

WA State Literacy Framework K-6 Assessment in Elementary Literacy

This document is a section from the [Washington State Literacy Framework K-6](#). Refer to the main source for more information. If you have policy questions related to the WA State Literacy Framework K-6, please contact ELA@k12.wa.us.

Why Assessment Matters

The Importance of Elementary Literacy Assessments

Literacy is foundational to all learning. In the elementary years, assessments help identify strengths, monitor development, and guide instruction. The Latin root of assessment, *assidere*, means “to sit beside” (Wilson, 2008). This image evokes trust, relationship, and reciprocity. This speaks to the relationship, trust, and support that effective assessment fosters. Educators are uniquely positioned to sit beside students understand:

- Student strengths and areas for growth.
- Students’ interests and identities.
- Experiences with language and literacy development.

What is a Balanced Assessment System?

A balanced assessment system is a comprehensive approach to understanding student learning. It includes a range of tools and methods used at different levels of the educational system to gather, interpret, and use information about student literacy development. It includes assessment at the classroom, school/district, and state levels. When assessments work together in a balanced way, they can be used to inform instruction, evaluate programs, and provide feedback to students, families, educators, and policy makers. Effective assessment practices help educators ask important questions:

- What do these students know and what can they do?
- How are they using literacy to make sense of the world?
- What strengths and experiences do they bring to learning?
- How can instruction build on these assets and meet their needs?

A balanced assessment system can contribute to all students having access to high-quality instruction and early literacy success. In classrooms, schools, and districts, collecting a constellation of assessment data can guide decisions so that every student has equitable access to high-quality instruction and early literacy success.



- **Assessment** is the ongoing process of gathering information about student learning. It includes many forms including observations, conversations, writing samples, projects, tests, and reflections.
- **Benchmark Assessments** are periodic checks aligned to grade-level standards. They identify trends and support instructional planning.
- **Progress Monitoring** tracks student growth in specific skills over time, especially for students receiving interventions.
- **Grading** is the act of assigning a value to student performance. This may take the form of scores, letters, or proficiency levels. Grading summarizes performance but does not always provide detailed feedback about specific strengths or areas for growth.
- **Reporting** is the communication of data and grading results to students, families, educators, and education systems. It includes tools such as report cards, family conferences, data dashboards, or statewide reporting. Communication helps ensure understanding and action at the classroom, school, and system levels.

The Assessment Process

Overview of Assessment Levels

Understanding the different types of assessment used at different levels of a balanced assessment system—classroom, school, district, and state—is essential for creating a coherent and effective educational system. Assessment at each level serves unique purposes, operates on different scales, and relies on different methods. Collectively, they are interconnected in supporting student learning and school improvement.

What Tool Should I Use? Matching the Tool to the Task

Assessment can take many forms, but not all assessments are meant to do the same job. Just as a carpenter would not use a paintbrush to hammer a nail, it is important for educators to select the right assessment tool for the task at hand. When assessment tools are used outside their intended purpose, they can produce confusion or cause ineffective instructional choices. Effective assessment begins with clarity about purpose, which informs educators to select the right assessment tools and apply them in ways that support learning.

To choose the most appropriate assessment tool, educators must begin by identifying the question they want to answer about student learning and the type of evidence that will best inform that answer. With that clarity, they can then select a tool that is purposefully designed to collect the needed data. By thoughtfully selecting tools that align with their intended purpose, educators can gather meaningful insights, tailor instruction, and support stronger literacy outcomes. It is essential to understand that assessment is not a single event but an ongoing process of inquiry. This cycle includes:

- **Asking Questions:** *What do we want to know about student learning?*
- **Gathering Evidence:** *What observations, conversations, student work, or data will help us explore this question?*

- **Applying Evaluative Lenses:** *How will we make sense of what we are seeing?*
- **Using Results:** *What actions will we take based on what we have learned?*

When educators know the answers to these questions, and where they are in the assessment cycle, the purpose of assessment is clear. In an early literacy context, effectively matching assessment purposes with the appropriate tools is essential for supporting young learners' development. Ensuring that the purpose of assessment is clearly defined and matched with the right tool is necessary to creating a responsive, supportive, and equitable early literacy environment (Haugen & Smartt, 2012). Each level and type of assessment serves a distinct role and requires tools that align with its specific goals. When assessment purposes and tools are not properly aligned in early literacy, the consequences can significantly hinder both teaching effectiveness and student learning.

