

WHITE PAPER

Proven, trusted, and adaptive: The MAP Growth difference



Introduction: The role of assessment in ensuring student success

Schools and districts have high-stakes decisions to make about how they can best serve their students every year. These can be difficult choices in an environment of resource constraints. In any given year, school leaders may consider a variety of school improvement programs, professional development opportunities for teachers, and assessment solutions for students, all while remaining focused on their ultimate goal: ensuring that their students have equitable access to learning opportunities that will put them on a lifelong path of success. School leaders know they need to carefully choose solutions that will bring this goal within reach, and that missteps can be both literally and figuratively costly for schools and their students.

As they evaluate their options, school leaders are guided by a set of intertwined concerns with respect to the specific results they need to deliver. The ever-present reality of achievement benchmarks set by districts and states, for example, creates ongoing pressure for schools and drives many of their improvement strategies. At the same time, schools need to take a more expansive, longer-term view of their responsibilities to students, preparing them well for college and beyond. And community concerns are always in the mix as well: Families and other advocates have high expectations of schools with respect to educational effectiveness, stewardship of resources, and equitable treatment of students, among other important issues.

Given these pressing concerns and their implications for student outcomes, school leaders understand that accurate, actionable assessments of student learning are essential ingredients in any recipe for success. Even the best initiatives to improve testing performance and college readiness will leave a significant number of students behind if schools lack the assessment data they need to accurately track progress and identify challenges for all students. To help

identify students' learning needs and determine where interventions will be most useful, schools are turning to interim assessments, administered at intervals throughout the school year, as a way to obtain the reliable and timely information they need.

With many assessment solutions available, it can be challenging to determine which one will best meet a school's needs and justify the time and effort involved in a successful implementation. At a minimum, schools are looking for a solution that will help them address their main accountabilities:

- Ensuring that education is accessible and equitable for all students
- Addressing the needs of struggling students by identifying and closing gaps
- Giving hard-working teachers a way to improve the instruction they provide
- Being able to predict student performance on summative tests, such as annual state tests or the SAT®/ACT®

While a number of assessment solutions available today [check these boxes](#) to some degree, the level of expertise and experience behind the solutions varies widely. For schools that pay attention to these distinctions and insist on the highest-quality solution available, their search process often brings them to [MAP® Growth™](#), the interim assessment solution from NWEA®—a research-based, not-for-profit organization that has worked for more than four decades to advance student learning. As this white paper will explain, MAP Growth is a trusted and innovative assessment for measuring achievement and growth in the domains of mathematics, reading, language usage, and science.

Inside MAP Growth

NWEA conceived of MAP Growth as a highly accurate and adaptive interim assessment to help educators answer one fundamental question: Are my students learning? Within this question lie several others: Which students have gaps and are falling behind? Which students are ready for more advanced material? How can we customize instruction to best meet students' individual needs? MAP Growth dynamically adjusts to each student's responses, resulting in a personalized assessment experience that is far more meaningful than a one-size-fits-all test that fails to capture the nuances of each student's learning progress.

The assessment data produced by MAP Growth helps teachers deliver well-informed, differentiated instruction for students. It gives school leaders the information they need to make prudent decisions about resource allocation. That's why so many administrators trust MAP Growth to help bring lagging students up to grade level, boosting test performance and college readiness across the board. These are the results schools are after, but not all assessment solutions can consistently deliver them. MAP Growth is widely regarded as a leading solution because schools know they are getting an assessment that was painstakingly designed to excel in four key areas: (1) accuracy, adaptivity, and accessibility; (2) robust reporting; (3) actionable insights to improve instruction; and

(4) outstanding predictive value. Let's explore each of these in detail.

Accuracy, adaptivity, and accessibility

When an assessment misses the mark and fails to accurately measure a student's knowledge, it's not just a missed opportunity to help that student succeed. It's also a potential misuse of resources as schools mobilize to intervene with students based on the results of their assessments. Students may end up sitting in the wrong classes or learning groups or receiving interventions that don't meet their needs; consequently, these worthy approaches may not be available to the students who could really benefit from them. The value and ramifications of accuracy in assessments are foundational to the methodology and design of MAP Growth.

The quest for [accuracy begins with research](#). For some assessment solution providers, research is an afterthought; at NWEA, it is integral. Developed by some of the industry's best [psychometricians](#), information architects, and content experts, MAP Growth sets a high bar for quality and upholds that standard with continuous improvement, fed by rich longitudinal data. Sophisticated item development and calibration help ensure that MAP Growth can precisely—and consistently—measure student growth and achievement.



