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Report: Future K-12 Education Assessments Must Help Improve Teaching and Learning, Inform Accountability

PRINCETON, N.J. (March 11, 2013) – A high-level, <u>30-member commission</u> of educators and thought leaders formed to examine the future of education and its assessment issued a <u>report</u> today calling upon state and federal policymakers to commit to a long-term effort to develop assessments that place greater emphasis on providing timely and valuable information to students and teachers.

The report of The Gordon Commission on the Future of Assessment in Education asserts that good assessments provide timely, constructive information that help students accelerate their learning and teachers personalize instruction. Commission members expressed concern that the use of test results for the sole purpose of school accountability has overshadowed, at times, the more valuable uses of assessments. The Commission also found that although digital technologies that may one day be used for real time assessment of learning show promise, much more research is required before they can be fully integrated into classrooms and schools.

The Commission's goal is to stimulate a national conversation about the relationship between assessment, teaching and learning at a time when policy developments such as the Common Core State Standards and the work of assessment consortia like PARCC and Smarter Balance have heightened awareness of the critical relationships among more rigorous standards, curriculum, instruction and appropriate assessment.

"The primary purpose of assessment ought to be to inform and improve teaching and learning," said Dr. Edmund Gordon, the Commission's Chairman.

The Gordon Commission endorses the Common Core assessment's emphasis on competencies such as critical thinking and problem-solving, rather than on the rote recall of information and more basic skills. The report warns, however, that the potential of new assessments might not be reached if their purpose is solely to hold teachers and schools accountable for performance. The nation must invest in the development of new types of assessments that work together to inform teaching and learning and still provide measures of progress for accountability purposes.

The Commission's Policy Report asserts that the country must invest in developing systems of assessment that provide timely, constructive information to help students accelerate their acquisition of those competencies and teachers to personalize instruction.

Named after its Chairperson, <u>Dr. Edmund W. Gordon</u> — one of the nation's foremost scholars on education issues such as assessment, the achievement gap, and the interactions between teaching and learning and an emeritus professor at Yale University and Teachers College, Columbia University — the Commission was established by Educational Testing Service (ETS) to honor Dr. Gordon's long and distinguished career and with the purpose of pro vidingguidance for the future of the field. The Commission operates independently of ETS.

"Our conviction is that while the field of measurement in education has established a splendid history primarily directed at the measurement *of* education, the future of assessment in education will depend on the field's capacity to pursue assessment *for* education," Dr. Gordon said.

Although there is much more research to be done, the Commission members are optimistic about the potential of digital games and simulations to combine learning and assessment. "I am really interested in ways that technology can dramatically change both what we assess and how we assess it and also our ability to make assessment more productive for teachers and others to use," said <u>Jim Pellegrino</u>, Liberal Arts & Sciences Distinguished Professor, Distinguished Professor of Education, Co-Director of the Learning Sciences Research Institute at the University of Illinois at Chicago who Co-Chaired the Commission.

Commission members recognize that accountability for performance will continue to be an important aspect of educational policy, but their report argues: "Accountability must be achieved in a way that supports high quality teaching and learning. It must be remembered that at their core, educational assessments are statements about what educators, state policy makers, and parents want their students to learn and, in a larger sense, become. What we choose to assess will end up being the focus of classroom instruction."

"Changes in the economy, the uses of technology, and the explosion of social media and other communications have changed the nature of what it means to be well-educated and competent in the 21st century," Gordon added. "Technologies have empowered individuals in multiple ways — enabling them to express themselves, gather information easily, make informed choices, and organize themselves into networks for a variety of purposes. New assessments — both external and internal to classroom use — must fit into this landscape of the future."

The Commission made three recommendations aimed at bringing this about.

- 1. States should create a permanent Council on Educational Assessments modeled on the Education Commission of the States. The Council's first responsibility would be to commission an evaluation of the approaches of the Smarter Balanced and PARCC assessment systems and their effect on teaching and learning. The purpose of this evaluation would be to ensure that the new assessments are, indeed, driving instruction consistent with the educational vision embodied in the standards. As has been done before with evaluations of important assessment programs such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), such an evaluation might be conducted by an independent panel assembled under the auspices of the National Academy of Sciences or the National Academy of Education.
- 2. President Obama and Congress should use the pending reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and other federal laws to promote new ideas about assessment. The Obama administration has successfully used incentives built into the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, the Race to the Top competitions, and the Investing in Innovation fund to bring about a variety of policy changes and innovations. The U.S. Department of Education has also used its waiver powers to allow states to experiment with measuring students' year-to-year growth rather than their status at a fixed point in time. This waiver power also was used to free states from some of the onerous accountability aspects of the No Child Left Behind Act.

3. The U.S. Department of Education, the Department of Defense, the National Science Foundation, and the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, in collaboration with the philanthropic community, non-for-profit, for-profit sector, professional teacher organizations, and universities should commit to a 10-year research and development effort to strengthen the capacity of the U.S. assessment enterprise.
The assessments that we will need in the future do not yet exist. The progress made by the PARCC and Smarter Balanced Consortia in assessment development, while significant, will be far from what is ultimately needed for either accountability or classroom instructional improvement purposes. The goal of this effort should be to broaden the range of behaviors, characteristics and manifestations of achievement and related development that are the targets of assessment in education. This effort should be a partnership between not-for-profit organizations (either existing or newly created) the for-profit sector, professional teacher organizations, and universities.

To obtain a printed copy of the report, contact: **contact@gordoncommission.org**

About the Gordon Commission on the Future of Assessment in Education

The Gordon Commission was created with the mission to study the best of educational assessment policy, practice and technology; consider the best estimates of what education will become and what will be needed from educational measurement during the 21st century; and to generate recommendations on educational assessment design and application that meet and/or exceed the demands and needs of education — present and predicted.