

LOCAL COMPREHENSIVE ASSESSMENT SYSTEMS IN SCHOOL DISTRICT SYSTEMS

ACT 173 TECHNICAL GUIDANCE

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Introduction

This document provides additional technical assistance and guidance around local comprehensive assessment systems (LCAS). It is one of a series of four supporting guidance documents the Agency of Education (AOE) has developed to provide supplemental information to the Education Quality Standards (EQS) rules and practices as they pertain to the change in practices necessary to implement [Act 173 of 2018](#). In a document entitled, [Developing Systems to Support the Success of All Students](#) released on August 26, 2019, the AOE identified four areas of focused activity for school districts and supervisory unions (SU/SDs) under Act 173:

- [Educational Support Teams \(ESTs\)](#);
- Local Comprehensive Assessment System;
- Coordinated Curriculum; and
- Needs-based Professional Development.

The AOE will be publishing supplemental guidance documents for each of these focus areas regularly through early 2020. Together, the goal of these guidance documents is to build coherence among educational stakeholders about the work involved to implement Act 173 successfully. Coherence and focus will be necessary as we then shift our work to identifying, supporting and scaling best practices across the entire educational system.

All supporting technical guidance documents in this series will follow a similar structure. Section one will contain a definition of the focus area so there is clarity about how it is situated in the current regulatory and practice context. Section two will describe why the focus area is a major systems lever for the successful implementation of Act 173. A systems lever is defined as an organizational structure among all schools in a district that can be used to quickly bring about the alignment of instructional support activities to enhance the effectiveness, availability and equity of services provided to students who require additional supports. Section three will describe how to implement the focus area in the context of a school district system. This is an important consideration, since SU/SD policies emanating from the state have pointed to centralizing key instructional systems at the SU/SD level. Section four will outline how the AOE plans to provide leadership, support, and oversight relative to the focus area in the coming months. Additionally, a Resources section will be appended to these guidance documents to provide an easy reference to related technical concepts.

It is important to consider when reading these documents how they intersect, support and build from one another. For instance, an effective EST will make critical decisions in how systems invest in and develop a local comprehensive assessment system that meets the needs of all learners. Whenever possible, we will seek to draw attention to these intersections for your consideration.

Section One: Local Comprehensive Assessment Systems in the Current Regulatory and Practice Context

This section defines a local comprehensive assessment system (LCAS) and its basis in statute and rule.

What is an LCAS?

The [VTmtss Field Guide 2019](#) describes in Component 4 a comprehensive and balanced assessment system as one that “. . . contains within it all of the information needed for making decisions that enhance, ensure and improve quality, equity and opportunity. A balanced assessment system contains many types of information about students and about the system so that users can answer and explore a wide range of questions and can gain fresh perspectives on how to improve outcomes for all students.”(p. 35) The goal of improving student outcomes as identified in Act 173 requires a strong assessment system that includes data from multiple assessments that are used to generate evidence of student learning, personalize instruction, inform program design and develop professional learning for educators.

According to Linda Darling-Hammond and colleagues (2013), assessments within the system should be of high quality and used to inform instruction. The assessments should be valid, reliable, fair, instructionally sensitive (i.e., be representative of content and concepts taught from curriculum and instruction), and have value for informing teaching. Additionally, high-quality systems include assessments of higher-order cognitive skills and critical abilities such as communication, collaboration, modeling, problem solving, reflection and research.

The VTmtss Field Guide 2019 explains the relationship between validity and the use of assessment data.

The validity of any individual assessment (how well it assesses what it says it does) is intimately linked to its use. For example, a large scale assessment that is meant to give a picture of the performance of groups of students is a very poor tool to use in determining whether a student has learned the content taught last week in biology. It is just this type of challenge that led the American Psychological Association to adopt language that evaluates assessments by asking whether the interpretations of test scores are valid for their intended use. *In other words, an assessment (itself) is not valid or invalid. Instead, the user needs to be clear that the assessment has been analyzed and used in the way – and for the purposes – it was intended.* [emphasis added] (p. 39)

Additionally, the VTmtss Field Guide 2019 offers guidance regarding reliability.

