

Smarter Balanced: An Introduction to Vermont's New Statewide Assessment Program

The New England Common Assessment Program (NECAP) tests of Reading, Writing and Mathematics, introduced to Vermont Schools in 2005, were administered for the last time in October 2013. Beginning in the spring of 2015, Vermont will transition to the Smarter Balanced Assessment System, a new computer-delivered testing program developed by Vermont and its 24 partner states in the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC).

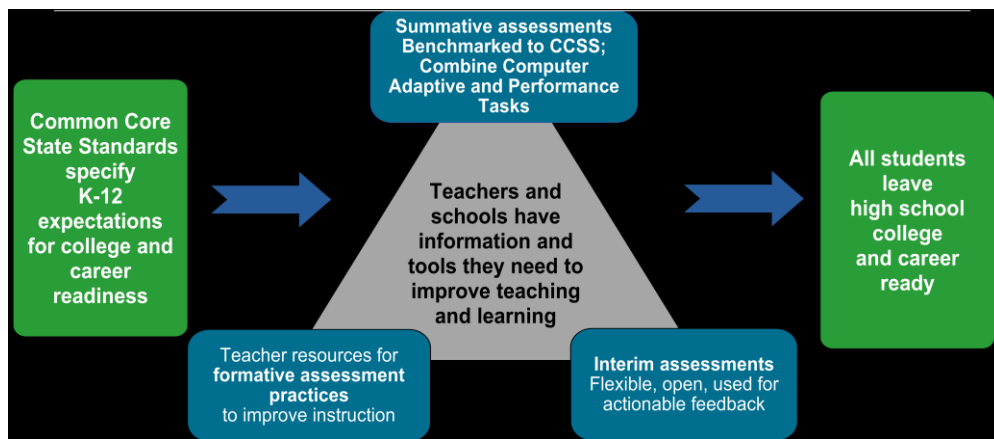
Transition to the new testing program provides Vermont with two important opportunities. First, with the infusion of nearly 180 million dollars in Federal Race to the Top funds, the SBAC states have been able to build its new tests using an array of innovative digital assessment technologies that promise to provide more precise student achievement results, in less time, and in a format that will engage students in ways that were not possible with traditional "fill in the bubble" standardized tests. Second, and perhaps more important, the introduction of the new assessments will allow Vermont to rethink its statewide accountability system with an eye toward correcting the two major flaws in the current "Adequate Yearly Progress" model: the over-reliance in the current system on a single statewide standardized testing program, and the tendency to use the scores from those tests in ways that are inappropriate and not statistically defensible. The purpose of this paper is to provide a brief introduction to Smarter Balanced, and will end with a discussion of how the Agency of Education intends to position the new tests in a broader view of school effectiveness that will drive systematic improvement of learning for all students.

SBAC – What's new? What's different?

SBAC has been described widely as representing the "next generation" of academic achievement assessments, improving on the tests currently administered to our students in more ways than can be covered here. A few of the major improvements are described below:

- **Academic Readiness for College and Careers** – the SBAC tests, which will cover English Language Arts (e.g., Reading, Writing, Listening and Research) in grades 3 through 8 and Grade 11, will focus on assessment targets drawn from the Common Core State Standards. Scores in grades 3 through 8 will reflect a student's position on a readiness continuum, whereas grade 11 scores will be stated in terms of a student's mastery of basic academic skills necessary for success in entry level, credit-bearing college courses and the workforce.
- **Multi-purpose, multiple-measures assessment system** – Although Vermont's NECAP system had a variety of uses, its primary purpose was to serve the needs of the statewide accountability system. In contrast, SBAC will provide a suite of assessments that can meet a variety of needs presented in classrooms and local schools in addition to the more traditional state level uses. The following graphic provides an overview of the SBAC system:





The SBAC system will have three components: (1) a summative test that includes performance tasks that will be used primarily as part of the statewide accountability system, but also for other purposes that require highly reliable assessment results that cover a broad array of skills and standards (e.g., trends over time, measurement of achievement gaps, comparisons of student groups), (2) an optional interim assessment that can be administered periodically across a school year to meet a variety of local assessment needs including program improvement, periodic measurement of student progress toward meeting standards, and community reporting, and (3) a digital library of formative assessment tools and processes that will help teachers develop “on the fly” instructionally embedded assessment techniques that help them gauge the progress and pacing of classroom instruction. Administrators and school board members should note that the Agency of Education will bear the cost of the SBAC program, although schools will need to provide the computers, internet access, and local technical support necessary to implement the program.

