

Opinion: States should use pandemic to create more relevant tests

By [Maureen Downey](#), The Atlanta Journal-Constitution
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President of Southern Regional Education Board says testing should be flexible and focused on students

Stephen Pruitt, president of the nonpartisan [Southern Regional Education Board](#) in Atlanta, writes in a guest column that the pandemic provides an opportunity for states to overhaul tests and make them more relevant and useful.

A 16-state compact, including Georgia, SREB is funded by member appropriations, as well as by contracts and grants from foundations and from local, state and federal agencies. Pruitt started out as a high school chemistry teacher in Fayette County and held leadership roles at the Georgia Department of Education. Before coming to SREB in 2018, Pruitt was Kentucky's state commissioner of education.

By Stephen L. Pruitt

As the pandemic continues to impact schools and families in 2021, Georgia—and every state—should seek to give schools a break from accountability rules that judge their quality based heavily on students' test scores.

Georgia's School Superintendent Richard Woods and state Board of Education recently changed regulations to make this spring's state test results count very little toward Georgia's school accountability rules.

To do anything less would be unfair considering the trauma many students have been through in the past year. Too many students faced major hurdles in their lives even before the coronavirus crisis.

To be clear, we should still offer state tests this spring. It's just that the results won't be very reliable this year for accountability.

And stepping back, why not use this opportunity to overhaul tests so they are more relevant to students and more useful to schools?

We can also improve school accountability by introducing indicators that will show us for the first time whether students have the opportunities they deserve. No student should be invisible. Our states can't afford to let the differences in the quality of children's education persist. Tests and measures of school quality need to reflect our clear mission for public schools: Everything

we do in education must focus on building students' knowledge so they can pursue the life and career they want.

After all, we're in the midst of the fourth industrial revolution. Everyone's job is undergoing massive change because of technology, and [around half of all job tasks](#) in some of our state's largest job sectors — food preparation and service, production, transportation, and office or administrative duties — may be eliminated or see significant changes in the next five years.

As many as 18 million Southerners, including 1.5 million Georgians, face “unemployability” because they lack the skills and education to adapt to these changes.

Unless we have tests and some type of accountability that requires schools to improve, we won't know if we're meeting our goal.

The new U.S. secretary of education should set a new vision for state tests and make them more useful for educators, policymakers, and students — and incentivize states to improve school accountability.

Building better tests

Let's make tests more meaningful for educators and students. Bad data can be worse than no data at all.

A state algebra exam could be tailored for a career pathway in welding. A student studying aerospace engineering could encounter relevant physics questions. A student studying agriculture could take a biology test that asks about soil samples rather than something more obscure.

The federal government should allow every state the time to build a high-quality, affordable test more closely aligned to what students are studying — especially when a state is revamping its academic standards. States shouldn't be allowed to postpone tests if it simply means inadequate, multiple-choice exams will persist.

Preparing students for a more advanced workplace also means holding all students to the same academic rigor but with greater relevance for each young person.

I keep a sign on my desk in Atlanta that a Kentucky high school student made using a plasma welder. That student knew coding well enough to make the sign — but in the same breath told me he hated math. I had to help him see the connection. What if state tests also made these links clear?

The new administration could provide states wanting to overhaul their tests with two-year delays and grant funding to develop the tests — with teachers at the heart of the process.

States could spend those two years, and the money they'd save not giving tests, to develop exams more relevant to students' interests and preparation.

We'd then have a much more accurate take on student achievement than any series of general questions can provide on a given day.

Building better accountability

School accountability in each state still needs to include test scores so that states and school systems can check students' progress and make education more equitable for all. The federal [Every Student Succeeds Act](#) requires testing for that reason.

But if accountability is built primarily on students' test scores, then scores steal all the attention. Federal law requires that test scores must be the foundation for only the majority of school accountability. The goal of a quality school-accountability system should be to act as a flashlight to inspect what needs improving and a spotlight on the things our schools do well.

How could states do it differently? We could report on the numbers of students of color and poverty in each school and district who have — and don't have — access to the arts, advanced courses, and career-and-technical pathways that lead to meaningful credentials and various types of college. These days, schools also need to support students' well-being with mental health counselors, school nurses and related resources.

We should insist on high standards for every child — no vocational-only high school diplomas or similar low-level credentials. Soon very few low-skill jobs will be available, and more people will have to rely on government subsidies for their livelihood.

We can build on students' potential by providing pathways to valuable workplace credentials and postsecondary opportunities. Everyone will need to be a viable member of the workforce and economy very soon.

Given the right opportunities and support, every student can accomplish great things. Let's build a more student-relevant approach to testing and school accountability that makes sense for 2021 and beyond.