



# Arizona State Senate Issue Brief

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## Note to Reader:

The Senate Research Staff provides nonpartisan, objective legislative research, policy analysis and related assistance to the members of the Arizona State Senate. The *Research Briefs* series is intended to introduce a reader to various legislatively related issues and provide useful resources to assist the reader in learning more on a given topic. Because of frequent legislative and executive activity, topics may undergo frequent changes. Additionally, nothing in the *Brief* should be used to draw conclusions on the legality of an issue.

## **STUDENT ASSESSMENTS AND SCHOOL ACCOUNTABILITY**

### **OVERVIEW OF STUDENT ASSESSMENTS IN ARIZONA**

Over the past 20 years, student achievement testing has evolved and become an integral part of both the federal and state education systems. Arizona utilizes multiple statewide assessments in order to meet federal and state specific requirements. The State Board of Education (SBE) is required, by state law, to administer and implement a statewide test to measure pupil achievement of adopted academic standards in reading, writing and mathematics and is also permitted to adopt assessments in social studies and science.<sup>1</sup>

The passage of the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), which in 2002 reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), requires public schools receiving federal funding under Title 1, Part A of ESEA, to annually administer statewide, high-quality, academic assessments in mathematics, English language arts (ELA) and science, corresponding to state adopted academic standards. Prior to the passage of ESEA/NCLB, Arizona maintained a statewide assessment program that was administered to students. Federal requirements require that mathematics and ELA assessments be given annually in grades three through eight and once in high school, and science assessments must be given at least three times throughout a student's academic career. The U.S. Department of Education allows states to apply for "flexibility requests" (sometimes referred to as waivers) to gain relief from specific requirements of ESEA/NCLB. However, the standards and assessment requirements are not elements which may be waived.<sup>2</sup>

Arizona administers three state developed assessments and two national assessments as part of its student assessment system. The statewide assessment system is integrally connected with the various other programs and school accountability systems.

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<sup>1</sup> A.R.S. § 15-741

<sup>2</sup> Arizona was initially issued a waiver on July 13, 2012, which was subsequently amended in 2013 and most recently on May 21, 2014

**HISTORY AND BACKGROUND OF STUDENT ASSESSMENTS IN ARIZONA**

There are two major types of standardized assessments used in measuring student achievement: a criterion-referenced test (CRT) and a norm-referenced test (NRT). CRTs align with a state’s academic content standards. The purpose of a CRT is to measure student performance of specific subject areas and proficiency in the state’s academic content standards written to each grade level. NRTs assess student performance in various subject areas, not necessarily aligned to state academic content standards, and describe performance relative to other students in the same grade across the nation who took the test at about the same time in the school year. The national reference group of students to whom students are compared is called the “norm group.”

Statewide student assessments in Arizona began with the Arizona Instrument to Measure Standards (AIMS) test. The AIMS test was developed through a process involving test contractors, the Arizona Department of Education (ADE), teachers and district test coordinators. The first initial pilot of the AIMS test was administered in Spring 1999 to high school students in writing, reading and mathematics. The first administration of the AIMS test for grades three, five and eight was administered in Spring 2000. The first Fall administration of the AIMS test for high school was administered in 2004. In Spring 2005, AIMS was expanded to include grades three through eight, and included an embedded NRT. The science content portion of the AIMS test was first administered in Spring 2008 in grades four, eight and high school.

Performance classifications for the AIMS test were developed by the SBE and ADE in each of the content areas. The performance level of a student was categorized into four classifications: 1) exceeds standards; 2) meets standards; 3) approaches standards; or 4) falls far below standards.

Students graduating in Spring 2006 were required to either “meet” or “exceed” the reading, writing and mathematics portions of the

AIMS high school test in order to graduate. High school students began taking the AIMS test for graduation purposes as sophomores with multiple opportunities to pass the test before the end of a student’s senior year. As students progressed through their high school curriculum and the academic content standards, the test was intended to measure academic achievement and mastery of tenth grade academic standards as a minimum requirement for graduating. Multiple versions of the high school test were required, since high school students had multiple opportunities to pass the AIMS high school graduation test.