Using multiple sources of information is likely to increase the reliability of the judgments made. In the case of reliability, we are asking whether the judgments made are (would be) consistent over time and across diverse student groups. It considers whether we can trust the decisions made based on the quality of the information generated. This is an especially important consideration when assessing students from diverse backgrounds. The

assessment system must ensure that all students are afforded equitable means to demonstrate their learning.

The Vermont Education Quality Standards (EQS 2123.2) further clarify expectations for strong assessment systems. Kindergarten through Grade 12 local comprehensive assessment systems must:

- assess standards adopted by the Vermont State Board of Education;
- include a balance of assessment types, including but not limited to, teacher- or student-designed assessments, portfolios, performances, exhibitions and projects;
- utilize both formative and summative assessments in order to understand a student's progression towards proficiencies, based on standards, and inform the creation of Personalized Learning Plans;
- enable users to make informed decisions related to professional learning, resource allocation, and curriculum; and
- connect to the district's Continuous Improvement Plan to ensure coherence to the larger education system.

The second bullet identifies various types of performance assessments that are key components within a personalized, proficiency-based system of education. In tandem with a coordinated curriculum, performance assessments play a vital role by providing opportunities for students to apply learning within rich contexts, find entry points at various developmental levels, and collect evidence of learning in flexible environments. In the document, *The Promise of Performance Assessments* (2018), the authors further explain the power of performance assessments:

The strength of performance assessments—and the source of their validity—is their authenticity... Performance assessments are themselves learning tools that can build students' abilities to apply knowledge to complex problems while also helping students develop co-cognitive skills such as collaboration, grit, resilience, perseverance, and a growth mindset. Students who experience a steady diet of inquiry projects linked to performance assessments ultimately perform better on measures of higher order skills... *Performance assessments also tend to be more valid measures of individuals' higher order thinking and performance abilities than traditional test measures that rely on multiple-choice questions...* [emphasis added] (p. 3-4)

Rather than assessments being isolated events at the end of a unit, performance assessments embedded throughout units of instruction create opportunities for learners to demonstrate new learning, reveal areas of confusion and connect discrete pieces of information. Performance assessments can be a critical tool for ensuring high-quality and responsive instruction within a coordinated curriculum.

Finally, the performance criteria related to proficiencies within an assessment system must be well-defined and easily understood by teachers, administrators, students, parents/guardians, and community members. Developing learning targets related to proficiencies that are explicit

and measurable makes this possible. The goal is to clearly articulate what students will know, understand, and be able to do as a result of new learning.

Essential components of an effective LCAS

The following are the essential components of an effective local comprehensive assessment system (LCAS):

A Clear Vision for Teaching and Learning

An assessment system should be driven by a clear vision of priority goals for teaching and learning. A locally-developed portrait of a graduate can be an effective tool for clarifying the destination -- what students should know, understand, and be able to do in order to be career and college ready. Tools such as personalized learning plans communicate the roadmap for how students can gain the experiences, skills and dispositions to be college and career ready. The AOE will soon be releasing the Vermont Portrait of a Graduate – an example portrait developed by students, educators and stakeholders over the course of more than a year – to assist supervisory districts in clarifying their vision for teaching and learning.

Design for Rigor

Working backwards, identify proficiency-based graduation requirements, performance indicators and learning targets. Clarify the criteria for proficiency. Construct related comprehensive performance assessments that integrate content and transferable skills, require students to apply learning to new contexts, and elicit evidence of learning. Identify related formative performance assessments to determine the students' strengths and areas that require additional instruction and support.

An Assessment Inventory

Identifying the assessments that are currently in place is a first step towards the development of a coherent, balanced assessment system. This review can serve as an opportunity for educators to build a common understanding of the purpose of the assessment system, the alignment to standards or proficiencies, the gaps and redundancies, and the appropriate use of assessment data. The Assessment for Learning Project also suggests reflecting on your system through three lenses. To what extent:

- is assessment an ongoing process integrated with curriculum and instruction?
- do classroom culture and strong relationships enable rich feedback and reflection?
- do assessments generate rich and varied evidence of learning?
- do assessment strategies enact more equitable learning environments?

