



The Future of Assessment is Coherence

**Connecting Curriculum, Instruction,
Improvement, and Accountability**

By

Danielle Branson, Chief Curriculum and Assessment Officer

Donna Johnson Geist, Vice President, Strategic Partnerships



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Education faces a coherence problem. For decades, we have built systems in which curriculum, standards, instruction, and assessment often operate in parallel rather than in alignment. As a result, educators, students, and families are often asked to navigate multiple, and sometimes conflicting, signals about learning and progress. Too often, this fragmentation has been accepted as an unavoidable part of large-scale education systems. Today, however, there is growing recognition that this fragmentation is not an inherent feature of the system, but a design challenge. The opportunity before us is to build more coherent, intentionally aligned systems to better support teaching, learning, and continuous improvement.

In many places across the nation, states and districts are already doing important work to increase alignment in their assessment systems, with promising examples and early successes emerging. States are exploring greater flexibility, educators are seeking more meaningful and actionable evidence of learning, families are asking for clearer information about student progress, and new technologies are rapidly reshaping what may be possible. While these efforts reflect significant progress, they also point to the need to connect and build upon this work in deliberate and integrated ways. The future of assessment cannot be reduced to debates about testing frequency, technology platforms, or isolated policy changes alone. Instead, the larger challenge, and opportunity, is to build coherent systems that connect curriculum, instruction, assessment, reporting, accountability, and continuous improvement in ways that strengthen learning, sustain public trust, and help educators respond more effectively to student needs.

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The Moment We Are In

What is unfolding in American education is something deeper than a slow recovery from pandemic-related learning loss. Recent national, state, and district-level data from statewide assessment reporting, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), and the Education Recovery Scorecard indicate that the nation entered a “learning recession” around 2013, with achievement in reading and math stagnating and beginning to decline years before COVID-19 disrupted schooling. The pandemic accelerated these trends, but it did not create them. While there are some bright spots among states and districts, those improvements are not widespread. Even more concerning are the significant disparities in recovery among our most vulnerable students. As reported by Kevin Mahnken, the Education Recovery Scorecard has found that 83% of school districts have lower reading achievement today than a decade ago. This raises important questions about whether our current

systems are designed to respond effectively to what the data reveal.

As education leaders are considering changes to improve assessment and accountability systems, policymakers are debating increases in flexibility, educators are asking for more meaningful and actionable data, and new technologies, including artificial intelligence, are rapidly changing what may be possible in the design and delivery of assessments. This convergence creates both urgency and opportunity.

The education community now faces a critical question:

“How do we design systems that align what is taught, what is measured, and what drives improvement, while preserving clear visibility into student learning, ensuring each assessment serves a clear purpose, and generating evidence that is credible, trustworthy, instructionally useful, and responsive to what students need?”

This is the right question to ask, but it cannot be answered through the age-old, repeated testing debates. The future of assessment should not simply be framed as false binary choices between: accountability or innovation; statewide measures or local flexibility; summative assessments or deeper learning.

Across the country, states are exploring new flexibility through federal waivers and changes to the Every Student Succeeds Act state plans in both assessment and accountability design. This flexibility creates important opportunities for innovation, modernization, and more meaningful evidence of learning. But flexibility without transparency risks weakening the public trust and visibility that assessment and accountability systems were designed to enhance.

The challenge ahead is not whether these systems should evolve. It is whether they can while preserving clarity, comparability, and meaningful reporting about student outcomes.

At a time when student performance trends show slow recovery, education systems do not need to add even more disconnected data points.

The goal is not less information. It is clearer, better-connected information. Data that are more coherent, efficient, and more actionable will help education systems respond before students fall further behind.

The Future of Assessment is Coherence

Assessment helps educators, families, school leaders, and communities understand what students know, what they can do, where they are growing, and where they need additional support. It helps teachers adjust instruction, helps schools identify patterns, and helps policymakers understand whether systems are delivering on their promises to students.

