

# Reflections from K-3 Formative Assessment Consortium Participants on Implementing an Enhanced Assessment Grant

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## Introduction

The goal of the Enhanced Assessment Grant was to design an assessment that built upon North Carolina's kindergarten formative assessment process to be used through third grade, test the enhanced assessment, and then implement the assessment across states. States that participated in the K-3 Formative Assessment Consortium had the opportunity to provide reflections about whether their goals were met during the grant period. This report summarizes input from five Consortium states: North Carolina (the lead state), Delaware, Maine, North Dakota, and Oregon<sup>1</sup>. This resource may be best utilized by states interested in implementing a statewide formative assessment, states interested in participating in a similar initiative or grant, or federal agencies that offer similar grants to states.

## Findings

We asked states about their grant activities, the successes and challenges of the grant, advice they would offer to other states, and future activities. Responses from the five state representatives are summarized below.

## Grant Activities

**States initially participated in the Consortium because they had an interest in understanding what was available around formative assessment or observation-based assessments, and they wanted to know how to make these assessments available in their state.** States that either had a statewide formative assessment option (DE and NC) or were a part of the pilot process early in the grant (ME) found that they



The K-3 Formative Assessment Consortium is a multi-state consortium formed by North Carolina to enhance a K-3 Formative Assessment and implement it in consortium states. The enhanced K-3 Formative Assessment is a formative assessment process that considers the whole child on five developmental domains. Information from the K-3 Formative Assessment process provides information for educators to improve instruction.

For more information on the Consortium and its efforts, visit: <http://www.ncpublicschools.org/enhanced-assessment/>

<sup>1</sup> Consortium states (NC, AZ, DE, IA, ME, ND, and OR) were asked to provide reflections on the grant during a two-week period in September 2018. The five states in this resource were able to complete a phone interview during the two-week period in September 2018.

generally met these goals throughout the grant. However, states that started to pilot the assessment toward the end of the grant (ND and OR) noted that they are not ready to make it available across the state.

**Every state acknowledged that the grant offered them an opportunity to participate in critical activities that they would not have been able to accomplish otherwise.** For example, every state mentioned that having funding to bring states across the nation together to discuss solutions for a common goal of using an observation-based assessment in early grades was a key activity of the grant. They also appreciated that school-based educators were given the opportunity to participate in these cross-state convenings. Other helpful activities included offering professional development to teachers, providing access to an online platform for teachers to store child observations, building stakeholder buy-in and capacity, and offering stipends or incentives to teachers who were piloting the enhance assessment.

**However, state leads also mentioned that it would have been helpful to have funding to cover other activities,** such as building capacity at the state level. States generally had 1-3 individuals driving the initiative at the state level (North Carolina being the exception with a larger state team), and they were unable to engage other state-level leaders to be a part of a team of individuals while also completing grant activities. Additional funding could have helped to cover time for another individual to lead the initiative or to pay for someone to oversee a specific aspect, such as communications to stakeholders or gathering feedback from educators. State leads also mentioned that having funds to cover support for coaches or for ongoing professional development outside of pilot periods would have been helpful.

## Successes and Challenges

State leaders were asked to reflect on what they accomplished during the grant and what challenged them during the grant. **The primary successes were increased collaboration across states and increased awareness of an observation-based assessment within states.** Additionally, some states found the resources helpful. On the other hand, **states experienced challenges related to limited state-level capacity,** especially when navigating personnel or administration changes. When asked specifically about the role of the online platform in their state’s successful use of the assessment, **every state said an online platform was critical to the success.** Some states noted that without the online capability, the assessment would not happen or be feasible in their state. Multiple states expressed that, because of the cost of using the platform, **an open source option would have been an ideal product of the grant.** For more information, see Table 1.

