

# Capacity- Driven Schools

Positive  
Assessment  
Climates



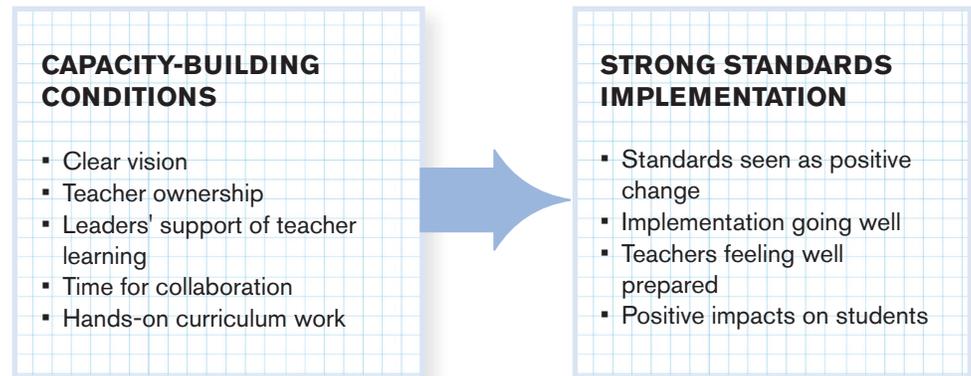
NATIONAL CENTER FOR  
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**NCLE**



Assessment data used to guide and inform, not judge and punish, become a powerful resource in the learning process of schools working to strengthen literacy. As part of a research series from the National Center for Literacy Education (NCLE) examining how schools are implementing new state literacy standards, this paper examines the role of standards-linked assessments in literacy improvement. The findings establish strong connections among three factors: (1) capacity-building approaches to change, such as investing in teacher learning, promoting powerful collaborative practices, and building teacher ownership; (2) strong standards implementation; and (3) a positive, constructive assessment climate.

The introductory paper in this series, *Building Literacy Capacity: The Conditions for Effective Standards Implementation*, demonstrates a strong relationship between a capacity-building approach to literacy change and progress in standards implementation, as measured by the indicators in the graphic below.



This paper explores the role of standards-linked assessments in the equation, leading to recommendations about how schools and districts can create a positive climate around the role of assessments in the learning process.

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## Broad support for standards, concentrated skepticism about assessments

The controversy surrounding standards often conflates the standards themselves and the ways in which they are implemented and assessed. NCLE's research finds that a solid majority of teachers support new literacy standards, but their opinions of assessments linked to those standards are more divided.

In our 2015 national survey, 77% of teachers agreed with the statement "In general, the new literacy standards will improve instruction and classroom practice," an increase from 65% agreement in 2013.<sup>1</sup> This level of support for the substance of the standards is consistent with numerous other studies, including those conducted by both of the nation's largest teachers' unions.<sup>2</sup>

Fewer teachers express positive views on the state assessments meant to measure whether students have mastered the standards. A 2014 headline from the Gallup Poll put it bluntly: "Teachers Favor Common Core Standards, Not the Testing."<sup>3</sup> NCLE's research finds a more nuanced picture, suggesting that teachers are not opposed to testing when they feel they have been given the tools they need to help their students succeed. **Teachers' attitudes about the assessments are clearly tied to conditions within their schools for learning about and implementing the standards.** In short, schools taking a capacity-building approach, investing in teacher learning and collaboration and utilizing teacher expertise in the rollout process, not only report more progress in standards implementation but more positive views of new tests.

In the national sample as a whole, agreement with positive statements about the characteristics of the new assessments range from 41% to 62%:

	Total agree
Well aligned with what I have been teaching all year	62%
Cover the full range of literacy standards	57%
Good measures of the analytical skills/critical thinking emphasized by standards	52%
Improvement on past state tests	46%
A fair measure of what my students know and can do	41%

These mid-range levels of agreement could suggest that teacher views of the assessments are mixed or ambivalent. In fact, most teachers either agreed with all of the statements or disagreed with all of them. The substantial number of teachers disagreeing that the new assessments are well aligned with their teaching and fair measures of student learning is problematic; when assessments are not viewed as fair they are more likely to distort than support the teaching and learning process.

