The following op-ed piece by Secretary Duncan originally appeared in the Washington Post on Oct. 17. Secretary Duncan addressed the issue of getting assessment right in conjunction with an Oct. 15 official statement on the issue from President Obama.

Standardized Tests Must Measure Up

As a parent, I want to know how my children are progressing in school each year. The more I know, the more I can help them build upon their strengths and interests and work on their weaknesses. The more I know, the better I can reinforce at home each night the hard work of their teachers during the school day.

The standardized tests my kids take are one gauge on the dashboard, but parents and educators know that tests are not the only indicator.

Last week, state education chiefs and district superintendents announced a plan to examine their assessment systems, ensure that assessments are high-quality and cut back testing that doesn’t meet that bar or is redundant. I welcome that important step.

Parents have a right to know how much their children are learning; teachers, schools and districts need to know how students are progressing; and policymakers must know where students are excelling, improving and struggling. A focus on measuring student learning has had real benefits, especially for our most vulnerable students, ensuring that they are being held to the same rigorous standards as their well-off peers and shining a light on achievement gaps.

However, many have expressed concern about low-quality and redundant tests. And in some places, tests — and preparation for them — dominate the calendar and culture of schools, causing undue stress.

Policymakers at every level bear responsibility here — and that includes me and my department. We will support state and district leaders in taking on this issue and provide technical assistance to those who seek it.

To be clear: I strongly believe in using high-quality assessments, including annual tests, as one (but only one) part of how adults improve instruction and hold themselves responsible for students’ progress. With my own kids, I know parent-teacher conferences, grades and other feedback round out the picture of whether they’re on track.

After a generation of watching other nations surpass ours educationally, the United States is putting the building blocks in place for schools that will once again lead the world. But for this effort to pay off, political leaders must be both strong and flexible in support of the nation’s educators.

America’s schools are changing because our world is changing. Success in today’s world requires critical thinking, adaptability, collaboration, problem solving and creativity — skills that go beyond the
basics for which schools were designed in the past. But in recent decades, other countries have retooled their schools faster than we have.

We must do better. A great education isn’t just what every parent wants for his or her child; it’s a necessity for security in a globally competitive economy.

The good news is that, thanks to the hard work of educators, students and communities, America’s schools have made historic achievements in recent years. The U.S. high school graduation rate is at an all-time high, and the places most committed to bold change have made major progress on the nation’s report card. Since 2000, high school dropout rates have been cut in half for Hispanic students and more than a third for African Americans. College enrollment by black and Hispanic students has surged.

Perhaps even more important, educators are taking fundamental steps to help reclaim the United States’ leadership in education. Throughout the country, students are being taught to higher standards, by teachers empowered to be creative and to teach critical thinking skills. Last year, nearly 30 states, led by both Republicans and Democrats, increased funding for early learning.

Yet change this big is always hard, and political leaders — myself included — must provide support and make course corrections where needed. We are asking a great deal of our educators and students. Despite their hard work, and a growing embrace of many of these changes, one topic — standardized testing — sometimes diverts energy from this ambitious set of changes.

Fortunately, states and districts are taking on this challenge — including places such as Rhode Island and New York state; St. Paul, Minn.; Nashville; and the District, where leaders are already taking actions to limit testing. As they and others move forward, I look forward to highlighting progress others can learn from.

States are also leading the way on improving test quality, building assessments that move beyond bubble tests and measure critical thinking skills and writing; the Education Department has provided $360 million to two consortia of states to support that work. And to reduce stress on teachers during this year of transition, my department in August offered states new flexibility on connecting teacher evaluation to test results.

It’s vital that political leaders stand behind changes that will prepare our young people for success in the real world — changes that educators have worked so hard to get underway. We must also stand behind states that have increased standards for learning, and where adults are holding themselves responsible for the progress of all students. We must stand strong for responsible and equitable school funding. We must stand strong for making both preschool and college accessible to all.

And we must stand strong in the knowledge — not the belief but the knowledge — that great schools make a difference in the lives of all children.