Table 2: Overview of Assessment Levels and Types

Assessment Level & Type	Description	Purpose/Examples
Classroom-Based (General)	Part of daily instruction; provides immediate insights.	Purpose: Support responsive teaching, provide real-time feedback, understand day-to-day learning. Examples: samples, observations, student reflections, anecdotal, class conversations.
Classroom-Based (Formative)	Uses instruction to guide teaching and provide feedback; clarify learning goals and success criteria.	Purpose: Monitor understanding, adjust instruction, engage students. Examples: conversations, exit tickets, peer/self-assessments, rough draft conferences, think-pair-share activities.
Classroom-Based (Summative)	Measures achievement at the end of a learning cycle; measures mastery of grade level content standards.	Purpose: Measure proficiency, evaluate instruction, communicate progress. Examples: End-of-unit tests, evaluation of final writing pieces, performance assessment, district benchmarks, report card assessments.

Assessment Level & Type	Description	Purpose/Examples
School & District (General)	Provides a broader view across classrooms and grade levels; identifies students' eligibility for school- and district-wide services, programs, and interventions.	<p>Purpose: Identify support needs, assess instruction system-wide, understand how instruction is working across classrooms.</p> <p>Examples: Common district benchmarks, universal literacy screeners, interim assessments, school-level data reviews; MTSS assessments.</p>
School & District (Diagnostic)	Identifies specific learning strengths and needs in a focal skill area.	<p>Purpose: Pinpoint specific skill gaps, support targeted instruction or intervention planning.</p> <p>Examples: Phonemic awareness screeners, decoding inventories, language assessments.</p>
School & District (Interim & Benchmark)	Administered several times throughout the school year to identify progress within a content domain or targeted set of state standards. Often aligned with pacing guides, curriculum maps, or district goals.	<p>Purpose: Monitor progress, identify trends, inform instructional adjustments.</p> <p>Examples: Quarterly reading/writing assessments, district-developed performance tasks, Smarter Balanced Assessment (SBA) interims.</p>
School & District (Progress Monitoring)	Tracks student growth in specific skills over time.	<p>Purpose: Track the effectiveness of interventions and programs.</p>

Assessment Level & Type	Description	Purpose/Examples
Statewide	Administered across Washington to assess alignment with state standards.	<p>Purpose: Evaluate state-level learning trends, ensure accountability, inform funding and policy.</p> <p>Examples: Smarter Balanced Assessment (SBA), Washington Access to Instruction and Measurement (WA-AIM), WIDA ACCESS, WA KIDS.</p>

Assessment Within a Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS)

MTSS is a proactive, preventative, data-driven approach to ensuring that every student receives the appropriate level of instruction and intervention. Literacy assessments are foundational to making that system work effectively. Within the MTSS framework, school-based literacy assessment plays a critical role in identifying student needs, guiding instruction, and monitoring progress across all levels of support. In MTSS, assessment ensures that instruction meets the needs of all students.

- At **Tier 1 (Core Instruction)**, universal screening assesses all students and evaluates core instruction.
- At **Tier 2 (Core + additional support)**, more targeted assessments are used to identify specific skill gaps and help educators design small-group interventions. Progress monitoring assessments are used frequently to track student response to intervention and determine whether adjustments are needed.
- At **Tier 3 (Core + additional support + intensive support)**, individualized assessments to inform intensive, often one-on-one, interventions. Students do not need IEP or a formal medical diagnosis of any kind to receive intensive literacy support from their school.

In accordance with [RCW 28A.320.260](#), LEAs must use MTSS consistent with OSPI’s recommendations to provide screening and interventions to students in kindergarten through second grade who are at risk for reading difficulties, such as dyslexia. LEAs and schools must use MTSS to provide timely and accessible interventions and supports to every PK–12 student.