Assessment is not the whole story of learning, but without clear and trustworthy evidence of student outcomes, we are left guessing. Without visibility into student learning, meaningful improvement becomes difficult to sustain.

Consistent and comparable evidence of student learning remains essential for understanding how students are performing across schools, districts, and student groups. Transparent statewide measures remain one of the few tools capable of helping communities understand whether all students are receiving access to meaningful learning opportunities and whether those opportunities are translating into outcomes.

At the same time, measurement alone is insufficient. The challenge facing education systems is no longer simply whether data exist, but whether systems are coherent and efficient enough to act on what the data reveal. Too often, schools operate within crowded and fragmented assessment environments.

Students may take diagnostic assessments, interim assessments, classroom quizzes, curriculum embedded tasks, teacher-created checks for understanding, statewide summative assessments, and now some are adding AI-supported practice tools. While each of these serve a purpose, when they are not clearly connected to curriculum, instruction, reporting, professional learning, and school improvement processes, they generate more noise than insight.

The result is a system rich in data but poor in coherence. The problem is not that we have multiple measures. The problem is that too often those measures are disconnected from one another and the decisions they are intended to inform. A coherent assessment system begins with clarity of purpose. Different assessments serve different purposes at different levels of the system. A formative assessment helps a teacher determine the next instructional steps. A curriculum-aligned interim assessment helps a grade-level team understand whether students are mastering key concepts within a sequence of instruction. A statewide summative assessment helps communities and policymakers understand broader trends, gaps, and outcomes.

Each of these measures has a role. Challenges arise when assessments are expected to serve multiple, incompatible purposes or when overlapping tools are introduced without a clear design. The future of assessment must become more intentionally connected not only within assessment systems, but to the broader work of teaching, learning, and continuous improvement.

From Assessment Events to Connected Improvement Systems

Principled assessment design begins with clarity of purpose. Before selecting tools or building systems, education leaders must answer a fundamental set of questions:

- What do we need to know about student learning?
- Who needs that information, and for what purpose?
- When is that information needed, and how will it be used?

Without clear answers to these questions, even well-intended assessment systems can become fragmented, redundant, or misaligned.

In systems where multiple assessment tools are already in place, this work often begins with an internal audit. Leaders examine the assessments being used, what purposes they serve, where overlaps exist, and where critical gaps remain. Coherence is not achieved by simply adding more measures, but by ensuring that each component of the system serves a clear role and contributes to a connected understanding of student learning.

Assessment data should not be separated from the work of teaching and learning. It should function as part of a connected improvement ecosystem that includes standards, high-quality instructional materials, instruction, formative feedback, interim measures, professional learning, reporting, and

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continuous improvement planning. When these elements work together, assessment becomes more than a compliance activity; it drives improvement.

For too long, education systems have treated assessment as a separate activity rather than an integrated part of teaching, learning, and improvement. In many schools, assessment data arrives too late, feels disconnected from classroom instruction, or is presented in ways that make action difficult.

Educators frequently find themselves asking: “Which data should we prioritize? Which assessments matter most? How do these results connect to what students were actually taught? What instructional changes should follow?”

When systems cannot answer those questions clearly, assessment loses much of its potential value and these elements become more focused on compliance than improvement. The future of assessment requires moving from isolated measurement systems to an aligned improvement ecosystem.

The strongest education systems recognize that assessment cannot operate effectively as a stand-

alone function. Strategic planning, curriculum adoption, instructional priorities, assessment systems, educator development, public reporting, accountability structures, and improvement supports must work together as interconnected parts of the same system. This is a central principle in Cognia’s approach to system improvement: alignment across these elements is what enables evidence to drive action. When these elements compete or operate in isolation, fragmentation grows. When they reinforce one another, systems become more capable of turning evidence into meaningful improvement.

In these environments, assessment is no longer a series of disconnected events, but part of a continuous cycle of learning, evidence, and improvement. Schools are far more likely to improve when the signals they receive are aligned rather than competing.

