Developing the Enabling Context for Student Assessment in Brazil

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About the Series

Building strong education systems that promote learning is fundamental to development and economic growth. Over the past few years, as developing countries have succeeded in building more classrooms, and getting millions more children into school, the education community has begun to actively embrace the vision of measurable learning for all children in school. However, learning depends not only on resources invested in the school system, but also on the quality of the policies and institutions that enable their use and on how well the policies are implemented.

In 2011, the World Bank Group launched Education Sector Strategy 2020: Learning for All, which outlines an agenda for achieving “Learning for All” in the developing world over the next decade. To support implementation of the strategy, the World Bank commenced a multi-year program to support countries in systematically examining and strengthening the performance of their education systems. This evidence-based initiative, called SABER (Systems Approach for Better Education Results), is building a toolkit of diagnostics for examining education systems and their component policy domains against global standards, best practices, and in comparison with the policies and practices of countries around the world. By leveraging this global knowledge, SABER fills a gap in the availability of data and evidence on what matters most to improve the quality of education and achievement of better results.

SABER-Student Assessment, one of the systems examined within the SABER program, has developed tools to analyze and benchmark student assessment policies and systems around the world, with the goal of promoting stronger assessment systems that contribute to improved education quality and learning for all. To help explore the state of knowledge in the area, the SABER-Student Assessment team invited leading academics, assessment experts, and practitioners from developing and industrialized countries to come together to discuss assessment issues relevant for improving education quality and learning outcomes. The papers and case studies on student assessment in this series are the result of those conversations and the underlying research. Prior to publication, all of the papers benefited from a rigorous review process, which included comments from World Bank staff, academics, development practitioners, and country assessment experts.

All SABER-Student Assessment papers in this series were made possible by support from the Russia Education Aid for Development Trust Fund (READ TF). READ TF is a collaboration between the Russian Federation and the World Bank that supports the improvement of student learning outcomes in low-income countries through the development of robust student assessment systems.

The SABER working paper series was produced under the general guidance of Elizabeth King, Education Director, and Harry Anthony Patrinos, Education Manager in the Human Development Network of the World Bank. The Student
Assessment papers in the series were produced under the technical leadership of Marguerite Clarke, Senior Education Specialist and SABER-Student Assessment Team Coordinator in the Human Development Network of the World Bank. Papers in this series represent the independent views of the authors.
About the Author

Maria Helena Guimarães de Castro was the State Secretary of Education of São Paulo (2007–2009), the largest public school system in Brazil. She still serves as a member of the State Board of Education in São Paulo (since 2009). From 1995 to 2002, she was President of Instituto Nacional de Estudos e Pesquisas Educacionais Anísio Teixeira (INEP), the federal assessment institute of Brazil, which oversees student assessment programs in the country. Prior to that, she was a Professor at the State University of Campinas/Brazil (1985–2010). Currently, she is the Executive Director of Fundação Sistema Estadual de Análise de Dados (SEADE), a public foundation responsible for social statistics in the State of São Paulo (since 2012).
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Special thanks to Ricardo Correa Coelho, who made important contributions to this paper. Ricardo has worked as a specialist in public policy at the Ministry of Education since 2000 and has a doctorate in Political Science from the University of São Paulo.
Executive Summary

After expanded coverage of the school system, ensuring that students learn at school has become the priority in many developing countries. This, in turn, has created a push for the development of student assessment systems that can inform pedagogy, monitor and certify learning levels, and select students for further education. What reforms are required to create such assessment systems? What lessons can be learned from countries that already have travelled the road to a stronger assessment system?

This case study analyzes Brazil’s experience in developing its student assessment system. Brazil’s story should prove particularly interesting to those aiming to understand how a large (and, in this case, federal) country can successfully implement extensive reforms of its assessment system.

In Brazil’s case, the reforms involved developing a comprehensive policy framework for the support and funding of assessment activities; creating an autonomous, federal institution to be in charge of key assessment programs; ensuring stable and sufficient funding; and developing in-country capacity to carry out assessment tasks.

Several factors allowed for these reforms to take hold. Among the most important were: stable political leadership; making education, and the need to monitor education quality, a national priority; and partnerships with nongovernmental institutions.

We can draw several important lessons from this case study. For example, Brazil’s experience demonstrates that a long-term vision is required for developing a strong assessment system because the process may take a decade or more. Sustained leadership across political coalitions also is important to ensure stable support for assessment initiatives. Finally, successful reforms require the participation of many stakeholders, including government and nongovernmental organizations, as well as international donors.
Developing the Enabling Context for Student Assessment in Brazil

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Introduction

After expanded coverage of the education system, ensuring that students learn at school is the key priority for a growing number of developing countries. However, putting learning first requires gathering evidence about how much students are learning. This, in turn, requires putting in place strong assessment systems that provide data for informing teaching and learning, monitoring and certifying learning levels, and selecting students for further education.