**Table 1. Successes and Challenges for States During the Grant**

	Successes	Challenges
<b>Delaware</b>	They improved the statewide roll-out of their state-specific assessment through the materials and resources provided and the collaboration with other states, particularly around how to communicate about the assessment well to stakeholders.	There was limited capacity at the state level, which prevented full engagement with consortium activities and cross-state meetings
<b>Maine</b>	Educators are increasingly more excited about understanding the whole child in their instruction and are embracing an observation-based assessment.	The assessment does not align with Maine’s Pre-K assessments, and state leads were unable to engage higher education in understanding the importance of this type of assessment (although they made multiple attempts to invite them into the process). State leads anticipate future challenges for teachers to assess all students in their class rather than the 10 students from the pilot period.

	Successes	Challenges
North Carolina	Their state-specific assessment was enhanced with added constructs and improved progressions. They built strong relationships with other states that are moving forward with using the assessment.	Some states were able to use the assessment earlier than other states, which made it challenging to know how to support states at different points of readiness. They also experienced challenges supporting states through administration and personnel changes.
North Dakota	They were able to get on the same page with other states about the formative assessment process and see it in action in classrooms in their state. They benefitted from the resources developed as a part of the grant and are seeing leaders built in the field who are leading grassroots efforts for this type of assessment.	The assessment was difficult to market within North Dakota because there were misconceptions that the assessment was used to determine a child's "readiness." Teachers who were the sole users of the assessment in their school or district had more difficulty using the assessment successfully than teachers with at least one other user in their school or district. State leaders also had limited capacity at the state level to support all the activities.
Oregon	They were able to collaborate with other states and to work with other states toward the same goal of increasing formative assessment in the early grades.	The main challenges were around being able to fully engage with the consortium from the beginning. Because state directors changed multiple times during the grant period, Oregon had limited participation at the start of the grant. Then, setting up contracts took more time than anticipated, which delayed the pilot of the assessment in the state. There was also limited capacity at the state level to support all the activities.

## Advice to States

To offer insight to other states that may be interested in applying or participating in a similar enhanced assessment grant, we asked states to reflect on how realistic it was to complete the design of an enhanced assessment, test it, and implement it within the five-year grant period. **States concluded that it was not feasible to complete all required activities within the grant period** in the way that would have met each state's needs. To accomplish required activities during the grant period, the enhanced assessment was being tested as it was also being designed, which led to some challenges.

**States suggested that building a complete assessment first, then testing and implementing the assessment would have been ideal.** One suggestion was to use the grant to completely enhance the assessment, and states could work together to find additional funding to implement the assessment since full implementation by itself could take 3-5 years, according to implementation science guidance. Additionally, three states (ME, NC, and OR) expressed that they would have changed how the assessment was designed. North Carolina would have not focused as much time on enhancing individual progressions, and Maine and Oregon would have wanted more time and resources to add constructs that would have helped to increase buy-in from their states (e.g., phonological awareness or math).

Regardless, when asked about what advice they would give to states that were interested in a similar initiative, **states encouraged participation in a similar effort.** The following are summarized advice:

- To make the most out of the grant, states could
  - Fully understand the timeline and purpose of grant activities at every stage

- Take full advantage of cross-state meetings and convenings to learn from other states and build a network of invested states
- Understand the role of research partners and what they can offer, such as implementation technical assistance. Then take full advantage of it.
- Recognize that not everything will go as planned and often things may take more time than anticipated (e.g., setting up contracts between states)
- When working across multiple states, it is important to
  - Have a point person who can understand each state’s needs throughout the process
  - Clearly explain the activities of the grant and the expected commitment of participating states, then have frank conversations with states if they are not ready to participate
  - Seek to engage states comparably from the beginning (e.g., have all states able and willing to pilot the assessment from the start) as much as possible
  - Foster a sense of collective purpose; this will require individual states to be flexible about meeting their state’s individual needs to meet the needs of the group
- To ensure success within individual states, state leads may want to
  - Check with state-level leaders prior to joining a consortium to ensure that there is greater statewide support for the initiative
  - Invite other state-level leaders to participate in the initiative to build statewide capacity and to share the responsibilities
  - Seek the support of state-level leadership, especially those who have the authority to make policy or procedural changes
  - Understand what is necessary for successful implementation even if it means that implementation may take more time to have the necessary components in place
  - Prioritize supporting teachers throughout the process

