



# Implementing Quarterly Exams

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District Leadership Forum

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# 1) Executive Summary

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## Key Observations

**Use quarterly exams to assess student progress toward instructional standards and inform future instruction.** Contacts at District A, School B, and District C report that quarterly exams allow teachers to assess students' learning both earlier and more frequently than traditional midterm and final exams. If the results of a quarterly exam indicate that students did not understand a specific standard, teachers can adjust their instructional approach and reteach that standard during the next quarter.

**Encourage teachers to deliver non-traditional assessments to align assessments with real-world skills.** Administrators at District D, District E, School B, and District A encourage teachers to assess their students using performance-based assessments (PBAs) (e.g., projects, presentations, research papers, portfolios) alongside more traditional assessments. Contacts report that PBAs—in conjunction with traditional tests—prepare students to complete a greater variety of assessments. Specifically, PBAs equip students to complete tasks and assignments that align more closely with workplace needs than do traditional multiple-choice assessments.

**Integrate quarterly exams into regular class schedules to preserve instructional time.** Administrators at School B, District A, and District C integrate quarterly exams into regular school schedules—students take quarterly exams during their normal class periods. Administrators at School B and District C used this change to eliminate early-release final exam days. As a result, contacts report increases to instructional time. Administrators at School B, for example, recouped over two weeks of instructional time each year via their new exam structure.<sup>1</sup>

**Reference college assessment practices to allay common parental concerns associated with the transition to quarterly exams.** Contacts at District A and District C note that parents sometimes hesitate to embrace new exam structures because they worry that quarterly exams will fail to prepare students for college assessments. To address this concern, administrators at District C researched assessment practices at a range of colleges and universities. They found that professors have shifted away from traditional exams and toward project-based learning. For example, professors now often assess students through collaborative group projects or oral presentations. Administrators at District C reference the results of their research to persuade parents that quarterly exams and PBAs will prepare their child for college assessments.

1) "District B Assessment," District B, accessed February 5<sup>th</sup>, 2020.

## 2) Motivations

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### Transitioning to Alternative Exam Formats

#### Traditional Exam Structures Do Not Facilitate Reteaching and Contribute to Student Stress

Under a traditional mid-term/final exam structure, high school students generally take long, cumulative exams at the end of each semester. To accommodate these exams—which can take two hours or more to complete—administrators typically schedule multiple early-release days at the end of each semester. During these early-release days, students normally take one or two exams in the morning and then leave—they attend no classes and receive no instruction.

Administrators typically weight final exam performance heavily when determining course grades—final exams can account for 20 to 25 percent of a student’s semester grade. Contacts at profiled districts—all of which previously relied on a traditional final exam structure—report multiple disadvantages of traditional final exams

#### Problems with Traditional Mid-term and Final Exam Structure



##### Does Not Inform Instructional Adjustments

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Contacts at School B and District A indicate that students often do not learn from the results of final exams. Students will often never see a final exam again and thus lack the ability to learn from their mistakes. At schools with a semester system (i.e., schools where students take each half of a course with a different teacher), students may never review the results of their mid-term assessment. In addition, because final exams occur after instruction, teachers cannot use student performance data from exams to re-teach concepts that students failed to learn. Instead, students proceed to higher-level courses with those skill gaps intact.



##### Contributes to Student Stress

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Contacts at District D and District A report that traditional final exams provoke high levels of student stress. Specifically, contacts at District D cite the high-stakes grading scheme associated with traditional final exams—final exams are often worth a fifth to a quarter of a student’s semester grade—as a major contributor to student stress. If students perform poorly on a final exam, their course grade may drop a letter grade or more. Prior to transitioning to quarterly exams, contacts at District D reported that they faced multiple student mental health crises associated with stress.



##### Reduces Instructional Time

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Contacts at School B and District A cite lost instructional time as a significant disadvantage to final exams due to early-release days. Administrators at School B traditionally scheduled one week of early-release exam days at the end of each semester during which teachers cannot deliver instruction.

At all profiled districts except District D, administrators transitioned from a traditional final exam structure to quarterly exams. At these districts, the key characteristics that differentiate quarterly assessments from traditional final exams are as follows:

1. Students take quarterly assessments at the end of each quarter rather than at the end of each semester.
2. Teachers and administrators design quarterly exams to take less time than midterm and final exams (i.e., quarterly exams incorporate fewer questions).
3. Quarterly exams focus primarily on standards taught during the quarter alone.
4. Quarterly exams often incorporate skills-based or writing-focused assessment questions rather than knowledge-based, multiple choice questions.
5. Teachers may assign PBAs as quarterly exams.

Administrators at District D—though they did eliminate traditional midterm and final exams—did not implement quarterly exams. Instead, administrators mandated a more flexible assessment format in which teachers must administer between five and 10 summative assessments per quarter. Under this structure, teachers do not need to assign any single major assessment at the end of each quarter or semester.

## Implement Quarterly Exams Primarily to Facilitate Adjustments to Instruction

Administrators at District C also use quarterly exam data to prioritize professional development topics for teachers. For example, if students across ELA courses underperform on the expository writing standard during their first quarter exam, administrators may lead professional development sessions on strategies to teach expository writing.

Contacts at District A, School B, and District C assert that quarterly exams allow teachers to measure student learning earlier in each semester. Teachers can use data from quarterly exams to alter their instruction and re-teach or re-emphasize standards that students originally failed to master. Further, contacts at District A note because quarterly exams occur earlier on in this course, teachers can review the exams with students and provide feedback, which allows students to learn from their mistakes on the assessment.

To help teachers quickly identify trends in student assessment performance, administrators at School B ask teachers to upload quarterly exam results to [PowerSchool's Performance Matters](#) online platform. This platform contains analytics tools that allow teachers and administrators to quickly identify standards on which students underperformed. Teachers can then adjust their instruction following the exam to focus on these standards.

Contacts cite the above advantage of quarterly exams as particularly compelling, but also cite a variety of other benefits to quarterly exams.