<sup>1</sup> A complete summary of findings from the 2015 survey, including the full distribution of responses from each question and methodological specifics, is available on NCLE's website at [www.literacyinlearning.org/building-literacy-capacity](http://www.literacyinlearning.org/building-literacy-capacity)

<sup>2</sup> Recent Polls: Do Educators Support the Common Core? [www.edutopia.org](http://www.edutopia.org), 1/28/14; "NEA Poll: Three out of Four Teachers Support Common Core." [www.nea.org](http://www.nea.org), 9/12/13.

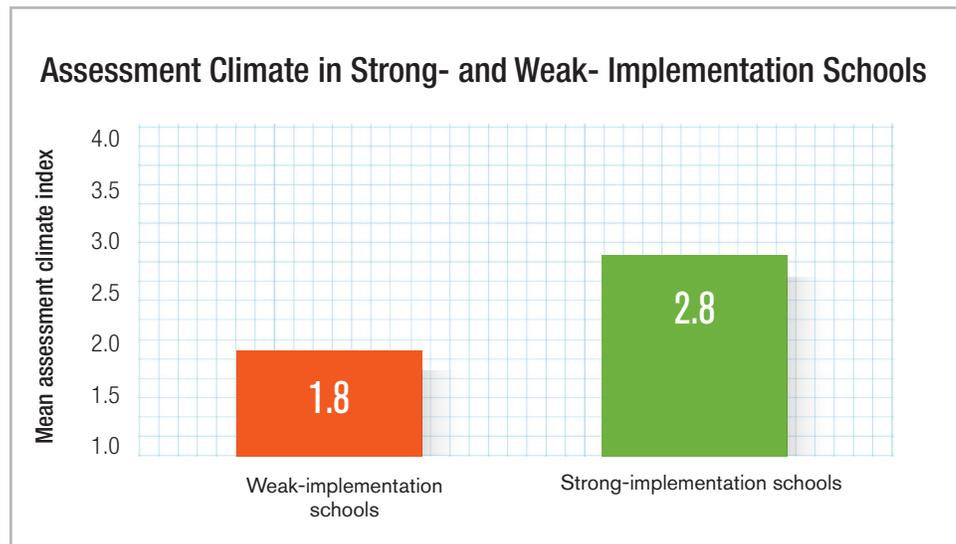
<sup>3</sup> Lyons, Linda. [www.gallup.com](http://www.gallup.com). 10/29/14.

In short, schools taking a capacity-building approach, investing in teacher learning and collaboration and utilizing teacher expertise in the rollout process, not only report more progress in standards implementation but more positive views of new tests.



Clearly, however, some teachers are already more optimistic. What are their schools doing differently?

The first paper in this series isolated a group of schools making the most progress with standards and analyzed their standards-implementation strategy, identifying specific capacity-building practices and conditions linked to implementation success.<sup>4</sup> This paper extends that analysis to look at assessment climate. Those same “strong-implementation” schools using the most capacity-building practices also have the most positive assessment climates, measured by average agreement with the five statements on page 3.



What does a “positive assessment climate” mean and why might it matter? First, it should be noted that these items refer only to new, generally high-stakes state assessments, not to the many other forms of formative and summative assessment teachers use. Teachers who view the new assessments as fair and well-aligned with what they teach are not necessarily pro-high-stakes assessment. Some may see these tests as a necessary evil, others may see them as actually supporting effective practice, but overall these teachers seem to see them as less of a threat. Because these assessments are high stakes, they have more potential to change priorities and behavior. If the tests are seen as fair and well-aligned, presumably these changes are less likely to negatively impact the teaching and learning process. See page 10 on what teachers say about their hopes for “Tests Worth Teaching To.” When the focus is on the tests themselves, however, distortion can creep in. See page 11, “The Role of Accountability Policies,” documenting the increased amount of time teachers spend on test prep activities when their own evaluations are linked to student scores.

Schools making the most progress with standards implementation have notably more positive assessment climates. It makes sense that teachers who report that standards implementation is generally going well in their schools and who personally feel prepared to teach the standards would also feel better prepared for the linked assessments. But what exactly are those schools doing that

<sup>4</sup> See “Building Literacy Capacity: The Conditions for Effective Standards Implementation” on the NCLE website ([www.literacyinlearning.org](http://www.literacyinlearning.org)) for a broad overview of the link between capacity building approaches and strong standards implementation, as well as methodological specifics of how researchers defined strong and weak implementation schools in the analysis.