## Future Activities

**All states have plans to use the assessment in some form during the current school year and are thinking about long-term plans.** Three states have made the assessment available statewide and have also encouraged the use of constructs across all domains of development (DE, ME, and NC). Two states (ND and OR) are piloting the assessment in the current school year with a small subset of constructs. Oregon, Maine, and North Carolina are expecting the assessment to be used across kindergarten through third grade (with a slightly smaller engagement at the third-grade level), whereas Delaware and North Dakota are focusing on kindergarten only. For more information, see Table 2.

Activities in the current school year are funded through some mix of the current grant funds, other grant funds (e.g., Striving Readers grant), state dollars, and local funding. However, every state acknowledged that **funding in future years would likely fall on the districts or schools to support assessment activities.**

**Table 2. Future implementation activities for states**

<b>Delaware</b>	The assessment is mandated at the kindergarten level and is only expected to be used within the first 60 days of school. All constructs across all domains of their state-specific assessment (the Delaware Early Learner Survey, DE-ELS) will be used statewide. While there is interest in moving it up to other grades, there are currently no formal plans.
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	To sustain momentum, activities have been included in their Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) plan; talks are being conducted with the teachers' union to recommend observation-based strategies to build teacher buy-in; and the Secretary of Education is set to sign-off on the strategies recommended by the teachers' union.
<b>Maine</b>	For the upcoming school year, the assessment is available statewide. Teachers who participated in the consortium pilot and field test testing process are trained as trainers for the assessment process and can be hired by districts to provide training after this current school year. All constructs are expected to be used across K-2 <sup>nd</sup> . State leads are continuing to build awareness about the assessment and the process of accessing training from teachers. They are also interested in understanding how the assessment aligns with district standards. To sustain momentum, they will focus on continued teacher engagement.
<b>North Carolina</b>	A whole child assessment is mandated at the kindergarten level and is only expected to be used within the first 60 days of school. The enhanced assessment is being made available to districts that are interested in using the enhanced assessment in 1 <sup>st</sup> -3 <sup>rd</sup> . All constructs are expected to be used. To sustain momentum, they communicate to stakeholders about how to foster developmentally appropriate practice in the early grades.
<b>North Dakota</b>	Three districts are using a subset of constructs (i.e., emotional regulation, emotional expression, emotional literacy, object counting, and writing) in kindergarten. State leads are planning how they can make the assessment available to other districts. There are no current plans to use the assessment in other grades.  To sustain momentum, they will work with early care and education through the Quality Rating and Improvement System to see how they can collaborate; engage their regional educational associations (REAs) to offer professional development; and engage stakeholders throughout the school year to help build capacity.
<b>Oregon</b>	One district is piloting a subset of constructs (i.e., emotional regulation, emotional expression, emotional literacy, and writing) in K-3 <sup>rd</sup> . There are plans to make the assessment available to other interested districts. They will conduct their own statewide evaluation to understand what works and how to scale implementation across the state. To sustain momentum, they would benefit from technology support for continued use of the assessment and an evaluation of how to scale the assessment to other districts.

## Conclusion

States that participated in the K-3 Formative Assessment Consortium moved the needle on encouraging the use of formative assessments or observation-based measure in their states. While they experienced limited capacity at the state level and a lack of affordable online options after the grant, states are making plans for how to bring this type of assessment to the early grades within each of their states. They benefitted from cross-state collaborations and look forward to opportunities to collaborate in the future.



*North Carolina's K-3 Formative Assessment Process was developed with funding from the US Departments of Education and Health and Human Services. The K-3 Formative Assessment was enhanced with funding from the US Department of Education. The contents of these assessment materials do not represent the policy of these Departments and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal Government.*