- **Computer Adaptive Testing** - The Smarter Balanced assessment system will capitalize on the precision and efficiency of computer adaptive testing (CAT) for both the summative assessment and the optional interim assessments. Based on student responses, the computerized assessment delivery program adjusts the difficulty of questions throughout the assessment. For example, a student who answers a question correctly will receive a more challenging item, while an incorrect answer generates an easier question. By adapting to the student as the assessment is taking place, these assessments present an individually tailored set of questions to each student and can quickly identify which skills students have mastered. This approach represents a significant improvement over traditional paper-and-pencil assessments, providing more accurate scores for all students across the full range of the achievement continuum.
- **Accessibility for students with special assessment needs, including students with disabilities and students who speak English as a second language** – An additional benefit of SBAC’s computer delivery system is the opportunity to embed accessibility tools and options into the assessment. The list of accessibility features include text to speech for students with persistent reading difficulties, print/background color options and text enlargement for students with visual impairments, refreshable Braille technologies, full translations into American Sign Language and Spanish, as well as key word translation glossaries, for students who are not proficient speakers of English. It should be noted that Computer Adaptive Testing



also provides significant benefits over our current generation of tests because it eliminates the possibility that a student will face a test that does not include any questions the student can answer.

Transition Timelines

As noted at the beginning of this paper, Vermont administered the NECAP reading, writing and mathematics tests in fall 2013 in preparation for the last release of results in early February 2014 and the final accountability decisions based on NECAP in August 2015. The NECAP Science Assessment will continue through 2016. In preparation for the first administration of SBAC in late March 2015, twenty-eight Vermont Elementary, Middle and High Schools will participate with counterparts from the other SBAC states in a large scale field test that is scheduled to begin in late March 2014. In addition to providing statistics needed to run the Computer Adaptive Testing system, the field test will also provide data that will inform standard setting, the process used to determine the scores students will need to achieve in order to be considered on track for career and college readiness. However, although SBAC plans to provide a key role for representatives of higher education in the standard setting process, the consortium plans to follow up on the first group 11th graders to take the test when they reach the end of their first year of college in 2017. Based on that information, proficiency levels will be adjusted if needed using an authentic measure of college readiness – actual student outcomes. Additional transition milestones include activation of the On-line Formative Assessment Digital Library during the final months of the 2013-2014 school year, and introduction of the interim assessments early in the 2014-2015 school year.

Are schools ready for a high-tech testing program?

According to Geoff Fletcher, Deputy Executive Director of the State Educational Technology Directors Association, SBAC will place mild to moderate demands on the technology infrastructure of typical US schools. “If a school can’t handle these tests,” he said, “then they have much bigger problems because their students will not be able to access all the excellent digital learning tools that are being introduced every day.” Vermont schools have participated in a periodic technology readiness survey developed by SBAC. Based on the most current survey results, roughly two-thirds of Vermont schools could administer the SBAC tests if they were given this year. However, there are reasons to believe the estimates are conservative because they don’t take into account the fact that schools will have three months to run all their students through the testing, and they will not need to test all the students at the same time. However, during the first two years of the testing program a pencil and paper testing option will be available for schools that do not meet technology readiness criteria. School boards may consider the new testing program as an opportunity to upgrade their technology infrastructure, although as Dr. Fletcher points out, there are likely more important reasons than SBAC to target those allocations.

Are schools ready to be evaluated on college and career readiness standards?

When the Vermont State Board of Education adopted the Common Core State Standards nearly five years ago, they also implemented a 5-year transition plan designed to provide schools with information and supports for realigning curriculum, instruction and local assessments with the new standards. Some Vermont schools have made concerted efforts to align with the new standards and



are well on the way to being ready for the first administration of SBAC. Others have paid less attention to the change agenda and are less ready as result. However, because of the new focus on rigorous college and career readiness standards, and based on the experiences of states that have already introduced new career-college ready tests, it should be no surprise in any of Vermont's schools if students do not score as well on SBAC as they have during the NECAP years. 2015 will provide a baseline and we should expect growth from there.

Transitions – How will accountability change in the era of SBAC?

SBAC promises to provide new and much improved tools for educators and policy makers that have no parallel in our current generation of tests. SBAC will be more precise, more efficient, and because of the economies of scale that result from a multi-state effort, SBAC will actually provide more information on students at significantly reduced costs. However, it's always important to keep in mind that we gather information on students, programs, and schools for a variety of reasons and purposes, and no one assessment system can serve them all. As noted in the introduction to this paper, SBAC provides Vermont with an opportunity to improve the quality and accuracy of our statewide achievement testing, but at the same time to find a more appropriate role for that type of assessment in our school improvement efforts. Following are some changes and improvements that will characterize accountability in the era of SBAC:

- Focus on a system of multiple measures that provide a more complete and accurate profile of each school;
- Focus on using assessments to reward success as well as to identify improvement needs;
- Focus on clarifying and expanding our notion of what it means to do well, and then identifying an array of high quality data sources to measure progress, for students and for schools, toward reaching that goal;
- Focus on performance assessments and proficiency-based measures that allow students to demonstrate their skills on novel tasks and real world challenges;
- Focus on a new “assessment literacy” that will help teachers and school leaders interpret effectiveness data accurately and productively, with a specific focus on moving away from proficiency level percentage scores, which often hide real improvement as well as problems, in favor of scaled score interpretations that are more sensitive to differences across groups and change over time.

For the Vermont Agency of Education, two things won't change: the Agency's continuing focus on addressing achievement gaps related to family income, and an emphasis on providing service and support to schools rather than monitoring compliance and enforcing sanctions.

To learn more:

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