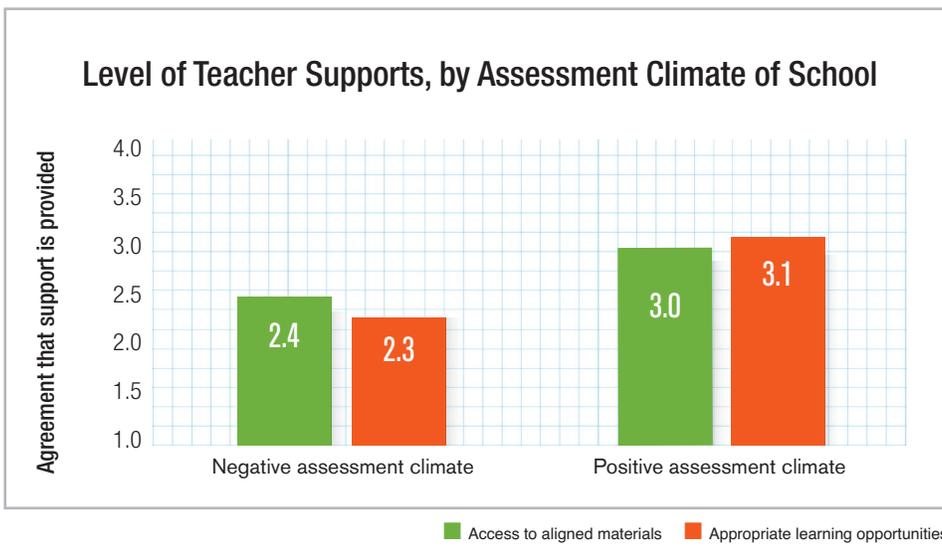
allows teachers to approach new assessments with confidence? The rest of this paper unpacks what schools with a positive assessment climate are doing differently, focusing on the following four elements of standards implementation:

- Schools with a more positive assessment climate provide<sup>5</sup>**
- 1 Tools** to do the job, including adequate opportunities to learn about the standards and access to aligned materials;
  - 2 Time** for the kind of professional collaboration in which teachers dig deep into the curriculum and develop shared agreements;
  - 3 Leadership** that provides a clear vision for literacy improvement; and
  - 4 Ownership** in which teachers shape the overall vision and have a voice in decisions about their own professional learning, curriculum, and instruction.

Teachers need tools for the large and complex job of integrating new standards into curriculum and instruction.

### 1. Tools for the job

Teachers need tools for the large and complex job of integrating new standards into curriculum and instruction. At a minimum those tools include aligned materials and professional learning opportunities. As shown in the chart below, teachers in schools with a positive assessment climate are more likely to report having access to aligned curriculum materials and appropriate professional learning support.