Assessment Literacy

A systemic structure designed to provide the time, resources, and professional learning related to assessment literacy needs to be in place. Teachers must have opportunities to calibrate scoring of student work in order to create consistency among scoring practices, and systems

should identify and commit to reliable assessments. Discussion of student work is also essential for enabling teachers to support one another in determining next steps and improving outcomes for students. Developing schedules that allow for consistent and predictable opportunities for content-specific and/or grade band teams to come together is essential. Consideration should be given to leveraging existing structures such as ESTs, staff and department meetings, and district professional learning days in addition to school/day schedules.

Personalized Learning Plans

Determining how personalized learning plans will be integrated throughout the system and used to document learning, provide opportunities for self-assessment and reflection on learning over time, and creating pathways for meeting future goals is a critical component to ensuring coordination across grade levels, instructors and a school system. Most importantly, it ensures that students play an active role in student-centered learning environments where they reflect on their own learning and aspire to new learning throughout their PK-12 experience.

A Culture of High Expectations

Create a culture in which students, parents, and educators truly believe that every learner can reach high expectations. Commit to meeting students where they are, moving them along a continuum of learning, and providing timely supports when needed. Invest in professional learning that builds educator efficacy. Implement a strong multi-tiered system of academic and behavioral supports that includes an EST which enhances the ability of educators to meet the needs of all learners.

The Importance of an Effective LCAS

The AOE's theory of action guiding this work states: If each SU/SD implements a local comprehensive assessment system with a balance of assessment types that provides information about student proficiency in a variety of ways, clearly communicates performance criteria and identifies methods for communicating student progress, then Vermont's SU/SDs will enhance the effectiveness, availability and equity of services provided to all students.

The Flexible Pathways Initiative (also known as Act 77) represents a commitment to foster a system in which every student graduates with the skills, knowledge and abilities needed to be successful in career, college and life. It was created "to promote opportunities for Vermont students to achieve postsecondary readiness through high-quality educational experiences that acknowledge individual goals, styles, and abilities." These goals, styles and abilities can be clearly communicated through the personalized learning planning process. Additionally, Act 77 requires opportunities for ". . . secondary students to pursue flexible pathways to graduation that: (A) increase aspiration and encourage postsecondary continuation of training and education; (B) are an integral component of a student's personalized learning plan." A local comprehensive assessment system, therefore, is essential for ensuring that students are progressing along a learning continuum that leads to the attainment of their goals as well as local graduation requirements.

Proficiency-based learning as required by the Education Quality Standards begins with highly effective instruction that is informed by research and guided by state standards and graduation requirements that are developed locally. Proficiency-based graduation requirements (PBGRs) are the locally-delineated set of content knowledge and skills connected to state standards that, when supplemented with any additional locally-developed requirements, have been determined to qualify a student for earning a high school diploma. The expectation is that graduation requirements are rooted in demonstrations of student proficiency. A comprehensive and balanced assessment system serves the purpose of capturing this evidence of learning. The assessment system should then elicit a “rich tapestry of information” (Ten Principles of a High-Quality System of Assessment, 2018) that tells the story of a student’s educational journey.

What Does it Look Like When We Do Local Comprehensive Systems Well?

A strong local comprehensive assessment system provides a rich collection of data. Educators, including an EST, must be prepared to collaboratively analyze, interpret and make instructional and programmatic decisions based on these data. Problem-solving protocols and data-based decision-making help to narrow broad statements about student performance into precise problem statements, making it more likely that continuous improvement plans are matched to needs and tied to student outcomes. Data literacy, therefore, is an essential competency for all decision-makers in this process that can be strengthened through needs-based professional learning. As stated by the Vermont Statewide Steering Committee on Response to Instruction and Intervention (2014):

Assessment information alone is useless; it should invite action. Educators must be wise consumers of assessment data, understanding its properties and appropriate uses. The data and information provided by assessment must be examined, discussed, reflected upon, and used to make decisions... (p. 27).

