



Assessments in Math and ELA Study: Emerging Themes Summary from Assessment Buyer Interviews

November-December 2023

Study Overview

Currently, there are a lot of challenges in the assessment space, including too much time spent testing, assessments not being designed with the needs of priority students in mind, and results not always being useful to drive instruction and/or to inform school and district decisions. By tapping perspectives of the Community Insights Network, our goal is to elevate the perspectives of grades 3-8, math and/or ELA teachers and coaches as assessment users, and school/district assessment leaders as buyers of assessment products to inform the Gates Foundation's efforts to drive innovation in the assessment space.

The Assessments in Math and ELA Study was conducted in part to understand the perspectives and experiences of school district leaders and principals who purchase digital assessment products. The following memo spotlights emerging takeaways from interviews with principal and district leader assessment buyers, which took place in November and December of 2023. The seven semi-structured interviews (3 Principals and 4 District Leaders) explored purchase factors, needs and priorities, barriers and challenges, equity in purchasing, desired changes to digital products, and specific information on digital interim/benchmark assessments. See the [Appendix](#) for more details on the study methodology and sample distribution.

By summarizing emerging themes heard during interviews with these key decision makers regarding assessment purchasing, this study aims to inform the development of more effective and equitable digital assessment solutions for K-12 education. Study goals are below; for a comprehensive study plan, please see [here](#). Insights from this memo may be used in suite with [findings from the online journal](#) to think beyond the bounds of how we see and use assessments today and to help uncover what future possibilities for assessments could look like.

Study Goals:

- **Assessment Users:** Elevate the needs, wishes and experiences of grades 3-8, math and/or ELA teachers, especially those serving priority students, as assessment users
- **Assessment Buyers:** Elevate the needs, wishes and experiences of district assessment leaders (decision-makers of assessment selection) especially those serving priority students, as buyers of assessment products.

Key Takeaways

Purchasing Influences

- **Key decision makers:** Roles varied, especially in school vs. district level. Principals tend to focus on buy-in from school leadership and teachers. District leaders often included a wider variety of roles in their purchasing decisions, including curriculum specialists or subject-specific leadership (i.e., director of mathematics).
- **Top purchase factors:**
 - Alignment with standards
 - Cost per assessment component and implementation
 - Ability to meet student and teacher needs
 - Ease of use

Implementation Considerations

- **Planning and capacity:** Both district leaders and principals pointed out that successful implementation requires ongoing support from assessment creators, adequate training budgets, and sufficient teacher/staff capacity.
- **Common barriers:** Capacity of teachers, poor user interface and functionality for both teachers and students, and clarity on how to interpret results.
- **Data use:** Data from interim/benchmark digital assessments is used to monitor student engagement and performance, identify students needing support, inform instruction, and share with parents.
- **Equity:** District leaders and principals often cited specific equity considerations sought out in digital assessment products, but noted more improvements are necessary for assessments to serve as helpful tools to address inequities.

Desired Changes in Assessments

- **Desired changes:** The most noted areas for improvement included increasing ease of use, more considerations for equity in assessment creation, increased functionality to meet student needs, and making assessment data more teacher friendly.

Detailed Findings

			
Purchasing	Assessment Implementation Considerations & Barriers	Focus on Equity	Desired Changes in Assessments



Purchasing

Decision Makers

For digital assessment purchases, key decision makers varied based on the scope of impact (school vs. district) and student population size. While principals appeared to emphasize buy-in from teachers and vice principals, district leaders involved more content-specific roles in their purchasing decisions, such as subject-specific leadership and curriculum specialists, in digital assessment purchasing and implementation.

School Level:

- **Principals:** Usually, the final decision maker on assessment purchasing decisions, principals explained that they often consult with teachers, vice principals, and other stakeholders first. Principals are also frequent assessment data users and are interested in their ability to export and present data both on teacher usage and student process as well.
- **School administration:** Vice-principals and teacher faculty leaders are also often key decision makers of purchasing decisions.
- **Teachers:** While teachers are often involved in piloting or evaluating new assessment products, their involvement as decision makers appeared inconsistent in the interviews with principals and district leaders.
- **Parents:** Parents were also named as decision makers, but their level of influence varied by school type and size of district/school. For example, in an interview with one principal, parents were named as a key stakeholder necessary to gain buy in from before purchasing and implementing any new assessments.

