The Question of “Opting-Out” of the Smarter Balanced Field Test

The media has recently fueled the debate about whether parents can and/or should request to “opt-out” of having their child participate in the 2014 field testing of the Smarter Balanced assessment. The full implementation of the completed Smarter Balanced assessment is scheduled for Spring 2015.

Please consider the reasons why districts and the CT State Department of Education are invested in the broadest possible participation in the field test:

1. Smarter Balanced is working with several established testing companies, including American Institute for Research (AIR) and ETS (SAT, AP, GRE, GMAT) on the scoring of items. Like Measurement Inc (who scored the CMT), the SBAC group uses a variety of scoring methods that are most closely suited to the items including machine scoring of some responses, live human scoring, and artificial intelligence (AI). The goal is to utilize more AI functions (that is used for SAT and GRE, for example) as time goes along once the technology is more reliable to bring down the cost but for now the process is similar to what is in place for scoring the constructed (brief) and extended responses on CMT. The scoring process is very expensive (about $27 per student) compared to what other states have been spending for only machine scored multiple choice tests, but CT felt strongly that it wanted a high level of rigor in the state assessment and that multiple choice questions alone were not sufficient to measure student understanding. None of these tests are locally scored by a teacher—that would require considerable training for validity and consistency.

2. In order for a high-stakes test to be considered reliable and valid, it must go through an extensive process of development and field testing. The Connecticut Mastery Test (CMT) went through four generations of development, and in each test administration, there were always new items included that were being tested but not scored in order to increase the bank of testing items. Smarter Balanced test developers, most of who are employed by the education departments of member states, have actively recruited teachers to submit or review items. Smarter Balanced has utilized cognitive Labs where individual students provided feedback to test developers about their experience with the innovative test questions, accommodations for students with special needs, and the testing software. Small-scale Trials of promising types of questions and software features were further tried out with hundreds of students. In Spring 2013, schools across Connecticut were involved in a pilot test of preliminary test questions and performance tasks. In spring 2014, the Consortium will conduct its Field Test to present the entire pool of Smarter Balanced items to students across member states. The Field Test will gather the information necessary for final evaluation of item quality.

3. There will be no individual student scores reported back from the field test this year because the vendor cannot guarantee that they are reliable and accurate until after all the test items have been tested out, evaluated for difficulty, and matched with the standards. In the field test there are a wide variety of items including ones that have been written by the state consortium members and items pulled from tests such as PISA and NAEP to see how they compare in difficulty.
When the testing bank has been constructed from the items that pass the field test, the scores will be used for the same things for which CMT data was used. Like CMT, SBAC will be a school and district accountability test, and it will be used to measure and rank schools for performance. Because schools get state and federal funding from taxpayer dollars, schools need to show proficiency or improvement as a return on investment. They also need to use the data to demonstrate that No Child is Left Behind—that members of minority groups, students in poverty, English-learners, and students with disabilities and special learning needs are also showing growth and not being covered up by the overall strong performance of the school as a whole. Schools are also rated for participation (100% of students are expected be assessed).

Schools that fail to make the grade on performance or participation may be assigned interventions from the CSDE such as requiring the school to establish a school governance council or mandated supervision from the CSDE Turnaround Office. Schools doing very poorly or failing to make progress for all groups of students may become part of the Commissioner’s Alliance network or be deemed Focus or Turnaround Schools. These schools get more funding, but are told what they must use the money for.

School and district performance scores are sent to each district from the testing company and are reported to the CSDE. This information posted on the state website as well as published in the media. The individual, school, and district scores are not reported to the federal government since the main authority for education resides with state agencies.

Most districts have elected to take the “lemon” of mandated accountability testing and “make lemonade.” Districts and schools use the data to see how well their locally developed curriculum and choice of programs and instructional techniques is preparing students to demonstrate proficiency on the state standards. Scores often show a pattern of weakness (or strength) in particular areas, and this information is at the heart of school improvement plans. Teachers look at those patterns to inform their pacing and instructional choices so they know where they need to focus. This information often helps teachers to form preliminary instructional groups in their classes around the student performance levels and readiness. It may be one of many criteria that is used in placement decisions, but is never the only factor in recommending students for a particular class or level of rigor—only one indicator.

4. There is currently no process for opting out of the testing. Schools are expected to test every student so they are not “hiding” students who may not do well. Students with severe cognitive issues are assessed using a Skills Checklist—only about 1% of students fit into this category. Other students with special learning needs or disabilities may get modifications but students must be tested on grade-appropriate concepts. Online testing has many more built-in, universal accommodations that can be used by any student. Students with IEPs, 504 plans, or English Language Learners may have special accommodations to make testing more accessible to them regardless of disability.
If students do not take the test, the school is penalized through the Participation Rate. The CSDE requires districts to account for all students that are registered. Schools that don’t meet the 100% target may be penalized through additional state oversight or funding.

Having all students participate in the state assessment program gives teachers and schools the same type of data on each student and information about where they need to change to better meet the needs of all students. Assessment data informs instruction because it identifies areas where teachers need to plan for more remediation and intervention. Students can’t expect to do well on the assessment if they haven’t had thoughtful, individualized instruction to help them master the content in the standards. Based on the range of scores, districts may order additional instructional materials such as software or supplemental items to fill out the program or curriculum so that lower achieving students can catch up. It also may inform staffing for interventions and supports. That is why all students, not just the ones with the best chance of success, need to participate.

5. Test scores on the state assessment are not used for decisions about grade promotion. These decisions are made by classroom teachers and building administration informed by the academic, social, and emotional progress of students over the course of the whole year. All students should be making progress towards grade level standards, but there is always a range of ability within a chronological age group.

6. The state standards are built on grade level standards, and there is a learning progression of increasingly sophisticated knowledge and skills from grade to grade. Unlike a spiraling curriculum that may revisit a topic several times before it assumes that students have mastered the content, the state standards do assume that each grade is a foundation for the next. That said, the information from the state assessment, from the district’s MAP assessments, and from other local district and teacher created assessments provide a more complete picture of what students know and are able to do. Teachers are expected to meet students where they are. This means that often teachers have to adjust lessons to fill in gaps in background knowledge and focus on areas where students need more support before presenting them with harder material. In a personalized learning system, students take as long as they need to learn—learning is the constant and time is the variable. In our current system, time is the constant (1 school year=180 days=900 hours of instructional time in a prescribed school day and often prescribed blocks of instructional time). Until districts move to personalized learning, there will always be variation in the range of abilities since different students learn at different paces. District curriculum teams will be looking at the issue of curriculum calibration—what is taught at each grade, does it match the grade standards, are there gaps or redundancies in the learning progression. The standards are the guidelines of what all students should know and be able to do, but they should be thought of as the floor, not the ceiling of learning. Until the students have had a chance to come up through the learning progressions in the standards from the earliest grades, teachers will need to be vigilant about gaps and check carefully for understanding.