

Lessons Learned from Developing and Implementing the Qatar Student Assessment System

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Qatar has recently undertaken ambitious education reforms, initiating a number of changes to its kindergarten through grade 12 and higher education systems. Its Education for a New Era initiative seeks to foster variety in educational offerings, choice for parents to select schooling options for their children, autonomy of newly opened schools, and accountability for all government-sponsored schools.

At the center of this initiative is the development of internationally benchmarked curriculum standards in modern standard Arabic, English as a second language, mathematics, and science for K–12 students. The standards include both content standards (what students should know) and performance standards (what students should be able to do by the end of each grade). Curriculum, assessments, and professional development are aligned with and follow from the curriculum standards developed by the Curriculum Standards Office in Qatar’s Education Institute.

Key to understanding how well these standards are being met are assessments of students’ knowledge and performance. To this end, RAND researchers and the Student Assessment Office in Qatar’s Evaluation Institute crafted the Qatar Student Assessment System (QSAS). The QSAS was intended to provide (1) information about school performance to the public; (2) feedback to teachers, helping them tailor instruction to support the needs of students; and (3) detailed information to policymakers about the general progress of the education reform and, specifically, about new Independent schools developed as part of the reform to help foster choice and variety. To serve these purposes, the initial design of the QSAS included multiple types of standardized assessments.

The core component of the QSAS was the Qatar Comprehensive Educational Assessment (QCEA), a summative assessment administered to students at the end of each school year. The

Abstract

Analysis of Qatar’s standards-based student assessment system, the first in the region, offers several lessons for other nations instituting similar reforms. These include the need to coordinate on standards and assessment development, allow sufficient time for a fully aligned assessment, and communicate about the purposes and uses of testing. Qatari policymakers need to address ongoing challenges in aligning assessments with future changes to curriculum standards, determining how best to use computers in testing, and accommodating students with special needs.

QCEA is the first national standards-based assessment in the region. It measures student learning and performance according to the requirements set forth in the curriculum standards using multiple-choice and open-ended questions. First administered in 2004, the QCEA was given to about 88,000 students in Ministry of Education, private Arabic, and Independent schools, or about 95 percent of the target population in each year. Starting in 2007, administration of the QCEA has been limited to Independent school students.

The QCEA has given Qatar the tools to understand the educational achievement of its student population to inform policymaking. It has also yielded several lessons for future assessment in Qatar and for education policymakers elsewhere who are considering a standards-based approach to student assessment.

Qatar’s System Offers Lessons to Education Policymakers

Standards development and assessment development should be coordinated. The design of the reform

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effort places responsibility for developing the curriculum standards with the Curriculum Standards Office and that for developing the assessments with the Student Assessment Office. However, communication and subsequent coordination between these offices was infrequent. Prior to the implementation of standards-based assessments, education policymakers should build formal linkages between standards-development and assessment-development authorities. One option is to have a permanent staff member with explicit liaison duties between the two offices. Another would be to have the curriculum staff and assessment-development staff housed in the same office.

Allow sufficient time to develop a fully aligned standards-based assessment. The Supreme Education Council planned for the QSAS to be developed and implemented in one year. However, the test developers encountered a number of challenges in meeting this tight deadline. Education research indicates that three to five years may be needed to develop standards-based assessments. This period allows ample time for developing, piloting, and aligning assessments with curriculum standards.

Balance logistics with the substantive needs of the testing operation. Student testing can reduce instructional time or cause unintentional stress for students, parents, and school administrators. Yet it is important to allot an adequate amount for testing to enable educators to measure and analyze student achievement. Prior to the administration of an assessment operation, the agencies in charge of administering the tests and analyzing the results should decide jointly on administration policies and procedures that allow them to strike a balance between limiting student burden or fatigue and ensuring that appropriate analyses can be made from the test results.

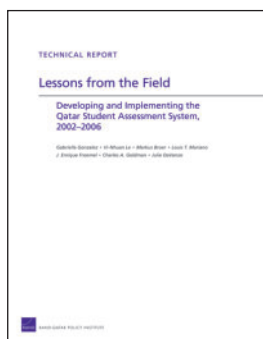
Ensure sufficient communication about the purposes and uses of testing. Public acceptance of an assessment system is vital for ensuring student motivation to take the tests and education stakeholders' confidence in the validity of the test results. Although the Evaluation Institute provided information to the public in an annual public forum, parents had many questions about the new system. Policymakers can improve acceptance

by offering direct outreach programs targeted to parents, other community members, and educators as well as by providing individual-level achievement data from the first year of testing.

These Steps Would Strengthen Qatar's System for the Future

The QSAS has made significant progress toward the goals of the initial design of using multiple methods to assess student progress relative to the standards, yet additional areas still need to be addressed. These include the following:

- Including students with learning or developmental disabilities who tend to be mainstreamed with traditional students in Qatar. This will require developing testing accommodations for students with disabilities.
- Responding to future modifications in the curriculum standards. The Evaluation Institute will need to make continuous appraisals of how well the QCEA aligns with any curriculum changes the Education Institute makes over time.
- Using computers to test standards. Many of the standards could be tested appropriately with the use of a computer. The Evaluation Institute could explore how best to do this and whether computer-based delivery of assessments is feasible, given the country's information technology infrastructure.
- Enhancing communication efforts. The Evaluation Institute could enhance communication with the public so that QCEA results can inform parental choice, school accountability, and educational policymaking. This includes reports of interest to practitioners and parents and studies to test the validity of using QCEA results to inform school-level or classroom-level education decisions.
- Considering the effects of limiting the testing to students in the Independent schools. The short-term and long-term ramifications of this decision will need to be weighed carefully against the goals and principles of the reform effort. ■



This research brief describes work done within RAND Education under the auspices of the RAND-Qatar Policy Institute and documented in *Lessons from the Field: Developing and Implementing the Qatar Student Assessment System, 2002-2006*, by Gabriella Gonzalez, Vi-Nhuan Le, Markus Broer, Louis T. Mariano, J. Enrique Froemel, Charles A. Goldman, and Julie DaVanzo, TR-620-QATAR, 92 pp., 2009, \$24, ISBN: 978-0-8330-4689-5 (available at http://www.rand.org/pubs/technical_reports/TR620/). The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit research organization providing objective analysis and effective solutions that address the challenges facing the public and private sectors around the world. RAND's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors. RAND® is a registered trademark.

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