Organizational systems, structures, and culture must be built to support data collection, analysis and decision making in order for a local comprehensive assessment system to effectively impact instruction and student outcomes. The VTmtss Field Guide explains that a culture of data-informed decision-making requires:

- strong leadership and an underlying systemic structure in place to facilitate and support the use of data;
- a focus on improving social-emotional, behavioral and academic outcomes for all students;
- a shared focus on using assessment information to improve instructional practices and outcomes;
- ongoing collection, examination analysis and interpretation of data; and
- a range of trustworthy and relevant data (pieces of information) used to solve problems and make decisions (Component 4, p. 36).

In reality, context matters. Schools at the elementary, middle and high school levels have access to different types of data and often use data to answer very different questions. Additional school variables such as size and location may influence organizational structures and

opportunities for collaborative data-based decision making. Regardless, all educational systems with high-quality local comprehensive assessment systems should have a relentless focus on using data to reveal patterns, identify successes and challenges, and improve outcomes for learners.

Section Two: LCAS as a Major Systems Lever for Act 173

The purpose of Act 173 of 2018 is to enhance the effectiveness, availability and equity of services provided to all students who require additional supports in Vermont’s schools. The following five recommendations were identified in the law as best practices for the delivery of services:

1. ensure core instruction meets most needs of most students;
2. provide additional instructional time outside core subjects to students who struggle, rather than providing interventions instead of core instruction;
3. ensure students who struggle receive all instruction from highly skilled teachers;
4. create or strengthen a systems-wide approach to supporting positive student behaviors based on expert support; and
5. provide specialized instruction from skilled and trained experts to students with more intensive needs.

A local comprehensive assessment system is coherent and allows educators to determine the effectiveness of core instruction, identify students who need additional support, and determine appropriate intervention strategies. A comprehensive system is a strategy for improving teaching and learning; it can facilitate high levels of student achievement and avoid children “slipping through the cracks.” Effective use of assessment is focused on enabling students to experience success and providing timely interventions when needed. However, students should not simply be passive recipients of assessment data decisions. There must be opportunities for them to actively participate in this process by documenting their progress in relation to learning targets and proficiencies, keeping track of this information in their personalized learning plan, and working with teachers to resolve challenges.

A local comprehensive assessment system can also inform decisions around needs-based professional learning and district-wide investments in professional learning to improve teacher efficacy and student outcomes. These decisions should be reflected in Continuous Improvement Plans, Consolidated Federal Programs investment requests and in-service learning opportunities.

Section Three: Implementation of LCAS in Supervisory Districts/Unions

Shifting the focus of an LCAS from a school-based activity to a coordinated supervisory union or school district-level activity provides the opportunity to re-evaluate how students, teachers and other stakeholders engage with assessments and student assessment data. One goal related to this shift is better use of data to inform the progress of student-centered learning across the PreK-12 continuum. Strategies for connecting assessment data to an individual student’s educational record will need to be developed in order to support this shift while ensuring the integrity of PLPs and protection of student-level data. Additionally, there will be new

opportunities to consider how data may inform system-level decision-making (e.g., identify duplication or gaps in a coordinated curriculum) and investments to improve student outcomes (e.g., curriculum development needs, coordination of efforts, and needs-based professional learning).

Another important reason for coordinating LCAS at the district level and using the data at the local level is to increase the effectiveness of core instruction in the classroom. As a system, a district should be critical of the amount of time spent on assessment *of* learning relative to amount of time spent on assessment *for* learning. Assessments that take a significant amount of time away from instruction and that have relatively low levels of interrater reliability should be closely monitored, and assessments that can be used more efficiently and reliably across a system should be adopted. Finally, if data from an assessment is not used in a meaningful way, decisions need to be made regarding how to support the use of data that is generated or the elimination of the assessment.

An effective system-wide LCAS, then, is not solely an articulation of all the possible assessments that are or could be used in a district, but rather should describe those assessment activities that provide data that can be utilized consistently across a system to inform instructional and team decision-making at the school-based level. Achieving this coherency in an LCAS at the supervisory union or district level requires the consideration of several factors.