## Benefits of Quarterly Exams or Other Non-Traditional Assessment Structures



### Reduce testing burden on students

Administrators at School B, District D, and District A leveraged the transition to quarterly exams to implement associated assessment policies that reduced the number and/or the amount of time students spend on assessments. Quarterly exams themselves do not necessarily reduce the testing burden on students. However, administrators may use the transition to quarterly exams as an opportunity to implement assessment policy reforms that reduces student testing burden. For example, District A' new exam policy associated with the transition to quarterly exams reduced the number of district-mandated assessments from between 24 and 38 to 20.<sup>2</sup>



### Increase instructional time

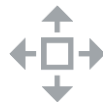
Contacts at School B and District A cite an increase to instructional time as a motivation to switch to quarterly exams. Teachers can administer shorter quarterly exams during regular class periods, which allows administrators to eliminate early-release days associated with final exams and dedicate that time to additional instruction.



### Align assessments with college assessment practices and workplace tasks

Administrators at District D and District A, School B, and District E leveraged their districts' shift away from traditional midterm and final exams to encourage teachers to deliver more PBAs. Contacts at District C and District E argue that PBAs correspond more closely with college assessment practices because students often must complete research papers, projects, or presentations at college. Contacts at District A also note that PBAs more closely resemble common workplace tasks and thus prepare students more readily for postsecondary careers.

Further, contacts at District A note that requiring two exams per semester mirrors the traditional midterm/final exam structure at colleges—college courses often require two major assessments per semester.



### Disperse grading to lower student stress

At profiled districts, the new grading schemes associated with quarterly exams or other non-traditional assessment structures reduce the weight of any single assessment. Contacts at District D and School B use this structure to prevent a student's grade from dropping significantly due to poor performance on one assessment alone. As a result, contacts at District D cite reduced student stress.

## Consider Using Quarterly Exam Data for Student Placement and Remediation Decisions

Though contacts at most profiled districts cite instruction adjustment as quarterly exams' primary advantage help teachers adjust instruction, administrators at District C also use quarterly exam data to make acceleration or remediation decisions for students. For example, administrators may decide to place a student who performs exceptionally well on initial quarterly assessments in a more rigorous class. Similarly, administrators may recommend that a student who performs poorly seek remediation or after-school tutoring.

Quarterly exams provide data to inform placement and remediation decisions earlier and more frequently than do mid-term or final exams. With quarterly exam data,

2) "High School Presentation," District A, provided February 4<sup>th</sup>, 2020.

administrators and/or teachers can identify students in need of support earlier in the semester.



### **Use the Transition to a New Exam Structure to Facilitate a Change in Assessment Mindset among Teachers**

Contacts at District A, District C, District E, and School B stress that their quarterly exams are not more frequent final exams; rather, they are progress checks meant to gauge student learning and subsequently inform instruction. Contacts at District A and District E report that teachers must shift their mindset away from viewing quarterly exams as equivalent to final exams—teachers must view quarterly exams as measures of ongoing student progress. If teachers interpret quarterly exams as equivalent to final exams, they likely will not use quarterly exam data to meaningfully adjust their instruction and may resent quarterly exams due to a perceived increase in their workload.

## 3) Structure

### Scheduling

#### Integrate Exams into Regular School Days to Preserve Instructional Time

Administrators at School B, District A, and District C schedule their quarterly exams into the regular school day—they do not modify class schedules. Previously, administrators dedicated multiple, early-release school days (i.e., days in which students leave after taking exams) to final exam completion. Now, students attend school as they would normally and take each quarterly exam within one standard class period.

Contacts at these districts report that integrating quarterly exams into the school day and eliminating early-release days preserves instructional time. At School B, for example, administrators previously designated the last week of each semester as final-exam, early-release days. By integrating quarterly exams into normal school days, administrators could convert those early-release days to instructional days.

#### Exam Schedules at Profiled Districts

| District/School   | Exam Schedule                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
|-------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>District A</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Administrators schedule a three-week testing window at the end of each quarter. Administrators ask teachers in each content area to administer their quarterly exam during one of those three weeks.</li><li>Teachers deliver quarterly exams during regular class periods without a modified schedule.</li></ul>                                                                                                                                                            |
| <b>School B</b>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Teachers administer quarterly exams during the last two weeks of each quarter. Administrators ask that teachers not administer quarterly exams on the last day of the quarter to prevent excessive exam overlap and afford teachers time to grade.</li><li>Teachers deliver their quarterly exams during normal, 46-minute class periods without a modified bell schedule.</li></ul>                                                                                         |
| <b>District C</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Administrators schedule specific days of the week during which teachers in each content area may deliver their assessments. For example, administrators may assign math courses to Monday and ELA courses to Tuesday. Teachers deliver their quarterly assessment on one of their content area's designated days at the end of the quarter.<sup>3</sup></li><li>Teachers administer quarterly exams during regular class periods without a modified bell schedule.</li></ul> |
| <b>District D</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Administrators do not mandate any spacing or timing requirements for assessments; teachers schedule between five and ten summative assessments across each quarter based on their preference.</li><li>Teachers deliver major summative assessments during regular class periods without a modified bell schedule.</li></ul>                                                                                                                                                  |
| <b>District E</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>For first- and third-quarter assessments, administrators designate four days at the end of the quarter during which teachers give their exams. Teachers deliver exams during regular class periods—administrators do not adjust the bell schedule.</li><li>For longer, cumulative, second- and fourth-quarter assessments, administrators schedule two early-release days at the end of each quarter during which teachers administer exams.</li></ul>                       |

3) "[District C] Assessment Calendar," District C, accessed February 5<sup>th</sup>, 2020.

The first year that District A implemented quarterly exams, administrators scheduled two early-release exam days at the end of each quarter during which students would take their quarterly exams (i.e., the quarterly exam structure mimicked the final exam structure). Contacts report that even though administrators changed the content, grading scheme, and length of quarterly exams, teachers resisted the change because they felt as though they now needed to administer twice as many final exams.