Developing a strong assessment system is a complex task. First, it requires putting in place the right enabling conditions for assessment activities, including the right policies, institutions, and fiscal and human resources. Only after these pieces are in place will a country be in a position to develop a stable assessment system that can effectively contribute to improved education quality and learning.

Countries aiming to strengthen their assessment systems may greatly benefit from the experience of countries that already have made this journey. In the space of two decades, Brazil developed a sophisticated assessment system that allowed for reliable tracking of student enrollment and learning levels across the country. This contrasts strongly with the situation in the 1990s when it was not even possible to know how many students were enrolled in Brazilian schools. The improved collection and use of assessment information has allowed Brazil to improve the quality and efficiency of its education system. Today, Brazil has one of the most improved school systems in the world.

This paper has three purposes: (1) to describe the main features of the student assessment system in Brazil; (2) to explain the factors that allowed for this system to take hold; and (3) to draw lessons for other countries aiming to develop their own student assessment systems.

The implementation of a successful assessment reform in Brazil is notable considering that this is an emerging economy and a young democracy with a

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1 For a general discussion about the enabling context for student assessment systems, see Clarke (2012).
2 This paper primarily focuses on assessment at the primary and secondary levels, although references to higher education are made when necessary.
large and multiethnic society. Brazil is the fifth-largest country in the world, both in territory and in population (200 million). It is the world’s sixth-largest economy. Although poverty has been drastically reduced in recent years, it still affects around 20 percent of the population.

Brazil is a federal republic with power distributed at three levels of governance: federal, state, and municipal. The country has 26 states, the Federal District (which includes the capital city), and around 5,600 municipalities. The federal, state, and municipal authorities are politically, economically, and administratively autonomous. They collect their own taxes, manage their own fiscal and human resources, and implement their own public policies. The provision of educational services is a shared responsibility among federal, state, and municipal governments. Post-secondary and tertiary education are under the control of the federal government; upper secondary is under the control of state governments; primary and lower secondary are under state and municipal government control; and preschool is under municipal government control. Public investment in education reaches 5.7 percent of GDP, and represents 17 percent of total government spending.

The school system in Brazil serves around 42 million students in 185,000 schools. Enrollment in primary education is universal; at the secondary level, it reaches 90 percent. Education quality has been improving gradually, as shown by national and international indicators. The national school quality index (IDEB, Índice de Desenvolvimento da Educação Básica) surpassed the yearly target in 2011. Results from the most recent Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) show that Brazil has significantly improved its performance in mathematics, language, and science since 2000. However, the country still suffers from high repetition and dropout rates (19 percent and 8 percent respectively in primary education).

The revamping of Brazil’s assessment system came as part of a larger reform package to improve education quality. Reforms first focused on building the enabling context for assessment activities. This included defining the overarching policy framework for assessment; creating the right institution to lead assessment programs; ensuring stable and sufficient funding; and developing in-country capacity for carrying out assessment tasks.

As we shall see, several factors allowed for these reforms to take hold. The most important were having stable political leadership; making education, and the need to monitor education quality, a national priority; international support; and partnerships with nongovernmental institutions.

The next three sections describe the current national university entrance examination, large-scale assessment programs, and classroom assessment activities in Brazil. The following sections discuss key factors (policies, institutions, human and fiscal resources) that allowed for these assessment programs and activities to take hold and be successful. The last section discusses lessons for other countries.
National University Entrance Examination

Up until the late 1990s, there was no national university entrance examination in Brazil. Instead, each university had its own examination (vestibulares); an arrangement that proved both expensive and inefficient. This arrangement required students to determine very early on those universities to which they would apply. Students had to decide taking into account the cost of each examination (they had to pay to take the tests at each institution), the testing schedule (they had to choose between examinations that were scheduled to take place at the same time in different locations), and geography (they had to travel to the different institutions to sit for the examination). Having to administer their own selection process also turned out to be very cumbersome for the universities. In addition, it precluded them from attracting applicants from all over the country.

From 1998 onwards, a national university entrance examination was gradually introduced across the country. The federal assessment institute, Instituto Nacional de Estudos e Pesquisas Educacionais Anísio Teixeira (INEP), was put in charge of its governance, design, and implementation. The Exame Nacional do Ensino Médio (ENEM) was created with the dual purpose of selecting students into tertiary education and certifying the completion of secondary school. The examination has a competency-based approach that prioritizes the measurement of student capacity to solve real-life problems. Initially, ENEM was a single, multidisciplinary test of five competencies; nowadays ENEM measures student performance in Portuguese, mathematics, natural sciences, social studies (all multiple-choice tests), and writing.

