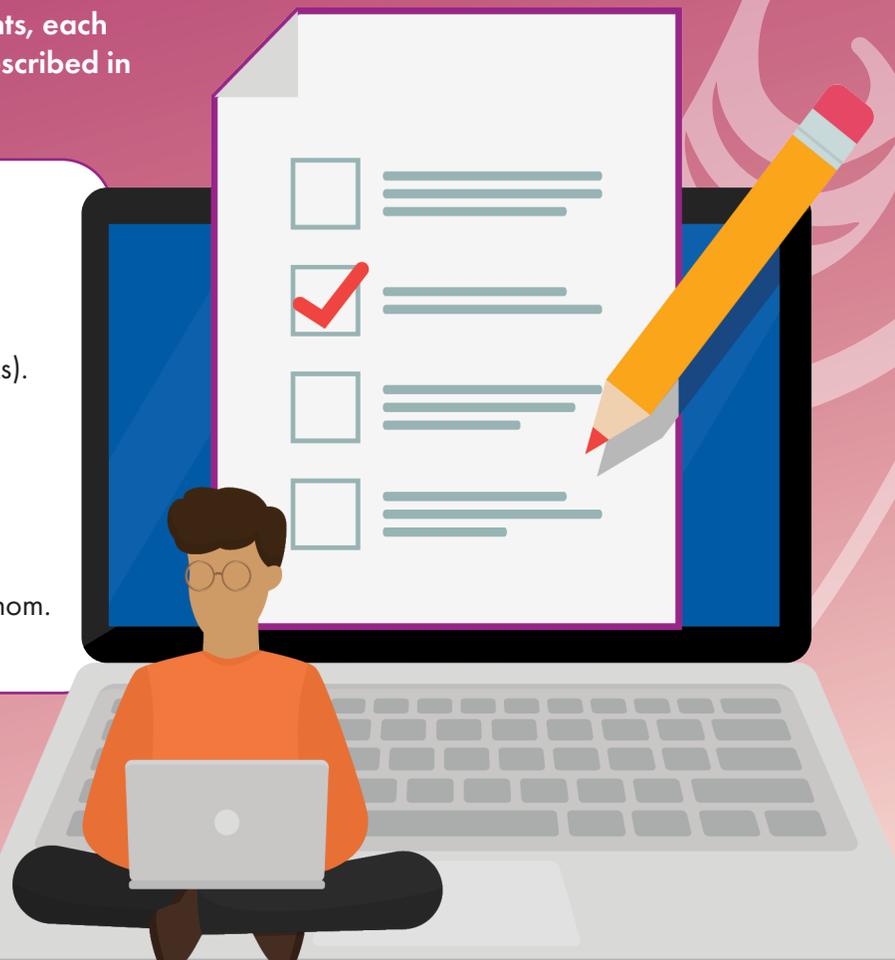
How the content is covered (types of tasks).



The timing of assessment administration.



How the results are to be used and by whom.



Designing a balanced system of assessment is an iterative process that requires a comprehensive understanding of how your assessments will meet your goals.

1
Define a theory of learning, and identify what role assessment will play in that theory.

2
Interrogate the existing assessment systems or resources available, revising existing systems and potentially eliminating unnecessary systems, and identify gaps in information and any additional needs of your school or district.

3
Design a comprehensive plan that will support your assessment needs before selecting assessments to be a part of your balanced system of assessment.

A single assessment system, even if serving multiple purposes, cannot accomplish everything.

For example, assessments that are designed to monitor student performance may not be suited to inform classroom instruction, and vice versa. Systems of assessment that are meant to serve multiple purposes must be carefully planned according to what data are needed at the classroom, school, district, and state levels.

Assessments are a vital part of education, giving teachers, education leaders, and policy makers important information on what students are learning and where resources can be most effectively allocated. Balanced systems of assessment allow educators to link assessments through clearly defined learning targets, provide multiple sources of evidence to support decision making, and document progress over time, allowing them to holistically support students.

Notes

1. National Research Council. (2001). *Knowing what students know: The science and design of educational assessment*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/10019>
2. Marion, S. (2019). *Do interim assessments have a role in balanced systems of assessment?* Centerline. <https://www.nciea.org/blog/assessment/do-interim-assessments-have-role-balanced-systems-assessment>
3. Herman, J., Wilson, M., Shavelson, R., Timms, M., & Schneider, S. (2005). *The CAESL Assessment Model. Building Science Assessment Systems that Serve Accountability and Student Learning* [Symposium]. American Education Research Association, Montreal, Canada.
4. San Diego County Office of Education. (n.d.). Supporting balanced assessment within the TK-12 learning ecosystem. SDCOE Learning and Leadership Services Division. Retrieved from <https://www.sdcoe.net/ils/assessment/Documents/Services/Balanced%20Assessment/Executive%20Summary.pdf>
5. Marion, S. (2019). *Do interim assessments have a role in balanced systems of assessment?* Centerline. <https://www.nciea.org/blog/assessment/do-interim-assessments-have-role-balanced-systems-assessment>
6. Marion, S., Thompson, J., Evans, C., Martineau, J., & Dadey, N. (2018). *A tricky balance: The challenges and opportunities of balanced assessment systems*. Presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council on Measurement in Education, Toronto, Ontario.

This infographic is based on the REL Pacific webinar, *The Challenges and Opportunities of Balanced Systems of Assessment in the COVID-19 Era*. You can access an archived recording of the webinar at the following link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z8dYbIXT6FE>

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