The following year, administrators at District A scheduled quarterly exams into the regular school day and created a more flexible exam timeline. Administrators kept the early-release days to provide teachers with time to grade, but teachers deliver instruction during those days rather than deliver exams. These scheduling changes, along with messaging from administrators, signaled that teachers should interpret quarterly exams as equivalent to other assessments in the quarter, rather than as long, intensive final exams. Contacts report that this change helped reduce teacher pushback related to workload.



### **Write Quarterly Exams to Fit Within One Class Period**

Administrators at District A design quarterly exams to take around 60-70 minutes—the length of one class period. At District E, administrators and teachers write first- and third-quarter exams to take 45 minutes and fit within a normal class period. However, second- and fourth-quarter cumulative exams take 60 minutes and require an extended class period.

## **Schedule Quarterly Exams to Prevent Students from Taking Too Many Assessments in One Day to Reduce Student Workload**

Administrators at District D, District C, and District A implemented policies to prevent students from taking an excessive number of assessments in one day.

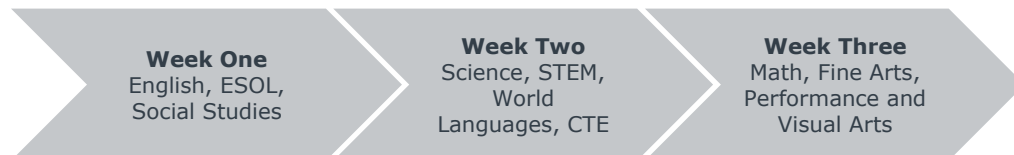
Administrators at District C and District A designate specific times for teachers to assess their students by content area. Specifically, administrators at District C designate one to two days of each week of the school year during which only teachers from select content areas may deliver assessments.<sup>4</sup> This policy ensures that on days when students complete a math assessment, they will not also need to complete a science assessment. This policy also applies to quarterly exams—teachers at District C deliver their quarterly exams on one of their content area’s designated assessment days near the end of the quarter.

Administrators at District A developed a similar policy targeted specifically at quarterly exams. Administrators at District A designate a three-week period at the end of each quarter for teachers to deliver quarterly assessments. Administrators require teachers in each content area to administer their quarterly exams during one of the three weeks. Under this exam structure, all teachers cannot assign quarterly exams during the last few days of the quarter, which decreases the probability that students take multiple assessments in one day. This three-week structure also affords

4) “[District C] Assessment Calendar,” District C.

students more time in between quarterly exams—students do not take all quarterly exams in the same week.

### District A Quarterly Exam Testing Windows<sup>5</sup>



Further, contacts at District A report that the district’s flexible testing window also facilitates scheduling PBAs. Contacts report that PBAs often require more than one day to administer and thus would be constrained by single-day testing windows.<sup>6</sup>

At District D, administrators did not create a formalized exam schedule. Administrators instead encourage departments and teachers to coordinate assessment schedules to reduce the chances a student must take multiple assessments in a day. Further, administrators allow students with multiple exams in one day to postpone one of those assessments to the following day.

#### Quarterly Exams Do Not Increase Student Workload at Profiled Districts

Contacts at School B, District C, and District D report little difference in the quantity of student work associated with switch to new exam structures. Contacts at School B note that students adapted well to the new exam structure and have not raised workload concerns related to quarterly exams. Further, at District C, administrators encouraged teachers to replace existing assessments with the quarterly exam to prevent students from taking an additional assessment during each quarter.

### Consider Providing Extra Time to Teachers to Support Quarterly Exam Creation

Contacts at District E and District C asked teachers to contribute to quarterly exam creation, which caused an increase in initial teacher workload.

To support this initial increase, administrators at both districts dedicated time for teachers to complete work associated with the transition to quarterly exams. Specifically, administrators at District E provided professional learning community (PLC) time every day for teachers to both create quarterly exams and rework their curriculum—teachers and administrators at District E completely overhauled their curriculum as they transitioned to quarterly exams. Administrators at District C provided time for teachers to write and implement the new exams in four ways.

5) "District Assessment Manual: High School," District A, provided February 4<sup>th</sup>, 2020.

6) "District Assessment Manual," District A.

## Strategies to Accommodate Initial Increases in Teacher Workload at District C

### 1 Time over the Summer

Administrators asked teachers to apply to develop exams over the summer in teams that included district supervisors. Teachers earned extra paid hours for this work.

### 2 In-Service Time

Administrators dedicated time at in-service professional development days for teachers to work in teams to create their exams.

### 3 Department Meetings

Each department meets for 45 minutes after school once per month. Administrators repurposed this meeting to allow teacher teams to create their exams.

### 4 Common Planning Time

Administrators schedule one 43-minute class period of common planning time per day for teachers who teach the same course (i.e., all Algebra I teachers have the same common planning time). Teachers used this time to create exams and now occasionally use it to revisit exams and realign them to district standards.

## Frame Quarterly Exams as Similar to Regular Assessments to Mitigate Teacher Perceptions of Increased Workload

Contacts at School B and District A report that teachers perceived an increase to their workload related to quarterly exams—contacts at District C report that teachers felt that grading four major assessments across each course rather than two increased the amount of time they spent grading. To address these concerns, administrators at District A and District C frame quarterly exams as similar to regular marking period assessments. Specifically, administrators at District C allow teachers to replace one of the assessments they previously assigned during the quarter with the district's quarterly exam. For example, if a math teacher normally assigns five assessments in a quarter, they may replace one of those assessments with a quarterly exam, rather than assign and grade an additional assessment.

Rather than frame quarterly exams as a regular assessment, administrators at School B stressed to teachers that while their workload would change in nature (i.e., teachers grade four assessments rather than two), it would not change in volume. Contacts note that shorter quarterly assessments take less time to grade than longer, more comprehensive midterm and final exams.