The introduction of the national university entrance examination was an extremely complex process. The examination was backed by law, but universities could adopt it on a voluntary basis. Private universities quickly adopted it as a selection mechanism. However, public universities, which were more powerful and selective, initially rejected it. Public universities only really started using ENEM from 2009 onwards, after distinct content areas were introduced. These universities gradually adopted the examination, either as a unique selection mechanism or as a complement to their institutional selection processes. Another major difficulty in the adoption of the national examination was the leak of some examination booklets in 2009. This forced INEP to redo the tests, and its president to resign. A year later, errors in some answer sheets raised concerns about the validity of the examination. The case reached the federal court. These irregularities raised skepticism and concern among public university officials who were still considering whether to adopt the examination.

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3 The original assessment framework for the national university entrance examination was largely based on PISA, one of the international assessments in which Brazil was participating.
The national administration of ENEM is a very complex operation. Around five million students take the assessment in more than 100,000 classrooms around the country. Students who finish upper secondary education at a public school are automatically enrolled in the examination at no cost. Low-income students from private schools are also exempt from the examination fee. The rest have to pay US$17 to sit for the examination. The assessment is administered under strict standardized and security conditions over two consecutive days.

Students apply to the study program of their choice through a centralized process administered by the Ministry of Education. The unified application process (SISU, Sistema de Seleção Unificada) allows students to apply to different institutions using their results in the ENEM tests. Institutions weight the test scores according to the relative importance they assign to each score. As of 2010, 26 out of the 55 federal universities had adopted ENEM and were part of the unified application process.

ENEM was further strengthened in 2004 when the federal government introduced scholarships for poor students based on their performance on the test. However, the examination also has been criticized for the extreme pressure it places on students. The examination also has been criticized for essentially consolidating the high school system into one academic track, and removing or downgrading the options for technical tracks.

A decade and a half after its introduction, ENEM is now generally well accepted in Brazilian society. Access to the examinations is democratized, allowing students from all over the country to apply to participating universities. ENEM also has been key to the implementation of the revised secondary education curriculum in Brazil. Specifically, to prepare their students to take ENEM, teachers began to adopt the principles of interdisciplinary study, contextualization, and problem solving that underpin this new curriculum.

**Large-Scale Assessment Programs**

This section describes student assessment programs in Brazil that report at the national level, including SAEB, Prova Brasil, and the international assessments, PISA and LLECE.

**National Large-Scale Assessments**

Over the course of two decades, Brazil has succeeded in developing a strong, national large-scale assessment program. First, a sample-based assessment called SAEB (Sistema Nacional de Avaliação da Educação Básica) was launched. The origins of SAEB can be traced to the late 1980s when the Ministry of Education funded the first pilot assessments of public urban schools. The first SAEBs took

4 Brazil also has an array of state- and municipal-level assessments that are beyond the scope of this case study.
place in 1990 and 1993; however, these assessments did not cover the entire country, and they lacked the technical sophistication to ensure valid and comparable results across states. The Ministry of Education took greater control of the assessment in 1995. Technical innovations to ensure valid and reliable results were implemented, including the selection of sound samples and the adoption of Item Response Theory (IRT) scaling. The assessment has been administered every two years since 1995, and trends in learning levels are available since then. In 1997, SAEB was transferred to the federal education assessment institute, INEP.

Brazil’s national large-scale assessment program was created with the primary purpose of monitoring education quality. SAEB aims to improve education quality by providing a diagnosis of the current status of education, identifying factors related to student achievement, informing policy, and putting pressure on the schools to do well. It targets students at grades 5 (end of primary school), 9 (end of lower secondary school), and 12 (end of secondary school) in all schools (public and private, urban and rural).

The assessment covers different subject areas of the school curriculum. However, since Brazil does not have national curricular standards, the assessments are based on a synthesis of state and municipal curricula, as well as on national guidelines that provide a non-compulsory reference for state and municipal curricula. Since 2003, the core tests have measured mathematics (problem solving) and Portuguese (reading comprehension). At times, SAEB has also measured history, geography, and the sciences (or physics, chemistry, and biology, in the case of upper-secondary students). All tests use multiple-choice questions.

The program also gathers background information as a way to identify and understand factors related to student achievement. SAEB uses student, teacher, and principal questionnaires to collect information about students’ socioeconomic levels, study habits, teacher training and practice, school administration, and working conditions, among others. This information is then used to identify factors related to student results, and to inform policy.

It soon became apparent that there was a strong demand for school-level results that could be used to monitor, support, and hold public schools accountable for student results. In 2005, a census assessment of public schools, Prova Brasil, was created to fill this gap. The census uses the same instruments and procedures as the SAEB, but only measures mathematics and Portuguese. It is administered every two years to all students at grades 5 and 9.