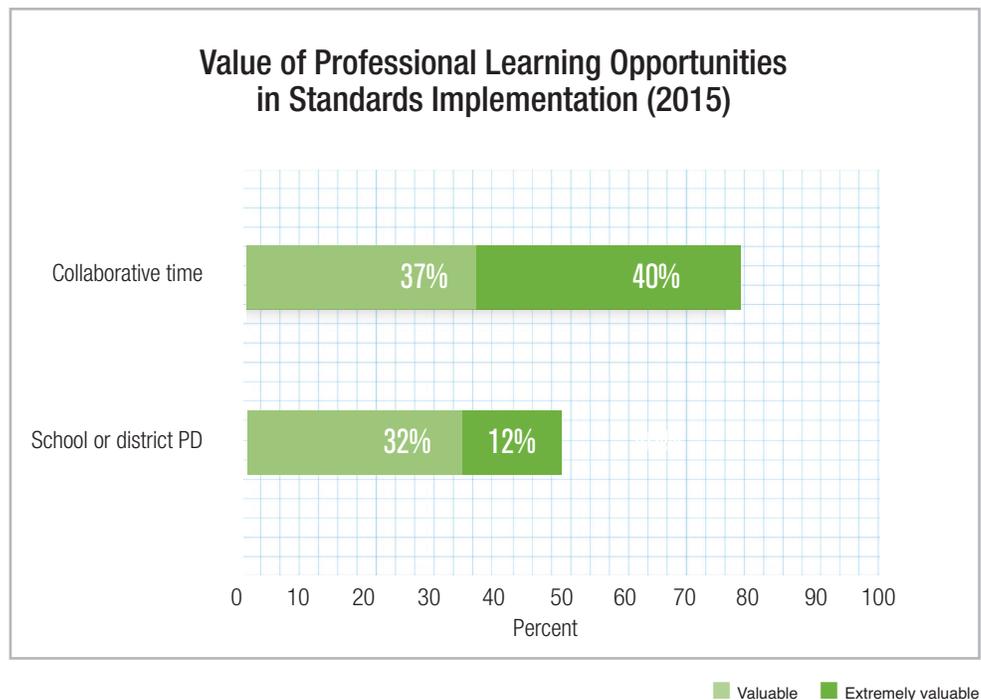
These teachers have been given the tools they need to get the job done. In this context, assessment is more likely to be viewed as better aligned with classroom practice, or at least less intrusive. This suggests that teachers are not as reflexively anti-testing as some media coverage would suggest. What they are against is being evaluated by tests for which they have not been well prepared to help their students succeed.

<sup>5</sup> See methodology appendix for the definition of schools with a "Positive Assessment Climate"



## 2. Time for effective professional collaboration

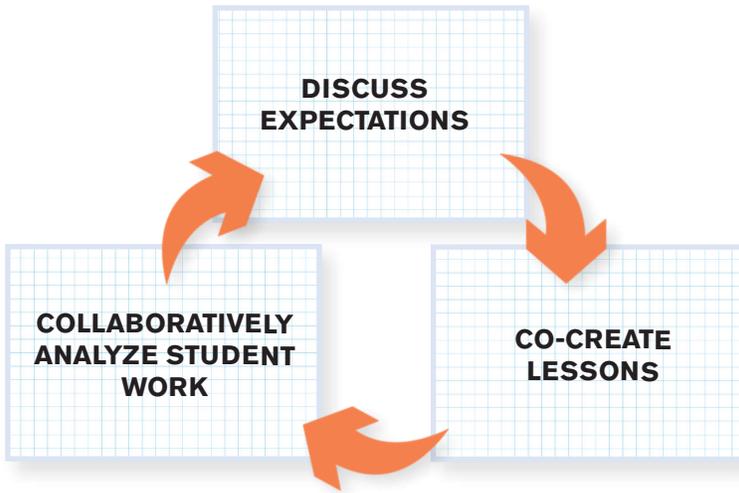
What kind of professional learning do teachers find most valuable in supporting their implementation of standards? In both NCLE's 2013 and 2015 national surveys, collaborative time with colleagues was rated the most valuable support for standards implementation. For example, note the contrast in the value teachers assigned to collaborative time and school or district PD for putting standards in place.



While teachers at all kinds of schools rate collaboration time as the most valuable professional learning, what they do during that time strongly influences whether they feel ready for the assessments.<sup>6</sup> To find assessments a fair measure, teachers have to see them as connected to what they have been teaching all year. When teachers collaboratively shape the curriculum, that connection is more likely to be in place.

Previous NCLE research identified “powerful collaborative tasks”—activities during collaborative work time that have the biggest payoff in classroom change. Ideally, such tasks are connected in an inquiry cycle, in which teachers talk about standards expectations, co-create lessons to help students meet those standards, and then collaboratively analyze student work products relative to the standard.

<sup>6</sup> A subsequent focus brief in this series will look more deeply at Professional Learning practices in schools with strong standards implementation.