District Level:

- **District leader roles:** Counseling Coordinator, Director of Equity, Director of Mathematics, and Executive Director of School Improvement.
- **Additional subject matter leaders mentioned:** Curriculum specialists, research and accountability, finance roles, and instructional coaches.

Purchase Factors

The most commonly cited digital assessment purchase factors considered by district leaders and principals were alignment with standards and curriculum, needs of students and other users, cost, and ease of use. However, while many factors were identified as ideal for assessments, principals and district leaders acknowledged the difficulty of achieving all of these goals in practice.

- **Alignment with standards and curriculum.** Expressed by both principals and district leaders, a digital assessment's alignment with standards and curriculum are essential and often outweighs other purchase factors.

"Cost is a factor. I don't want to say that it's not. But, we also have really spent the past several years working hard with my staff to go through the fact that if they want something, and it will benefit students' learning in their work in the classroom, we will figure out how to get it. I also think the alignment to standards are the factors that are of high value to them. It's important. So, if something's not aligned to those items or as tightly aligned [as other products] ...they're going to push back on it." – Middle School Principal, New York

- **Students' needs.** Student needs were often cited as the key initiator of exploring new digital assessments. Differentiation, addressing gaps in learning, and tracking student progress were the most listed areas of student needs. Acceleration was a noted need by two district leaders, who gave mixed feedback on digital assessments' ability to serve this purpose adequately.

"I don't necessarily have control over the budget, nor do I have control over what's mandated...But, something that I truly have control over is the differentiation piece." – K-8 Principal, California

- **Needs of other users.** District leaders and principals must consider the needs of different user groups simultaneously, specifically students, teachers, schools, and district. An assessment product that has a user-friendly and engaging interface for students may not simultaneously meet the respective data quality needs of teachers, principals, or district leaders. For example, a district leader (and former principal) explained the need to prioritize input by curriculum specialists over teachers to ensure the assessment products meet their needs first. Another district leader gave a verbal list to exemplify the numerous priorities and needs across assessment user groups within their district,

"Number one, do they have a normed data set so that the information that they get is really indicative of students' progress? Number two, are the assessments aligned to the California state standards? Number three is there a crosswalk between the assessment and the current curriculum that can show me whether or not students are at the prerequisite level prior to taking on that standard. Number four, is it an easy to use, intuitive interface for teachers, students, and for the administrators to gather data? And finally, is there a robust back end on data so that our data management team can get the raw data and look at it eight ways to Sunday's, i.e. breaking it up by different factors like how our English language learners do on the state standardized test in math versus our other students?" – District Leader, California

- **Cost considerations of assessment components.** Both principals and district leaders explained how the cost of an assessment is weighed heavily, and the number of assessment components and grade bands included in the overall price is often a key consideration. Some interviewees explained that they could not afford to purchase all of the components of an assessment product under consideration, which reduced its value and ability to meet their needs. This theme also frequently came up in response to questioning if interim benchmarks are seen as part of a comprehensive system. Most interviewees disagreed with and expressed frustration with the time and cost impacts of having to use multiple assessment products from different publishers to meet their needs.

"You only have \$100,000 and for everything that you need it is going to be \$200,000. You need to have that in the forefront of your brain because otherwise you're going to do all of this work, all of the groundwork, all of the research and everything already be told, 'Oh, but we can't get there.'" – District Leader, Texas

- **Cost considerations of assessment implementation.** Beyond the cost of the assessment itself, district leaders and principals both explained their need to project the costs of teacher training, launching the assessment in the classrooms, and continuing technical assistance needed to implement the digital assessment. District leaders explained that ongoing support from the assessment creator companies is desired, and the additional cost of training must be factored in the purchasing and in for planning for implementation.