The census assessment opened the way to the creation of a national school accountability program in 2007. The Índice de Desenvolvimento da Educação Básica (IDEB) is a school quality index that combines student performance (as measured by Prova Brasil) and repetition rates. The introduction of this index was seen as key to the goal of putting learning first and reducing the high

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5 The census assessment excludes schools that have less than 20 students in the target grade.
proportion of students that repeated grades. The index is used in some states to distribute monetary incentives to schools.

The joint administration of SAEB/Prova Brazil is a major operation. In 2011, 6.2 million students from all 26 states and the Federal District participated in the assessment. The federal institute, INEP, relies on states, municipalities, and contractors from all over the country to administer the tests.

Student assessment now plays a prominent role in society and in the school system. The regular administration of SAEB/Prova Brasil and the online publication of school results have contributed to creating a strong assessment culture in Brazil. All schools receive a report card comparing their results to municipal, state, and regional averages. Issues related to education quality and assessment results are quite prominent in the media. There is a growing mobilization of society at large in support of education. Nevertheless, there has been little progress to date in the pedagogical use of results by the schools and by teacher training programs.

**International Large-Scale Assessments**

Brazil regularly participates in different international large-scale assessment programs. Brazil’s first such experience was in 1997, in UNESCO’s Laboratorio Latinoamericano de Evaluación de la Calidad de la Educación (LLECE), which was an assessment given at grades 3 and 4 in mathematics and Portuguese. The country also took part in the 2006 LLECE, this time at grades 3 and 6 in mathematics, Portuguese, and science. A new LLECE assessment is scheduled to take place in 2013. In 2000, Brazil also joined OECD’s Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), which assesses the performance of 15-year-old students in mathematics, language, and science. Since then, Brazil has participated in every PISA exercise (2000, 2003, 2006, 2009, and 2012).

The conduct of international assessments in Brazil is the responsibility of the federal assessment institute. INEP designates a national manager or coordinator to be in charge of implementing the assessment in the country according to the international procedures and standards. INEP also contracts consultants to give support to its staff, and it works closely with the states, which collaborate in the areas of logistics and test administration.

**Classroom Assessments**

In Brazil, there is little support at the federal and state levels for monitoring or ensuring the quality of classroom assessment activities. Quality assurance mechanisms are informal, or do not exist at all. As a consequence, the quality and nature of classroom assessment varies considerably. Schools and teachers have a high degree of autonomy in defining assessment criteria and in applying these criteria to evaluate student performance.
Nevertheless, Brazil does have a national policy document that provides guidelines for classroom assessment. The National Educational Guidelines and Framework Law, approved in 1996, states that classroom assessment must be formative, continuous, and cumulative. It also establishes that student grades must play a more important role in the student evaluation process than the results from examinations administered at the end of the school year. Within this framework, the states implement different policies and guidelines for how teachers should assess student performance. Box 1 provides an example from the state of São Paulo.

Promotion and repetition policies vary widely among states and municipalities. Some states and municipalities have a more formative approach, with assessments mainly used to inform teaching and learning. Automatic promotion is used in the first grades of primary education, and students can only repeat at the end of school cycles (every two or four years). Other states and municipalities have a more summative approach to assessment, with tests administered on a monthly, bimonthly, quarterly, or half-yearly basis. Student may pass or be required to repeat any grade depending on their test results.

School-Based Assessment Program
The federal government recently launched a school-based assessment program to support student learning. The fact that many students were not learning to read in the early grades of primary education led to the launch of Provinha Brasil in 2008. This assessment was introduced with the main purpose of supporting teaching and learning in public schools. The program started measuring early-grade reading skills in grade 2, and then expanded, in 2012, to also measuring early-grade mathematics skills. Provinha measures these skills using multiple-choice paper-and-pencil tests.

Provinha is now a highly institutionalized assessment program. Related laws from 2007 state that education should focus on student learning, that schools should set learning targets, and that learning levels should be measured on a regular basis. Provinha is a concrete mechanism for implementing these laws. The federal assessment institute (INEP) was mandated to design the tests and procedures, and to make the material available to the schools.

This school-based assessment draws heavily on teachers and education administrators in order to ensure the effective uses of the assessment information. Teachers administer Provinha at the beginning and end of the school year. The first assessment is used as a diagnostic to set up end-of-school-year targets; the second assessment is used to see if the targets were met. Teachers also score the tests and use the results to adjust their pedagogy to the different learning levels of students. Test results are not published. Education administrators support the schools and hold them accountable for reaching their targets.
Box 1. Student Assessment in the State of São Paulo

São Paulo is the largest public school system in the country, with four million students, 5,300 schools, 220,000 teachers, and 50,000 administrative staff.

