

PRINCIPALS



Leading the Way

Joe Willhoft

Now is the time to start preparing for the next-generation assessments that are associated with the Common Core State Standards.

Preparing all students for success requires a renewed emphasis on supporting high-quality teaching, on using data to inform decision-making, and on creating a culture of high expectations. To support the shift toward college and career readiness, more than 45 states and the District of Columbia have adopted the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). Standards, however, are just part of a cohesive system that supports student growth and learning. Educators also need new tools to measure whether students are mastering the knowledge and skills needed for success in college and careers, as well as resources and support to help them meet those goals. Those assessments will provide a more complete, more efficient measurement of student progress—with periodic checks to help evaluate what students need to stay on the path to success and tools to help educators continually improve instruction.

Over the next two years, principals will play an important role in preparing their schools for the transition to next-generation assessments. A successful transition will require planning for technology readiness, real-world field testing, and training and professional development. In addition, teachers and parents will have many questions and will need resources and information about the assessments. The Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (Smarter Balanced)—one of two multistate consortia working to develop next-generation assessments in mathematics and English language arts/literacy to be implemented in the 2014–15 school year—is working with states to provide support in each of those areas, and principals are uniquely positioned to lead this effort.

Technology Readiness

For many states, school districts, and schools, one of the most significant changes will be the switch to online delivery of the assessments. Smarter Balanced assessments will be computer adaptive, providing more precise and efficient measures of student achievement. Although computerized assessments have many advantages—including faster turnaround of results and flexibility for more sophisticated test items—they also require thoughtful planning for technology resources.

What Is Smarter Balanced?

In 2010, the US Department of Education awarded grants to two state consortia, the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (Smarter Balanced) and the Partnership for the Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC), to develop next-generation assessments that are aligned to the Common Core State Standards.

Smarter Balanced is designing assessments in mathematics and English language arts/literacy. The system will include end-of-year summative assessments that will be taken at the end of grades 3–8 and 11. Those computer-adaptive tests will provide fair, accurate measures of the skills and knowledge that students need to be college and career ready.

Optional interim assessments can be used by educators to benchmark progress throughout the year. They will have the flexibility to administer a test on an entire grade's worth of subject matter or a subset of concepts. Further, scores will be reported on the same scale as the summative assessment, providing an accurate comparison.

Through a consensus-driven process and through close collaboration with teachers, administrators, researchers, and experts, Smarter Balanced is working to ensure that educators are prepared for those changes and have the tools to help their students master the skills and knowledge they need to succeed after high school.

Smarter Balanced is composed of 25 member states that educate approximately 19 million students from Hawaii to Maine. Twenty-one governing states play an active role in making decisions and steering the direction of the assessments. Four advisory states play a nonbinding, participatory role. Those states include:

Governing States:

California	Missouri	Washington
Connecticut	Montana	Wisconsin
Delaware	North Carolina	West Virginia
Hawaii	Nevada	
Idaho	New Hampshire	
Iowa	Oregon	
Kansas	South Dakota	
Maine	South Carolina	
Michigan	Vermont	

Advisory States:

Alabama
North Dakota
Pennsylvania
Wyoming

Smarter Balanced and the other assessment consortium, the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC), have developed a technology readiness tool to assess local IT capabilities. Earlier this year, states worked with districts and schools to collect baseline information about the technology resources available in each school. This information is guiding the design of the assessments to ensure that they reflect the IT reality in schools.

Tight budgets mean that few schools will have significant new resources to invest in technology. In many cases, however, existing IT capabilities will be sufficient for the new assessments. Computers may be able to be repurposed for instruction and assessment, and many tablets and other computing devices are sufficient for administering the assessments. What's more, the Smarter Balanced summative assessment will be administered during the last 12 weeks of the school year, allowing one computer lab to support many students. The window gives schools flexibility so that they can adjust the assessment schedule to match their limited technology resources.

As states develop their technology plans, principals should coordinate closely with district assessment and information technology coordinators. Future data collection opportunities through the technology readiness tool will allow schools to provide updated information about their IT resources. Full participation in this effort will be essential to producing an accurate picture of the technology capabilities and needs of schools across the country.

Real-World Field Testing

In 2013 and 2014, Smarter Balanced will conduct two rounds of real-world testing of the assessments. In early 2013, Smarter Balanced will test 10,000 items and performance tasks to determine the validity and accuracy of the test items and performance tasks that will make up the end-of-year summative assessments and the periodic interim assessments.

The pilot test is an opportunity for schools

and teachers to gain experience administering the new assessments and to provide feedback that will inform the development of additional items and performance tasks for the field test in early 2014. All schools in Smarter Balanced member states will be eligible to participate in the 2013 pilot test. Principals can work with district and state coordinators to determine which grades or classrooms would be most appropriate to participate.

Communications

One of the most important roles that principals will play in transitioning to the new assessments is that of communicator. Research with teachers suggests that principals are the most trusted source of information about educational change within schools. Communicating early and often about the CCSS and the new assessment system will ensure that everyone is pursuing the same goal of college and career readiness for all students.

Principals can share many resources with teachers and other stakeholders to improve their understanding of the CCSS and the Smarter Balanced assessments. The James B. Hunt, Jr. Institute for Educational Leadership and Policy has produced a series of videos (www.youtube.com/user/TheHuntInstitute) that are short, concise introductions to the CCSS, their guiding principles, and how they will inform the concepts taught at each grade level. Student Achievement Partners (www.achievethecore.org) has a variety of free and easy-to-use tools, resources, and research to help with implementing the CCSS. Such resources can help teachers adapt and align their lessons and prepare for the rollout of assessments.

As teachers participate in professional development and training to implement the CCSS, it will be important to signal that new assessments will provide better information and tools to evaluate student progress. Smarter Balanced is developing a digital library that will contain research-based formative assessment strategies and practices, including best



instructional practices for each grade level and strategies for collaboration. The digital library will also include information about how to use the assessment system, interpret results, and use data to improve instruction.

Beginning in the 2012–13 school year, Smarter Balanced will recruit an average of 100 educators in each state who will provide feedback on the development of formative assessment resources and professional learning tools. They will also serve as ambassadors to teach states how to use resources and training sessions to help stakeholders understand and interpret assessment results.

Smarter Balanced has also created a variety of materials (e.g., factsheets, newsletters, and updates on the consortium's progress) that can help principals communicate to various stakeholders. Those materials can be found at www.SmarterBalanced.org.

When teachers understand and are engaged in the implementation of the CCSS and the new assessments, they will be better able to communicate those changes to parents and the community. Few parents have even heard about the CCSS or the new assessments. They need help understanding what the CCSS are, where they came from, and how the new assessments will work.

As trusted education leaders, principals are in a unique position to advance implementation of the CCSS and next-generation assessments. The time for action is now. This is an opportunity to move forward to ensure that all students are ready for the demands of the 21st century. **PL**

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