**Going Beyond the Summative:**

**Thinking Through Requests for Proposals That Ask for More**

**May 2024**

**Introduction**

“If you don't know where you want to go, then it doesn't matter which path you take.” In the world of assessment, the desired path for a program often coalesces during the process of developing a Request for Proposals (RFP). And increasingly, these RFPs are asking for *more*. Interim assessments, item banks, literacy screeners, and state-funded assessment literacy training are becoming common parts of summative assessment RFPs. However, without explaining each of these components and why they matter, the responses to an RFP could represent a number of pathways targeting different destinations, including those that do not meet the specific needs of the state.

The Center’s [RFP Toolkit](https://www.nciea.org/library/requests-for-proposals-toolkit/) was developed to help state leaders develop a comprehensive RFP for a state summative assessment system. The toolkit includes a model RFP outline, that describes the full range of information that should be included in an RFP to help “protect and balance a state’s interests in the areas of quality of deliverables, meeting timelines, reducing strain on staff, and minimizing cost,” and ensure the bidding process is fair. The purpose of this document is to help state education agencies (SEAs) understand how to develop a good RFP in cases where the requested components go beyond or differ from those associated with a traditional once-per-year state summative assessment system.

What is a good RFP? A good RFP is one that provides bidders with *all* the information needed to craft a high-quality response that reflects the state’s goals and priorities. An RFP should detail (1) **what** assessment components are being requested, (2) **how** a state plans to use each of these components and thegoals they are meant to support, (3) **what** design features are expected/required to achieve these goals and (4) **where** the responsibilities of the vendor start and end. This information should be explained in clear and concise language within the RFP.

This is easier said than done. It requires substantial lead time (at *least* one year) for states to think deeply about the assessment resources necessary to support their overall vision for teaching and learning and, subsequently, what should be included in their RFP. In addition to the [RFP Toolkit](https://www.nciea.org/library/requests-for-proposals-toolkit/), resources like the Center’s [Interim Assessment Toolkit](https://www.nciea.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Interim-Toolkit_Phase-1_Assessment-Gaps-and-Need_0.pdf) and the [District Assessment Procurement Protocol](https://www.nciea.org/library/choosing-the-right-tests-the-district-assessment-procurement-protocol-dapp/) were developed to help state and local education agencies engage in these types of activities.

Engaging those who will use or be impacted by the tools under consideration is a key component of this process. The ongoing collection of feedback serves to ensure the state’s vision for teaching and learning is both shared by practitioners and operationalized in a way that reflects the needs of those it is intended to serve. This is especially important when the state intends to reshape or greatly expand the state’s program. Several states have convened assessment task forces or other advisory groups for this purpose (e.g., see Center-developed reports for [Wyoming](https://www.nciea.org/library/wyomings-statewide-assessment-system-recommendations-from-the-wyoming-assessment-task-force/), [New Mexico](https://webnew.ped.state.nm.us/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Student_Success_Task_Force_Report_Balanced_Assessment_System_-October_2019.pdf), & [Utah](https://schools.utah.gov/assessment/_assessment_/AssessmentStrategicPlan_Dec_20.pdf). While these activities may push the timeline for an RFP forward an additional year or necessitate an extension of the current program, that is a small price to pay to ensure that the resources developed are necessary, appreciated, and used as intended.

States often use RFPs from previous years (or other state programs) as a starting point for their new RFP. While this approach can help ensure continuity, and clearly saves time, it also runs the risk of sending conflicting messages about the state’s priorities. In addition, it is often the case that states are putting out an RFP because design decisions reflected in the previous program were not providing the type or frequency of information desired. When you start with a legacy RFP it is easy to overlook desired aspects of a new program and to forget to remove details relevant only to the prior program. One way to avoid this is by sketching out the desired components of the new program prior to referencing an old RFP. Developing a summary table, like that addressed in the next section, can help with this process.

**The Summary Table: Detailing the Road Ahead**

A summary table like the one below provides bidders with a snapshot that clarifies both the scope of the RFP and the state’s vision for each component. The table includes each component the vendor is expected to address, a summary of its purpose, and a brief description of the intended design or functionality. (A more expansive version of this table, although not specifically designed with non-summative components in mind, can be found within Table II.3.4, Components of the State Assessment System, on p. 4 of the RFP Outline in the [Center’s RFP Toolkit](https://www.nciea.org/library/requests-for-proposals-toolkit/'). The expanded table details not only the components within scope, but all components of the state’s assessment program.)

