

Building a Next-Generation Assessment System Aligned to the Common Core

From February to May this year, about a million students in 21 U.S. states were scheduled to take a new set of standardized tests. That might seem like any other spring term in American education until you consider the significance of this wide-ranging assessment process:

- It represents the rollout and review of about 5,000 test items that are aligned to the Common Core State Standards for math and English language arts and will eventually be part of a huge bank of formative, interim, and summative tools accessible to states.
- It includes technology-enhanced questions and performance tasks that will let students write, draw, and solve problems on the computer, provide rapid feedback to learners and teachers, and tailor the complexity of test items to each student's knowledge and skills.
- It represents a unique collaboration of states that have crafted a single assessment system to determine whether their students have met national and international benchmarks and are ready to take college credit-bearing courses.

All of these efforts are tied to the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium, a states-led initiative started in 2010, funded by a four-year, \$175-million Race to the Top grant from the U.S. Department of Education with additional contributions from charitable foundations.**

"By drawing upon the experience and expertise across our membership base, we are bringing a level of creativity to this enterprise that we've never seen before," says Joe Willhoft, Executive Director of Smarter Balanced.

"This development process allows states to consider the bigger picture," adds Juan D'Brot, Executive Director of the Office of Assessment and Accountability within the West Virginia Department of Education, which has been participating in the Smarter Balanced consortium. "The Common Core State Standards aim for international expectations, whereas traditionally states have thought about standards from within their own borders. That's not to say that states worked in a vacuum in the past, but now an international perspective is at the forefront. Now we're talking about expectations for a student in any state to be nationally and internationally ready."

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** Smarter Balanced is one of two consortia of states that are developing common assessments; the other is the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Career (PARCC).

More than new tests: New expectations, teaching approaches, and supports

“Smarter Balanced is creating an entire assessment system, not just a test,” says Stanley Rabinowitz, Director of the Assessment and Standards Development Services Program at WestEd, which serves as the Project Management Partner for the Smarter Balanced consortium.

The assessment system will not only help educators, policymakers, and parents determine how much students have learned in key content areas, it will also reshape the strategies used to teach them. Teachers will be able to access a suite of professional resources that include a digital library of formative assessment tools to track students’ progress as well as recommended interventions. The goal is to inform and improve instruction throughout the school year instead of waiting for year-end summative tests that may reveal surprising results.

“The Common Core is very different from most state standards and requires different types of instruction,” says Rabinowitz. “With the resources and brainpower from across the states, we can develop more items, better items, and better scoring systems, and we can develop a clearinghouse of support for teachers that no state could do for itself.”

The Smarter Balanced consortium is piloting many of the assessments and resources it has developed. A broader field test is scheduled for spring 2014, and the operational assessment system is slated to be ready for the 2014/15 school year.

A significant feature of the pilot phase is research—using cognitive labs, for example—to learn about students’ test-taking strategies and how students interact with the test questions. Because much of the assessments will be computer-based, test designers want to understand if they’ve presented information in the best way to gauge what students know. For a math problem, for example, a drop-down menu on the computer might give students access to a digital calculator. But if observations show that students don’t need that tool, the menu might be used for a different purpose. Or, if observations show that students can’t easily navigate reading passages and questions while scrolling through parallel columns of text, another format might be warranted.

Other research is on English learners and students with disabilities. Specialists want to identify appropriate supports that won’t give away answers to the questions. If a section seeks to measure math skills, for example, glossaries of contextual terms might be needed so language barriers don’t prevent students from demonstrating their understanding of math.

The pilot phase has students “voice their actions and thoughts while answering items so we can understand the congruence,” explains Tony Alpert, Chief Operating Officer of Smarter Balanced. “It’s a cornerstone of validity. Are we measuring what we assert we are measuring?”

In addition to uncovering unintentional bias and evaluating assessment delivery, test administrators are fine-tuning the system’s adaptive platform. Rather than giving all students the same fixed form of questions, the technology-enhanced system allows items to be tailored to achievement levels. For example, gifted students won’t get only low-level items—the computer gauges their fluency by how they answer initial questions and accordingly increases the complexity of later items. Similarly, struggling students won’t get too many items beyond their range. In all cases, the system evaluates students’ progress toward reaching the full range of standards instead of providing a fixed set of items focused on the middle. To develop this adaptive platform, the pilot phase

will inform item development and expectations for student performance, which will be further refined during the field test.

Shift from recall to more complex tasks and problem solving

Another key feature of the Smarter Balanced system is performance tasks, which are classroom-based activities that ask students to research, solve multistep problems, and share information coherently. The assessments are designed to probe students' ability to apply knowledge, not just memorize facts. A typical multiple-choice math test might ask students to identify the correct solution to a problem, where the Smarter Balanced assessments might ask students to provide the answer themselves and describe how they arrived at that solution. Or, students might have to read and compare two presentations, explaining which is more compelling.

It's unlikely that students will perform well on the new assessments without major changes in instruction, which is why the Smarter Balanced system provides so much online support and professional development options for schools, including models of teaching and assessing and suggested scoring rubrics.

"It's the combination of content and what we ask students to do, not just recognize but recognize, apply, and generalize," Rabinowitz says. "In English/language arts, that means not just writing about what I did on my summer vacation, but also composing research-supported conclusions. Or understanding the difference between facts and the trustworthiness of sources, and knowing that writing about science is different than writing a poem. If you don't assess this way, then teachers won't teach this way."


Systemwide alignment

The Smarter Balanced system aims to better align student outcomes in grades K–12 with postsecondary expectations. Because colleges and states have such variable standards and don't typically communicate well, most K–12 teachers are "shooting in the dark" about how to prepare students for life after high school, says Jacqueline King, director of higher education for Smarter Balanced. The consortium is leading an initiative to get states and postsecondary institutions to agree on the role and value of the new assessments.

"A focus of our work is that these assessments provide an indication to colleges and universities, through our grade 11 summative assessment, of how well prepared students are for entry-level, credit-bearing coursework," she says. "If kids can come in ready to do credit-bearing work, they are much more likely to get a degree and not spend money to learn things they should have learned in high school."

Each phase of the assessment development and delivery process has involved shared decision-making—among states, K–12 and higher education systems, and educators and policymakers—a depth of collaboration that many thought was impossible. One of the valuable lessons of the assessment system rollout is that collaboration can be both efficient and effective if every member's voice is heard and respected.

"One of the biggest lessons learned is not in assessment or contracting or financing but in how we go about our work," says Willhoft. "State education agencies tend to be top-down. That is not



how we do business. Our way does take a bit more time, but it has proven effective to check in regularly and let everyone say what they want before moving forward. If this was a top-down organization, we would not have the level of commitment and progress we've achieved."

For D'Brot, the consortium's cooperative exchange of ideas has revealed another important insight about improving instruction and learning. Whereas many school reform initiatives seek to replace one cog in the education machine with another, he says, the Smarter Balanced work has shown states how and why all the cogs must fit together.

"This approach is much more comprehensive," he says. "What I think it's doing is really defining what a system of assessment looks like within a larger system of education."

For more Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium information and updates, including practice tests in each grade and subject area, visit www.smarterbalanced.org or contact rdalert@WestEd.org.