### **Quarterly Exams May Increase Teacher Workload for Select Teachers**

Contacts at **District A** note that quarterly exams may have resulted in an actual workload increase for some teachers because skills-based quarterly exam questions often include written response questions, which take longer to grade than traditional, multiple choice assessments. To address grading concerns, administrators at District A release students early at the end of the quarter and allow teachers to use the extra time to grade quarterly exams. Previously, administrators scheduled four early-release days at the end of each semester for teachers to grade. Now, they schedule two early-release days at the end of each quarter for teachers to grade.

## Grading

### **Design Grading Schemes to Ensure Student Grades Do Not Drop Significantly Due to a Single Assessment**

At all profiled districts, grading schemes associated with quarterly/adjusted exam structures decrease the grade impact of any single quarterly assessment. Contacts at District D and School B report that they intentionally changed exam grading schemes to prevent any single assessment from significantly lowering a student's grade. At three of the five profiled districts, quarterly exams are worth only 10 percent of a student's quarterly grade. Contacts at District D cite that lower-stakes testing has reduced student stress at their district because a student's performance on one assessment no longer determines a large part of their grade. Contacts at District D also report that fewer students' grades drop significantly from one assessment alone due to their new policy.

## Quarterly/Summative Assessment Grading Policies at Profiled Districts

If a student at District A completes an assessment or assignment with a good faith effort, teachers may not score them below a 50 percent.

### District A

10%

Each quarterly exam is worth 10 percent of a student's **quarter grade**. To determine a student's **semester grade**, teachers average the student's two quarter grades.<sup>7</sup>

### District E

10%

Each quarterly exam is worth 10 percent of a student's **quarter grade**. Contacts report that the two quarterly exams cumulatively comprise 20 percent of a student's **semester grade**.

### School B

10%

Each quarterly exam is worth 10 percent of a student's **quarter grade**. Teachers use a conversion chart to determine a student's **semester grade** based on quarter grades (see **Appendix A**).

### District D

10-20%

Teachers may assign between five and 10 summative assessments each quarter, which together determine a student's **quarter grade**. Teachers can thus assign a weight of between 10 and 20 percent for each summative assessment. Homework and formative assessments do not factor into a student's grade except in rare exceptions. Administrators average student's two quarter grade percentages to determine students' **semester grades**.<sup>8</sup>

### District C

≤20%

Administrators require teachers to deliver at least three unit assessments each quarter, one of which must be the quarterly exam. Unit assessments cumulatively comprise 60 percent of a student's **quarter grade**. Importantly, a teacher may deliver more than three unit assessments—they may deliver five or six. Thus, quarterly exams cannot count for more than 20 percent of a student's quarter grade and often count for less.

## Assessment Components and Types

### Consider Designing Non-Cumulative Exams to Prioritize New Standards

Contact at District C, School B, and District A report that their quarterly exams are not cumulative (i.e., teachers do not assess standards taught during the first quarter on the second quarterly exam). Though contacts report that in some courses (e.g., math), students must understand material from previous quarters to successfully answer questions related to standards assessed during later quarters, teachers at these districts do not explicitly assess material from previous quarters on quarterly exams. Contacts at District C report that non-cumulative assessments allow teachers to prioritize in-depth questions related to newly taught standards. Because quarterly exams occur during one class period, contacts note that cumulative quarterly exams would not allow teachers to address newly taught standards with appropriate depth.

7) "Regulation [District A]: Grading," District A, accessed February 12<sup>th</sup>, 2020.

8) "Student Handbook," District D, accessed February 15<sup>th</sup>, 2020.

Contacts at District E, on the other hand, report that their second and fourth quarter exams are cumulative. Teachers assess standards from the first quarter on second-quarter exams and material from the third quarter on fourth-quarter exam. Contacts estimate that 25 percent of material on second- and fourth-quarter exams is material from the first and third quarter, respectively. In order to accommodate additional questions on content from previous quarters, administrators lengthen second- and fourth-quarter exams by 15 minutes.

Contacts at District A note that due to shorter exam periods associated with quarterly exams, teachers cannot assess every standard they teach during one quarter on a quarterly exam—much less make their exams cumulative across multiple quarters. Contacts at District E report that teachers now cover and assess fewer standards on quarterly exams but argue that this change reflects the district’s commitment to depth of instruction. Contacts report that previously, teachers at District E tried to cover and assess too many standards to explore each one with appropriate depth. Now, teachers focus on fewer standards across each course and assess each one in more depth.

## Shift Exam Content from Traditional, Knowledge-Based Multiple-Choice Questions to Skills-Based Testing

Contacts at District E and District A note that administrators used the transition to quarterly exams to discourage traditional, multiple-choice exams in favor of assessments that require students to demonstrate their skills. Contacts at District E report that their multiple-choice questions are often knowledge-based—they don’t ask students to apply knowledge to novel situations or practice skills. Now, teachers at District E incorporate assessment questions that require students to respond in writing—these questions require students to articulate their learning. Similarly, contacts at District C and School B stress that their quarterly exams are skill-based rather than fact-based—to succeed on quarterly exams, students must apply skills to novel problems or situations, rather than regurgitate knowledge. To help create new skills-based assessments, administrators at District A modeled their assessments on [PARCC assessments](#).

### Examples of Skills-Based Questions at *District C* and *School B*



#### English

After teaching *Romeo and Juliet*, teachers may ask students to apply skills they learned during the unit (e.g., compare and contrast) to an essay on an unfamiliar reading. In comparison, a fact-based assessment on *Romeo and Juliet* might ask questions such as “who does Romeo kill before he is banished?”



#### Social Studies

For a skills-based assessment on the industrial revolution, teachers may give students a political cartoon, a column from a newspaper, and an essay from that era that they have never seen before. Teachers then ask students to analyze those sources and write a response that incorporates background knowledge about the industrial revolution. In comparison, a fact-based test may ask “who invented the steam engine?”