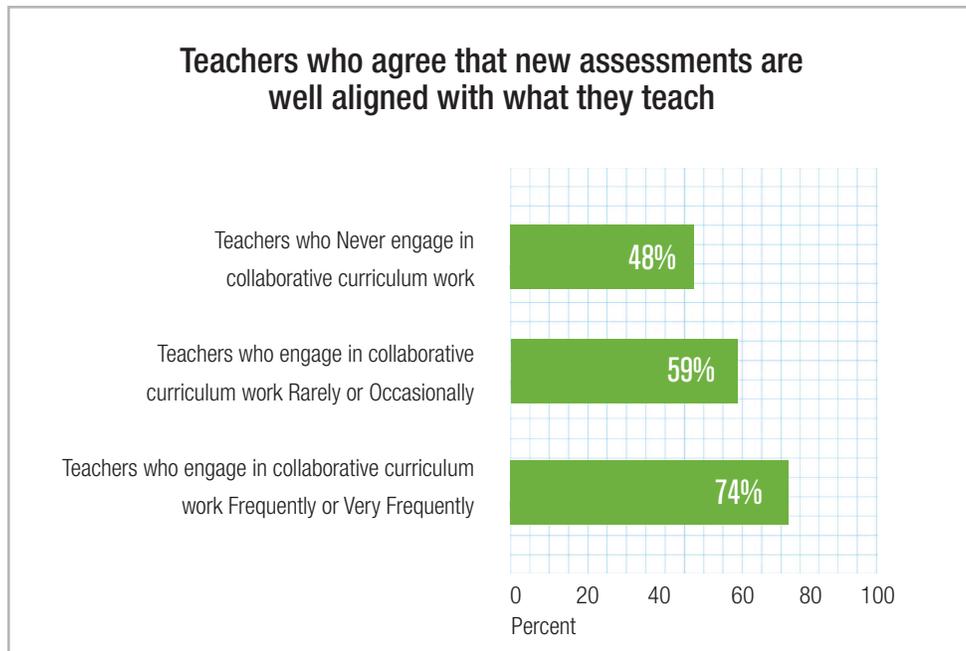


Teachers who do not have the opportunity to do these things—that is, teachers who do not have ownership over the curriculum they teach—are much less likely to see the assessments as well aligned with what they teach. Both curriculum and assessments are out of their control.

The chart below shows the level of teacher agreement that new state literacy assessments are aligned with what they teach, grouped by how frequently teachers report engaging in the following powerful collaborative practices:

- Discussing expectations across subject areas or grades
- Co-creating lessons
- Collaboratively analyzing student work

To find assessments a fair measure, teachers have to see them as connected to what they have been teaching all year. When teachers collaboratively shape the curriculum, that connection is more likely to be in place.



% agree, by frequency of collaborative curriculum work



### 3. Clear leadership

In addition to basic tools of learning support, access to aligned materials, and frequent engagement in powerful collaborative tasks, the overall culture of the school is strongly related to how teachers view the new assessments. Leadership sets the tone, specifically by establishing clear priorities for the school's literacy work.

Look, for example, at the levels of agreement with two assessment statements, grouped by teachers' perception of clear literacy priorities in their school:

Perceptions of Assessments	Teachers who see clear literacy priorities in their school	Teachers who do NOT see clear literacy priorities in their school
	% agreement to assessment statement	
Well aligned with what I have been teaching all year	71%	50%
A fair measure of what my students know and can do	51%	28%

Without that clear vision, teachers either take a "wait and see" attitude towards standards or try to navigate the transition on their own. With clear vision, teachers can feel more confident that the work they have been doing all year with their colleagues and in their classrooms is well aligned with new assessments.

