



Initiating a Theory of Action for a Balanced Assessment System

This document explains what a theory of action is and then scaffolds you through some of the initial TOA considerations. In doing so, the template asks you to broadly articulate your goals for a balanced assessment system and your hypothesis with respect to how those goals are mostly likely to be met. Throughout the document we reference additional tools and materials to support you as you engage in this process. Specifically, key aspects of the Center’s interim assessment toolkit are likely to be useful as you think about your assessment information needs and the assessment characteristics necessary to support those needs. As you use this template, please remember that it is meant to be a starting place for the development of TOA. As you work through the document we encourage you to revise or extend it as needed to appropriately reflect your vision and goals.

What is a theory of action?

- An empirically and logically stated argument
- A set of underlying assumptions
- A testable hypothesis...
 - That outlines *how* and *why* the proposed design of your system, will support the achievement of specified goals.

What are the desired characteristics of a balanced assessment system?

- **Comprehensive:** the assessment system allows students to demonstrate their understanding in a variety of ways and reflects the breadth and depth of the state content standards.
- **Coherent:** the conceptual model of student learning underlying the various assessments within a system are compatible and consistent with that reflected in curriculum and instruction.
- **Continuity:** the assessment system continuously documents student progress over time. Models of student progress in learning should underlie the assessment system.
- **Efficient:** Each assessment within the system is non-redundant and used to make educational decisions
- **Useful:** The assessment system provides the necessary information to make better decisions in a timely fashion and at the right level of specificity to support intended uses

What questions should be addressed within a theory of action for a balanced assessment system?

- What are the primary **goal(s)** for the balanced assessment system? What problems are you trying to address through the development of BAS (or modification of your existing system?)
- What does it look like to achieve those goals? What **outcomes** will serve to demonstrate that the system is working as intended?
- What broad **priorities** should be reflected in the assessment system design?
- What are the specific **information needs** and **uses** the assessment system must address/support?
 - What type of information do parents, students, teachers, schools and districts need to use assessment results in service to student learning?



- What are the **key features of the information necessary** to support each specified need and use?
- What **components/assessments/tools** should be included in the system and why?
- What **conditions or inputs** are essential to ensuring the system components work together and provide coherent information that supports the attainment of system goals?

Brainstorming Template

I. Goals

Goals reflect what the system is intended to accomplish and are the driving force behind most design decisions. Goal statements are generally broad and answer the question “What do we hope to afford or incentivize through the design of a balanced assessment system?”

Often goal statements stem from a state/district/school’s dissatisfaction or perceived issues with a current set of assessments; specifically related to their impact, use, quality or frequency. For example, if stakeholders believe assessments are too focused on lower level skills a goal of the system may be to *incentivize critical thinking or student transfer of knowledge skills*. If assessments are not providing information of the type needed to help educators identify and address students’ individual needs, *facilitating equitable outcomes* may be articulated as a goal. In many cases problems directly align to one of the previously specified characteristics of a balanced assessment system. For example, if assessments are perceived as too many and often, *efficiency* may be a primary goal. Consequently, goal statements can help ensure that consideration of how these characteristics will be achieved is explicitly addressed within the system design.

List the primary goals for your balanced assessment system. It is quite likely that there are multiple goals, but try to narrow your list to those you believe should be the primary focus of your design implementation efforts. Remember there is no one right way to write a goal, the key is to clearly articulate what you are hoping to accomplish through this effort. Add rows as needed.

Table I. Goals

Goal	Description
1	
2	
3	



II. Outcomes

List the observable and measurable outcomes (or changes) you want to occur as a result of system implementation. **Outcomes** serve to answer the questions: “What results do I expect to see if the system is working as intended?” “What does it look like to meet or show progress toward achieving the specified goals in terms of impact on students, teachers, and schools (e.g., performance, perceptions, and practices)?”

In the table below list the data would you consider in the short-term to evaluate whether you were on track toward meeting your goals and outcomes would clearly demonstrate that your goals were being met? Note: the same outcomes may be associated with multiple goals. Add rows as needed.

Goal	Short-Term* Outcomes Representing “On Track” Progress Toward Goal	Outcomes Representing Attainment of Goal
1		
2		
3		

*Note: Short-term and long-term refer to the intended life span of the innovative assessment program.

