

# ASK THE TEAM

BY ELLEN CUSHING AND CASSANDRA MEYER

November 2014

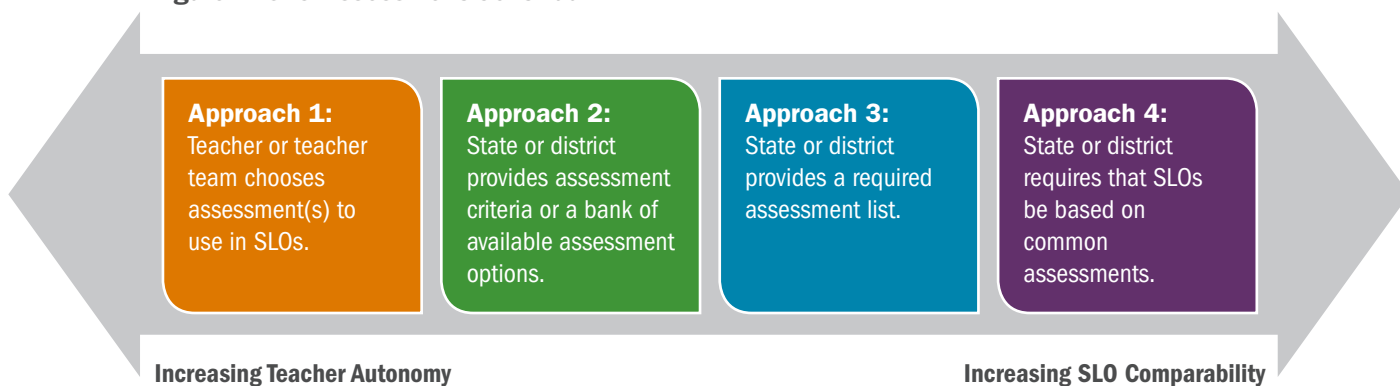
## Balancing Autonomy and Comparability: State Approaches to Assessment Selection for Student Learning Objectives

### Question From the Field

**How are states and districts balancing teacher autonomy and comparability in assessment selection for student learning objectives (SLOs)?**

Teacher autonomy and comparability across SLOs are important aspects of the SLO process for states and districts to consider when selecting their policy approach to assessments used in SLOs. States and districts need to determine whether they value one characteristic more than another and then select an assessment approach that reflects those values. This Ask the Team brief identifies four common approaches to assessments, shown in Figure 1, that prioritize teacher autonomy and comparability to different degrees. The brief discusses the benefits and drawbacks of each approach and includes examples from the field. We offer this information to inform state-level planning for strengthening SLO processes and procedures only and do not endorse any of the approaches or examples.

**Figure 1. SLO Assessment Continuum**



(Adapted from Lachlan-Haché et al., 2013)

## A Report to Note

The Regional Educational Laboratory Northeast and Islands report *How States Use Student Learning Objectives in Teacher Evaluation Systems: A Review of State Websites* (March 2014) summarizes state approaches to using SLOs and other goal-setting measures in teacher evaluation and is based on a review of state education agency websites.

The report found the following requirements for SLO assessments:

Number of States	Assessment Requirement
14	Nationwide or statewide standardized assessments are used.
12	Districtwide or schoolwide measures are used.
12	Classroom-based measures are used.
3	Vendor-developed assessment is used.
5	SLO assessments are comparable across classrooms.
3	SLO assessments are valid and reliable.
2	SLO assessments must be aligned with state standards.
2	SLO assessments must be rigorous.

(Lacireno-Paquet, Morgan, & Mello, 2014, p. 5)

Source: [http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/northeast/pdf/REL\\_2014013.pdf](http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/northeast/pdf/REL_2014013.pdf)

### Definitions

**“Student learning objectives** are content- and grade/course-specific learning objectives that educators can validly measure to document student learning over a defined and significant period of time” (Marion, DePascale, Domaleski, Gong, & Diaz-Bello, 2012).

**“Comparability** refers to how similar SLOs are among teachers who teach the same grade or subject across classrooms, buildings, district, or state” (Lachlan-Haché et al., 2013). Comparability can be addressed by using a common SLO checklist and providing comprehensive training to teachers and evaluators, in addition to setting guidelines related to the types of assessments used.

## APPROACH 1 THE TEACHER OR TEACHER TEAM CHOOSES THE ASSESSMENT(S) TO USE IN SLOS.

The first approach allows teachers to choose the assessment to use in their SLO and provides teachers with a great amount of autonomy because they may create or select any assessment that they believe will best measure student learning.