Selecting or Developing Assessments for Efficacy

As previously stated, a high-quality LCAS is both comprehensive and balanced. From a supervisory union or district perspective, this means there needs to be a systems-wide coordination of summative assessments in order to ensure students are held to the same high expectations. Assessments that are shared across a system also provide opportunities for educators to collaboratively discuss and assess student work, thereby deepening a collective understanding of proficiency. It is useful to consider the broader organizational purposes of assessment in making decisions about purchasing or developing new assessments. These purposes include:

- Instructional Purpose – using the data from an assessment to make ongoing instructional decisions at the student level;
- Administrative Purpose – using the data from an assessment to evaluate programs and program inputs such as curriculum and professional development; and
- Policy Purpose – using data at the school board governance level to set organizational goals for all students in a school system to address issues of quality and equity.

One aspect of overall assessment efficacy is to consider to what extent data from a single assessment can be used to satisfy multiple organizational purposes. For example, some assessments are better used exclusively for instructional decisions but, due to their low reliability, are unsuitable for program evaluation. Instead of seeking to address reliability concerns only by implementing separate assessments for formative and evaluative purposes, a district should consider when feasible implementing a reliable assessment that can do both.

Likewise, it is very important for school boards to base their policy-level decisions on reliable assessment data. To support board goal setting for student outcomes, school boards should consider using reliable local assessment data that can be compared to regional, national or international performance measures.

Assessment Data: A Coordinated Approach

There are essentially three basic processes involved with using assessment data:

1. Data Collection – the gathering of data from assessments into common tools such as spreadsheets or databases;
2. Data Arrangement – the organization of data using various calculations and statistical processes; and
3. Data Visualization – the publication of arranged data into tables, charts, graphs, and other graphical formats to support the analysis of the data by students, teachers, and other stakeholders.

From a systems perspective, it is important to note that all three of these processes can be automated with modern assessment tools. Students, teachers and other stakeholders should be involved with the design of these processes with the goal of establishing common data processes across the entire system, but the key to coherency in this area is the adoption of a common data tool set. Student information systems (SIS) can be useful in accomplishing this coherency. Most SISs include assessment modules that can improve data collection and arrangement processes. Many districts purchase separate data visualization platforms, however, to provide data dashboards and other visualizations to support data analysis.

Data Literacy: The Role of Data Teams

Data teams can be a useful organizational structure for promoting data literacy and efficient approaches to data analysis. Data teams should not be used to collect data, arrange data or to visualize data. These processes should be completed before data teams are convened (here, too, a common tool can be critically important). The focus of data teams should be on the analysis of data and instructional decision-making including program evaluation.

Like educational support teams (ESTs), data teams can be more effective when organized across an entire system with the support of central office personnel. There is an obvious nexus between EST and data teams that should be developed based on the scale of an organization. For example, if a district were to deploy modern data management tools that automate the collection, arrangement, and visualization of data, participants on both ESTs and data teams will have a common language on how to interpret the data and design interventions. In smaller school systems, there will be an opportunity to combine both of these activities into a single team. The district would then assume more of the responsibility for evaluating programs leaving school-level teams to focus on the formative instructional needs at the classroom or grade level.

Assessing Student Aspirations through Personal Learning Plans

Lastly, the shift of LCAS to a supervisory union or district-level activity should anticipate how to manage data obtained through personal learning plans (PLPs). One of the most important uses of assessment data is student goal-setting. A consistent format and approach to PLPs across a school district system can provide important insights into program development such as flexible pathways and help inform program evaluation. Using guidelines such as the [Critical Elements of PLPs](#) and tools such as the [Flexible Pathways Implementation Kit](#) and the Vermont Portrait of a Graduate, can support identifying key data to collect and consistency in implementation across a school district system as well as the state. In order to make the connections among these data, districts should seek to develop a consistent coding scheme for student aspirations that can be correlated to standards and proficiencies. Student Information Systems (SIS) can be useful in this regard, although many do not include full PLP modules. Some districts have been able to address this through the implementation of separate learning management systems (LMS).

Regardless of how the management of student aspiration data is addressed, it is important to put the need to manage these data at the forefront in the design of a systems-level LCAS. New data standards are emerging in this area (e.g., such as the [Experience API or xAPI](#)) which will allow districts to organize assessment data related to student experiences beyond the typical boundary of school-level assessment. As much as we focus on instructional and administrative uses of data to expose opportunity gaps, these data can help expose aspiration gaps, an important consideration in a rural state such as Vermont.