Changes were made to the high school graduation requirement that allowed students who had not passed individual portions of the AIMS test to augment their score with grades from required coursework for graduation. In 2013, passage of the AIMS test was eliminated as a graduation requirement starting with the graduating class of 2017.<sup>3</sup> While the AIMS reading, writing, and mathematics test was administered to all students for the last time in Spring 2014, AIMS retesting opportunities were required to be available through Fall 2016 as high school students graduating through 2016 were still required to pass each section of AIMS in order to graduate. However, in 2015, an immediate moratorium was put in place on the AIMS testing graduation requirement for any remaining student, thereby allowing students in 2015 and 2016 to graduate from high school without passing the reading, writing and mathematics portions of the AIMS test.<sup>4</sup>

<b>2014 HS AIMS Results</b>	<b>Falls Far Below</b>	<b>Approaches</b>	<b>Meets or Exceeds</b>
<b>Reading</b>	1%	13%	86%
<b>Writing</b>	5%	21%	74%
<b>Math</b>	23%	14%	64%
<b>Science</b>	43%	18%	40%

Although passage of the AIMS test is no longer required, high school students, beginning

<sup>3</sup> Laws 2013, Chapter 20

<sup>4</sup> Laws 2015, Chapter 5

in the 2016-2017 school year, will be required to pass the civics portion of the naturalization test issued by the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services with at least a 60 percent.<sup>5</sup> Students are able to retake the test as many times as is necessary in order to achieve a passing score. Unlike other statewide assessments, local school district governing boards and charter school governing bodies are able to determine the manner and method of test administration.

In 2010, the SBE adopted new academic content standards for mathematics and ELA. The Arizona College and Career Ready Standards (AZCCRS) for mathematics and ELA, formerly referred to as the Common Core State Standards, were adopted in conjunction with 43 other states. As part of the adoption of the AZCCRS, the state entered into the Partnership for Assessment Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) in order to procure a new assessment for mathematics and ELA aligned to the newly adopted AZCCRS. However, Arizona withdrew itself from PARCC in 2014. Subsequently, Arizona received notice from the U.S. Department of Education that Arizona would need to amend its ESEA flexibility request in order to be in compliance and that it would need to have a “high-quality assessment” aligned to the newly adopted academic standards for the 2014-2015 school year.

**ARIZONA MEASUREMENT OF EDUCATIONAL READINESS TO INFORM TEACHING (AzMERIT)**

The SBE is the agency required to contract for the purchase of assessments that are required by federal and state law.<sup>6</sup> After withdrawing from PARCC, the SBE initiated the state procurement process and eventually selected and contracted with the American Institute of Research to develop a new statewide assessment, AzMERIT, in order to fulfill state and federal requirements.

AzMERIT is similar to AIMS in that students are tested annually in ELA and mathematics in grades three through eight in a CRT format. Furthermore, students will continue

to be tested in high school; however, students in high school will be tested in a substantially different manner than AIMS. While in high school, students will take various AzMERIT end-of-course (EOC) exams based on their course enrollment.

Mathematics	ELA
1) Algebra 1 EOC	1) ELA 9 EOC
2) Geometry EOC	2) ELA 10 EOC
3) Algebra 2 EOC	3) ELA 11 EOC

Unlike AIMS, where students continued to take a similar exam aligned to tenth grade standards, students will take an EOC exam as they complete coursework. The first administration of AzMERIT occurred in Spring 2015. Starting with the 2015-2016 school year, AzMERIT EOCs will be offered in the Fall, Spring and Summer. Students are expected to test in the same semester (Fall, Spring or Summer) that the one-credit course is completed. With this structure, it will be assumed that the typical student will take two EOCs (one mathematics EOC and one ELA EOC) in grades nine through eleven each year. However, it will depend on a student’s individual path as they complete coursework.

