

Sensible Assessment Practices

for 2020–21 and Beyond



Connecticut State Department of Education
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Contents

Introduction	1
Essential Terminology	2
One Assessment Cannot Serve Many Purposes	3
The Smarter Balanced Interim Assessments	4
Figure 1: Content Coverage of Summative Assessment and IABs	4
Sensible Assessment Practices for 2020–21 and Beyond	5
1. Summer 2020 — Prior to the Start of School	5
Review Available Information	5
Plan the First Unit of Instruction	5
Support Professional Learning	6
2. Start of the School Year	6
Build Community with New Class	6
Deliver the First Unit	6
3. Rest of the School Year	6
Shift Fully to On-Grade Instruction with Scaffolds and Supports	6
4. End of the School Year	7
Administer On-Grade Summative Assessment	7
Conclusion	8
Infographic: Sensible Assessment Practices in 2020–21 and Beyond	9

Introduction

The extent of disruption to learning caused by the COVID-19 pandemic is unprecedented in its nature and scale. As schools plan for reopening in the fall and integrating their learners back into school, it is important to remember the following:

- We **already know a lot** about returning Connecticut public school students; we have a wealth of information and longitudinal data (e.g., test scores, IEP progress reports, attendance, discipline, mobility, course grades) at our disposal.
- **Two-thirds of the school year 2019–20 was completed in person** prior to mid-March.
- The results of a statewide survey¹ revealed that **nearly three quarters of all students statewide participated fully in distance learning** during class cancellations due to COVID-19, though the quality of the learning experiences may be varied.
- The same survey also showed that for over 17 percent of students across the state, **family, health, and trauma issues** were barriers to greater participation in distance learning.
- There is **no single, “magic-bullet” assessment** — whether screening or diagnostic or summative — that can meet the needs of all stakeholders and satisfy all purposes.²
- In a wide range of research across many decades, **formative assessment practices** have been shown to significantly raise student achievement and student attitudes toward learning.³

The purpose of this document is to offer guidance to educators including general education teachers, special education teachers, interventionists, instructional specialists, and related service providers on how they can “assess” their incoming students when schools re-open without necessarily having to “test” them.

The assessment and instructional practices in this document are intended to apply to all students, including students with disabilities and English learners. The unique needs and strengths of these learners must be considered in the planning of both assessment and instruction, including the provision of supports, accommodations, and modifications as required in a student’s individualized education program (IEP), Section 504 plan, or other intervention/learning plan.

Essential Terminology

Before discussing the proposed approach to sensible assessment practices for 2020–21 and beyond, let's clarify some essential terminology.⁴

Summative Assessment

- Administered to all students at the end of instruction to check for learning
- Can vary in grain-size, e.g., the state summative assessment, teacher made final exams, and several commercially available benchmark assessments sample the entire content domain for a grade, while unit-level summative assessments might cover the content for a much narrower set of standards

Screener Assessment

- A short assessment that is administered to all students to screen them for being at risk of not mastering a skill in the future, e.g., screening for future reading difficulties
- Typically have a cut score (norm or criterion referenced) to identify at-risk students
- Often followed by other assessments to diagnose specific need

Diagnostic Assessment

- An assessment that is administered before a unit of instruction to a small group of students or one-on-one and not a large scale survey
- Grain size of content assessed is small
- Suitable for identifying student strengths and weaknesses
- Useful to teachers so they can differentiate instruction and decide what to teach to whom

Formative Assessment Practices

- Not a single test but a series of effective teaching practices — inseparable from instruction
- Practices include clarifying the purpose of the learning, providing exemplars so students know what good work looks like, using activities that engage students, eliciting evidence of their learning, providing feedback that help learners to know what they need to do to continue learning, using students as learning resources for one another, and increasing student ownership of their learning.⁵
- Strong, high-quality evidence of its positive impact on increasing student achievement

Differentiated (Learner-Focused) Instruction and Personalized (Learner-Led) Learning

- *Differentiated instruction* is an approach to teaching that maximizes the progress of all students within the general education setting by addressing critical differences among students, for example, through the use of flexible grouping, different instructional materials, or different ways of presenting the same content.⁶
- Instruction is *personalized* when the strategies address the distinct learning needs, interests, aspirations, or cultural backgrounds of individual students.⁷
- Teachers are expected to remain flexible and adjust what's taught based on how students are progressing.
- Effective Tier I instruction is differentiated and personalized.