According to the state regulations, the assessment of student learning is the responsibility of schools and teachers. Students are assessed using a combination of formative and summative assessments. Students can only repeat grades at the end of the primary (grade 5) and lower secondary (grade 9) cycles. The decision to repeat grades takes into account student performance in the last year of each school cycle. In upper secondary school, students might repeat on an annual basis if they do not reach the minimum required grade average.

A reform was introduced to improve the low learning levels that students were exhibiting at the end of each school cycle. The reform included four strategies: (i) the adoption of an unified curriculum for all schools with structured text books for teachers and students; (ii) the creation of an index of educational development—Índice de Desenvolvimento da Educação do Estado de São Paulo (IDESP)—which establishes annual goals to be achieved for each school according to the state standards and results of the state-level, large-scale assessment program—Sistema de Avaliação de Rendimento Escolar do Estado de São Paulo (SARESP); (iii) monetary incentives for school staff according to the goals achieved on IDESP; and (iv) merit pay for teachers, measured by their performance in the teacher evaluation process.

The state developed learning standards for all grades and subject areas, together with a curriculum framework to support implementation. In 2007, it also published guidelines to support formative classroom assessment. After consulting with school staff, the state adopted the following mandatory set of assessment practices:

- Reporting grades on a zero to ten scale. Grades should consider student progress in homework, participation in class, collaboration, and performance on tests.
- Implementing bimonthly mandatory assessments, and making available remedial classes for low-performing students.
- Distributing report cards to each student, and requesting that the card be signed by a parent.
- Distributing an annual report card with information on individual results on the SARESP.

At the beginning, there was some resistance to these practices, but parents eventually expressed broad support for reforms. The publication of the results of the 2009 national large-scale assessment program (SAEB/Prova Brasil) demonstrated concrete improvement in the performance of São Paulo’s education system.

The Provinha operation involves many schools all over the country. States and municipalities participate in the school-based assessment program on a voluntary basis. Beginning in 2012, all urban public primary schools will participate, around 50,000 schools. Hard copies of the Provinha Brasil tests and administration guides are distributed to all schools, and are also made available online.

Six years after its initial implementation, there are mixed feelings about the school-based assessment program. Its promoters defend it on the basis of a clear theory of action linking Provinha to improved pedagogy and student learning. Its detractors claim that not much is happening in the schools as a consequence of Provinha. An impact evaluation of the program would be necessary to judge its real contribution to education quality.
Enabling Context Issues

This section discusses some of the enabling factors behind the sustained development of the student assessment system in Brazil. It focuses in particular on the mission, legal framework, organizational structure, and human and fiscal resources of the federal institute in charge of the main assessment programs in Brazil—the Instituto Nacional de Estudos e Pesquisas Educacionais Anísio Teixeira (INEP).

INEP is a semi-autonomous federal institute linked to the Ministry of Education. It is recognized as a leading assessment institution in Latin America that has built its reputation on high-quality work and a proven capacity to design, implement, and bring to scale assessment innovations in the context of a very large, federal country. INEP’s mission is to help improve education quality and equity by assessing student performance, maintaining education statistics, and doing educational research. The institute also supports states and municipalities in the development of their own assessment programs. INEP has played a key role in informing stakeholders and influencing the assessment policy dialogue in Brazil; it also has been highly influential in shaping policies at the federal, state, and municipal levels.

INEP is a stable institute recognized by law. Related federal laws and policy documents specify the governance and responsibilities of the institute and ensure stable funding. They also mandate INEP to manage several key assessment programs, including the national university entrance examination (ENEM), the national large-scale assessment program (SAEP/Prova Brasil), international large-scale assessments (PISA, LLECE), and the school-based assessment program (Provinha Brasil). These policies also specify the purposes, target population, frequency, and procedures of these assessment programs.

The federal institute has a well-developed organizational structure and permanent staff. It has six main areas of focus, including planning and management, technology and communication, statistics, higher education assessments, primary education, and research and development. As of 2010, INEP had a staff of about 300 permanent civil servants and an established career path. A pending task is the creation of new posts and job profiles for specialists in statistics and assessment methods.

INEP works in collaboration with an array of institutions to implement the various assessment programs. The institute outsources core assessment activities (for example, test design, sampling, and administration) to specialized organizations through international calls for bids. It works in alliance with the states and municipalities to administer the assessments. It provides training all over the country in item writing, test supervision, and administration. By so

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6 See the INEP webpage at: http://portal.inep.gov.br/.
doing, INEP has built countrywide capacity to run assessment activities and, equally important, has gained support from stakeholders.

