



Highlights of GAO-09-911, a report to the Chairman, Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions, U.S. Senate

## Why GAO Did This Study

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLBA) requires states to develop high-quality academic assessments aligned with state academic standards. Education has provided states with about \$400 million for NCLBA assessment implementation every year since 2002. GAO examined (1) changes in reported state expenditures on assessments, and how states have spent funds; (2) factors states have considered in making decisions about question (item) type and assessment content; (3) challenges states have faced in ensuring that their assessments are valid and reliable; and (4) the extent to which Education has supported state efforts to comply with assessment requirements. GAO surveyed state and District of Columbia assessment directors, analyzed Education and state documents, and interviewed assessment officials from Maryland, Rhode Island, South Dakota, and Texas and eight school districts in addition to assessment vendors and experts.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that Education (1) incorporate assessment security best practices into its peer review protocols, (2) improve communication during the review process, and (3) identify for states why its peer review decisions in some cases differed from peer reviewers' written comments. Education indicated that it believes its current practices are sufficient regarding our first recommendation and agreed with GAO's other two recommendations.

[View GAO-09-911 or key components.](#)  
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# NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND ACT

## Enhancements in the Department of Education's Review Process Could Improve State Academic Assessments

### What GAO Found

States reported their overall annual expenditures for assessments have increased since passage of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLBA), which amended the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA), and assessment development was the largest expense for most states. Forty-eight of 49 states that responded to our survey said that annual expenditures for ESEA assessments have increased since NCLBA was enacted. Over half of the states reported that overall expenditures grew due to development of new assessments. Test and question—also referred to as item—development was most frequently reported by states to be the largest ESEA assessment expense, followed by scoring. State officials in selected states reported that alternate assessments for students with disabilities were more costly than general population assessments. In addition, 19 states reported that assessment budgets had been reduced by state fiscal cutbacks.

Cost and time pressures have influenced state decisions about assessment item type—such as multiple choice or open/constructed response—and content. States most often chose multiple choice items because they can be scored inexpensively within tight time frames resulting from the NCLBA requirement to release results before the next school year. State officials also reported facing trade-offs between efforts to assess highly complex content and to accommodate cost and time pressures. As an alternative to using mostly multiple choice, some states have developed practices, such as pooling resources from multiple states to take advantage of economies of scale, that let them reduce cost and use more open/constructed response items.

Challenges facing states in their efforts to ensure valid and reliable assessments involved staff capacity, alternate assessments, and assessment security. State capacity to provide vendor oversight varied, both in terms of number of state staff and measurement-related expertise. Also, states have been challenged to ensure validity and reliability for alternate assessments. In addition, GAO identified several gaps in assessment security policies that were not addressed in Education's review process for overseeing state assessments that could affect validity and reliability. An Education official said that assessment security was not a focus of its review. The review process was developed before recent efforts to identify assessment security best practices.

Education has provided assistance to states, but issues remain with communication during the review process. Education provided assistance in a variety of ways, and states reported that they most often used written guidance and Education-sponsored meetings and found these helpful. However, Education's review process did not allow states to communicate with reviewers during the process to clarify issues, which led to miscommunication. In addition, state officials were in some cases unclear about what review issues they were required to address because Education did not identify for states why its decisions differed from the reviewers' written comments.