One Assessment Cannot Serve Many Purposes

There is no single assessment that can meet the needs of all stakeholders and purposes. For example, a teacher may want to know if their students can:

- isolate, blend, add, segment, substitute, and delete phonemes; or
- use equivalent fractions as a strategy to add and subtract fractions.

A district/school leader may want to know:

- which students in early elementary grades are having difficulty with foundational reading skills;
- which schools are evidencing strongest academic growth, especially for students with high needs; or
- who should be identified as gifted/talented.

The Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE), Boards of Education (BOE), legislators, and other community stakeholders may want to know:

- which districts consistently reflect lowest student achievement statewide;
- which schools are consistently growing students at a substantially greater pace than the state, especially for students with high needs; and
- which districts/schools should receive resources and supports from the state.

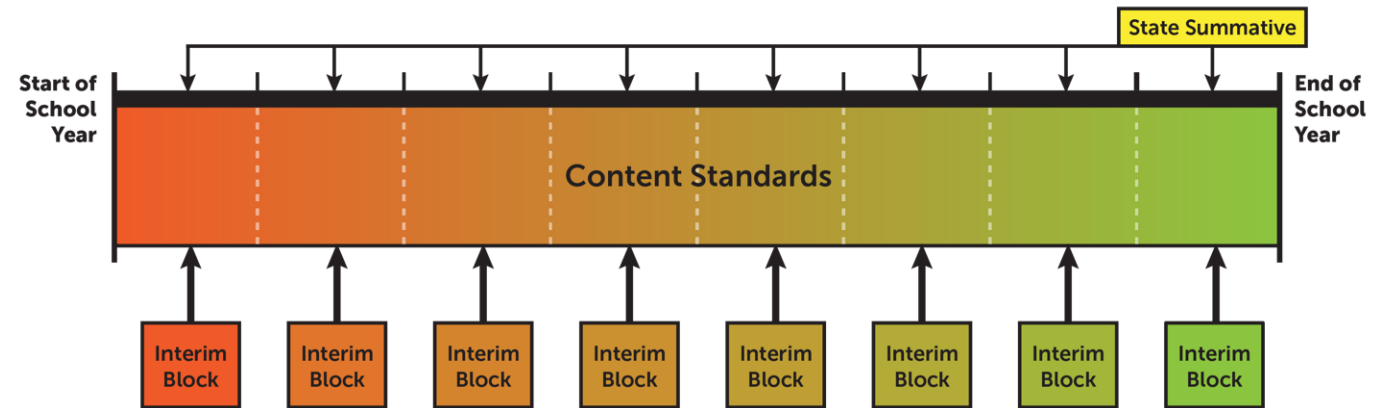
While the teacher may need good *diagnostic* assessments to identify specific strengths and weaknesses, the district may need *screeners* to identify students at risk of developing reading difficulties, and the CSDE/BOEs may need large-scale standardized *summative* tests for comparing how different schools prepared students on the grade-level standards. ***One assessment cannot serve many purposes!***

Be mindful that commercial test developers may provide many scores and reports from a single test. Each inference **about a student from the test score(s)** must be validated with evidence. When we refer to the “validity” of an assessment, we’re really talking about the validity of the *inferences* we make from the information provided by the assessment.⁸ Some inferences may have strong validity evidence while others may not. For example, student performance on a summative assessment that samples the content for an entire grade can yield a valid inference about the student’s *overall* achievement on the grade-level standards; however that same assessment cannot yield a valid inference about a student’s abilities in a very specific skill area like phonemic awareness or adding fractions.

The Smarter Balanced Interim Assessments

The Smarter Balanced assessment system offers both the state summative assessments and a full suite of Interim Assessment Blocks (IABs). Figure 1 illustrates the difference in scope between the two.

Figure 1: Content Coverage of Summative Assessment and IABs



Unlike the summative assessment, which samples the content standards for the *entire* grade, the IABs are short, fixed-form assessments (i.e., the same test questions in the same order for all students) that focus on a **subset** of the grade-level standards. The tests are scored immediately; teachers can view the test questions, scoring rubrics, and student responses to obtain greater insight into student cognition and reasoning. Starting in 2019–20, Smarter Balanced began releasing Focused IABs (F-IABs) that are even smaller in their grain size than the regular IABs. For the 2020–21 school year, the Smarter Balanced system offers 149 block assessments in all grades combined; 69 IABs and 80 F-IABs.⁹ An additional 56 F-IABs are expected to be released in the next two years.