**Computer-Based Format** – AzMERIT is intended to be a fully computer-based test, however, the implementation requirements necessary to administer a computer-based test were not fully realized prior to the first Spring 2015 administration. According to ADE, 40 percent of schools administered the computer-based test, while 60 percent administered the corresponding paper-based test for the Spring 2015 administration of AzMERIT. There is no official deadline set for when schools will be required to administer the computer-based test, however, schools must continue to make yearly requests to administer the paper-based test each year.

**Performance Classifications** – Just as the AIMS test had four performance classifications for student success based on scale scores, AzMERIT has similar designations. The SBE, in conjunction with ADE, worked with stakeholders in developing and determining

<sup>5</sup> Laws 2015, Chapter 1

<sup>6</sup> A.R.S. § 15-742

these performance classifications. In 2015 the SBE adopted the following performance classifications to describe student success: 1) highly proficient; 2) proficient; 3) partially proficient; and 4) minimally proficient.

### ***AIMS SCIENCE***

Although Arizona adopted new ELA and mathematics standards in 2010 and a corresponding new assessment in 2014, academic content standards for science remained the same. Science content standards were revised and adopted in 2005. Federal law requires a statewide science assessment to be administered three times, once in each of the following blocks: grades three through five; grades six through nine; and grades ten through twelve. Arizona will continue to administer the science portion of the AIMS test as part of its statewide assessment program to measure student achievement of the science content standards in grades four, eight and high school.

### ***ALTERNATE ASSESSMENTS***

Alternate achievement assessments are utilized for Arizona students with significant cognitive disabilities who, even with accommodations, are unable to participate in AzMERIT.<sup>7</sup> Federal regulations permit no more than one percent of the student population to be tested and deemed proficient using such alternate assessments. Previously, students meeting eligibility requirements were assessed using the Arizona developed AIMS A assessment. AIMS A was comprised of online multiple choice questions and teacher administered performance tasks. AIMS A was administered to approximately 7,000 students annually.

In 2010, the ADE Alternate Assessment Unit began working with the National Center and State Collaborative, which included 24 state partners, two universities and educators to develop an alternate assessment based on Alternate Achievement Standards aligned to the new standards adopted by the SBE in 2010. Approved by the SBE in Fall 2014, Arizona administered the NCSC Alternate Assessment

for ELA and mathematics in Spring 2015. Although a new assessment was developed for ELA and mathematics, ADE will continue to utilize the AIMS A for Science as it is aligned to the relevant science content standards.

### ***ARIZONA ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNER ASSESSMENT<sup>8</sup>***

The Arizona English Language Learner Assessment (AZELLA) is a standards-based assessment that meets both state and federal requirements to measure a student's English language proficiency. AZELLA is used for both placement and reassessment purposes. Students who have been identified as second language learners on the Home Language Survey<sup>9</sup> take the AZELLA placement test. The student's proficiency scores determine appropriate placement for instruction. Students who have been placed into an English language learner (ELL) program will receive appropriate services and support to build proficiency in English. Students who are in ELL programs also take the AZELLA reassessment once per year until they achieve proficiency. Students who have scored "proficient" on AZELLA are then monitored for two years to help ensure success after their move into a mainstream classroom.

### ***NATIONAL ASSESSMENT OF EDUCATIONAL PROGRESS***

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), also known as "the Nation's Report Card," is a national and continuing assessment of what students know and can do in various subject areas. Since 1969, assessments have been conducted periodically in reading, mathematics, science, writing, U.S. history, civics, geography and the arts.

Under its current structure, the Commissioner of Education Statistics, who heads the National Center for Education Statistics in the U.S. Department of Education, is responsible for carrying out the NAEP project. The National Assessment Governing Board (NAGB), appointed by the Secretary of Education but independent of the U.S.

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<sup>7</sup> A.R.S. § 15-755

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<sup>8</sup> A.R.S. § 15-756

<sup>9</sup> A.A.C.R.7-2-306(B)(1)

Department of Education, sets policy for NAEP and is responsible for developing the framework and test specifications that serve as the blueprint for the assessments. The NAGB is a bipartisan group whose members include governors, state legislators, local and state school officials, educators, business representatives and members of the general public. Congress created the 26-member governing board in 1988.