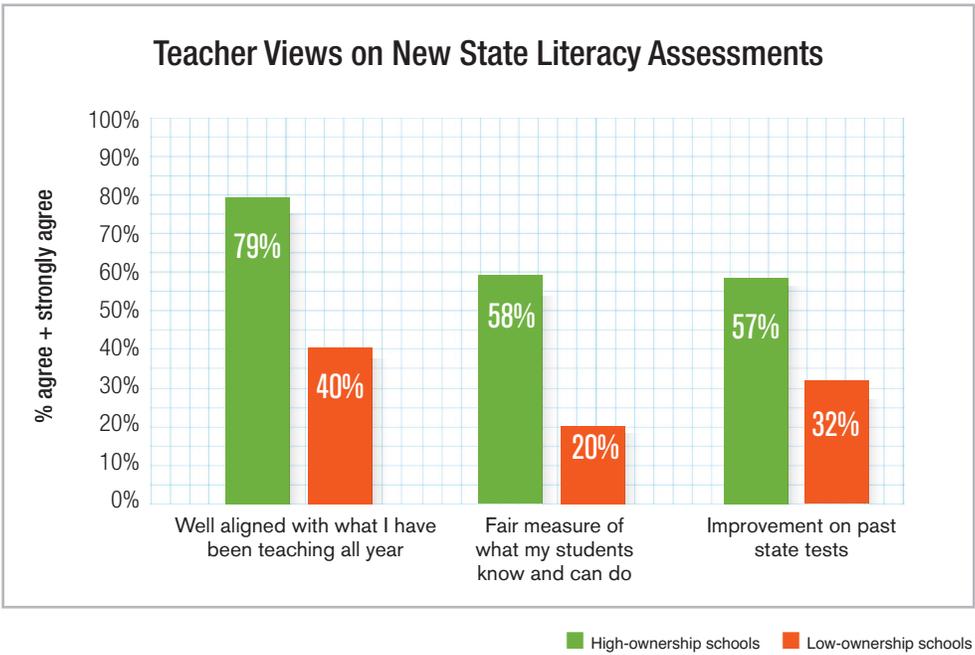
### 4. Teacher ownership of change

NCLE's research emphasizes, however, that clear leadership must be balanced with teacher ownership of the change.<sup>7</sup> Ownership is measured in this research using indexing of three statements reflecting teacher participation in decisions that impact their work:

- (Our school's) literacy priorities were developed collaboratively with teachers.
- Decisions about literacy curriculum and instruction draw on the expertise of teachers.
- Teachers have influence over their own professional learning.

In the following chart, compare the reactions of teachers in high- and low-ownership schools (the top and bottom quartiles on the ownership index) to new state literacy assessments:

<sup>7</sup> A subsequent focus brief in this series will examine what Capacity-Building Leadership looks like in schools with strong standards implementation.



Teachers with active ownership of their own and their students' learning clearly feel better prepared for the new assessments.

## Reclaiming professional accountability

NCLE research suggests that the more teachers have ownership of curriculum and have learning opportunities to translate broad standards into specific student learning experiences, the more likely teachers are to see assessments as fair and well-aligned with their practice. When educators have the time to develop shared agreements about effective literacy practices, they become accountable to one another for using and refining those practices and assessments become less of a distorting or distracting force.<sup>8</sup>

Based on research and direct experience in highly effective school systems in the US and internationally, Michael Fullan argues persuasively that this kind of internally generated professional accountability is the key to deep and lasting change. He identifies test-driven accountability as one of the “wrong drivers” of change, because it cannot create (and may actually impede) the changes in motivation and technical competence needed to improve instruction. Our findings suggest that most teachers are not reflexively anti-testing but are opposed to high stakes being attached to tests for which they have not been well prepared to help their students succeed. Similarly, Fullan is very clear that he is not arguing against the presence of standards and assessments but against their role as drivers of change: “Change the underlying attitude toward respecting and building the profession and you get a totally different dynamic around the same standards and assessment tools.”<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Fullan, M. (2004) “Choosing the Wring Drivers for Whole System Reform.” Seminar Series 204, Center for Strategic Education. Victoria: Australia.

With clear vision, teachers can feel more confident that the work they have been doing all year with their colleagues and in their classrooms has prepared them for new high stakes assessments.

## Recommendations: Building a climate of assessment for learning

To ensure that assessments linked to state standards reinforce rather than distort effective literacy teaching and learning, schools and districts should consider the following steps:

- (1) Ensure that teachers have adequate opportunities to discuss and unpack new literacy standards and have access to aligned materials, including a wide range of authentic texts. To create an implementation strategy that gives teachers the tools they need, involve teachers in the planning process;
- (2) Provide and protect time for professional collaboration, while ensuring that the time is used effectively on powerful tasks linked directly to student learning.
- (3) Establish together a clear vision for the role standards can play in literacy improvement. Administrators need to buffer teachers from political uncertainty and mixed messages and keep the focus on core goals for students' reading, writing, listening, and speaking;
- (4) Honor teacher expertise in developing the school's literacy vision and planning how it will be implemented and monitored.

