

# Smarter Balanced and School Success

## Abstract:

The Smarter Balanced Achievement Consortium (SBAC) summative test is administered in Oregon in grades 3-8 and 11 in response to requirements of the federal ESSA law. However, only 13 of the original 32 states that used SBAC continue to do so. In addition, so many students have withdrawn from the test that some districts are out of compliance. Some of the problems with this test are:

1. SBAC provides almost no information to guide instruction of the individual student.
2. SBAC demands significant time and resources that are diverted away from teaching students.
3. SBAC provides redundant information about the success or failure of schools and cohorts of students that is not sufficiently unique to justify its use seven times within a student's school career.
4. The necessity to teach to SBAC standards limits the capacity of teachers to teach to the unique and diverse strengths of each student.
5. SBAC disproportionately disadvantages English Language Learners, even in the math sub-test.
6. By emphasizing failure rate rather than letting students demonstrate competency within the curriculum, SBAC ratings may contribute to the drop out rate and student sense of failure within the school system.
7. We still don't have good data on the reliability or validity of this test over time. Initial research shows that it adds no information about college achievement beyond that which can be found in GPA or college entrance test data.

This paper proposes:

- That the State of Oregon investigate an ESSA waiver or other mechanism to implement alternative assessments that:
  - can be used directly in identifying individual students' areas of strength and weakness,
  - provide a benchmark to measure progress within and between districts and students,
  - integrate with what is taught in the classroom, and
  - assess students equitably.
- If SBAC data is desired for compliance purposes, it be administered only once each in elementary, middle, and high school. New Hampshire has obtained an ESSA waiver to do this, implementing alternative assessments at other levels.
- That the state and school districts throughout the state use this waiver development as an opportunity to engage and inform teachers about valid, reliable, useful assessment that can be used to further student progress.
- That the use of meaningful assessment that guides student achievement and lets students demonstrate their areas of competence will contribute to student and family engagement in education and subsequent school success.

## SBAC and Student Success

I have tested thousands of school children in my role as a consulting clinical psychologist both in private practice, in school districts in Oregon and Alaska, and through working with the Youth Transition Program with Department of Vocational Rehabilitation. I see well crafted and administered testing as invaluable to guide student instruction. However, I have serious concerns about the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) tests that are administered in Oregon schools and used for ESSA assessment of school success. I will try to summarize these concerns below:

1. SBAC provides almost no information to guide instruction of the individual student. SBAC is a summative assessment. The data provided to parents identifies a score of 1 through 4 in ELA (English Language Arts) and Math. There is no breakdown of strengths and weaknesses within these levels that could guide teaching.
2. SBAC demands significant time and resources that are diverted away from teaching students. Many school districts have to tie up libraries and computer labs for weeks and hire additional staff as all grades are tested.<sup>1</sup> Again, this results in no feedback on how to improve teaching students.
3. SBAC provides redundant information about the success or failure of schools and cohorts of students that is not sufficiently unique to justify its use seven times within a student's school career. Schools don't change overnight and the SBAC is a sufficiently blunt and unreliable instrument it doesn't pick up subtle changes.
4. The necessity to teach to SBAC standards limits the capacity of teachers to teach to the unique and diverse strengths of each student. Especially as we look at education through an equity lens, the necessity to tailor curriculum to the needs and interests of the specific student community becomes paramount.
5. By emphasizing failure rate rather than letting students demonstrate competency within the curriculum, SBAC ratings may contribute to the drop out rate and student sense of failure within the school system.<sup>2</sup> Imagine yourself as a student or parent receiving a "report card" that says that your scores on some test with mystery content fall below the line. You have no other information about what this means or what to do about it. Some of the reasons for "failure" on the ELA subtest could range from lack of ability to pay attention to lack of vocabulary to inability to draw conclusions to dyslexia. There is no indication of which of these applies.
6. SBAC has been demonstrated to disproportionately disadvantage English Language Learners (ELL). In other tests, Math has often been an area where competent ELL students can demonstrate their skills. The Math portion of SBAC is so verbally loaded, that this opportunity is not available.<sup>3</sup>
7. We still don't have good data on the reliability or validity of this test over time. A study cosigned by 115 university researchers included the information:

Here in California, the SBAC assessments have been carefully examined by independent examiners of the test content who concluded that they lack validity, reliability, and fairness, and should not be administered, much less be considered a basis for high-stakes decision making. <sup>4</sup>

### So, what to do about it?

With possible waivers under ESSA, states have begun to design assessment programs that inform education within their state while integrating more fully with the goals and styles of indi-

vidual districts and teachers. As of October 2018, only three states have taken advantage of these waivers and have charted three quite different courses. Of the three, New Hampshire is implementing a system that best answers the concerns raised above.<sup>5</sup> Briefly, it includes:

- Administering the SBAC less frequently - The English Language Arts (ELA) subtest is assessed in 3rd grade, math in 4th grade, and both areas in 8th grade. In addition, 11th graders are tested with the SAT.
- Working with teachers and districts to develop a system of ongoing assessments that give feedback during the school year and assure accountability on the state level.
- An emphasis on supporting deeper learning through competency education that is more integrated into students' day-to-day work than current standardized tests.

## **Proposal**

Based on these observations, I ask that the Joint Committee on Student Success request that the Oregon Department of Education look at developing an ESSA waiver application that reflects the work done in New Hampshire and the prior work done in Oregon to develop meaningful assessment in the classroom.

This waiver could include:

- Reduction or elimination of use of SBAC. As an interim step, the use of SBAC only once each in elementary school, middle school, and high school allows for much less onerous assessment. This will require development of alternative testing to comply with ESSA as is being done in many states.
- Development of assessments that are student centric, teacher driven, timely, and informative and are evaluated to be sure that they look at education through an equity lens. There is much work being done in the nation at this time around these initiatives and these can help guide and inform the work that will need to be done for Oregon.
- Clear evaluation of the impact of assessment on student and family motivation and sense of self-efficacy within the school system. Both scoring and feedback on the tests should be prescriptive and include clear ideas for specific remediation if necessary.
- Emphasis on individual growth rather than on measurement relative to a static benchmark.
- Emphasis on measured student strengths within their learning profile.

These proposals echo many of the conclusions of the report A New Path for Oregon: System of Assessment to Empower Meaningful Student Learning <sup>2</sup> developed by the Oregon Education Investment Board in 2015. Since that time, ESSA waivers have been granted to other states paving the way for a similar attempt in Oregon.

## **A final note**

One of the hopes of the initial use of SBAC was to help look at problems in schools through an equity lens. However, we have a lot of data on that now. We recognize that both between student cohorts and between districts, there are great discrepancies. Continual use of a test that provides negative feedback with no indication of how to remediate and little indication of success does not contribute to equity. While we need to responsibly assess the impact of our teaching, we also need to find ways for all students to demonstrate competence and to have that recognized. Moving away as much as possible from a one size fits all assessment system is an important step in this important endeavor.

Thank you for your attention. Feel free to contact me for further information or comment.

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