Section Four: AOE Leadership, Support and Oversight

In order to support the development of strong local comprehensive assessment systems, the AOE is providing leadership by:

1. clarifying expectations for our graduates through the sample Vermont Portrait of a Graduate;
2. collaborating with stakeholders to refine the Quality Criteria for Local Comprehensive Assessment Systems;
3. researching and sharing strategies for supporting student-designed assessments;
4. providing resources and facilitating the development of strong performance assessments;
5. researching and providing training opportunities for district leaders to use school and district-wide tools to get instructor and student perspectives on student-centered learning experiences; and
6. facilitating the development of proficiency scales and learning targets.

The AOE is providing support by:

1. convening educators in northern and southern locations to construct a shared understanding of the essential components of high-quality local comprehensive assessment systems;

2. supporting professional learning of tools that can be implemented at the local level such as the CBE360;
3. organizing and facilitating a Networked Improvement Community (NIC) of instructional coaches;
4. identifying models of high-quality assessment systems;
5. working with leadership teams to enhance and/or refine proficiency-based assessment systems;
6. releasing the VTmtss Field Guide; and
7. publishing the Specific Learning Disability (SLD) Guidelines that will clarify a process for identifying students with disabilities, in particular students suspected with SLD classification.

The AOE is providing oversight by:

1. creating the Vermont Annual Snapshot;
2. collecting information related to LCAS in the Education Quality Review process including Integrated Field Reviews; and
3. monitoring progress towards IEP goals.

References:

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[Ten Principles of a High Quality System of Assessment](#), (2018). Boston, MA: Jobs for the Future.

[The Vermont Education Quality Standards](#)

Vermont Agency of Education (2019). [VTmtss Field Guide 2019: Vermont Agency of Education's multi-tiered system of supports guidelines](#). Montpelier, VT.

Vermont Statewide Steering Committee on Response to Instruction and Intervention (2014). [Vermont multi-tiered system of supports response to intervention and instruction field guide](#). Burlington, VT: Author.

AOE Resources:

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General Resources:

- [State and Local Assessments](#)
- [Quality Criteria for Performance Assessments](#)
- [Performance Assessment Tools and Resources](#)

Performance Assessments Templates:

- [Arts Performance Assessment Template](#)
- [Health Performance Assessment Template](#)
- [Interdisciplinary Performance Assessment Template](#)
- [Mathematics Performance Assessment Template](#)
- [Physical Education Performance Assessment Template](#)
- [Science Performance Assessment Template](#)
- [Social Studies Performance Assessment Template](#)

Additional Resources:

- [Assessment Design for Broader, Deeper Competencies: Report 12 of the MyWays Student Success Series](#) presents the evolution towards greater authenticity and multiple measures, and recommends the use of Five Assessment Strategies: formative assessment, performance assessment, multiple measures, badges and micro-credentials, and Quality reviews.
- [Assessment Manifesto: A Call for the Development of Balanced Assessment Systems](#) describes a vision for excellence in assessment that calls for practices that support the learning of all students, helping them to master required standards.
- [Designing a Comprehensive Assessment System](#) conceptualizes what comprises a comprehensive system that is balanced and aligned, and identifies what actions states, districts, and schools can take to create a comprehensive assessment system.
- [Not as Easy as It Sounds: Designing a Balanced Assessment System](#) identifies and describes three essential criteria for a balanced assessment system: coherence, a theory of action, and efficiency.
- [Student Assessment Inventory for School Districts](#) supports a process by which districts evaluate the assessments students are taking, determine the minimum testing necessary to serve essential diagnostic, instructional and accountability purposes, and work to ensure that every district-mandated test is of high quality and used to improve outcomes for students.
- [The Future of Assessment Practices: Comprehensive and Balanced Assessment Systems](#) describes the components of an ideal comprehensive, balanced assessment system that includes formative assessment (within and between lessons), medium-cycle formative assessment (within and between instructional units), classroom summative assessment (grading), long-cycle formative assessment (several times during the school year), and district and state-level accountability assessment.