III. Design Priorities

List the priorities and non-negotiables for the system design. Essentially these are features or elements that must be reflected in the final design. For example if the state summative is perceived as having too big of an impact on teaching and learning, reducing the impact of the state summative may be a design priority. Other examples include: decreasing the frequency of district or state mandated assessments or promoting the development of high quality curriculum embedded or teacher developed assessments.

What features should be prioritized in the final system design and why? Add rows as needed.

	Design Priority and Rationale
1	
2	
3	



IV. Information Needs and Uses

In this section you will list and describe the specific information needs and uses that should be prioritized in the design of your system. Information needs and uses stem from an understanding or vision regarding the role of assessment within an educational system's broader vision for teaching and learning. This vision serves to articulate the conditions, actions and interactions believed necessary to promote student learning and the role assessment information can/should play within that context. We strongly recommend that this vision be articulated, even at a high level, prior to articulating the types of information different stakeholders need to be successful. The activities represented on pages 3-4 in [Phase 1 of the Interim Assessment and Evaluation toolkit](#) developed by the Center for Assessment represent a quick and efficient way to begin this process.

In the table below discuss the specific **information needs** and **uses** the assessment system must address/support specific to different stakeholder groups. For each information need and use, begin to articulate some of the key features the information should demonstrate to support the use. Examples include such things as: results are comparable across schools and students, information aligns to expectations outlined in curriculum and instruction, quantifies progress or growth, granular enough to clarify specific remediation needs, can be collected on an as-needed basis, etc. The purpose of this activity is to begin to brainstorm some of the requirements that will need to be met when identifying/developing assessments for inclusion in your system. There is no right or wrong answers.

Note: An example is provided in the first row. There should be one row for each information need. There may be multiple rows for a given user and users can be defined in whatever way is most useful to support your planning and design. Add rows as needed.

Information Need/Use	User	Key Characteristics
1 The district needs data that can be used to monitor progress in closing academic achievement gaps at the district and school level	District/LEA	<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Comparable across schools in the district.○ Allows for results to be compared across years.○ At a minimum the data should be collected once a year.○ Information should reflect student performance relative to content standards
2	District/LEA	
3	Teachers	
4	Parents	
5.	Students	



V. System Components

List *potential* sources of information that might be used to address the needs and uses reflected in previous section. While these sources may include assessments or processes that already exist within your district or school, it is not necessary to name specific instruments- general descriptions of are completely appropriate at this point in the process. For each proposed source describe the rationale for why/how that source will meet the need. If a specific instrument is listed, clarify how that instrument adequately addresses the range of characteristics previously discussed.

Information Need		Potential Source(s)	Rationale	Assumptions that must hold
1	The district needs data to monitor progress in closing academic achievement gaps at the district and school level	State summative assessment. District developed, common benchmark assessments	Aligned to the state content standards. Allows for results to be compared across schools, students and years. Same as above. Also provides for a mid-year evaluation of progress.	
2				
3				
4				

Upon completing your table go back to the rationale column and identify any component of your rationale that is an assumption rather than a fact. Assumptions should be verified especially if they are necessary for the information to serve its role as intended, as reflected in the previous section. Common assumptions include: alignment to the state content standards, reflects curriculum and instruction, and helps teachers individualize instruction. Interrogating your rationale serves to highlight preconceived notions and/or ideas that may not actually be supported by evidence. It can also help you further articulate the key/necessary characteristics represented in section #3. For example, a statement that an assessment will “help teachers individualize instruction” should be followed up with the question “How?”

VI. Conditions and Inputs

List the conditions that need to hold, or the inputs that need to be put in place in order for 1) each of the proposed components to serve its intended role 2) the components to work together (i.e., as a balanced assessment system) in service to achieving the overall system goals.

For example does the use of information as intended require implementation of a common curriculum and pacing across all schools? Will a learning management system be required to help



educators and student track individual progress toward end of year achievement? What type of professional develop or assessment literacy support is necessary to ensure educators can interact with and use assessment information as intended? At the system level, what resources, supports or guidance are necessary to facilitate coherence? How will information collected at different levels of the system be communicated and shared across stakeholders in a way that ensures the full range of stakeholder needs and uses are met?

In the table below articulate the conditions and inputs necessary to ensure the system will function as intended, and who is responsible for ensuring those conditions hold/resources are developed. Add rows as needed.

Conditions and Inputs	Responsible