In addition to administering the entire IAB as a stop-and-test event, the IABs can also be used in non-standard ways. For instance, a teacher may use test items from an IAB to illustrate the expectation of the standard, as a do-now exercise in the classroom, or as an exit ticket to check for understanding. The IABs can also be administered off-grade. The IABs are a critical component of the system because they can align coherently with a district's curriculum and assessment practices.¹⁰ The IABs (and especially the F-IABs) can be viewed as diagnostic assessments because they identify strengths/weaknesses of students and have the potential to directly inform what a teacher should teach next, and to whom. For 2020–21, the IABs will be available on September 1, which is sooner than in prior years.

Sensible Assessment Practices for 2020–21 and Beyond

To empower teachers, reduce testing time, maximize instructional time, ease student transition back to school, and accelerate student learning, the CSDE offers the following four-step approach to targeted assessment and instruction for school reopening in the fall (also see infographic on page 9):

1. Summer 2020 — Prior to the Start of School

Review Available Information

In lieu of administering a separate assessment to all students at the start of the school year, teachers should be supported to utilize the information and longitudinal data that are already accessible in the school district to “assess” their students. This process should occur in summer 2020, prior to the start of school in late August.

1. Teachers, interventionists, instructional specialists, and related service providers must have the opportunity to participate in **vertical teams** with their colleagues from the prior grade. This may be from the same school or a different school. They should learn about what content was covered pre-COVID and what was covered during distance learning. They should also get the perspectives of their prior grade peers on the academic performance and distance learning participation of students in the incoming class.
2. Teachers, interventionists, instructional specialists, and related service providers should receive summaries of the **longitudinal student data** provided by CSDE and available within the district including:
 - a. non-assessment data such as the Early Indication Tool support level (i.e., Low-Medium-High), attendance, discipline, mobility, and course failures; and
 - b. assessment data such as the Kindergarten Inventory, Smarter Balanced, Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS), IABs including Focused IAB, LAS Links, fall/winter benchmark test scores, and IEP Progress Reports

Using multiple measures in lieu of a single test will result in a stronger “assessment” and better inferences. Of course, students who are new to Connecticut public schools in 2020–21 will likely need a screening and/or overall assessment such as the Interim Comprehensive Assessment (ICA)¹¹ or some other standardized measure of overall achievement level in a subject area.

Plan the First Unit of Instruction

Along with reviewing available information, educators should design the first unit of instruction for the start of the school year to not only engage students but also ensure that students, including students with high needs, will have a high probability of success with that unit. For example, in mathematics this may be a geometry or statistics unit as opposed to one that places a heavier emphasis on computational skills. While the first unit is ideally an on-grade unit, in some instances it may be necessary for this unit to review standards from the prior grade. If a review approach is chosen for the first unit, then the selected content should emphasize the important pre-requisite standards for new learning in the current grade. The length of a review unit will depend on the needs of the students in the classroom; it may last as little as a few days but is definitely not intended to extend beyond 2–3 weeks.

Support Professional Learning

To use existing information about students effectively, and plan the first unit of instruction that has a high probability for engagement and success, teachers may need professional learning opportunities on: assessment/data literacy; formative assessment practices; differentiated instruction and personal learning; learning progressions of the Connecticut Core Standards; and blended learning (i.e., class that combines in-person classroom teaching with online instruction) approaches/tools.

2. Start of the School Year

Build Community with New Class

Some students may have experienced family/health/trauma issues due to the pandemic. Therefore, it is especially important in 2020–21 to take time at the start of the school year to **build community and establish norms** in the new class through fun and engaging activities. While this may best be done in person, a classroom community can also be developed in virtual learning environments through ice-breaker introductions, virtual theme weeks, personalized videos, one-on-one check-ins, and synchronous/asynchronous discussions¹². This may be particularly needed if some form of blended learning continues in the fall. It will prepare students mentally to engage with the learning and any assessment. Without such community building at the outset, any formal assessment may artificially depress student achievement.