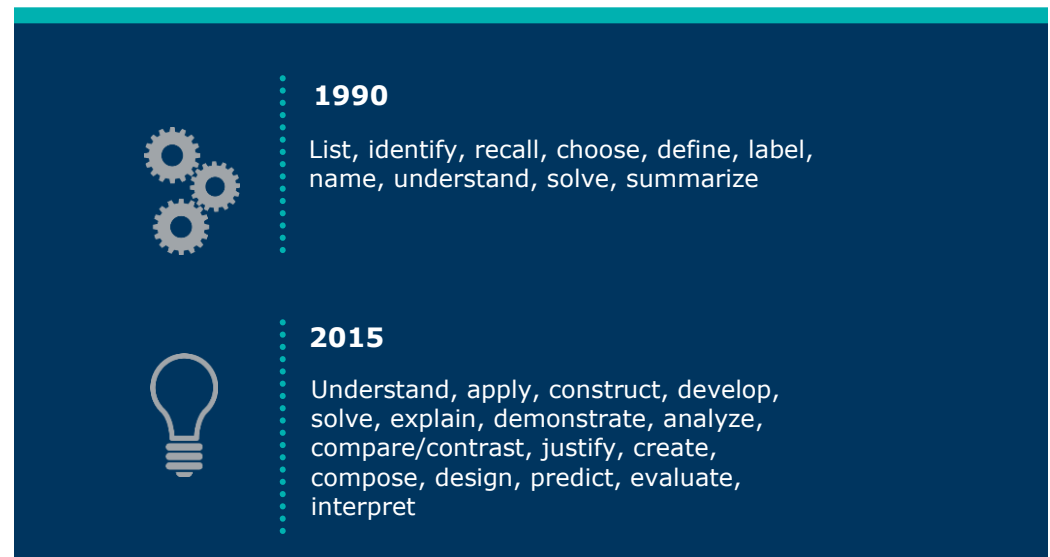


#### Science

Teachers may ask students to write a request for proposal (RFP) for a composting project that requires students to synthesize and combine concepts from biology, chemistry, and business.

To further illustrate this shift away from traditional assessments, administrators at District A compiled a list of the most common cognitive verbs in the local state standards in 1990 and compared them to the verbs in the 2015 state standards. The 1990 list contains verbs primarily related to knowledge of facts indicating that old standards aligned well with traditional assessment. In comparison, the 2015 list contains verbs that ask students to apply their knowledge and skills to new problems or situations—indicating that new standards align well with skills-based assessments.

### Most Common Cognitive Verbs in Local State Standards<sup>9</sup>



### Consider Hiring Consultants to Facilitate the Shift to Skills-Based Exams

Administrators at District E and District D hired external consultants to facilitate the transition to their new exam structures. Specifically, administrators at District E hired consultants through the [Consortium for Educational Change](#) to lead professional development on how teachers can design exams and questions that authentically assess the skills associated with subject-area standards.

### Allow Teachers to Assess Students Through Performance-Based Assessments to Help Prepare Students for Real-World Tasks

Administrators at District D, District E, School B, and District A encourage teachers to assess students with PBAs. Contacts report that PBAs provide students with a variety of assessment experiences, which prepares students for a wide variety of real-world

9) "Performance Based Assessments," District A, provided February 4<sup>th</sup>, 2020.

tasks. In the workplace, people often must collaborate on a project or present information clearly—contacts at District A note that PBAs helps students practice these skills and thus better prepare students to succeed in the workforce.

### Types of Performance-Based Assessments at *District A*<sup>10</sup>



However, contacts at School B and District A note that PBAs more effectively assess student mastery in some subjects compared to others. For example, contacts at School B report that it is difficult for a student to show mastery of mathematical concepts through one of the above PBA formats. For this reason, math teachers at School B do not administer PBAs and deliver traditionally formatted assessments.

<sup>10</sup>) "Creating a Quarter Assessment," District A, provided February 4<sup>th</sup>, 2020.

## 4) Implementation

### Feedback and Communication

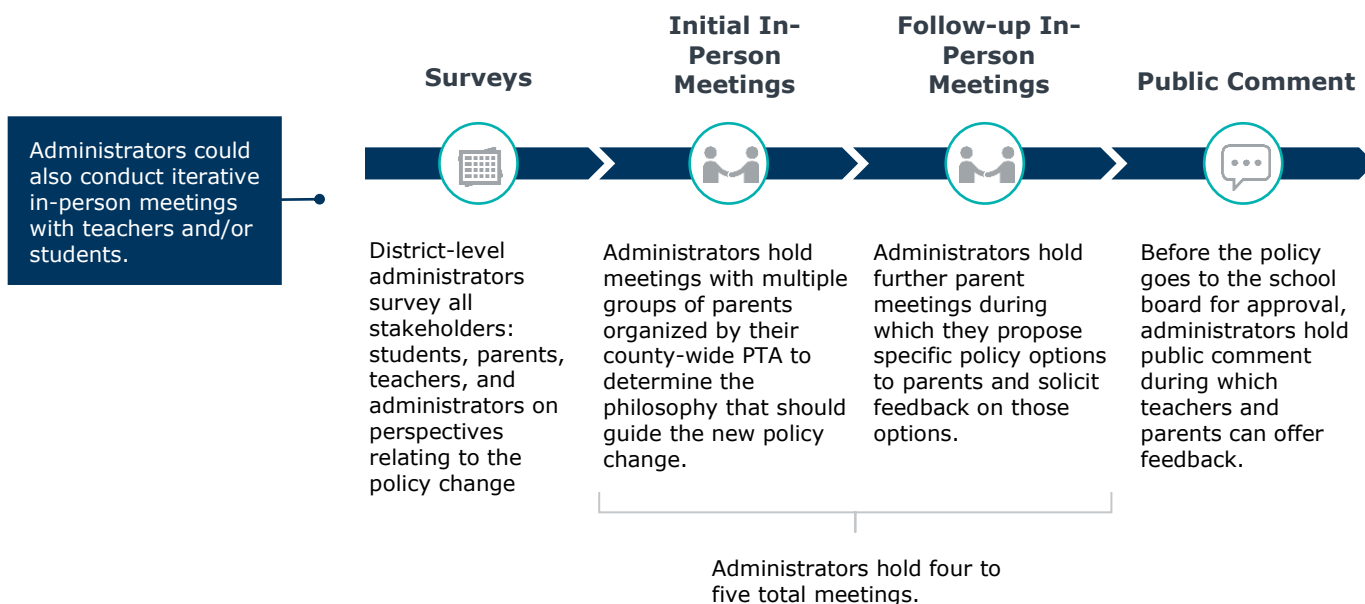
#### Solicit Stakeholder Feedback Through Iterative, In-Person Meetings