### Tests worth teaching to?

This brief deliberately focuses on factors in standards implementation that schools and districts can control. One important factor that can shape how assessment influences teaching and learning but is beyond the control of schools is the design of state tests. Three-quarters of teachers agreed that the content of the standards has the potential to improve teaching and learning, but only about half agreed that the new state assessments they saw this year covered the kinds of critical thinking skills the standards actually emphasized. That gap is crucial.

In our qualitative study from 2014, teachers described what they liked about the standards and how they were starting to adjust their instruction in that direction. A common theme was the emphasis on broad skills over discrete content, which teachers saw as more useful to students:

*The students are writing open-ended responses to nonfiction and literature. What we are doing now with Common Core is better because the students really have to think more. It is thrilling because they are getting it. We are working on forcing the kids to look back in the text. The questions that the teacher prompts have to be really deep.*

*(We are) using Common Core as a guide to move in a direction that many of us wanted to go towards anyway, so students are assessed based upon skills and not content . . . The main goal is to assess critical reading and writing skills and not content in history.*

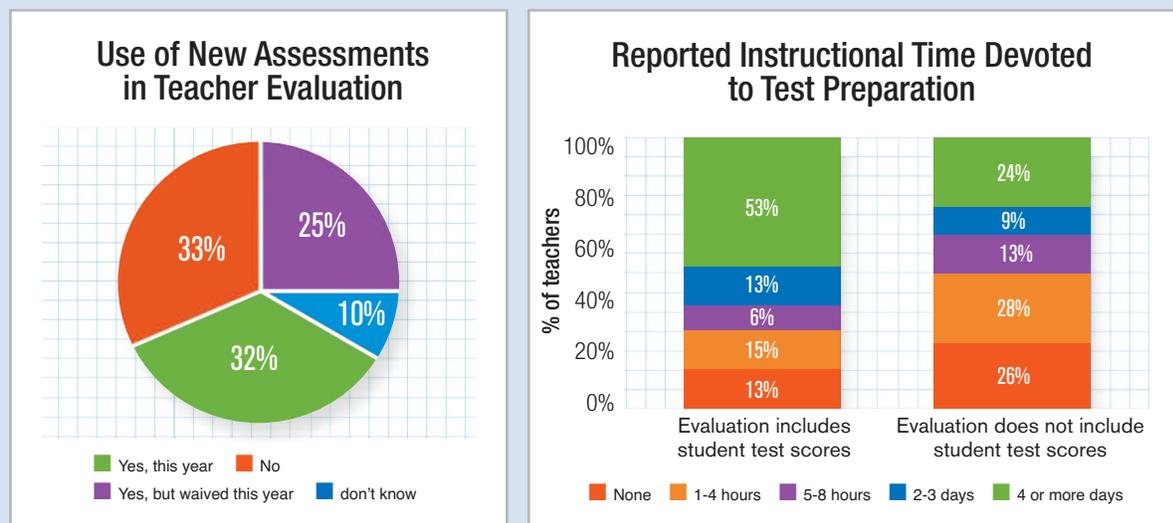
*My personal teaching has changed a lot because the readings are on grade level and the types of questions require a depth of knowledge and critical thinking that is quite different than in some previous assessments students are used to taking.*

Teachers are optimistic that if standards-linked assessments truly measure what the standards emphasize, there will be a beneficial shift to focusing on broad, transferable skills rather than discrete pieces of content that are easily measured by multiple-choice assessments (or, as one teacher pointed out, "are looked up on their cell phone in seconds.")

## The role of accountability policies

Perhaps the most powerful way that state policy influences school assessment climate is through the role of assessment in high-stakes accountability policies. As even casual observers of K–12 education politics know, the use of brand new tests of new standards as a component of teacher evaluation has proved particularly toxic. The same Gallup poll that found 76% of teachers approved of common standards found just 9% reacted positively to linking teacher evaluations to their students' test scores.

About a third of teachers in our survey reported that the new assessments would be linked to their own evaluation in the 2014–15 school year, with at least another fourth of teachers facing that prospect in the future.



Teachers whose evaluations are linked to the assessment results are somewhat less likely to have positive views of the assessments, but the big differences are in the amount of time they spend on assessment-related tasks. Teachers and schools who know they will be evaluated using this year's test results are under the gun, and their implementation approaches seem to be focused more specifically on test preparation than on professional learning about the standards.