Why Curriculum Alignment Matters More Than Ever

As more states and districts adopt High Quality Instructional Materials (HQIM), the relationship between curriculum and assessment becomes increasingly important. Strong curriculum provides a coherent progression of learning, rich instructional tasks, deeper content knowledge, and clearer expectations for student work. But curriculum alone is not enough. Educators also need aligned assessments that help them understand how students are progressing through these instructional sequences.

One of the most important shifts in the future of assessment may not be the format of the assessment itself, but the degree to which assessments are coherently connected to the instructional experiences students are having. When assessments are disconnected from what students are learning, the resulting data may be technically sound but instructionally weak. Teachers may receive reports organized around broad standards or generalized skill categories yet still need to translate

What does a coherent education system do?

Strategic priorities shape instructional expectations



High-Quality Instructional Materials (HQIM) support learning expectations



Assessments generate evidence connected to what students are actually learning



Reporting systems help educators, families, and communities understand progress



Improvement supports help schools respond when challenges emerge



those results back to the specific texts, concepts, and tasks students encountered in class.

By contrast, assessments aligned to HQIM such as EL Education’s literacy curriculum can generate stronger instructional signals. Curriculum-aligned formative and interim assessments help educators understand not only whether students performed well, but how performance reflects the learning progression and informs next instructional steps.

This is a meaningful distinction. This is the difference between data that reports on learning and data that helps improve learning. Curriculum-aligned assessments reduce the distance between evidence and action. That connection becomes increasingly important as states and districts work to accelerate learning while also preparing students for increasingly complex demands.

Assessment Literacy and Public Trust

Even the best-designed assessment system will fall short if educators, families, and stakeholders do not understand what the data mean, what it does not mean, and how it should be used. Assessment literacy is not a communications add-on. It is critical infrastructure for improvement.

Assessment literacy looks different across stakeholder groups, but its purpose is the same: helping people make better decisions on behalf of students. Educators need information that informs instruction, school leaders need evidence that guides improvement, families need a clear understanding of student progress, and policymakers need trustworthy information about system performance. This is one reason New Mexico’s recent work around coherent assessment literacy is particularly noteworthy. New Mexico’s assessment redesign efforts have emphasized not only technical design, but stakeholder understanding, communication, and shared ownership of the broader assessment ecosystem. That work reflects an important shift in the field:

“Transparency means not only sharing important information but also taking steps to ensure that people can understand what it means, why it matters, and how they can use it to support students.”

—Data Quality Campaign

assessment systems cannot function effectively if only experts understand them.

As the Data Quality Campaign advised, “transparency means not only sharing important information but also taking steps to ensure that people can understand what it means, why it matters, and how they can use it to support students.”

When stakeholders do not understand assessment data, trust erodes. Families may see scores but not understand what they represent. Educators may feel overwhelmed by disconnected reporting requirements. Policymakers may overreact to isolated metrics or underestimate the complexity of measuring learning well. Communities may begin to lose confidence in assessments and public reporting entirely. Assessment systems that communities do not understand or do not trust are unlikely to sustain long-term public confidence.

Transparency matters not only for compliance purposes, but because families deserve clear and honest information about whether students are on track and where additional support is needed. Clear, timely data is foundational to strong family and community engagement and becomes a critical

driver of academic improvement. As states explore innovations in assessment, accountability redesign, and increased flexibility, they must ensure that transparency, comparability, and meaningful reporting remain central priorities rather than afterthoughts.

Groups such as Data Quality Campaign and Learning Heroes emphasize the importance of clearer, more actionable reporting that helps families and communities make sense of student progress. Families should not have to reconcile conflicting messages from report cards, assessments, and classroom performance in order to understand how their child is progressing. A coherent system makes those connections clearer rather than requiring families to piece it together on their own.