Approach 1 can make it quite challenging to demonstrate comparability across teachers because, in many cases, the work is done in isolation. States and districts can, however, increase comparability in the process by encouraging collaboration across teachers by setting minimum requirements for assessment quality and by providing additional resources and training.

### State Spotlight

**Wisconsin.** The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (WI DPI) piloted SLOs in 2012–13 and 2013–14. The first full year of implementation will be 2014–15. Teachers write at least one and up to six SLOs as part of their Educator Effectiveness Plan (EEP). Teachers have the autonomy to select the assessments to be used in SLOs, but to support SLO development, WI DPI provides an *SLO Process and Scoring Guide*, which includes criteria for selecting evidence sources and assessments, and a handout on using a *balanced assessment framework* to support the SLO process.

## APPROACH 2 THE STATE OR DISTRICT PROVIDES ASSESSMENT CRITERIA OR A BANK OF AVAILABLE ASSESSMENT OPTIONS.

The second approach provides teachers or teacher teams with state-provided assessment criteria or a bank of available assessments to guide their decision about which assessment(s) to use in their SLOs.

### Providing Guidance on Assessment Criteria

Some states provide teachers with a list of criteria that an assessment must meet to be considered appropriate for an SLO, such as requiring that the assessment be valid, reliable, aligned with state standards, and rigorous. Typical criteria are that the test items vary in the depth of knowledge they demand, that the language of the items be clear and appropriate for the students' level, and vary in format.

Providing a list of criteria ensures a minimum level of rigor and consistency across teacher assessments and still allows for district and teacher autonomy in their assessment selection.

Monitoring whether all assessments selected at the local or school level meet the requirements, however, can be a challenge because the burden of assessment review and approval is placed at the local level. Approach 2 also highlights the need for providing teachers with training in assessment literacy.

#### State Spotlight

**Ohio.** The Ohio Department of Education provides teachers with an assessment ranking that orders types of assessments by their likelihood to be valid, reliable, and aligned to standards in its [Guidance on Selecting Assessments](#) document. This resource also supports assessment literacy and encourages teachers to select or design assessments that are valid, reliable, free of bias, and complete with enough “stretch” to show growth in both high- and low-performing students. Teachers in Ohio then can use this assessment information to choose assessments and set growth targets on their SLOs. [A Guide to Using SLOs as a Locally-Determined Measure of Student Growth](#) includes the Checklist for Selecting Appropriate Assessments as well as resources to support teachers in setting growth targets.

#### State Spotlight

**New Jersey.** The New Jersey [Assessment Blueprint](#) provides teachers and districts with a guide to aligning assessments in student growth objectives (the state's name for SLOs) with the content standards and their depth of knowledge. The blueprint and guide includes actions for the teacher to take before, during, and after test design. Further information on assessments used in student growth objectives are in the [Student Growth Objectives: Developing and Using Practical Measures of Student Learning](#) guidebook.

### Providing a Bank of Vetted Assessments

States and districts also can offer a bank of vetted and approved assessments that teachers can use when developing their SLO. With this approach, the state or district establishes assessment approval criteria and reviews each assessment against the criteria. The assessment's score determines whether the assessment can either be approved or not.

Offering a bank of vetted and approved assessment reduces the burden on districts and teachers and can provide some consistency across teachers. One challenge with this approach, however, is the burden on state or district staff to review and vet the assessments.

### State Spotlight

**Colorado.** Colorado is one state that offers a bank of approved assessments as a resource to teachers, but it does not require their use. The Colorado Department of Education (CDE) [Assessment Resource Bank](#) allows teachers to sort and filter the assessments by grade level and subject area. CDE developed a list of criteria included in its [Assessment Review Tool](#) to review all of the assessments in the bank. As teachers sort and filter the assessments, the assessment's score on the Review Tool, including whether CDE recommends the assessment, is provided. This information supports teachers in making informed assessment selection decisions and in setting appropriate growth targets.

### District Spotlight

**Austin, Texas.** Austin Independent School District has been implementing SLOs as part of their REACH evaluation and support system since 2007. Because the district was an early adopter of SLOs, they have provided years of training to teachers and evaluators, building institutional knowledge and capacity. The [2014–15 REACH SLO Manual](#) describes the requirements of the Austin SLO process. In addition, the district provides a bank of preapproved assessment options that are available. That said, teachers can decide to use a different assessment than what is in the bank, but that assessment must meet minimum assessment criteria.