"We purchase these platforms, and the implementation has been difficult because we are now having to purchase additional professional development to train our people on how to implement the program. So, you're talking about \$5,000 to \$25,000 each time for the vendors to come out and train your people. Or they may say only ten people can come, and you only get maybe two professional developments. So that's been a challenge, it's implementing it and scaling it on a global scale because of the cost factor, or you're limited to how many people, or limited to how many times you can receive the training." – District Leader, Texas

- **Ease of use.** The ability to easily navigate and use digital assessment products was frequently named as a key purchase factor because of its impact on cost-effectiveness, teacher time management and sustained buy-in, student accessibility, and data utilization.

"I think if my staff didn't want something, or wouldn't use it, or was struggling to navigate it, it's not something I would get." – Middle School Principal, New York

Assessment Implementation Considerations & Barriers

In addition to considerations made prior to purchasing digital assessments, district leaders and principals were asked about their experiences with implementing digital assessment tools into their schools and district. These responses were further probed to better understand how these experiences influenced their decision to keep or



change their assessment products. Because of this, their responses often mirrored purchase factors and provided more in depth information on why these assessment features were so valuable.

- **Planning and capacity.** Both district leaders and principals pointed out that successful implementation requires ongoing support from assessment creators, adequate training budgets, and sufficient teacher/staff capacity.

"Our teachers are, even the older ones, very tech savvy. So, when it came down to Star Phonics and the training that was provided and implementing, there was definitely a gap. We were losing too much instructional time in order to incorporate Star Phonics." – K-8 Principal, California

- **Common barriers.** Capacity of teachers, poor user interface and functionality for both teachers and students, and clarity on how to interpret results.

"I think that's just part of it is making sure that the question complexity is equivalent [to standards] and that the interfaces are similar. So, the kid's not saying, 'Where do I click?' or 'How do I navigate?' So, getting consistency in navigation through the product or at least having it be intuitive." – District Leader, California

"So, looking at other platforms that the district had already purchased and trying to work with those with the students, they weren't user friendly. The kids didn't like them. They did not capture their attention. And so, if they're not capturing the student's attention and they're not working with the students, ultimately, they're useless." – District Leader, Texas

- **Data use.** Data from interim/benchmark digital assessments is most often used to monitor student engagement and performance, identifying students needing support, inform instruction, and share with parents.

"We need something that we can chew on. What are we doing by classroom, grade-level, by discipline? ...Are we building off something so that we have the benchmark data piece? Is there growth? How do we do that? Is the company that we're going to partner with providing all that for us? So, we're looking forward to that. We're looking for professional development, we're looking for amazing customer service at the ready when needed" – District Leader, California



Focus on Equity

When principals and district leaders were asked about how equity is factored into their assessment purchasing process, their responses illuminated the need for greater equity considerations and options in the purchasing process, assessment design, implementation, and data use. A common theme across interviews was that while equity considerations were often taken, digital assessment products are lacking in the tools and features to address their considerations.

- **Equity needs to be prioritized more in assessment design and content.** District leaders often expressed that digital assessment products currently available are not often enough features or insight into how equity considerations are incorporated into assessment design.

"Are the scenarios that these platforms giving diverse to our students and their experiences, the passages that they're reading, the word problems that they're reading, how are we making sure all students are included so that the assessments are not biased?...Because history does tell us there are so many assessments that we as citizens take that are biased because they're not including the culture, diversity and experiences of people that are not the status quo." – District Leader, Texas

- **Principals and district leaders gave examples of how digital assessment can (or should) meet the diverse needs of their students.** Features such as Spanish-based assessment of mathematics were praised as a necessary feature for more equitable student testing, but many district leaders and principals also noted that more improvements were needed to ensure that assessments are more aligned with students needs and lived experiences. More than one district leader expressed a need for assessment language and real-life examples to be more representative of the diversity of student's experiences, such as food types (i.e. cultural reference point for papaya vs. Apple or orange). One principal shared how any assessment purchased must be easily adaptable to fit the needs of all their students, stating