Follow the link for more OSPI information on [Washington State MTSS Framework](#).

Washington State Assessments

Washington's statewide literacy assessments serve a range of purposes and student populations, so that all learners are represented in the state's accountability system. These assessments provide valuable data on student progress, readiness, language development, and instructional

effectiveness. They are designed to align with state learning standards while meeting federal requirements and supporting equitable access to education. The table below outlines the key state-level literacy assessments, including who takes them, when they are administered, and how the results are used to inform instruction, programming, and policy.

Table 3: Overview of State Literacy-Related Assessments

Assessment Tool	Who Takes It	Grades	Purpose	How Results Are Used
LEA selected assessment tools	All K–2 students	K–2	Identify students who display risk indicators that are associated with dyslexia and highly predictive of future reading difficulty.	Provide evidence-based multisensory structured literacy interventions to students in grades K–2 who are at risk for reading difficulties.
ELA SBA	All students (except WA-AIM eligible students).	3–8 & 10	Measure students’ proficiency on ELA standards.	Interpret group-level trends and patterns; start instructional inquiries.
WA KIDS (Washington Kindergarten Inventory of Developing Skills)	All students in Kindergarten and Transition to Kindergarten (TK).	TK & K	Understand school readiness and whole-child development.	Inform classroom instruction; support early learning collaboration; inform policy and investment decisions.
WIDA Screener	Newly enrolled students who qualify for screening.	K & 1–12	Determine initial placement in English Language Development (ELD) services.	Identify which students qualify for ELD support.
WIDA Alternate Screener	Newly enrolled students who qualify for screening with significant cognitive disabilities receiving special education	1–12	Determine initial placement in ELD services.	Identify which students qualify for ELD support.

Assessment Tool	Who Takes It	Grades	Purpose	How Results Are Used
	services and ELD services.			
WIDA ACCESS	All MLs receiving ELD services.	K & 1–12	Measure annual English Language Proficiency (ELP) level.	Determine continued eligibility for ELD services; support language instruction.
WIDA Alternate ACCESS	MLs with significant cognitive disabilities receiving special education services and ELD services.	1–12	Measure annual ELP level.	Determine continued eligibility for ELD services; support language instruction.
WA-AIM	Students with the most significant cognitive disabilities.	3–8 & 10	Alternate assessment aligned to grade-level content standards with modified achievement expectations.	Provide access to grade-level content; inform instruction; meet federal and state accountability requirements.

Early Literacy Screening

Washington state law ([RCW 28A.320.260](#)), enacted through Senate Bill 6162 in 2018, requires all K–2 students to be screened for indicators of dyslexia using evidence-based tools. This requirement took effect in the 2021–22 school year and aims to identify students at risk for reading difficulties early, ensuring that timely interventions can be provided. Districts are responsible for selecting screening tools that meet state guidelines. These screenings are a required part of the district's balanced assessment system and play a critical role in detecting potential literacy challenges early, allowing educators to respond with appropriate, timely support. Screening focuses on foundational early literacy skills, including:

- Phonemic awareness
- Phonological awareness
- Letter-sound knowledge
- Rapid automatized naming (RAN)

Follow the links for more OSPI information on [Dyslexia Guidance: Implementing MTSS for Literacy \(2024\)](#) and the [Early Literacy Screening Crosswalk \(Updated 2026\)](#).

Smarter Balanced Assessment (SBA)

The SBA is a standardized test used in many states, including Washington, to assess the systems that provide literacy programming outcomes of student proficiency in ELA. It is aligned with the Common Core State Standards and includes both computer-adaptive questions and performance tasks. The SBA provides data on student achievement and growth, informing programmatic decisions and accountability.

Follow the link for more OSPI information on [Washington State SBA Consortium](#).

Washington Kindergarten Inventory of Developing Skills (WaKIDS)

WaKIDS is an observational assessment used in Washington state to understand the developmental readiness of kindergarten students. It focuses on six domains, including social-emotional, physical, and cognitive development. WaKIDS helps teachers tailor instruction to meet the needs of young learners and supports a smooth transition into the K–12 system.