Deliver the First Unit

As stated previously, the first unit should not only be engaging, but also allow students to have a high probability of success in learning the material. This will help students to ease into learning in the new school year and experience success early. Teachers should differentiate instruction and utilize formative assessment practices to gauge the impact of their teaching and adjust instruction as necessary. To minimize student anxiety at the start of the school year, this unit should not require the administration of a separate test. For certain students, Tier 2 supports can be embedded within the classroom to accelerate learning and advance equity.

3. Rest of the School Year

Shift Fully to On-Grade Instruction with Scaffolds and Supports

As Harvard University professor Heather C. Hill and Brown University professor Susanna Loeb wrote in a recent article,¹³ “Teachers have always faced students who return in the fall with unfinished learning.” While this pandemic was unprecedented and its impact on students should not be underestimated, it remains true that two-thirds of the 2019–20 school year was completed in-person and nearly three-quarters of all students participated in distance learning during the spring.

Therefore, once the community building and first unit (which may include a review of prior grade content) have been completed (no more than 2–3 weeks)¹⁴, teachers should transition fully to on-grade instruction.

- Focused, regular IABs, or something similar that was created to fit within the local curriculum can serve as quick, short, **diagnostic** precursors to the on-grade instructional unit. Districts can identify the prerequisite skills for each on-grade unit **and** the corresponding IAB that can be used as a diagnostic assessment. Those prerequisite skills may be from a prior grade in which case the appropriate, off-grade IAB can also be administered. The IABs can tell teachers the strengths and weaknesses of the students in their class. Districts may also wish to use existing diagnostic assessments that are already available and familiar to teachers, so long as they are of a fine enough grain-size and truly allow for valid interpretations of students' strengths and weaknesses.
- Teachers then deliver **differentiated instruction** that covers the grade-level content and is **personalized** to needs and interests of students.
- **Formative assessment practices** should be implemented so teachers can gauge the impact of their teaching by eliciting evidence of student learning, providing feedback, and adjusting their teaching.
- **Tier 2 supports** should be offered based on the information derived from the formative assessment practices. The support can be either embedded in the classroom or provided separately based on student need.
- Optionally, at the end of the unit, teachers may choose to **administer an aligned, on-grade IAB** or other district determined assessment as a means of evaluating learning mastery.

The same cycle then continues for each instructional unit for the remainder of the year.

4. End of the School Year

Administer On-Grade Summative Assessment

At the end of the year, the student is administered an on-grade summative assessment (which may be the state assessment for students in Grades 3–8 and 11) to evaluate overall achievement on the state standards.

Conclusion

This guidance for sensible assessment in 2020–21 and beyond is designed to ease students back, accelerate learning, and advance equity by:

- minimizing testing time;
- increasing instructional time;
- empowering teachers;
- promoting vertical communication among teachers;
- using available information; and
- implementing differentiated instruction, personalized learning, and formative assessment practices.

Sensible Assessment Practices in 2020–21 and Beyond

1. Summer 2020

★ Review Available Information

In lieu of a separate assessment, what can we already know about our students from existing data/information?*

Vertical Teams for Teachers, Interventionists, Instructional Specialists, and Related Service Providers

- What standards were taught in-person pre-COVID and during distance learning?
- How does the previous teacher describe the student's strengths and weaknesses?
- How well did the student engage in distance learning?

Longitudinal Data (Non-Assessment)

- Early Indication Tool support level (Low-Medium-High), attendance, discipline, mobility, course failures, etc.

Longitudinal Data (Assessment)

- K-Inventory, Smarter Balanced, NGSS, Alt. Assessments, LAS Links, IAB, F-IAB, Fall/Winter Benchmark, IEP Progress Reports

★ Plan the First Unit and Support Professional Learning

The first unit should not only engage students but also ensure that students will have a high probability of success. Teachers will need professional learning on topics such as assessment/data literacy, formative assessment practices, differentiated instruction, learning progressions, blended learning approaches/tools.