Data that is technically available but difficult to interpret does little to strengthen trust, support learning, or improve decision-making. Learning Heroes' research shows that families and educators want to have real conversations about student progress. Those discussions become far more difficult when data is confusing and disconnected from the learning experiences students encounter every day.

In a moment when public trust in educational institutions is increasingly fragile, how we explain assessment may matter nearly as much as how we design it.

Accountability Still Matters

Accountability is rarely glamorous, and is often politically difficult, but transparent evidence of student outcomes remains essential to public education. States and communities need to know whether students are learning, if gaps are closing, if investments are producing results, and if all students have access to the opportunities they deserve.

Accountability should not be reduced to compliance checklists or disconnected rating systems. Strong accountability systems create visibility into student outcomes while also helping education systems focus attention, allocate resources, and drive

improvement efforts where they are needed most. Accountability is most effective when its indicators are intentionally aligned to system goals, connected to broader improvement priorities, and designed to generate meaningful and actionable data to inform next steps.

Accountability without connection to improvement is incomplete. Recent national conversations emphasize preserving the essential public functions of assessment: rigor, transparency, fairness, comparability, and subgroup visibility. Others have pushed the field to imagine richer demonstrations of learning, more authentic evidence, performance-based approaches, and assessment models that better reflect the skills students need for the future. These ideas should not exist in opposition to one another.

The future of assessment and accountability requires innovation with guardrails. Public reporting and stakeholder-facing data systems may identify where outcomes are falling short, but they do not by themselves improve instruction, build educator capacity, strengthen curriculum implementation, or create better learning experiences for students. If accountability tells us where outcomes are weak, coherent assessment and improvement systems must also help explain why and help systems determine what to do next.

As states explore new opportunities for flexibility regarding accountability and allocation of supports, these are the very connections that education leaders now need to build. The U.S. Assistant Secretary for Elementary and Secondary Education, Kirsten Baesler wrote, "Flexibility is not a license to obscure outcomes." Innovation matters, but transparency, comparability, and public visibility into student learning remain essential responsibilities of public education systems. The future of assessment therefore cannot be framed as innovation versus accountability.

We need state systems that continue to provide comparable evidence of student learning, especially for historically underserved students. We should preserve what works, stop overpromising what

current systems can deliver, and build capacity for what comes next. The path forward is coherent innovation: systems that modernize thoughtfully while preserving trust, transparency, and clear evidence of student learning.

Promising Improvement in the Field

Encouragingly, many states and organizations are already beginning to move in this direction.

Alabama has demonstrated how sustained coherence across policy, instructional supports, and educator development can contribute to improved student outcomes in math and literacy over time. Their leadership recognized that, to improve student learning, initiatives focused on improving math and literacy performance, addressing chronically underperforming schools, and supporting educator and leader development and retention all needed to row in the same direction. Siloed initiatives would not be successful in helping them achieve their long-term goals. Alabama's well-documented recent successes have not resulted from a single assessment change or isolated reform. Rather, it reflects the cumulative effect of purposefully aligned policies, educator supports, curriculum initiatives, and instructional investments working together over multiple years.

Kentucky offers another important example through its United We Learn council and local accountability pilot efforts. The KY State Board of Education and state-level leaders identified their "education moonshot" as a path through assessment, accountability, and continuous improvement. Rather than approaching accountability redesign as a technical exercise conducted in isolation, they engaged educators, families, students, policymakers, and community stakeholders in broader conversations about what should matter most in the future of learning, accountability, and public reporting. That work reflects an important principle for the field: coherent systems are built not only through technical design, but through stakeholder

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trust, shared ownership, and honest conversations about student outcomes.

North Dakota's longstanding emphasis on strategy maps, continuous improvement planning, and stakeholder-centered leadership similarly highlights how states can align accountability expectations with broader improvement processes rather than treating them as disconnected systems. They embraced the opportunity through federal accountability as a way to create a broader and more coherent vision for continuous improvement that could be shared by all schools across the state. Over time, they worked collaboratively to align assessments, accountability metrics, and focused priorities to the state goals, district goals, and school level strategy maps.

