



Formative assessment policies, programs, and practices in the Southwest Region



Institute of Education Sciences
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Summary

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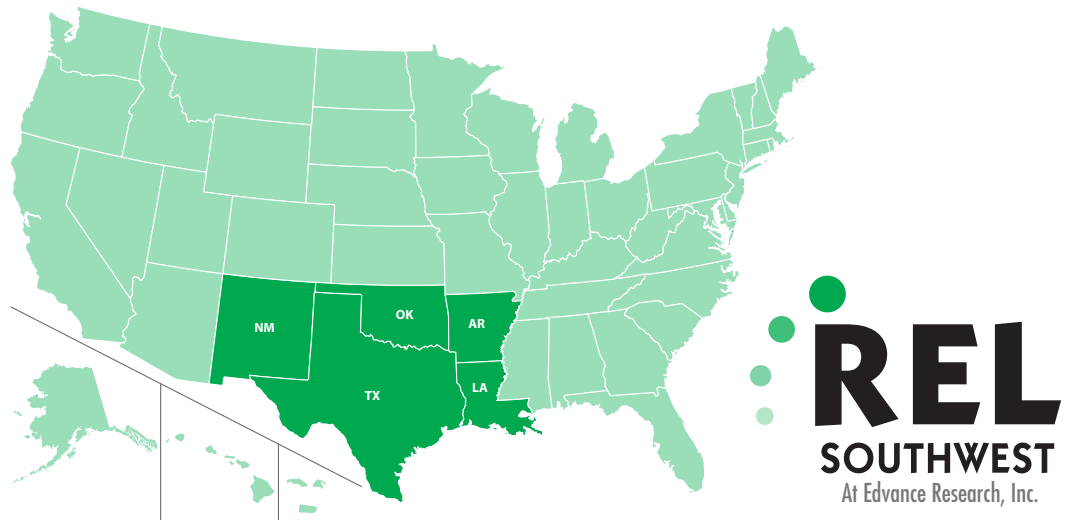
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Summary

Formative assessment policies, programs, and practices in the Southwest Region

Formative assessments help educators target instructional practices to meet specific student needs and monitor and support student progress toward valued state learning outcomes. Policies and programs in the five Southwest Region states suggest a range of strategies to support the development and use of formative assessments.

This report describes state formative assessment policies, programs, and practices in the five states covered by the Southwest Regional Educational Laboratory: Arkansas, Louisiana, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas. Formative assessments, unlike summative assessments, yield descriptive data—not judgments. They are used diagnostically and to improve instruction—not, for example, to assign end-of-course grades (Wiggins, 1998).

Such distinctions are reflected in a definition of formative assessment recently adopted by the Council of Chief State School Officers: “An assessment is formative to the extent that information from the assessment is used, during the instructional segment in which the assessment occurred, to adjust instruction with the intent of better meeting the needs of the students assessed” (Popham, 2006). This definition was used to guide the collection of formative assessment data for this study.

A systematic examination uncovered disparities in how states define formative assessment. Arkansas, Louisiana, and New Mexico have formal definitions—but the definitions differ, suggesting that Southwest Region states view formative assessment through slightly different lenses. (No formal definitions were discovered for Oklahoma or Texas.)

Researchers found no study that specifically explored the effects of formative assessment policy on local practice. But related research on school reform (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995), assessment reform (Chudowsky & Pellegrino, 2003; Stiggins, 2002), and accountability (Goodwin, Englert, & Cicchinelli, 2003) suggests that explicitly communicating a clear, consistent message about effective practices facilitates cross-district consistency with the state’s education goals.

Three Southwest Region states have been most explicit in communicating their intent for formative assessment to stakeholders through state policies or mandates, state-supported programs or products, or allotments of services and resources to districts:

- Arkansas’ House Bill 2253, although currently withdrawn pending further study, calls for a two-year pilot using formative assessments statewide.

- Louisiana's Enhanced Assessments of Grade-Level Expectations gives teachers access to an online pool of custom items aligned to state standards, with additional tools for individualizing instruction.
- New Mexico's *Consumer Guide* (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2006b) evaluates vendors' tests and judges their appropriateness for formative use by state districts.

Each state's position appears intended to fit coherently within its existing comprehensive assessment system and state context.

Substantial variability emerged in how much states regulate the development or use of formative assessments at state and local levels. Researchers found a range of state laws, with formal state directives only in Arkansas, Oklahoma, and Texas. State education agency policies also vary across the Southwest Region. In Arkansas the Academic Improvement Plan specifies that districts must implement a formative assessment component, but districts are responsible for selecting and purchasing the tool for this (Arkansas Department of Education, 2006a). Similarly, Oklahoma requires end-of-course test data to be reported to districts for formative use, but does not supply districts with strategies for reaching this goal. In Texas the Technology Immersion Pilot provides a platform for administering online diagnostic assessments, though the test items are to be provided by each district (Texas Education Agency, 2006b). Louisiana's guidance is most direct: a state grant allows the

Louisiana Department of Education to provide all districts with an online formative assessment system, including both a pool of custom items (aligned to state standards) and training in collecting and reporting data for formative purposes.

Variability also was observed in the support provided to districts for formative assessment, such as professional development opportunities, resources, and product endorsements. Researchers found evidence of five different state-sponsored professional development opportunities related to formative assessment for Arkansas educators, but none for New Mexico educators. Oklahoma was the only state for which researchers could find no evidence of state resource allocation for formative assessment. But Oklahoma, along with Arkansas and Texas, provides districts with endorsements for particular programs or products related to formative assessment.

Overall, Arkansas, Louisiana, and Texas appear to have developed multitiered or multifaceted strategies for supporting formative assessment at the state and local levels. For example, Arkansas provides state guidance and support through regulations, programming, and professional development opportunities for teachers through resource allocation. In contrast, New Mexico focuses its support primarily on one state initiative, its *Consumer Guide*. In Oklahoma limited evidence emerged on state policies and programs, but a range of district formative assessment practices was found.