**Students new to CT public schools will likely need a screening and/or overall assessment such as the ICA or a local benchmark assessment.*

2. Start of the School Year

★ Build Community with New Class While Delivering the First Unit

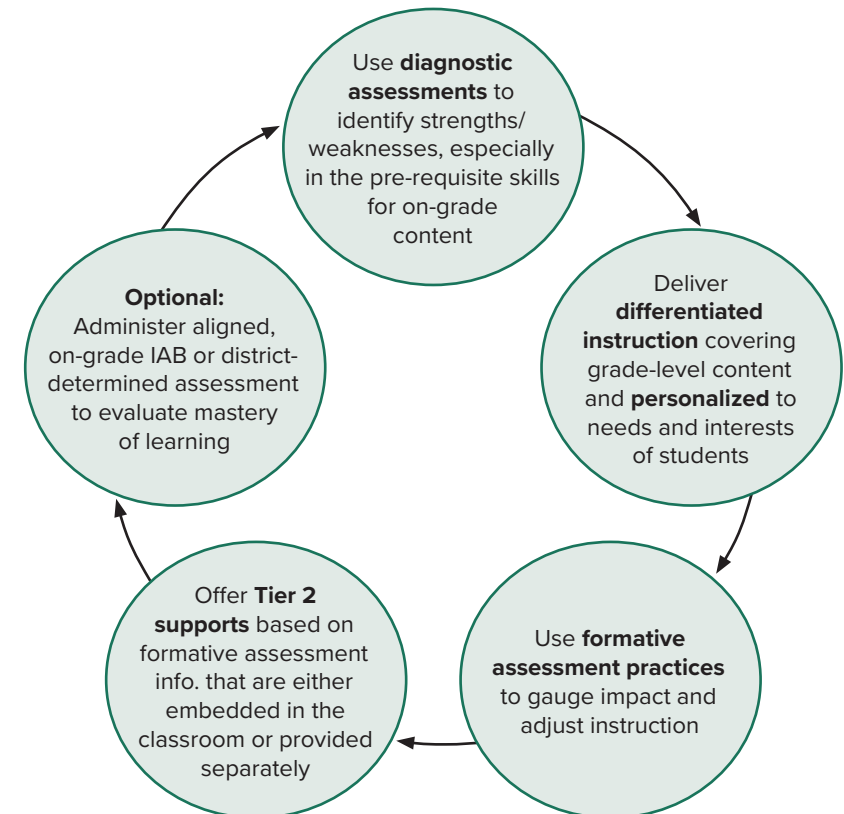
Acknowledge and address social-emotional learning needs and family/health/trauma issues due to pandemic. Start with a unit that is engaging and has high probability of success. Review key prior grade content if necessary.

- **Deliver differentiated instruction** by starting with engaging on-grade unit with high probability of success; review if necessary.
- **Use formative assessment practices** to gauge impact and adjust instruction.
- **Embed Tier 2 supports** in the classroom based on review of available information in the summer.

3. Rest of the School Year

★ Shift Fully to On-Grade Instruction with Scaffolds and Supports

If the first unit incorporates review, then the shift fully to on-grade instruction should occur within 2–3 weeks. Districts should identify pre-requisite content for each instructional unit and the corresponding diagnostic assessment.



4. End

★ Administer End-of-Year Summative Assessment

Administer an on-grade summative assessment (which may be the state assessment for students in Grades 3–8 and 11) to evaluate overall achievement on state standards

Endnotes

1. The CSDE conducted a brief survey in May 2020 to gauge the approaches to distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, including the extent of student participation in those offerings and the barriers (especially devices and connectivity) to greater participation. The findings from this survey will be available online at the [Performance Office Research Library](#).
2. See the May 12, 2020 blog post by Dr. Carla Evans from the National Center for Assessment titled [Stop Searching for the Holy Grail: Responding to COVID-19 Achievement Gaps — How Educators Should Address Achievement Gaps Exacerbated by the COVID-19 Pandemic](#) and the June 9, 2020 blog post by Dr. Will Lorie titled [Contextualizing COVID-19 “Learning Loss” and “Learning Recovery” — Education Reform has Always Been About Recovering Losses in Learning](#).
3. The following research studies offer strong, high quality evidence on the positive impact of formative assessment practices in increasing student achievement.
 - Black, P., & Wiliam, D. (1998). Assessment and classroom learning. *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice*, 5(1), 7–74.
 - Fuchs, L. S., & Fuchs, D. (1986). Effects of systematic formative evaluation: A meta-analysis. *Exceptional Children*, 53(3), 199–208.
 - Hattie, J. (2009). *Visible learning: A synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses relating to achievement*. London, England: Routledge.
 - Kingston, N., & Nash, B. (2011). Formative assessment: A meta-analysis and a call for research. *Educational Measurement: Issues and Practice*, 30(4), 28–37.
 - Ozan, C., & Kincal, R. Y. (2018). The effects of formative assessment on academic achievement, attitudes toward the lesson, and self-regulation skills. *Educational Sciences: Theory & Practice*, 18, 85–118. <http://dx.doi.org/10.12738/estp.2018.1.0216>
4. These terminologies have been adapted from multiple sources including:
 - The [National Center on Response to Intervention at the American Institutes for Research](#);
 - The May 6, 2020 blog post by Dr. Brian Gong from the National Center for Assessment titled [Fall Educational Assessment: The Information You Need and How to Get It](#); and
 - The June 3, 2020 blog post by Dr. Scott Marion from the National Center for Assessment titled [You Say Tomato: Concerns About the Diagnostic Assessment Rhetoric](#)
5. These are adapted from Dylan Wiliam’s book *Embedded Formative Assessment* (2011). Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree Press.