Administrators at School B and District D sought feedback on their exam policies before initiating the switch to quarterly exams. Administrators at District D sought feedback for their new exam structures in three ways: surveys, in-person meetings, and public comment. First, administrators surveyed students, parents, teachers, and administrators to understand their perspectives on traditional final exams. Then, district-level administrators solicited in-person feedback from principals. Lastly, administrators sought the feedback of parents and teachers through public comment. Contacts at School B also report soliciting feedback through public comment prior to initiating the policy change. Specifically, School B's district allows member of the community—often teacher and parents—to speak about a proposed policy change at board meetings.<sup>11</sup> Further, the district also seeks online public comment for policy changes.<sup>12</sup>

On the other hand, contacts at District E report that they did not solicit feedback from stakeholders such as parents or students—administrators at the district level mostly directed the change.

Though administrators at District D did solicit feedback through several channels, contacts report that they wish administrators had sought feedback through iterative in-person meetings. Contacts report that they used iterative feedback meetings with success during a more recent policy change.

#### Feedback Process for District D's Recent Policy Change



11) "Public Participation: Ways to Participate," District B, accessed February 13<sup>th</sup>, 2020.

12) Policies for Public Comment," District B, accessed February 13<sup>th</sup>, 2020.

## **Communicate Shift to Quarterly Exams Through Multiple Channels to Maximize Communication Reach**

Administrators at District D and School B communicated the switch to quarterly exams in county-wide emails. At District A, the superintendent wrote an article in the local newspaper to accompany a district press release. Contacts at District E report that administrators informed the community both through their newsletter and parent announcements. Administrators also reinforced communications about the change through word of mouth communication. Further, School B's district maintains a robust Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) webpage, which communicates the rationale behind the district's switch and addresses common concerns related to quarterly exams.

## **Communicate Motivations and Benefits of Quarterly Exams to Teachers, Parents, and Students to Engage Stakeholders and Allay Common Concerns**

To engage stakeholders with the switch to quarterly exams, administrators at District A delivered PowerPoint presentations to their school board, teacher's union, and groups of student leaders. These presentations outlined the proposed changes, motivations, and benefits of switching to quarterly exams along with scheduling information. Similarly, administrators at School B emphasized the benefits associated with quarterly exams to teachers when communicating the change. Specifically, administrators emphasized that quarterly exams will allow teachers to check student progress earlier and use results to improve student learning.

However, contacts at District E, District A, and School B report that stakeholders—usually teachers and sometimes parents—hesitated to embrace new exam structures. Profiled districts used various messaging strategies to allay common concerns and engage hesitant stakeholders with the new exam structures.

## Messaging Strategies to Address Stakeholder Concerns at Profiled Districts

### Common Concerns



### Messaging Strategy

#### Quarterly exams will not prepare students for college



Administrators at District C studied college assessment practices at institutions ranging from Ivy League schools to local community colleges. Administrators found that skills-based assessments and PBAs more closely resemble current college assessment practices than do traditional final exams—contacts report that college professors have begun to use more project-based learning in their courses. However, contacts are careful to note that some college courses, particularly math, still rely on traditional assessment practices. When teachers or parents approach administrators and express this concern, administrators stress their research to persuade stakeholders that quarterly exams and PBAs will prepare students for college. Further, the quarterly exam FAQ page for School B’s district notes that students also take a host of traditional, standardized tests throughout their K-12 careers, which helps prepare students to take traditional assessments as well.<sup>13</sup>

#### Quarterly exams will increase teacher workload



When administrators at District A transitioned to quarterly exams, they also removed other district-required assessments. Specifically, the new policy only required 20 district exams, whereas the old policy required between 24 and 38. Administrators emphasized this overall reduction in testing during presentations to teachers to quell workload-related pushback.<sup>14</sup> Further, administrators framed the quarterly exam as equivalent to a standard assessment a teacher would deliver during the marking period to dispel the idea that administrators wanted teachers to deliver more frequent final exams.