## APPROACH 3 STATE OR DISTRICT PROVIDES A LIST OF REQUIRED ASSESSMENTS.

The third approach provides a set of limited assessment options that all teachers in a particular grade or subject within a district must administer to their students as a part of the SLO process. This approach prescribes which standardized or locally approved assessment—state assessment, vendor assessment, or locally developed assessment—teachers must select from when developing their SLO, but district teacher teams can select which assessment to administer from the list of options provided as long as they all use the same assessment in their subject or grade.

Providing a list of required assessments helps ensure that teachers in similar grades and subjects use the same or similar assessments in their SLOs. This approach also reduces the burden on districts and teachers for finding high-quality assessments for their subject or grade. In states where districts can choose from a set of limited assessment options, districts are provided some local autonomy to select assessments that best fit their context.

One cost to this approach, however, is that districts and teachers are required to invest in either developing standardized assessments or purchasing assessments from an outside vendor.



**New York.** The New York State Education Department (2013) requires some teachers to use specific assessments based on their grade or subject, described in the *Guidance on the New York State District-Wide Growth Goal-Setting Process for Teachers: Student Learning Objectives* guidebook. New York uses an approach similar to Approach 4 (which follows) in that it identifies the assessment requirements for science and social studies teachers in Grades 4 through 8, including assessment requirements. The state also, however, allows districts to determine the common assessment to be used for some teacher types, which can be considered an example of Approach 3. For example, science teachers in Grades 4 and 8 are required to use the New York Science assessment in their SLOs. For science teachers in Grades 6 and 7 and social studies teachers in Grades 6 through 8, the state has a set of limited options for the assessment selected. In this example, teachers in these grades and subjects have the option of using (1) a state-approved third-party assessment; (2) a district, regional, or Board of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES)-developed assessment; or (3) a school- or BOCES-wide group or team goal (New York State Education Department, 2013, pp. 12–13).

#### **APPROACH 4 STATE OR DISTRICT REQUIRES THAT SLOS BE BASED ON COMMON ASSESSMENTS.**

The fourth approach increases SLO comparability by requiring teachers to build their SLOs around the mandated assessments provided; all teachers in a particular grade or subject must administer the provided assessment to their students as a part of the SLO process. This approach prescribes which standardized or locally approved assessment—state assessment, vendor assessment, or locally developed assessment—teachers must use when developing their SLOs.

Much like the third approach, requiring common assessments helps ensure that teachers in similar grades and subjects use the same or similar assessments in their SLOs. This approach also reduces the burden on districts and teachers for finding high-quality assessments for their subject or grade. In states where districts can choose from a set of limited assessment options, districts are provided some local autonomy to select assessments that best fit their context.

This approach also may require districts and teachers to invest in either developing standardized assessments or purchasing assessments from an outside vendor. Another drawback is that teachers cannot base their SLOs on their baseline data. They are required to use the common assessments, even if that is not the content or standards where their students need to focus for the year.



**Georgia.** The Georgia Department of Education spent the last several years working with Race to the Top districts to create a bank of district-developed assessments that teachers in similar grades and subjects can use as their SLO assessment. District teams attended a multiday training that walked participants through the assessment development process, including identifying key content and standards, establishing depth of knowledge requirements, and developing test items. Once the assessments were developed, the state reviewed and approved them. Districts or teachers can pull entire assessments or use a selection of items to create a new assessment. The Georgia Department of Education *List of Courses With Assessment Supports* lists some of the public domain assessments and test items available for use in SLOs.

Districts in Georgia then have the responsibility to identify which assessments will be used locally. In Georgia, districts are responsible for writing SLOs, according to the Georgia *Student Learning Objectives—Roles and Responsibilities*. The Georgia Department of Education provides a *Target Calculation worksheet* to support districts in setting growth targets.



## APPROACHES TO PROMOTING ASSESSMENT LITERACY

As SLOs and other measures of student growth have been implemented as a part of educator evaluations, some states have identified assessment literacy as an important professional development topic because

SLOs are only as good as the assessments used. Increasing practitioner assessment literacy is an important piece of developing quality SLOs regardless of the approach a state or district chooses.

Assessment literacy training has been provided to district leaders in at least four states: Georgia, Massachusetts, Ohio, and Tennessee. The [Student Learning Objectives Operations Manual](#), which provides information about the Georgia SLO process, highlights the steps that Georgia Department of Education implemented for developing district assessment literacy. The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education provided a [webinar series](#) and resources on assessment literacy to all districts. Ohio and Tennessee have partnered with an outside organization for assessment training. (Information on Ohio and Tennessee's training and the topics addressed for the training are not publicly available.) The Rhode Island Department of Education has provided [online modules and resources](#) to support the development of assessment literacy, including an assessment toolkit (summarized in this [overview](#)) for primary, elementary, and secondary grades.