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| --- | --- | --- |
| **Component** | **Purpose** | **Description and Design Features** |
| Summative Assessment (3-8 ELA & Math) | * Meet requirements of ESEA * Support state and district leaders determine where support should be targeted * Help schools evaluate the impact of programmatic changes (e.g., curriculum and instruction) | End-of-year summative designed to meet the depth and breadth of the state standards  **High Priority Design Features:**   * Aligned to state’s content standards * Blueprint structured according to content standard domains * Covers the full depth and breadth of the state standards in a two-year rotation * Computer administered, non-adaptive |
| Interim Assessments (3-8 ELA & Math) | * To support educators in determining whether their students have meet standards-based expectations, so that they can customize upcoming lesson plans or engage in self-evaluation * To support instructional leaders in targeting supports during the year | Modular interim assessments designed to assess SEA-defined groups of standards (currently six modules in each subject and grade), to be given on demand by educators within the same platform as the statewide test. Reported in terms of proficiency on each group of standards  **High Priority Design Features:**   * Aligned to state’s content standards * Computer adaptive - above and below grade level * Not secure - educators have access to items after testing * Immediate reporting that includes status and growth |
| Assessment Literacy Professional Development | * To support teachers in developing their abilities to follow (a) general best practices in classroom assessment and (b) situate state-provided assessments within those practices * To help leaders understand the best ways to support their teachers’ assessment practices, as well as to understand specific ways assessment data can be used in informing program evaluation type decisions | A set of professional learning modules, such as the Center’s [open-source](https://sites.google.com/view/assessment101/home) assessment literacy modules or those provided by a vendor, that cover the basics of formative and summative assessment with respect to test purpose, use and design  **High-Priority Design Features**   * These modules should be tailored to the state context, including the uses of the state provided assessments, and accompanied by materials that support local training efforts (e.g., power points, speaker notes) * Module materials should be made available online in early summer * Module content should also be delivered live online monthly based on a mutually agreed upon calendar |
| Item Bank | * To supplement or support the development of local assessments * To provide items and tasks for difficult to assess standards (fill gaps) * To replace low-quality items/tasks with high-quality tasks * To provide common items/tasks to support professional learning | An item bank that includes high quality items aligned to the state standards.  **High-Priority Design Features**   * Include a mix of individual items and short performance tasks * Standards alignment at the item level * Online web portal with search features, and permissioned log ins for teachers * Open access for teachers, with options for download * Includes scoring rubrics with annotated exemplar responses |

This table is just one example. There may be non-summative components a state wants to include in its RFP that are not listed, or some listed that are not desired. States should adapt this table to suit their needs.

Even with modification, this kind of simple summary table is not going to provide all the information a vendor would need to provide a comprehensive response. Therefore, the RFP should have a section or chapter devoted to **each** component. The sections for each non-summative component should have levels of detail similar to the summative.

**Component Sections: The Turn-by-Turn Directions**

The technical requirements for RFPs are often structured in three big chunks: (1) the first provides details of the procurement process, background on the state, the state assessment programs and contract details, and the requirements for the new summative assessment program and major milestones; (2) the second is devoted to a deep and comprehensive dive into the new summative assessment, and (3) the third describes the management of risk, change requests and terms and conditions.

We suggest that the second section, a deep dive into the summative program, include equally detailed chunks on each additional required component.[[1]](#footnote-1) These component sections should be organized as similarly as possible (e.g., having the same or similar sub-headers) while also providing detail unique to each section (e.g., the delivery of professional learning materials will have a number of unique aspects not relevant to, say, the delivery of the summative assessment, and vice versa). Essentially, each component invites a potential bidder to develop statements of work for each proposed component.

In doing so, each component section should address several key points. An outline of a component section might be:

1. Component Context
   1. Short History of the Component, Including Work to Date on the Component
   2. Explanation of Why is It Being Introduced, Whether and How it Relates to Other Components
   3. Elaboration of High Priority Design Features and Associated Rationale
2. Component Design
   1. Program & Project Management
   2. Content Frameworks/Content Standards
   3. Item & Test Development
   4. Test Administration
   5. Item Scoring
   6. Psychometrics
   7. Standard Setting
   8. Reporting
   9. Security
   10. Communications
   11. Independent Evaluation and Replication

This outline should be adapted to fit the nature of the component being defined. For example, 2.d, Test Administration, would say something like, “2.d - Delivery of Professional Learning Materials for an Assessment Literacy Professional Development component.” The list above is a summary; much more detail is found in Chapter III of the RFP Outline in the [RFP Toolkit](https://www.nciea.org/library/requests-for-proposals-toolkit/'). Parts could be added, or some removed. In addition, some parts, like program management, could be covered across components in an omnibus section within, for example, the first section. Key in developing multiple component sections is maintaining parallel structure as much as possible across the multiple components to help bidders navigate the RFP. Doing so provides clear turn-by-turn directions to bidders, helping them map out each component.

**Considerations and Next Steps: Getting There**

All these steps are in service of providing as much detail to a vendor to respond to a request for proposal (RFP), but also of encouraging states to take the time to think deeply about how their system can and should work. This kind of deep thought necessarily involves collaboration, both within state departments of education and with local education constituents.

1. Chunks 1 and 3 are equally important, but we do not address them in this document. Detailed guidance about the information needed to support these sections is included in the RFP Outline piece of the RFP Toolkit. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)