Collectively these examples reinforce a central lesson: the strongest systems are those that align assessment, instruction, improvement, stakeholder understanding, and public transparency into a coherent whole, rather than pursuing isolated reforms.

Five Steps Toward Coherence

- STEP 1** Clarify Purpose and Use
- STEP 2** Conduct a System Audit
- STEP 3** Redesign for Overall Coherence
- STEP 4** Prioritize Curriculum-Connected Assessment
- STEP 5** Strengthen Assessment Literacy and Transparency in Reporting

Five Steps Toward Coherence

Building coherent systems is not simply a technical redesign exercise. It is a design challenge that requires clarity, discipline, and intentional alignment across the system. The path forward begins not with new tools, but with clearer thinking about purpose and use.

From a Cogna perspective, this work can be understood as a sequence of five deliberate steps:

- **Step 1—Clarify Purpose and Use**

Coherent systems begin with clear answers to a fundamental set of questions: What do we need to know about student learning? Who needs this information, and for what purpose? When is that information needed, and how will it be used? Without this clarity, systems tend to accumulate assessments without improving decision-making. Different purposes may require different types of evidence. Instructional decisions, system improvement, and public accountability each demand distinct tools, timelines, and levels of precision.

- **Step 2—Conduct a System Audit**

Once purpose is defined, leaders must take stock of the current system. In many contexts, assessment tools have been added over time to meet evolving needs, often without revisiting how they fit together. A disciplined audit goes beyond inventory. In addition to the coherence, the National Center for the Improvement of Educational Assessment (NOIEA) has shared that assessment systems should be evaluated against four additional core principles: continuity, comprehensiveness, utility, and efficiency.

Expert guidance from the NOIEA emphasizes that these multiple measures only function as a system when they are intentionally designed to work together to support decision-making.

- **Step 3—Redesign for Overall Coherence**

Only after clarifying purpose and auditing the current system can meaningful redesign begin. The goal is not necessarily to eliminate assessments or introduce new layers, but to intentionally design a system in which each component has a clear role and contributes to a connected understanding of student learning. Future systems should align strategic planning, curriculum, instruction, assessment, reporting, professional learning, improvement planning, and accountability around a shared vision for student learning, so they reinforce, rather than compete with each other.

- **Step 4—Prioritize Curriculum-Connected Assessment**

One of the most powerful ways to strengthen coherence is to reduce the distance between instruction and evidence. Assessments that are aligned to high-quality instructional materials and learning progressions produce stronger instructional signals and support real-time improvement.

- **Step 5—Strengthen Assessment Literacy and Transparency in Reporting**

Data that stakeholders do not understand cannot drive improvement. Reporting systems must be clear, timely, and designed for use by educators,

families, and policymakers. Families, educators, policymakers, and communities need reporting systems that are transparent, understandable, and actionable. Comparable statewide evidence remains essential, not because testing is the goal, but because transparency and public trust require consistent, valid, and reliable information about student learning. Assessment literacy and strong public reporting are core components of a functional assessment and accountability system.

As leaders embark on these efforts, they must be certain that such innovation proceeds with guardrails. AI-supported tools, performance-based approaches, competency demonstrations, and new assessment models all hold promise, but innovation disconnected from purpose and coherence risks creating more fragmentation rather than better systems. Future assessment and accountability innovation should strengthen validity, transparency, instructional usefulness, and public trust, not weaken them.

A Path Forward

The future of assessment will not be defined by a single test, platform, or model. Strong systems will likely include statewide summative measures, curriculum-aligned interim assessments, classroom formative practices, performance-based tasks, local evidence of learning, and, where appropriate, AI-supported tools. More is not always better in this situation. Assessment decisions must be grounded in clear purpose and use. A system is strong when each component serves a distinct role and is intentionally designed to minimize impact on instructional time while producing clear, actionable evidence. Rather than adding more assessments or generating more data, the aim is to build systems that are more efficient, better connected, and capable of producing clearer signals about student learning.