Follow the link for more OSPI information on [WaKIDS Roles & Responsibilities](#).

WIDA ACCESS Multilingual Students

WIDA ACCESS is an annual ELP assessment for MLs. It measures students' skills in listening, speaking, reading, and writing in English. ELP placement (Screener) assessments determine initial English proficiency and inform programmatic decisions, such as initial identification of MLs and placement into an ELD program. ELP annual assessments (ACCESS) are used to determine identified MLs' current level of English proficiency.

Follow the link for more OSPI information on [WIDA Assessment Guidance](#).

Washington ACCESS to Instruction and Measurement (WA-AIM)

WA-AIM is an alternate assessment for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities. It is aligned with grade-level content standards, with modified achievement expectations to ensure accessibility. WA-AIM is designed to provide meaningful access to instruction and assess student progress in a way that supports inclusive educational practices and meets federal accountability requirements.

Follow the link for more OSPI information on [Guidelines for State Accountability Assessments](#).

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) in Assessment

UDL is a research-based framework that helps educators design learning and assessment experiences that are accessible, flexible, and inclusive. It recognizes that students vary in how they engage, process information, and demonstrate understanding (CAST, 2020). UDL has powerful implications for assessment design.

Assessments designed with UDL principles offer students a range of ways to demonstrate their understanding. This flexibility is especially important in supporting the diverse needs of all learners, including multilingual students and those with disabilities or varied learning profiles, who may benefit from alternative formats, additional scaffolds, or varied response options to fully access and engage with the task. To support all learners, educators can:

- **Offer Choices** in how students demonstrate understanding.
- **Scaffold** assessments with tools, prompts, or models.
- **Use Supportive Conditions**, flexible parameters and remove unnecessary barriers so all students can meaningfully participate.
- **Interpret Scores in Context**, with curiosity and positive assumptions, not certainty.
- **Multiple Means of Representation** and options for accessing and processing information and content.

Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Assessment

Much like an iceberg, the most powerful influences on student learning often lie beneath the surface. Culturally and linguistically responsive assessment recognizes that learning is shaped by many interwoven factors, including:

- Home languages and community practices.
- Values, interests, and lived experiences.
- Social and cultural ways of knowing.
- Emotion, motivation, and identity.

Culturally responsive assessment helps teachers look below the surface. It invites educators to view assessment not as a judgment of performance, but as a process of inquiry that honors students' identities, experiences, and ways of making meaning. Rather than only measuring skill performance, culturally responsive assessment invites curiosity and connection. Within responsive assessment, educators consider:

- What does this student's approach reveal about their perspective or logic?
- How might their cultural knowledge or language shape their response?
- What opportunities can I create for students to draw on their own experiences?

Assessment should reflect the diverse ways students learn, communicate, and demonstrate understanding and consider dimensions of learning that are often overlooked in conventional assessments. Students bring rich backgrounds, languages, and lived experiences into the classroom, and these should be seen as strengths, not barriers.

Dr. Adeyemi Stenbridge, in his work *Culturally Responsive Education in the Classroom* (2020), states that traditional assessments often prioritize standardization over authentic understanding, particularly for students from historically underserved communities. This can obscure students' true capabilities and disengage them from meaningful learning.

Culturally responsive assessment shifts this paradigm. It draws on students' funds of knowledge—language, identity, background, relationships, and motivation—and considers how they think, make decisions, and connect new ideas to lived experience. Assessment becomes a tool for affirmation and access, not gatekeeping. To support equitable learning, Stembridge encourages strategies such as:

- **Designing With Identity in Mind:** Invite students to draw from cultural experiences and interests. Create tasks that allow students to draw on their cultural backgrounds, interests, and experiences, making learning more relevant and engaging.
- **Use Formative Assessment with Dialogue:** Make learning visible in the student and teacher relationship through reflection and informal check-ins. View assessment as an ongoing conversation rather than a final judgment.
- **Prioritizing Voice and Choice:** Offer multiple ways to demonstrate understanding like storytelling, movement, drawing, or oral expression.
- **Focusing on Thinking Over Correctness:** Value reasoning and perspective, by giving students opportunities to explain their thinking or process, even when answers are not conventional.