Teachers whose evaluations will incorporate student test scores this year reported spending much more time “departing from normal instructional activities in order to prepare students for tests.”

Results were similar when teachers were asked about how much time they spent analyzing data from benchmark or interim tests and on logistical preparation for and actual administration of the tests. All of the time spent preparing for and administering tests and analyzing data is time teachers are not spending developing and testing curriculum and instruction to actually teach the standards.

In our qualitative study, teachers expressed frustration about how time spent focused on testing negatively impacts them and their students:

*(Our) district has created quarterly assessments modeled off of Smarter Balanced so we have to do those every quarter and they take a whole week. We also have practice performance tests modeled after those and we are expected to do that at a much slower rate to get our students ready for the real tests. That really takes a lot of time and cuts into our autonomy.*

*During the month of March we will be spending three out of four weeks testing and so learning will only be for one week.*

*(We are) spending a lot of time on . . . these assessments as opposed to developing teaching approaches and materials and collaborating with other teachers and developing lessons.*

## Appendix: Methodology

### 2015 National Survey

Unless otherwise noted, all findings reported are from our most recent national survey, conducted online in May 2015. Only building-level PK–12 educators who reported that their states had recently adopted or revised their literacy standards were eligible to respond. The findings reported here are limited to classroom teachers, of whom we had 1,456 total respondents.

Full question-by-question findings are available in the document Summary of Findings from NCLE's 2015 National Survey on College- and Career-Ready Literacy Standards & Collaborative Professional Learning, available on our website at [www.literacyinlearning.org/building-literacy-capacity](http://www.literacyinlearning.org/building-literacy-capacity).

The survey deliberately used the language of “new state literacy standards” as opposed to Common Core State Standards to reflect the fact that many states have adopted new standards using language other than “Common Core.”

### Defining “Positive Assessment Climate”

Questions specifically about new state assessments were asked only of the 829 teachers whose states had administered new literacy assessments this year. The full distribution of responses was:

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Well aligned with what I have been teaching all year	12%	26%	48%	14%
A fair measure of what my students know and can do	26%	33%	34%	7%
Cover the full range of literacy standards	14%	28%	46%	11%
Good measures of the analytical skills and critical thinking emphasized by the standards	18%	30%	41%	11%
Improvement on past state tests	25%	29%	33%	13%

To identify characteristics of schools with a more positive assessment climate, we created an index of the five assessment items. Values ranged from 1 (Strongly Disagreed with all five statements) to 4 (Strongly Agreed with all five). Respondents divided into almost even thirds, with one third at 2 or below (average disagreement), one third at 3 or above (average agreement) and one third in the middle. We describe the schools of teachers who averaged 3 or above on the assessment index as having a “Positive Assessment Climate.”

### 2014 Qualitative Study

In the spring of 2014, the National Center for Literacy Education (NCLE) conducted interviews with 102 teachers across all regions, grade levels, and subject areas about how their schools are making the transition to the Common Core literacy standards. The previous fall NCLE fielded a national survey on the same topic, yielding a high level overview of what is working well and not so well in supporting teachers in making this shift. These interviews, each lasting 45 minutes to an hour, were designed to go deeper by eliciting teachers' Common Core implementation stories in a detailed and structured way. Unlike the 2015 survey, these interviews did use the language of “Common Core” and sampled only teachers working in states who at the time of the interview had officially adopted Common Core.

The National Center for Literacy Education is a coalition of 25 professional education associations, policy organizations, and foundations united to support schools in elevating literacy learning.

Alliance for Excellent Education (AEE)  
American Association of School Librarians (AASL)  
American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL)  
ASCD  
Association for Career and Technical Education (ACTE)  
Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE)  
Connecticut Center for School Change  
Consortium for School Networking (CoSN)  
Cotsen Foundation for the ART of TEACHING  
Ford's Theatre  
Human Systems Dynamics Institute (HSD)  
International Literacy Association (ILA)  
International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE)  
Learning Forward  
National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP)  
National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP)  
National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS)  
National Center for Families Learning (NCFL)  
National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (NCTAF)  
National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS)  
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