## References

- Lachlan-Haché, L., Bivona, L., Reese, K., Cushing, E., & Mean, M. (2013). *Student learning objectives: Early lessons from the Teacher Incentive Fund*. Washington, DC: Teacher Incentive Fund Technical Assistance Network.
- Lacireno-Paquet, N., Morgan, C., & Mello, D. (2014). *How states use student learning objectives in teacher evaluation systems: A review of state websites (REL 2014–013)*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Northeast and Islands. Retrieved from [http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/northeast/pdf/REL\\_2014013.pdf](http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/northeast/pdf/REL_2014013.pdf)
- Marion, S., DePascale, C., Domaleski, C., Gong, B., & Diaz-Billelo, E. (2012). Considerations for analyzing educators' contributions to student learning in non-tested subjects and grades with a focus on student learning objectives. Concord, NH: Center for Assessment. Retrieved from [http://www.nciea.org/publication\\_PDFs/Measurement%20Considerations%20for%20NTSG\\_052212.pdf](http://www.nciea.org/publication_PDFs/Measurement%20Considerations%20for%20NTSG_052212.pdf)
- New York State Education Department. (2013). *Guidance on the New York state district-wide growth goal-setting process for teachers: Student learning objectives*. Albany, NY: author. Available at <http://www.engageny.org/sites/default/files/resource/attachments/slo-guidance.pdf>



## I WANT TO KNOW MORE!

### Bonus Resources

Center on Great Teachers and Leaders. (2013). *Professional learning module: Introduction to student learning objectives: Facilitator's guide*. Washington, DC: American Institutes for Research. Retrieved from [http://www.gtlcenter.org/sites/default/files/IntroSLOs\\_FacilitatorGuide\\_2.pdf](http://www.gtlcenter.org/sites/default/files/IntroSLOs_FacilitatorGuide_2.pdf)

Donaldson, M. L. (2012). *Teachers' perspectives on evaluation reform*. Washington, DC: Center for American Progress.

Gill, B., English, B., Furgeson, J., & McCullough, M. (2014). *Alternative student growth measures for teacher evaluation: Profiles of early-adopting districts* (REL 2014-016). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Mid-Atlantic. Retrieved from [http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/midatlantic/pdf/REL\\_2014016.pdf](http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/midatlantic/pdf/REL_2014016.pdf)

Lachlan-Haché, L., Bivona, L., Reese, K., Cushing, E., & Mean, M. (2013). *Student learning objectives: Early lessons from the Teacher Incentive Fund*. Washington, DC: Teacher Incentive Fund Technical Assistance Network.

Lachlan-Haché, L., Cushing, E., & Bivona, L. (2012). *Implementing student learning objectives: Core elements for sustainability*. Washington, DC: American Institutes for Research. Available at [http://educatoralent.org/inc/docs/Implementing\\_SLOs.pdf](http://educatoralent.org/inc/docs/Implementing_SLOs.pdf)

Lachlan-Haché, L., Cushing, E., & Bivona, L. (2012). *Student learning objectives: Benefits, challenges, and solutions*. Washington, DC: American Institutes for Research. Retrieved from [http://educatoralent.org/inc/docs/SLOs\\_Benefits\\_Challenges\\_Solutions.pdf](http://educatoralent.org/inc/docs/SLOs_Benefits_Challenges_Solutions.pdf)

Lachlan-Haché, L., Cushing, E., & Bivona, L. (2012). *Student learning objectives as measures of educator effectiveness: The basics*. Washington, DC: American Institutes for Research. Retrieved from [http://educatoralent.org/inc/docs/SLOs\\_Measures\\_of\\_Educator\\_Effectiveness.pdf](http://educatoralent.org/inc/docs/SLOs_Measures_of_Educator_Effectiveness.pdf)

Reform Support Network. (2012). *A quality control toolkit for student learning objectives*. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved from <https://www2.ed.gov/about/inits/ed/implementation-support-unit/tech-assist/slo-toolkit.pdf>

Reform Support Network. (2014). *A toolkit for implementing high-quality student learning objectives 2.0*. Retrieved from <http://www2.ed.gov/about/inits/ed/implementation-support-unit/tech-assist/toolkit-implementing-learning-objectives-2-0.pdf>

**For more examples or information on this topic**, please e-mail [gtlcenter@air.org](mailto:gtlcenter@air.org).

**Ellen Cushing** is a researcher at the American Institutes for Research and serves as the technical assistance lead for the Center on Great Teachers and Leaders.

**Cassandra Meyer** is a technical assistance consultant at American Institutes for Research and provides technical assistance for the Center on Great Teachers and Leaders.