Too often, education systems have treated assessment and accountability as parallel initiatives rather than interconnected parts of the same system. The result is fragmentation, competing

We should preserve what works, stop overpromising what current systems can deliver, and build capacity for what comes next.

priorities, disconnected data, initiative fatigue, and improvement efforts that struggle to gain traction over time.

The challenge is designing systems where each component serves a clear purpose and where the signals work together to create a fuller understanding of student learning. That work requires something larger than assessment redesign alone. It requires states, districts, and schools to build improvement ecosystems and connect evidence to action.

Cognia is uniquely positioned to support states, districts, and schools in this work. For more than 130 years, Cognia has worked alongside education systems in their pursuit of continuous improvement. As a nonprofit organization grounded in the belief that all learners deserve high-quality educational opportunities, Cognia's mission has centered on helping schools and systems strengthen their capacity to improve, not through isolated initiatives, but through aligned and sustainable systems of support.

That perspective is especially relevant in today's conversations about assessment and accountability redesign. The challenge facing states today is larger than replacing a test, redesigning a dashboard, or modernizing accountability calculations. It is the work of building systems in which key elements are intentionally aligned, and where supports reinforce one another rather than compete for attention.

Across the country, Cognia has expanded its work to help education systems align and integrate improvement planning, instruction, professional learning, assessment literacy, stakeholder communication, balanced assessment systems, and curriculum-aligned supports into more integrated approaches to school and system improvement. Cognia has partnered with states as they have explored these issues. Similar conversations are now emerging in additional states as leaders seek to modernize systems while preserving transparency, comparability, and public trust.

The future of assessment should not be a retreat from measurement, nor should it be a defense of every inherited practice. It is an opportunity to build systems that are connected, transparent, more instructionally useful, and responsive to student needs.

When assessment systems are coherent, educators are not drowning in disconnected data, families are not handed confusing reports, policymakers are not forced to choose between accountability and innovation, and students benefit from systems that are more likely to notice what they need and respond effectively.

The challenge before us is larger than assessment redesign alone. It is the work of building coherent improvement ecosystems that connect curriculum, instruction, assessment, accountability, and continuous improvement in service of better outcomes for every learner.

This is the work ahead and this is why the future of assessment is not just innovation.

The future of assessment is coherence.

About the authors

Danielle Branson, Chief Curriculum and Assessment Officer

Danielle Branson serves as Cognia’s Chief Curriculum and Assessment Officer, bringing over 15 years of experience in assessment, education policy, measurement, and strategic planning. Prior to joining Cognia, she served as Deputy State Superintendent of Academics and Schools at the District of Columbia Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE), where she also held roles as Deputy Assistant Superintendent of K-12 and State Assessment Director. Before joining OSSE, Danielle led strategic planning initiatives with district and state superintendents. At Achieve Inc., she partnered with more than 20 states to develop next-generation assessments. Danielle began her career as a middle school special education teacher in Washington, D.C. She holds a bachelor’s degree from Carnegie Mellon University, a master’s degree in special education from George Mason University, and a master’s degree in education policy and political strategy from Georgetown University.



Donna Johnson Geist, Vice President, Strategic Partnerships

Donna Johnson Geist is Vice President of Strategic Partnerships at Cognia and a recognized leader in assessment, accountability, and school improvement. She brings more than 20 years of experience spanning classroom teaching, district leadership, state education policy, and education reform. Prior to joining Cognia, she served as Director of Accountability for the Office of the State Superintendent of Education in Washington, D.C. and Executive Director of the Delaware State Board of Education. She has authored multiple publications on assessment, accountability, and continuous improvement and is a frequent contributor to discussions on education policy and reform. She currently serves on the Capital School District Board of Education and the Board of Directors for DelawareKidsCAN.



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