## Timeline

### Consider Staggering Quarterly Exam Implementation to Facilitate the Switch to a New Exam Structure

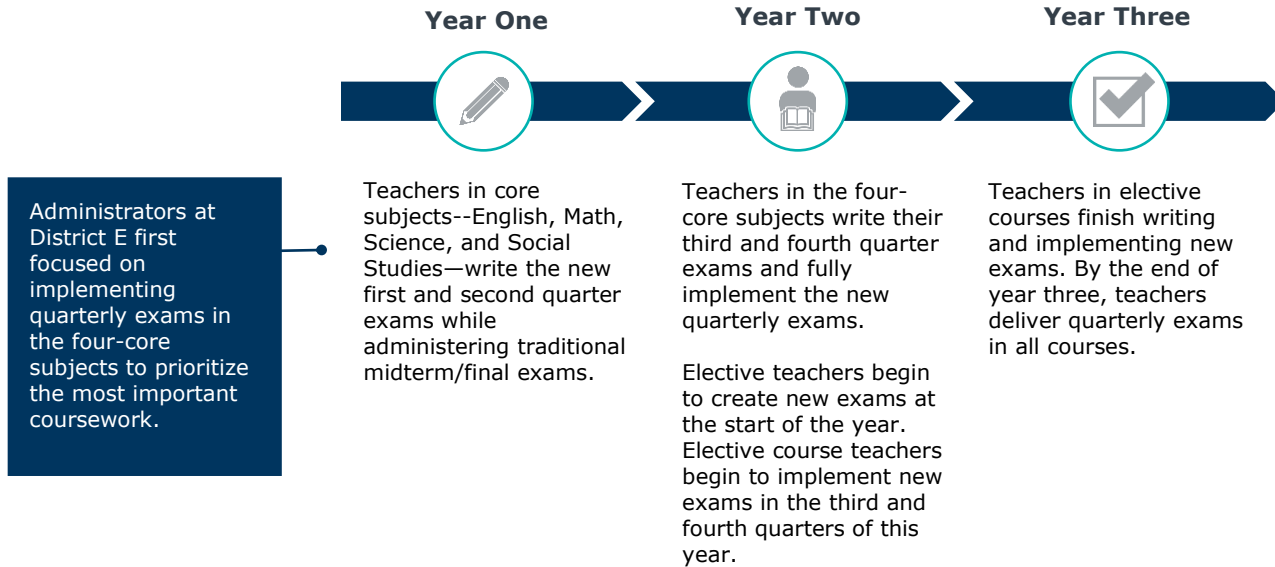
Administrators at School B and District E phased in their quarterly exams over the course of several years. Contacts at both District E and School B report that during the transition to quarterly exams, their districts also underwent at least partial curriculum changes.

Administrators and teachers at District E completely overhauled their curriculum during their switch to quarterly exams. To accommodate the work associated with both implementing a new curriculum and implementing a new exam structure, administrators at District E phased in quarterly exams over the course of three years.

<sup>13</sup>) “[District B Assessment],” District B.

<sup>14</sup>) “High School Presentation,” District A, provided February 4<sup>th</sup>, 2020.

## District E Quarterly Exam Implementation Timeline



Administrators at School B implemented quarterly exams for Math, English, and Technology classes in one year and later phased in quarterlies for other classes. Contacts note administrators phased in science quarterlies, in part, to accommodate a transition to new science standards. In Biology courses, for example, teachers only administered one quarterly assessment the first year, then two quarterly assessments the second year. Contacts report that it would have been difficult to create four meaningful quarterly assessments in the first year of an entirely new curriculum.

On the other hand, administrators at District A fully implemented quarterly exams across one school year. First, teachers and administrators spent a year constructing new assessments for all four marking periods for every required course. Then, administrators implemented those assessments across all courses the next year. However, contacts at District A report that the first year of quarterly exam implementation was not highly successful because teachers viewed quarterly exams as more frequent final exams. Contacts note that if they had implemented quarterly exams over a more gradual timeline, they could have better incorporated teacher feedback and dedicated more time to communicating the shift in assessment practices associated with quarterly exams.

### Consider Dedicating a Professional Development Day to Quarterly Exams to Facilitate Initial Implementation

The first year of quarterly exam implementation, administrators at District A used their 'back to school' professional development day to deliver critical information concerning quarterly exams to teachers. Administrators delivered scheduling information and allowed teachers to see the new exams. Administrators at District A used a later professional development day to emphasize that quarterly exams are not more frequent final exams—they are much more similar to normal unit assessments.

## Exam Creation

Contacts at District A note that administrators did not remake every quarterly assessment for every subject. For example, administrators merely divided the traditional physical education midterm and final exam into two parts to create the quarterly assessments.

### Consider Using District-Level Teams to Create at Least Some Quarterly Exams

Administrators at profiled districts either required their teachers to write their quarterly assessments in teams, dedicated district-level groups of teachers and administrators to write exams, or used a combination of the two approaches. By involving both district-level staff and teachers in exam creation, curriculum supervisors and assessment experts can contribute their knowledge of assessment best practice, while allowing teachers to contribute helps them feel ownership over the assessments. These district-level assessments are often traditional-format skills-based assessments but can also be PBAs.

### Exam Creation Strategies at Profiled Districts



#### School-Level Teacher Teams

##### District E

Teachers create their own assessments, usually in same-subject teams to ensure that teachers who teach the same course deliver the same assessment. Contacts at District E note that this strategy promotes teacher ownership over assessments and thus promotes teacher engagement with a new exam structure. However, this strategy increases initial teacher workload as teachers must create new exams.



#### District-Level Teams

##### School B

The district-level office of curriculum and instruction uses work groups over the summer, which include teachers, often department chairs, to create exams. This strategy likely reduces the initial workload associated with exam implementation on teachers, as teachers do not need to create new exams.



#### Both Teachers and District-Level Teams

##### District A

Teachers work with staff from the central office staff to write and vet quarterly assessments. Specifically, after these teams of teachers and central office staff create an assessment, teachers who did not help create the quarterly exam review the exam and provide feedback.

Administrators do not always require teachers to use district-created quarterly exams. In some instances, teachers may create their own assessments or PBAs.

District C only operates one high school. Same-subject teacher teams within the school created common quarterly assessments.

### Require Teachers to Deliver Common Assessments Across a Course to Ensure Accurate Benchmarking

Administrators at District C and School B require teachers across a course to deliver the same, common quarterly assessment, which could be a skills-based paper and pencil assessment or could be a PBA. Common assessments provide consistent data across all students within a course, which allows administrators to analyze student performance at the school and district level—not just the classroom level. For example, if two students in separate Algebra I classes—in the same school or not—take a common quarterly assessment, administrators can compare their performance. Contacts at District C also report that common assessments allow administrators to more precisely identify professional development areas for teachers and make remediation decisions.

Administrators at District A require teachers in most courses to use a mix of district-created common quarterly assessments and teacher-created assessments. For example, administrators require teachers to deliver two district-created common assessments per year in Social Studies courses. For the other two quarters, teachers may either create their own assessments or use other district-created assessments. This strategy allows district administrators to benchmark student performance at the classroom, school, and district level through common assessments, but also gives teachers the option to creatively assess students through their own unique PBAs.