NAEP provides results regarding subject-matter achievement, instructional experiences and school environment for populations of students (e.g., fourth-graders) and groups within those populations (e.g., female students, Hispanic students). Students can score in one of the four performance classifications: 1) below basic; 2) basic; 3) proficient; or 4) advanced.<sup>10</sup>

### **STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT AND STATE ACCOUNTABILITY**

Proposition 301 was approved by voters in November 2000 to increase funding for education through an increase in the state sales tax by six-tenths of one percent. As part of the corresponding legislation, a new school accountability program (AZLEARNS) was established. AZLEARNS is also used to meet federal school accountability requirements.

In 2010, the achievement profile labels established as part of AZLEARNS were replaced with an A-F letter grade classification accountability system that assigns a letter grade base on prescribed criteria to school districts and individual schools, including charter schools. The specific A-F letter grade classifications were developed by ADE and adopted by the SBE. Achievement profiles and corresponding letter classifications are required to include all of the following<sup>11</sup>: 1) measures of pupil academic progress; 2) student performance on the statewide achievement assessment (AzMERIT and AIMS Science); and 3) results of ELL assessments. Achievement profiles for school districts and schools that serve grades nine through twelve use the same criteria mentioned above; however, they also include the annual

dropout and graduation rates. Academic performance measures must account for 50 percent of the criteria used in determining a letter classification for a school district or school. Other factors in the methodology for determining letter grade classifications are utilized, but these criteria do not influence the overall letter grade classification as heavily as the academic performance measures.

The current A-F accountability system is used to inform parents and the general public of how schools are performing. A school's achievement profile and subsequent letter classification is published annually in school report cards. Letter classifications are also used in determining other accountability measures schools and districts must follow based on their classification. For example, if a school is assigned a "D" for three consecutive years, ADE must confirm the classification data, review implementation of the school's improvement plan and assign the school a letter grade of "F." A school assigned an "F" is assigned a solutions team that assists the school in order to improve achievement. In 2012, the SBE was allowed to assign a school or school district a letter grade of "F" before the entity had been assigned a letter grade of "D" for three consecutive years if the SBE determines there is no reasonable likelihood that the school will achieve an average level of performance within the next two years.<sup>12</sup>

Furthermore, school letter classifications are a factor in Arizona's system of school choice, providing parents with the information to assess the quality and achievement of a school in order to determine what options are available for their student. Students that attend a school or school district that has been assigned a letter grade of "D" or "F" are eligible to receive an Empowerment Scholarship Account that provides publicly funded monetary support for other educational opportunities should the student accept certain statutory obligations.<sup>13</sup>

**Transition Period<sup>14</sup>** – In 2015, a two-year transition period was established that prohibited

<sup>10</sup> Look in the additional resources section to find latest NAEP achievement results.

<sup>11</sup> A.R.S. § 15-241

<sup>12</sup> Laws 2012, Chapter 76

<sup>13</sup> A.R.S. § 15-2401

<sup>14</sup> Laws 2015, Chapter 76

ADE and the SBE from assigning letter grade classifications to school districts and schools for the 2014-2015 and 2015-2016 school years. During this transition period, accountability data, including student achievement data, will continue to be collected and published; however, there will be no letter classification assigned. The purpose of the transition period was to develop a revised accountability system that includes information from the new statewide student achievement assessment, AzMERIT. By December 15, 2015, the SBE is required to submit proposed statutory changes for the 2016 legislative session.

**Teacher Evaluations**<sup>15</sup> – In 2010, the SBE began implementing new teacher and principal evaluation requirements. Currently, statute requires the teacher evaluation framework to include four classifications: 1) highly effective; 2) effective; 3) developing; and 4) ineffective. As with the other accountability systems in place in Arizona, any evaluation instrument developed by the SBE must base between 33 and 50 percent of the evaluation framework using quantitative data on student academic progress.