The federal institute has a stable and sufficient budget ensured by law. In 2011, it had an annual budget of US$460 million. Around 70 percent of this budget was used to fund the various student assessment programs, including the national university entrance examination (ENEM), the national large-scale assessment (SAEB/Prova Brasil), and international assessments. The university entrance examination is the most expensive program, costing US$200 million in 2011. Most of the money comes from the federal government; less than 20 percent comes from examination fees. The annual federal budget of the national large-scale assessment program is around US$90 million. International assessments have an annual federal budget of around US$250,000.

Despite all of this, INEP has been in somewhat of a governance crisis since 2009. The university entrance examination, ENEM, has become ungovernable and seems too big for a single institution. It has consumed all of the energy of INEP’s staff, who go on strike (or threaten to do so) on a regular basis. While INEP is meant to be a strategic government institution, most of its resources are currently being devoted to nonstrategic issues, such as logistics and security in administering tests. Moving forward, decisions will need to be made about how to resurrect INEP’s strategic role in the assessment landscape in Brazil.

Just a few decades ago, the enabling context for assessment activities in Brazil was very weak. The first large-scale assessments of the late 1980s were no more than pilot projects supported by the Ministry of Education and carried out in a few states. There was no legal framework, institutions, or stable funding for assessment activities. The country also did not have enough people with experience in student assessment. Moreover, important stakeholders were opposed to the very idea of assessment. For many educators, politicians, and researchers, assessment was more a tool of control than something that could be used to monitor and support education.

International donors played a key role in the development of the assessment system in Brazil. In the 1990s, Brazil did not have the capacity and the money to run large-scale assessments by itself. Support for assessment activities first came from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), which partially funded the first SAEB exercises of 1990 and 1993. Then the World Bank came in as a key player in 1995, funding what can be considered the first national SAEB administration. World Bank support was key to ensuring the continuity of assessment activities until 2000.

Over time, the Ministry of Education gradually took on more responsibilities, contributing to assessment activities in the form of both funding and staff. The states collaborated with the federal government, giving support to their public schools to participate in the national assessment. Moreover, many states and municipalities put in place their own large-scale assessment programs.
The institutionalization of student assessment programs in Brazil relied heavily on an ambitious legal reform. First, the Brazilian Constitution of 1988 guaranteed autonomy to the states and municipalities to organize their own education systems. The constitutional reform of 1995 put education in the foreground, and the National Educational Guidelines and Framework Law of 1996 established the national system of educational assessment for basic and higher education. The legislation also stipulated that the federal government had the responsibility to evaluate education quality, and to define policies to improve it. This law defined the architecture of the national assessment system. It was within this context that the national assessment system took shape in the mid-1990s.

Revamping the old federal assessment institute was absolutely decisive for the development of an effective assessment system in Brazil. INEP, which was established in 1938, had been going downhill over the years. Legislation passed in 1997 mandated INEP to lead assessment activities in the country. The institute was then transformed into a leading assessment and research institution with international recognition.

Strengthening human resources was a key factor in revamping the assessment institute. At first, between 1997 and 2006, INEP temporarily hired most of its staff through international cooperation with UNDP and UNESCO. In 2007, a specific career path was created for INEP civil servants. In 2008, a public selection process was implemented in order to secure high-level permanent staff. The staff of INEP grew from 50 people in the early 1990s to around 300 civil servants in 2012. The staff profile also changed: besides public administrators, statisticians and experts in curriculum and evaluation joined the institute.

With the revamping of the assessment institute, the budget for assessment activities increased and became more stable. In 1997, INEP’s funding was secured by law. In real terms, INEP’s annual budget more than quadrupled in a decade (growing from US$104 million in 2000 to US$460 million in 2011). This allowed Brazil to gradually take control over its assessment activities, and to reduce reliance on international donors.

Nongovernmental institutions have played a key role in the development of the assessment system. In the mid-1990s, only two major organizations specialized in student assessment: Fundação Cesgranrio and Fundação Carlos Chagas. Currently, several companies and nongovernmental organizations work in this area. Brazil now has assessment centers linked to public universities, a national association of educational assessment (ABAVE), and graduate programs on educational assessment and evaluation.

Unfortunately, teacher training institutions have not played a key role in building an assessment culture, or in producing teachers that are “assessment literate.” There is a lack of connection between assessment programs and teacher training institutions. Teachers have few opportunities to learn how to interpret
and use assessment information to improve student learning. Pedagogical analyses of assessment results are scarce.

Strengthening the enabling context (legislation, institutions, staff, funding) for assessment activities allowed the assessment system in Brazil to expand. The sample-based national assessment (SAEB) included only 12 out of 26 states in 1990; then expanded to 21 states in 1993, and reached all 26 states in 2012. By 2002, 13 states had developed their own state-level, large-scale assessments. The school-based assessment program (Provinha Brasil) gradually expanded to reach all states and schools.