6. Tomlinson, C. and McTighe, J. *Integrating Differentiated Instruction with Understanding by Design*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2006.
7. The Glossary of Education Reform for Journalists, Parents, and Community Members
<https://www.edglossary.org/personalized-learning>
8. American Educational Research Association, American Psychological Association, & National Council on Measurement in Education. (2014). *Standards for educational and psychological testing*. Washington, DC: American Educational Research Association. <https://www.apa.org/science/programs/testing/standards>
9. An overview of the Smarter Balanced interim assessments is available at
<https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/SDE/Student-Assessment/Smarter-Interim-Assessments/CT-interim-assessments-overview-2019-10-25-19.pdf>

Type	ELA	Math	Total
Focused IAB	40	40	80
IAB	42	27	69
Total	82	67	149

10. Marion, S., Thompson, J., Evans, C., Martineau, J, and Dadey, N. (2019). *A Tricky Balance: The challenges and opportunities of balanced systems of Assessment*. Paper Presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council on Measurement in Education. Retrieved on October 27, 2019 from https://www.nciea.org/sites/default/files/publications/A%20Tricky%20Balance_031319.pdf
11. The Smarter Balanced Interim Comprehensive Assessments (ICA) are similar to the summative assessments in length, content, and format. Each content area ICA has two parts, a grade-level ICA and an ICA Performance Task. Both parts of the assessment must be completed in order to obtain information about student performance on the assessment. While all Smarter Balanced assessments are untimed, these fixed-form tests may take over three hours to administer when educators use both sections of math and ELA. If necessary, these assessments can be given out of grade level. Automated scoring is available for most open-ended items.
12. Some virtual community building resources include:
 - 5 Virtual Ways to Build a Classroom Community. PBS Teacher’s Lounge, April 1, 2020. <https://www.pbs.org/education/blog/5-virtual-ways-to-build-a-classroom-community>
 - How to Build an Online Learning Community (In 2020). Learn Worlds, April 28, 2020. <https://www.learnworlds.com/build-online-learning-community/>
 - <https://www.weareteachers.com/creating-classroom-community-online/>

13. How to Contend with Pandemic Learning Loss: Teachers will need to work together to uncover missed learning
By Heather C. Hill & Susanna Loeb, May 27, 2020
<https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2020/05/28/how-to-contend-with-pandemic-learning-loss.html>
14. For students in K–3, this may be the appropriate time to administer a short assessment from Section 1 (general outcome measure) of the [CSDE's Approved Menu of Research-based Grades K–3 Universal Screening Reading Assessments](#) to screen for dyslexia or other reading-related learning disabilities. Districts that seek to administer broad survey assessments such as those from Section 2 of the approved menu are encouraged to reevaluate the need for such assessments and if needed, to defer administration to later in the year.

Also, please remember the following:

- Newly enrolled PK-special education students need to be administered the [Early Childhood Outcomes assessment](#) within four weeks of entry.
- By mid-October, every kindergarten teacher completes the [Kindergarten Entrance Inventory \(KEI\)](#) for each student in the classroom.
- In the winter, identified English learners in grades K–12 are administered the statewide [English language proficiency assessment](#), LAS Links.