"We do have one child who's completely visually impaired and another child who is completely deaf...So we really work to make sure that any materials we have either already contain the appropriate supports for those children or they're able to be easily modified so that those children can also use them." – Middle School Principal, New York

- **Equity in data use and reporting.** This was another area of both high priority and need for future improvements from assessment products. However, it's important to also note that a theme of skepticism emerged about usefulness of digital assessment data for addressing inequity. Speaking about what data use opportunities that digital assessment provides, one principal shared their skepticism that assessments can accurately provide valuable insights into inequities among student performance,

"They're definitely providing us with instructional effectiveness. They're giving us that data. But are they really demonstrating equity? I don't think so, to be honest." – K-8 Principal, California



Desired Changes in Assessments

Interviewed principals and district leaders shared recommendations for improvement in digital assessment products to better fit the needs of their schools, teachers, and students.

- **Ease of use.** Improve the student and teacher user experience by offering shorter paths to get to the most important and commonly needed tabs within a tool. Move away from tools being unnecessarily complex or hard to navigate.
"We want to make sure that the interface is of the product is similar to what they're seeing later in the year or at least so intuitive it's not an obstacle." – District Leader, California
- **Improved equity considerations.** For assessments to make more considerations into how they are developed to increase their useability and relevance to students from different backgrounds or with different needs.
"I think that has to be added. Are the scenarios that these platforms giving diverse to our students and their experiences, the passages that they're reading, the word problems that they're reading, how are we making sure all students are included so that the assessments are not biased?" – District Leader, Texas
"So, when companies do their sales pitch to us, the first question out of our mouths is, 'Can you translate this immediately? Is there a function within that everyone's go to?'" – District Leader, California
- **Increase functionality to capture student needs.** Both district leaders and principals explained how digital assessments could be doing more in aiding student needs, such as acceleration and differentiation. For example, a district leader explained the value of adding more capacity for students to show "intent" or "work" to measure comprehension.
"What are the students' intent? Why are they selecting answers that they're selecting? So that we can really reteach to those [concepts] specifically." – District Leader, Texas
- **More teacher friendly.** Change in assessment design is making them more useful tools for the teachers. Interviews point out that a great tool is one that shares data and then advises on how to use time with students to meet specific goals.
"I'm thinking specifically about some supplemental activities that one teacher had pulled, and their data was significantly better than another teacher in a different grade level. My goal was to help the other teacher learn about the supplemental activities and better utilize them. And we were able to achieve that...Although I think it could be more efficient to just say to somebody, 'It doesn't appear you're using this program. Can you tell me about that?'" – Middle School Principal, New York

Appendix: Methodology

The ResultsLab Community Insights Team recruited and conducted semi-structured interviews to gather insights from school leaders responsible for purchasing digital assessment products (Assessment Buyers). Utilizing an existing network of education professionals (K-12 Practitioner Panel) and referrals from EdSolutions, ResultsLab recruited participants who met the inclusion criteria for principals and district leaders who are from a representative school district.

Seven interviews were conducted with District Leaders (4) and Principals (3) representing urban, rural and suburban school districts from the states of Georgia, California, New York, and Texas. Each of the three interviewed principals represented a different school setting (Elementary School, Middle School, and K-8th School) to capture differences in their experiences and needs. Principals who purchased digital assessments for their school and were from elementary or middle schools were prioritized. District leaders selected met requirement of working for a school district that primarily (>50%) serves Black/African American, Hispanic/Latinx, or free/reduced lunch eligible students.

Through open-ended questions and probes, interviews with Community Insights Network members elevated data on purchase factors, needs and priorities, barriers and challenges, focus on equity in purchasing, desired changes to digital products, and specific information on digital interim/benchmark assessments. All interviews were held virtually. Inductive and deductive thematic analysis of the transcripts and emergent notes captured by interviewers were used to identify key insights and themes to inform this report.