The development of the assessment system in Brazil was also enabled by several macro-level variables. The 1980s were characterized by political, economic, and social turmoil; by contrast, the 1990s brought political stability and economic growth. The federal government pushed for the rationalization of resources, decentralization policies, and a closer monitoring of the efficiency and efficacy of public policies; education also was launched as a national priority. This new context allowed for the first steps toward developing a sustainable assessment system. It also created the need for up-to-date education statistics and information about student learning levels in order to monitor education quality.

The single most important driver that allowed for the development of this enabling context for student assessment in Brazil was political leadership. Former president Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1994–2003), who was supported by an ample majority in the National Congress during his two-term government, gave strong support to developing the national assessment system. The legal framework supporting the assessment system was designed and approved under his mandate. The strategic decision to revamp the federal assessment institute was also part of his legacy. President Lula (2003–2011) largely continued and expanded the assessment legacy of his predecessor and political rival. This came as a surprise to many supporters of President Lula given that he had once criticized these assessment policies. The current president, Dilma Rousseff, is expected to largely continue Lula’s policies.

Political leadership by the assessment institute was also critical to developing the assessment system. The close relationship between INEP and the Minister of Education’s cabinet was key to facing down the opposition to the assessment reforms, and to gaining allies for its implementation. The cooperative relationship between national, state, and municipal governments, and the voluntary adoption of national assessments by the states and municipalities, created a positive environment for assessment activities.

Another factor that allowed for the development of this enabling context was the support of international donors. UNDP, UNESCO, and the World Bank provided technical leadership and funding for the first assessment activities. Over time, Brazil gradually developed its own assessment capacity and ensured public funding for its assessment programs. Today, Brazil leads and maintains its
assessment system in an autonomous way, without the support of international donors.

Apart from the federal assessment institute, many institutions have contributed to creating an assessment culture in Brazil. There is now a number of states and nongovernmental institutions helping to build support and create capacity for assessment activities all over the country.

Over the last 20 years, attitudes toward assessment have changed from negative to positive. In the 1980s, education was dominated by strong negative views about assessment activities. In a highly ideological arena, assessment was perceived as a right-wing domination tool. This negative perception started to change in the 1990s. This change was made possible thanks to strong political and technical leadership provided by key individuals and institutions, and the influence of international assessment programs. Nowadays there is a growing mobilization of society at large pushing to improve education. The wide disclosure of school-level results empowered society to ask for better education. It also attracted the attention of media outlets, which regularly discuss quality and equity issues using assessment results.

As of 2012, assessment is considered a permanent component of state education policies. In fact, assessment was one of the key policy areas addressed in the decennial plan for the development of education (2001–11). This plan supported the development of assessment programs in all the states.

**Lessons Learned**

Over two decades, Brazil has created a strong and well-regarded assessment system. Today, Brazil has highly institutionalized examinations for secondary school certification and selection into tertiary education, large-scale assessments for monitoring education quality levels, and school-based assessments for supporting teaching and learning.

These assessments have stimulated the process of accountability. Society deeply appreciates the assessments and relies on the results to press political authorities for greater quality in public schools. Mayors and governors are concerned with the test results of public school systems and strive to improve their performance. The National Congress organizes public hearings to discuss the assessment results. The teacher unions, which radically opposed large-scale external assessments in the 1990s, now recognize their legitimacy, although they are still opposed to the wide disclosure of school results. Parents are beginning to appreciate the better-performing schools. The media regularly covers the themes of student learning and assessment results. Governmental and nongovernmental agencies also regularly debate these themes.

Based on the Brazilian experience, here are some key lessons for other countries aiming to develop a strong enabling context for student assessment:
• **Developing a national assessment system is a long-term project that must be gradually implemented.** There is a long journey from the first assessment efforts (usually once-off assessment exercises) to the establishment of a stable assessment system. For Brazil, this journey took at least 15 years.

• **Ensuring political leadership.** The political engagement of presidents, governors, ministers, and local authorities is critical for the success of an assessment system. This engagement must transcend political coalitions and ideologies, and must be stable in time. Direct connections with the Minister of Education and other stakeholders are strategic to ensure support for assessment programs. These conditions allow for deploying long-term assessment policies. In Brazil, the direct support of presidents Cardoso and Lula allowed for the adoption of a new policy framework, the revamping of an old assessment institute, and the implementation of federal and state assessment programs.

• **Establishing a clear policy framework that ensures the stability of assessment activities.** In Brazil, the legal framework for assessment provided the architecture for the system. It defined the assessment programs to be implemented and the type of institution that should be in charge of them. It also provided the required funding.

• **Designating a clear organization in charge of the assessment.** The creation of an independent agency in charge of national assessments, educational statistics, and research is paramount. In Brazil, the designation and revamping of an old assessment institute (INEP) was strategic for the development of the assessment system.