### **MOVE ON WHEN READING**

In 2010, Arizona developed a kindergarten through third grade reading program to ensure that students are adequate readers before they move on to the fourth grade. A major provision of the program was the mandatory retention of third grade students based on their achievement on the statewide student achievement test<sup>16</sup>.

Beginning with the 2013-2014 school year, a pupil may not be promoted from the third grade if the pupil falls far below on the reading portion of the statewide student achievement test (the AIMS test at that time). A pupil may be exempted from the retention policy if the pupil meets any of the following requirements: 1) is an English learner or a limited English proficient pupil with fewer than two years of English language instruction; 2) is a pupil who is in the process of a special education referral or evaluation for placement in special education; 3) a pupil who has been diagnosed as having a

significant reading impairment; or 4) a pupil with a disability and the pupil's individualized education program team agrees that promotion is appropriate. Pupils that are retained are provided with intervention and remedial strategies developed by the SBE. The reading program also uses school letter grade classifications in determining if schools are eligible for extra funds.<sup>17</sup>

### **PARENTAL OPT-OUT**

All students attending public schools are required to participate in the statewide student achievement assessment system. Homeschool students and private school students are not required to participate in the program, but may participate if they choose to do so. This requirement includes all special education students, students who receive modifications (504 plans) and ELL students.

In 1997, the Arizona Attorney General released an opinion stating that parents may not opt their students out of the statewide student achievement assessment system.<sup>18</sup> Specifically, the Attorney General focused on previous exemptions that were allowed under statute noting that a parental opt-out was not enumerated under those exemptions. Furthermore, the opinion makes a distinction between learning materials and activities, from which parents are able to remove their children<sup>19</sup>, and the statewide assessment program. The opinion concludes that the statewide student assessment program could lead to a manipulation of the testing system. Subsequent letters from the Attorney General in 2013 and 2014 have codified the initial findings of the 1997 opinion.

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<sup>15</sup> A.R.S. § 15-203 (A)(38)

<sup>16</sup> A.R.S. § 15-701 (A)(2)(a)

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<sup>17</sup> A.R.S. § 15-211

<sup>18</sup> Attorney General Opinion I97-008

<sup>19</sup> A.R.S. § 15-102

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Assessments: Arizona Department of Education  
<http://www.azed.gov/assessment/>
- K-12 Academic Standards: Arizona Department of Education  
<http://www.azed.gov/standards-practices/>
- State Report Cards: Arizona Department of Education  
<http://www.azed.gov/research-evaluation/report-cards/>
- Arizona State Board of Education  
<https://azsbe.az.gov/>
- AIMS Assessment Results (2010-2014)  
<http://www.azed.gov/research-evaluation/aims-assessment-results/>
- The Nations Report Card: National Assessment of Educational Progress  
<http://www.nationsreportcard.gov/>
- National Assessment Governing Board  
<https://www.nagb.org/>
- U.S. Department of Education: Arizona ESEA Flexibility Map Page  
<http://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/guid/esea-flexibility/map/az.html>
- Attorney General Opinion I97-008  
<http://azmemory.azlibrary.gov/cdm/ref/colle ction/agopinions/id/8706>
- Letter from Attorney General, September 16, 2013  
<http://www.azed.gov/assessment/files/2014/04/parent-requests-to-opt-out-of-state-mandated-testing-letter-2013.09.16.pdf>
- Letter from Attorney General: December 10, 2014  
[http://www.azed.gov/assessment/files/2014/12/ag-letter-re-parent-request-to-opt-out-of-azmerit\\_december-2014.pdf](http://www.azed.gov/assessment/files/2014/12/ag-letter-re-parent-request-to-opt-out-of-azmerit_december-2014.pdf)
- National Center and State Collaborative  
<http://www.ncscpartners.org/>
- Arizona Administrative Code: State Board of Education  
[http://apps.azsos.gov/public\\_services/Title\\_07/7-02.pdf](http://apps.azsos.gov/public_services/Title_07/7-02.pdf)