Tennessee is the fastest improving state in the nation as measured by the National Assessment of Educational Progress, showing the highest improvement of any state since the tracking of results began in 2003. Selecting a strong next-generation assessment now will help to ensure that we continue to challenge our kids and promote similar growth in the future.

We believe that teacher experiences must be factored into the process to ensure that Tennessee selects high-quality ELA and math assessments. Teachers are the end-users of these assessments. We plan our curriculums around them, administer each assessment and work with the results. As such, our observations and experiences should be taken into account when considering the next generation of assessments. After consulting our colleagues across Memphis, we have outlined seven criteria teachers believe must be met by the next generation ELA and math assessments to ensure their success in helping students grow academically to the next level:

Criteria 1: Include Pre- and Formative Assessments
The next generation assessments should provide an official pre-test at the beginning of the year and quarterly formative assessments. The pre-test provides teachers with a benchmark against which to track progress throughout the year and to compare with an end-of-year assessment. The quarterly formative assessments offer teachers of all grades and all contents data checkpoints throughout the year that help them and parents gauge student progress. The near real-time assessment data gleaned from these formative assessments allows teachers to make immediate curricular decisions to maximize student performance.

We offer one caveat: these assessments must be purposefully designed to align to the curriculum. Too many formative assessments contain material that is not aligned to standards being taught. In the end, purposefully-designed formative assessments eliminate the guessing game of the summative assessments.

Criteria 2: Provide Teacher Access to Item-Specific End-of-Year Data
Currently teachers receive data on student growth and overall performance. However, we receive no data on how students did on specific standards or specific test items. Along with TVAAS data and growth data, teachers should receive detailed reports outlining the items on which their students succeeded and on which they struggled. This data would empower us to identify our strengths and weaknesses when it comes to our content and make improvements for the coming year. Such a breakdown also communicates to teachers that testing is first and foremost about helping us improve our craft, not about punitive measures as it is often perceived.
Criteria 3: Accurately Assess Technological Needs

Computer-based assessments reduce testing time, but without taking technology requirements into account this step is likely to cause more stress to teachers than the current exams. School-based technology in urban settings is frequently a generation behind or simply not present, which can make administering these assessments difficult. Any new computerized assessment should be carefully evaluated to determine what is required to implement it and ensure that moving to if in fact reduces testing time and stress instead of adding to it.

Criteria 4: Reduce Assessment Time

Current Tennessee ELA and math assessments are marathons. These assessments are lengthy and time-consuming tests that have a multitude of nearly identical, multi-choice questions devoid of any conceptual reasoning displayed by students. Next-generation assessments must be designed in a way that is efficient and purposeful for students and teachers. The students must be able to succinctly display their knowledge in ways that gauge their conceptual understanding of material. This will reduce students’ anxiety around the test, result in more meaningful data for teachers, and free up more instructional time which can be built around the knowledge gained from assessments.

Criteria 5: Expand Testing Support for All Grade Levels

Current Tennessee ELA and math assessments only exist for grades 3-12 in many districts. Next-generation assessments should begin in Kindergarten and run through grade 12 to ensure data and assessment continuity. This has several advantages for students, educators and parents. Starting testing early can build students’ comfort levels with assessments. It can help educators identify at-risk students earlier and target them for assistance. And it can help ensure fairness in evaluation for K-2 teachers who currently do not have their own TVAAS data. Early assessments also empower parents to follow their child and seek support if they struggle. While early standardized assessments may not be appropriate for all high stakes decision making, teachers should have availability to use the assessments as they see fit to inform classroom instruction and as one data point among multiple measures. Training in the use of standardized assessments also needs to be made available for lower grade teachers.

Criteria 6: Develop Accommodations for Special Needs Students

Next-generation assessments should improve on existing efforts to accommodate Special Education students and English Language Learners. For example, next-generation assessments should provide technology-based alternatives to having teachers read the entire assessment from low-level readers as is often required. This will allow students to interact with the content of the assessment and relieve pressure on educators to read the assessment while at the same time keeping testing security at the highest levels. These technology-based assessments should also be designed to meet the accommodations and modifications of each student individually. For example, current assessments have lengthy, multiple-step directions and questions that often confuse Special Needs students and make the content unreachable for them. Instead, we need to meet
their needs by having accommodations that break apart the content to help them show their true abilities. If we teach to meet each child where they are, then we must assess in a way that meets the child where they are.

**Criteria 7: Ensure Adequate Teacher Support Resources**
The importance of providing teachers with adequate support and resources cannot be overstated. A key educator concern with Common Core is a lack of test-aligned resources. This concern came to the forefront during PARCC field testing this past year, and it has not improved with the existing uncertainty surrounding the future of next-generation assessments. This lack hurts teacher morale and ultimately lowers student achievement by confusing their academic targets. To be accepted by educators and ensure success by students, these assessments must have classroom-ready resources such as item samplers, practice questions and full-length practice tests available for teachers to utilize as soon as possible.

**Conclusion**
Adopting test that meets these criteria will ensure that the next generation of Common Core-aligned assessments are useful to educators, students and parents. It will empower teachers to continue the trajectory of Tennessee students as the fastest improving in the country.

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