• **Avoiding the risk of overloading the leading assessment institution with operational tasks related to assessment implementation.** The implementation tasks (test production, distribution, administration, data processing, and reporting) can easily consume all of the time and energy of an institution. However, this should not be the role of a strategic government agency. In Brazil, the federal assessment institute (INEP) has not yet found the right balance between policy/strategy versus implementation. This was very clear during the introduction of the national university entrance examinations. Nowadays, one of the biggest difficulties that INEP is facing is the implementation of the university entrance examination. Since 2009, INEP has been in successive crises because of the politics and the technical challenges of this university entrance examination. As a result, INEP is losing its identity as a leading assessment organization. Instead, it is more and more perceived as the national agency in charge of selecting students into tertiary education.

• **Ensuring participation of key stakeholders in running the assessment.** INEP outsources key implementation tasks to private organizations. These tasks include training teachers in item writing (enabling them to submit questions to be included in the national assessments) and training test
Developing the Enabling Context for Student Assessment in Brazil

supervisors and administrators in the states and municipalities. This approach allows INEP to focus more on strategy and less on operational tasks (although more needs to be done here). Most importantly, it allows for building capacity and support for assessment all over the country.

- **Defining national standards and a curriculum that provides focus to the assessment system.** Ideally, this should be done before designing the assessment so that everything is aligned. In Brazil, the introduction of the national university entrance examination followed the introduction of a curriculum reform.

- **Building staff capacity to run assessment programs.** Options include on-the-job training, and training to enable temporary staff to participate in assessment activities (such as item writing and test administration). Other options include funding for personnel to study abroad in advanced assessment programs (at the masters or doctoral level), or internships in assessment institutions. Brazil has explored all of these options.

- **Creating new institutions specialized in student assessment.** In 1998, with the support of the World Bank, INEP funded the creation of five assessment centers linked to public universities. Some of these centers have had excellent performance and trained many assessment professionals. In 2001, the creation of the National Association of Educational Evaluation (ABAVE) brought new incentives and support for masters and doctoral studies in assessment. Today, Brazil has many centers of research specialized in student assessment and, most importantly, it has a critical mass of people with expertise in this field.

- **The use of assessment results for school accountability purposes may greatly contribute to consolidating an assessment culture.** In Brazil, the public dissemination of a school quality indicator (IDEB) fostered a demand for information, and attracted the attention of civil society and the media. This indicator was widely adopted by municipalities and states to monitor and support school performance and to distribute monetary incentives.

- **The use of assessment results to inform policy also contributed to consolidating the assessment system, especially among researchers and policy makers.** In Brazil, economists and statisticians greatly contributed to identifying factors related to student performance. This information has been regularly used to inform and design education policy.

- **A key challenge for consolidating the assessment system seems to be the use of assessment results to inform teachers and pedagogy.** There is currently a disconnect between the assessment programs and teacher training institutions in Brazil. This severely impairs the capacity of assessment information to improve teaching practices and learning.

- **Countries have to ensure that assessment information is used to improve pedagogy and learning.** One mechanism for doing this is by creating
assessment programs that have the primary objective of supporting student learning. Brazil did this with its school-based assessment program, Provinha Brasil. Other mechanisms (not yet explored by Brazil) include funding pedagogical research using assessment data, and publishing pedagogical material based on the assessment findings.

- **Introducing national university selection examinations is an extremely complex and long-term task.** Factors that may facilitate the process are a clear policy document backing the examinations, the voluntary adoption of the system by universities, and the involvement of stakeholders in defining what should be measured. Public trust needs to be built, and the best way to do so is by avoiding mistakes in examination implementation. In Brazil, the full implementation and adoption of the national examinations took more than a decade. It is extremely hard to convince universities to risk their reputation in a national competition for the best students. It is also very hard to convince them to delegate to a federal agency their power in administering their own admission process.

It is hoped that these lessons will be useful for other countries that, like Brazil, have made a commitment to develop their student assessment system in order to improve education quality and student learning.

**Bibliography**


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This case study analyzes Brazil’s experience in developing its student assessment system. Brazil’s story should prove particularly interesting to those aiming to understand how a large (and, in this case, federal) country can successfully implement extensive reforms of its assessment system.

In Brazil’s case, the reforms involved developing a comprehensive policy framework for the support and funding of assessment activities; creating an autonomous, federal institution to be in charge of key assessment programs; ensuring stable and sufficient funding; and developing in-country capacity to carry out assessment tasks.

Several factors allowed for these reforms to take hold. Among the most important were: stable political leadership; making education, and the need to monitor education quality, a national priority; and partnerships with nongovernmental institutions.

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