This high level of accuracy is, in large part, a result of the flexibility and adaptive capabilities that are baked into MAP Growth. The computer-adaptive design and reliable scale of MAP Growth help schools and educators eliminate time-wasting, redundant assessments. With one tool, schools can screen students, personalize instruction, measure growth, and evaluate programs.

Here's how it works in practice. Consider a fourth-grader taking a 45-item assessment. After the first item, the assessment presents either more or less challenging questions depending on the student's response. The assessment will continue to dynamically present new questions—harder or easier—based on correct or incorrect answers. This approach allows the assessment to identify each student's specific instructional readiness, providing much more meaningful and actionable information than fixed form tests in which all students receive the same questions.

And unlike other assessment solutions, MAP Growth is not constrained by either a narrow range of grade-level content or artificial time constraints. A fully adaptive test of this nature shows teachers exactly where their students are across a wide spectrum of different skills and learning domains. A fixed test, in comparison, works fine for students performing at grade level, but it doesn't provide useful insights for students with learning gaps or those ready to accelerate past the typical complexity of grade-level expectations.

These adaptive capabilities build upon themselves over time. Each new test administration picks up where the previous test left off for each student, rather than resetting to grade-level content. This efficient design helps the assessment quickly home in on the student's current instructional level, without wasting questions on content that students have already demonstrated they understand.

The accuracy and adaptive capabilities of MAP Growth are made possible by research-driven test design. A stable, high-quality technological

platform ensures smooth delivery and provides accessibility to more students than any other interim assessment. To support students with disabilities, the platform includes embedded features like text-to-speech and compatibility with supports like keyboard navigation, magnification, and color contrast adjustment.

Accessibility also means providing opportunity for the growing population of non-native English speakers in the US, the largest of which is Spanish-speaking students. MAP Growth includes Spanish-language assessments for students in English-only, bilingual, or dual-language immersion programs.

Robust reporting

For each student who takes part in MAP Growth, the platform generates a richly detailed profile that forms the basis for new instructional approaches and targeted interventions for students who may need them. The [student profile report](#) brings together a comprehensive set of assessment data and makes that information accessible to educators and school leaders by providing a complete, well-contextualized picture of a student's learning. Teachers, in particular, are able to gain valuable insights from this report at a glance. Not only can they quickly find an individual student's test results by subject, but they can also compare their students' performance to national norms and view projections for state summative and college readiness.

The student profile report drills down to show students' readiness levels in specific instructional areas, as well as the areas where they need reinforcement or further development. The specificity of these reports—and their interactive capabilities—make them invaluable resources for helping set students' growth goals. With graphs and other data visualizations, the reports show students' performance as they move from grade to grade, and they show projected growth based on the rate of learning progress to date.



Actionable insights to improve instruction

Without an accurate and complete picture of a student's learning, efforts to improve instruction and meet individual students' needs will always depend on guesswork to some degree. MAP Growth replaces guesswork with actionable data, the impact of which can be far-reaching. Teachers use the student profile report to inform the assignments they give and the learning groups they create, thus enhancing their ability to keep students challenged and engaged. With greater insight into each student's learning progress, teachers are able to reach not only the students who need intervention or extra support, but also the students whose assessment scores show they may be ready for more advanced material. [MAP Growth also aligns test results to state standards](#) so teachers can connect their instructional activities to those standards.

The granular data produced by MAP Growth gives educators a thorough and nuanced view of student learning. The assessment reveals not whether students are “good” or “bad” at particular subjects, but rather which specific tasks or conceptual areas may be challenging for them—the [zone of proximal development](#) described by the psychologist Lev Vygotsky. A student could have a talent for mathematics, for example, while struggling with certain geometry tasks. MAP Growth zeroes in on

such details, helping teachers individually tailor instruction in ways that would be significantly more difficult in the absence of these insights.

Outstanding predictive value

Schools are eager for reliable information about not only how students are doing today, but also how they are likely to perform tomorrow. MAP Growth reports leverage robust data to share informed, highly accurate predictions about student performance on state summative tests, as well as college readiness. With this data in hand, school leaders can continually weigh their students' progress toward proficiency standards, thus reaching a much better understanding of where interventions and resources are needed most.

The high value of MAP Growth's predictive data is a result of the ongoing work of the research team at NWEA, which is foundationally a research-based organization. Data validity is explicitly built into MAP Growth as a core feature, beginning with a highly rigorous process for developing and calibrating test items. The end result is a unique assessment for every state, aligning with state or Common Core standards and delivering dependable insights that educators can trust to provide the right supports for student learning.

