

# STANDARDS AND ASSESSMENTS

## Key Discussants:

Sue Rigney, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, US Department of Education  
Margaret Heritage, Accountability and Assessment Comprehensive Center

## Facilitator:

Steve Hamilton, New England Comprehensive Center

## Recorders:

Fran Collignon, New England Comprehensive Center  
Angela Penfold, Center on Instruction

Participants in the session exchanged ideas on their understanding of the topic through roundtable discussions followed by a whole-group discussion and reflection. The conversation focused on the opportunities and the challenges presented by the *Race to the Top* funds allocated for the development of high quality standards and assessments.

The *Race to the Top* standards and assessment initiative challenges states to build coherent, comprehensive assessments to measure attainment of college and career-ready standards. Much of the conversation around the call for high quality standards and assessments focuses on the federally funded project currently underway to develop a set of common standards that states can choose to adopt as the foundation of their development of assessments. Presenter Sue Rigney addressed concerns mentioned by the session participants about states being required to adopt the emerging common standards. In New England, four states currently collaborate on the NECAP standards and assessment process and they have documented success in raising student achievement through the regional collaboration. Rigney agreed that states need not discard systems that are working to produce strong student achievement and suggested that, in fact, New England could be a model for other states to follow in developing regional assessments based on common standards.

Presenter Margaret Heritage reiterated Rigney's comments that the focus for all efforts under the federal grant programs should ultimately be on teaching and learning. Heritage declared, "Standards alone won't change classroom practice." She urged session participants to think about standards and assessments broadly, beyond the typical accountability perspective to one in which they become tools for informing teachers about what students know and what they need to learn. Both Rigney and Heritage urged participants to recognize the inherent connections between standards, assessment, curriculum, and student outcomes. By examining standards and assessments as a coherent system, classrooms, schools, states, and the nation will be better able to help students become college- and career-ready.

The presenters challenged participants to consider changing their language and thinking from "closing the achievement gap" to "continuous movement forward," using growth measures of student achievement rather than static, single point-in-time measures.

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Changing conceptions of assessment to think about its use to inform continuous improvement align with the goals of schools across the spectrum, from high-performing to low-achieving. Rigney pointed out that *Race to the Top* assessment funds are available to support ways of measuring student achievement beyond once a year testing to allow for time-intensive performance measures which can broaden teachers' understanding of student learning.

"Raising the bar," implementing higher standards and expectations, creates opportunities for growth and the ARRA funds offer growth opportunities for all students, regardless of their racial and ethnic backgrounds, the level of income and education of their parents, whether they have disabilities or limited English proficiency. Heritage shared some examples from other countries in which assessment is broadly conceived to allow students to make decisions about how they will demonstrate their knowledge. She directed participants to remember that assessment can in fact be part of the learning process if the learner is engaged and the demonstration of learning is done well and wisely. When teachers design rich and meaningful assessment tasks, teachers become learners too.

Participants highlighted the need for the Department to support states in affirming what states are doing right and helping states build on what they have already established. They proposed that USED "do no harm" by not forcing states to abandon well thought out standards and assessment systems, such as NECAP (New England Common Assessments Program), which are showing positive gains in student achievement. Participants agreed with both presenters that the central consideration in standards and assessment concerns how they support classroom teaching and learning. Learning theory and pedagogy must be considered in developing high-quality standards and assessments.