### **Ask Teachers to Revisit and Realign Assessments Every Year for Continuous Improvement**



Contacts at District E stress that teachers must constantly revisit their assessments and realign them with state and district standards to accommodate any curriculum changes and to strive to improve assessments each year.

## 5) Outcomes

### Learning and Stress

#### Contacts Report Anecdotal Increases to Student Learning and Student Motivation

No profiled districts could provide data that indicates quarterly exams lead to improved student learning or student test scores. Contacts at District A note that their state assessments have changed multiple times over the last several years, which disallows meaningful longitudinal data to assess the impact of quarterly exams on student learning.

However, contacts at both School B and District E report anecdotally that they believe quarterly exams improved student learning at their district. Specifically, contacts at School B report that they believe that students master course standards more so with the quarterly exam structure than with the traditional final exam structure. Contacts at School B attribute gains in student learning and standard mastery at their district mostly to teachers' ability to analyze student progress earlier and more frequently and adjust instruction or reteach standards accordingly. Similarly, contacts at District A note that teachers have successfully used quarterly exam data to adjust their instructional approach and reteach poorly understood standards in later quarters.

Contacts at District E caveat that they underwent a complete curriculum overhaul concurrent with the transition to quarterly exams and thus cannot attribute gains in student learning solely to the new exam structure.

Contacts at District A also note that their new exam structure motivates students to apply themselves more consistently because teachers have not yet finalized student's grades for the semester when students take their first and third quarter exams. In the previous mid-term and final exam structure, students could calculate the exact grade they needed on each exam to reach their goal semester exam grade. On first and third quarterly exams, students cannot complete this calculation, and thus must strive to earn the best grade possible.

Lastly, contacts at District D cite improved student grades as a result of their transition away from mid-term and final exams. Under the traditional exam structure at District D, contacts report that student grades often dropped a letter grade or more due to their performance on final exams. Now, contacts no longer see that same decrease in student grades at the end of each year. Further, contacts at District D report that the transition did not negatively impact college admissions performance—students still apply to and attend the colleges that they have traditionally attended.

#### Adjusted Exam Grading Structures Reduce Student Stress at *District D*

Contacts at District D report that their new grading scheme reduced student stress. Contacts report that previously student's grades often dropped significantly due to the final exam because it comprised much of a student's grade. Now, student's grades no longer drop significantly due to one assessment and student stress decreased as a result.

## 6) Research Methodology

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### Project Challenge

Leadership at a partner district approached the Forum with the following questions:

- Why do contact districts use a quarterly exam structure?
- How did contact districts implement quarterly exams?
- How do contact districts structure their quarterly exam schedule?
- How do contact districts schedule quarterly exams to minimize increases to teacher workload?
- How do contact districts schedule quarterly exams to minimize increases to student workload?
- Have contact districts identified changes to student outcomes due to quarterly exam implementation?
- Do contact districts administer quarterly cumulative exams? Why or why not?
- How do contact districts factor quarterly exam scores into semester and final grades?
- If contact districts recently transitioned to a quarterly exam model, how did contact districts communicate the change to district stakeholders to maximize stakeholder support?
- If contact districts recently transitioned to a quarterly exam model, how did contact districts solicit stakeholder feedback prior to the change?

### Project Sources

The Forum consulted the following sources for this report:

- EAB's internal and online research libraries (eab.com)
- National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). <http://nces.ed.gov/>.
- District A. "Creating a Quarter Assessment." Provided February 4<sup>th</sup>, 2020.
- District A. "District Assessment Manual: High School." Provided February 4<sup>th</sup>, 2020.
- District A. "High School Presentation." Provided February 4<sup>th</sup>, 2020.
- District A. "Performance Based Assessments." Provided February 4<sup>th</sup>, 2020.
- District A. "Regulation [District A]: Grading." Accessed February 12<sup>th</sup>, 2020.
- District B. "[District B Assessment]." Accessed February 5<sup>th</sup>, 2020.
- District B. "[Grade Chart]." Accessed February 6<sup>th</sup>, 2020.
- District B. "Policies for Public Comment." Accessed February 13<sup>th</sup>, 2020.
- District B. "Public Participation: Ways to Participate." Accessed February 13<sup>th</sup>, 2020.
- District C. "[District C] Assessment Calendar." Accessed February 5<sup>th</sup>, 2020.
- District D. "Student Handbook." Accessed February 15<sup>th</sup>, 2020.

## Research Parameters

The Forum interviewed district-level and school-level administrators at districts that operate quarterly exams or other non-traditional exam structures.

### A Guide to Institutions Profiled in this Brief

| Institution | Location     | Approximate Enrollment |
|-------------|--------------|------------------------|
| District A  | Mid-Atlantic | >50,000                |
| School B    | Mid-Atlantic | 2,000                  |
| District C  | Mid-Atlantic | 1,000-2,000            |
| District D  | Mid-Atlantic | >50,000                |
| District E  | Midwest      | 10,000-20,000          |

## 8) Appendix A

### Grade Conversion Chart

***District B's Grade Conversion Chart<sup>15</sup>***

| AA=A | BA=A | CA=B | DA=B | EA=C |
|------|------|------|------|------|
| AB=A | BB=B | CB=B | DB=C | EB=C |
| AC=B | BC=B | CC=C | DC=C | EC=D |
| AD=B | BD=C | CD=C | DD=D | ED=D |
| AE=C | BE=C | CE=D | DE=D | EE=E |

***Legend***

- The first letter in each box represents a student's first (or third) quarter grade
- The second letter in each box represents a student's second (or fourth) quarter grade
- The last letter in each box—the letter after the equals sign—represents a student's resulting semester grade

<sup>15</sup>) "[Grade Chart]," District B, accessed February 6<sup>th</sup>, 2020.