How MAP Growth stacks up against the competition

As a research-based, not-for-profit organization, NWEA is motivated first and foremost by the needs of students and the overarching goal of helping them learn and succeed. These priorities are demonstrated most clearly where they matter most: the design, content, and functionality of industry-leading assessment solutions. [NWEA's experience, expertise, and mission](#) help differentiate MAP Growth from competing solutions in numerous ways. For example, MAP Growth:

- **Is foundationally based in research.** Unlike some assessment providers that bring in researchers to validate their products after the fact, NWEA works hand in hand with experienced researchers, designers, and test developers every step of the way to maintain the highest standard of quality. This is the difference between an organization that is foundationally based in research and one that treats research as an add-on feature.
- **Values learning over profit.** MAP Growth is beholden to the research-driven, not-for-profit ethos that has guided NWEA for decades. While other assessment providers may support learning, their decisions often serve their primary purpose of earning revenue. When revenue and what's best for student learning are at odds, NWEA is driven by its mission to choose learning, every time.
- **Has rich data and frequently refreshed norms.** With millions of schoolchildren taking MAP Growth assessments every year, NWEA has a vast, anonymized data set that is unmatched in the industry. As a result, NWEA is able to re-norm MAP Growth every three to five years using a nationally representative population from partners in all 50 states and Washington, DC. Competing solution providers do not perform high-quality re-norming as often, and they pull from smaller and less nationally representative samples.
- **Has the largest interim assessment item bank in the industry.** The more than 50,000 test items in MAP Growth far exceed what you will find in competitors' assessments. This large item bank allows for strict item exposure limits: MAP Growth prevents students from seeing the same item twice within a 14-month time frame for grade 2-12 tests, and a three-month time frame for K-2 tests. This ensures an accurate and reliable adaptive test experience for students at all achievement levels.
- **Has a wide variety of item types.** While competing assessments are limited to multiple-choice questions and a few other formats, MAP Growth offers a wide variety of question and item types, including free text, text or graphic order buttons, matching tables, table fill-ins, and other formats to keep students engaged with the assessment and avoid privileging any single test-taking style over another.
- **Leverages external resources.** Rather than linking only to its own instructional content, NWEA data can link to a wide variety of external [instructional content providers](#). This gives educators a range of options for choosing the solution that best meets the needs of each student, class, or school.
- **Provides full implementation support.** NWEA understands that the success of assessments depends in large part on how effectively they are rolled out across districts and schools. That's why MAP Growth includes robust support for implementation, hosting, and data integration, rather than charging for these things separately and risking an incomplete or piecemeal implementation.

Conclusion

There is no question that while assessments can be a great asset for schools, they are also a logistical challenge. Administering schoolwide assessments requires a tremendous amount of coordination on multiple fronts. Schools must tend to the schedules and movements of students, teachers, and personnel, such as proctors. Schools must also address space considerations and ensure that technology needs are met. And they must spend time—a lot of it. Schools often set aside many hours or even a whole day to conduct an assessment.

With this level of investment, an assessment cannot be a gamble. Schools don't want to risk adopting a flawed assessment that doesn't give them meaningful results. They need a dependable solution that can effect real change, and they need the right insights and data to drive that change.

Leveraging data to drive change and boost student achievement is the guiding purpose of NWEA, and MAP Growth—its signature assessment solution—is the culmination of decades of research-driven innovation. With the highest-quality normative data available for student learning and growth, MAP Growth delivers actionable insights that cascade across the educational environment. First and foremost, students find the assessment engaging and personalized, as the instrument adapts to their knowledge as they proceed through the test and

from one test to the next throughout the year. Teachers and school leaders get the information they need to identify at-risk students, determine how best to allocate resources, and move toward a more equitable model of differentiated instruction. And administrators get precise predictions on student performance on the ACT/SAT and state summative tests, as well each student's level of college readiness.

As schoolchildren complete assessments throughout the year and from grade to grade, the reliability of those assessments is critical in earning students' continued trust. Schools are asking students not only to sit through lengthy tests, but also to set learning and growth goals based on their results. The tests they take need to be worthy of these demands. Across the country, schools choose MAP Growth because in addition to providing rich data and predictive insights, it is a solution that engenders trust, bringing a school's aspirational goals within reach and activating students to strive for success.



NWEA is a not-for-profit organization that supports students and educators worldwide by providing assessment solutions, insightful reports, professional learning offerings, and research services. Visit [NWEA.org](https://nwea.org) to find out how NWEA can partner with you to help all kids learn.

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