Effective Feedback in Early Literacy—A Bridge to Learning

Feedback is a critical component of the assessment cycle in early literacy because it bridges the gap between assessment and learning. Feedback serves as a resource that helps young learners understand what they are doing well and where they need to improve, all within the framework of their developmental stage (Hattie & Clarke, 2019). To be effective, feedback must be timely, clear, and supportive of students' developmental needs. Strategies for impactful feedback include:

- **Use of Clear, Specific Language:** Feedback should be simple and focused: "You remembered to use a capital letter at the beginning of your sentence!"
- **Positive Framing:** Emphasize what the student did well before suggesting improvements: "I like how you sounded out that word. Let's try it again together and see if we can make it even smoother".
- **Visual and Verbal Cues:** Use visuals (e.g., smiley faces, thumbs up) and gestures to reinforce feedback, especially for younger learners or MLLs.
- **In the Moment and Frequent Feedback:** Provide feedback during reading or writing activities, not just after. This helps reinforce learning as it is happening.
- **Goal Setting with Students:** Involve students in setting literacy goals (e.g., "I will use finger spaces between words") and track progress.
- **Peer Feedback:** Teach students how to give kind and helpful feedback to each other using sentence starters like "I noticed..." or "Next time you could..."

Assessment-Capable Learners of Literacy

The term "assessment-capable learner" is most associated with the work of John Hattie, a leading educational researcher known for his meta-analyses on what works in education. Hattie popularized the concept through his research on visible learning, emphasizing that students

who are assessment-capable understand their learning goals, can evaluate their own progress, and know what steps to take next to improve. Young children can become assessment-capable learners when they are supported to:

- **Understand** what they are learning (e.g., “I can hear beginning sounds in words”).
- **Know** how to recognize success (e.g., “I can match the sound /b/ to the letter “B”).
- **Use** feedback to improve (e.g., “My teacher said I need to stretch out the sounds more slowly”).
- **Monitor** their own progress (e.g., using coloring charts or reading logs).
- **Set goals** (e.g., “I will read out loud to someone at home every day this week”).

Self-Assessment Happens in Everyday Literacy

Self-assessment, as described in Hattie’s assessment capable learners, is the practice of students reflecting on their learning and performance in ways that build metacognition and the ability to develop literacy skills beyond the classroom. Literate individuals reflect constantly, often without realizing it. It is deeply embedded in literacy practice and rooted in the human desire to understand and be understood. Self-assessment is woven into literacy practice. Students reflect and adjust naturally when they reread confusing text, revise a draft for clarity, or ask for clarification in conversation. These actions are driven by internal questions like:

- Does this make sense to me?
- Will a reader understand my writing?
- What does this remind me of?
- How does this confirm or change what I already knew?

For students, this approach affirms strengths and encourages deeper engagement by connecting learning to their lived experiences. Rather than being passive recipients of instruction, these students are encouraged to reflect on their learning using their full linguistic and cultural funds of knowledge.

Evidence-Based Practices in Literacy Assessment

Based on guidance from the What Works Clearinghouse (WWC), the following practices are recommended to support effective assessment in elementary literacy settings:

- **Universal Screening:** Screen all students early and mid-year to identify those at risk and guide resource planning.
- **Diagnostic Assessment:** For students flagged as at risk, use diagnostics to pinpoint specific skill needs like decoding or fluency.
- **Progress Monitoring:** Use short, validated tools regularly to track literacy skill growth and inform instructional adjustments.
- **Data-Driven Instruction:** Use ongoing assessment data to plan instruction, group students, and adjust supports responsively.
- **Embedded Formative Assessment:** Use daily instruction to gather real-time insights

and provide immediate feedback.

- **MTSS-Aligned Assessment:** Incorporate assessment tools within an MTSS to monitor the effectiveness of Tier 2 and 3 interventions.
- **Collaborative Data Use:** Hold regular team meetings to analyze literacy data, co-plan instruction, and engage families in the next steps.

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