

Literacy and the Smarter Balanced Statewide Summative Assessment System – Executive Summary

Purpose

This document was developed by the Agency of Education (AOE) to support the Advisory Council on Literacy (Council) in performing their duties as defined in Act 28 of 2021. What follows is a brief overview of the Smarter Balanced Statewide Summative Assessment (SBAC) of English Language Arts (ELA) and what it measures.

Introduction

Act 28 of 2021 defines its purpose as “to continue the ongoing work to improve literacy for all students in the State [...]” and refers to “methods of teaching literacy in the five key areas of literacy instruction, as identified by the National Reading Panel.” These five areas are phonics, phonemic awareness, vocabulary, fluency, and reading comprehension. While these five areas constitute foundational reading skills and contribute to the definition of literacy as a whole, they do not constitute a complete definition of literacy nor reflect the integrated nature of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) adopted by the Vermont State Board of Education.

Additionally, the SBAC was developed as a summative assessment of those Common Core State Standards (CCSS). The CCSS has emphasized career and college readiness skills generally and the standards for English Language Arts takes an integrated approach that includes reading, writing, speaking and listening, and language. Thus, the statewide summative assessment of (ELA) proficiency assesses more than the five key areas of literacy instruction outlined in Act 28.

Definitions of Literacy and Literacy Assessment

The National Council for Teachers of English (NCTE) defines *literacy* as “the practices of engaging—creating, consuming, and critiquing -- with all kinds of multimodal texts” ([NCTE, 2018](#)). In a position paper about adolescent literacy, NCTE explains that literacy “encompasses much more than reading and includes writing, and a variety of social and intellectual practices, including digital and interdisciplinary literacies. Literacy learning is an ongoing and non-hierarchical process in which each academic content area poses its own literacy approaches and challenges” ([NCTE, 2018](#)). Furthermore, NCTE defines *literacy assessment* as “decision-making processes resulting in an examination of students’ performance on literacy tasks as described above; literacy assessments, which include all aspects of such assessments, range from formative response to student writing to the design of higher-stakes assessments” ([NCTE, 2018](#)).

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In [Reading as Liberation - An Examination of the Research Base](#), Student Achievement Partners describe the focus of an English Language Arts (ELA) curriculum as “learning to read, reading and listening to content-rich texts widely and deeply, and responding to what they read through lively discussions and writing” ([SAP, 2021](#)). The authors go on to discuss what they call the “five essential components of literacy: the accelerators for every student learning to read and use language capably” ([SAP, 2021](#)). These include:

1. Making sure students learn how to read: securing solid foundational reading skills early on in students’ school careers (ideally by grade three) so students can continually develop as fluent readers in every grade level thereafter.
2. Growing knowledge of the world so students develop a trove of knowledge to reference whenever they read.
3. Expanding the vocabulary children bring with them through a volume of reading and word study.
4. Marshalling evidence and communicating it when speaking and writing about what the text is conveying.
5. Deepening understanding of what is read through regular reading of ever richer, more complex text, with supports as needed for universal access and success. ([SAP, 2021](#))

Key Takeaways:

1. Literacy, or being literate, is not solely proficiency in the five skill areas defined by the National Reading Panel (phonics, phonemic awareness, vocabulary, fluency, and reading comprehension) but requires an individual to minimally develop those skills in order to develop literacy.
2. Assessment of literacy requires more than examining student performance on one assessment -- let alone one *type* of assessment -- that measures performance on literacy tasks.

How SBAC Measures and Reports on Literacy

The Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) published a document called [Content Specifications for the Summative Assessment of the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects](#) that breaks down how SBAC measures and reports on a student’s overall performance in English Language Arts (ELA). Below are some specific insights on how this informs the determination of a student’s proficiency in literacy, which includes more than the ability to read and write.

- SBAC reports on a student’s performance on an **overall literacy claim**, which is informed by and further broken down into **four domain-specific claims**:
 - **Claim #1 (Reading)**: Students can read closely and analytically to comprehend a range of increasingly complex literary and informational texts.

- **Claim #2 (Writing):** Students can produce effective and well-grounded writing for a range of purposes and audiences.
- **Claim #3 (Listening and Speaking):** Students can employ effective speaking and listening skills for a range of purposes and audiences.
- **Claim #4 (Research and Inquiry):** Students can engage in research and inquiry to investigate topics, and to analyze, integrate, and present information.
- These four claims are related to and comprised of the four [Common Core State Standards \(CCSS\)](#) strands (Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening, and Language), but there is not a one-to-one correspondence; skills from each strand are integrated throughout the assessment. “Summative assessment targets do not replace the Common Core State Standards; rather, they reference specific standards at each grade level that test developers will use to guide item and task development and collectively serve the purpose of providing a consistent sampling plan for assessment within and across grades. The summative assessment targets at each grade level represent the prioritized content and skills for assessment” ([SBAC](#), p. 29).

Additionally, Reading Foundational Skills are not assessed by SBAC, as these “can be assessed more appropriately in the early grades using any of a number of widely available diagnostic assessments for evaluating the developing reading and literacy skills of young children” ([SBAC](#), p. 16).

Key Takeaways:

- SBAC measures more than a student’s ability to read and write. SBAC claims for reading, writing, listening and speaking, and research and inquiry are broad statements that describe intended outcomes for students in each area of literacy.
- A student’s overall ELA score is broken down into the four claims.
- Due to the integrated nature of both the CCSS and SBAC, SBAC claims align with the four strands of the CCSS, but each claim is not an assessment of an individual strand.

Examining the ELA SBAC Claims

Claim #1 (Reading): Students can read closely and analytically to comprehend a range of increasingly complex literary and informational texts.

- Claim #1 measures more than decoding and fluency.
- “At the heart of the Common Core State Standards is a focus on literacy instruction that centers on careful examination of texts—reading closely and drawing evidence from the text to support inferences and judgments made (Coleman & Pimentel, 2012a, 2012b). The ability to read a variety of text types, including increasingly complex texts, is another key component of being college and career ready” ([SBAC](#), p. 28).
- “In 2006, ACT, Inc. released a report, *Reading between the Lines*, which revealed an important finding: text complexity matters (ACT, Inc., 2006). Being able to read and

analyze a variety of complex texts helps students make sense of information, understand diverse viewpoints, and become active, productive, and informed citizens. Students who are college and career ready in reading can, without significant scaffolding, comprehend and evaluate complex texts across a range of types and disciplines, and they can cite and evaluate specific evidence when offering an oral, written, or graphic interpretation of a text” (SBAC, p. 28).

- The following assessment targets inform the Total Reading score: key details, central ideas, word meanings, reasoning & evidence, analysis within or across texts, text structures & features, and language use, both in literary and informational texts. The Total Reading score is based on “evidence of critical thinking while reading, including the ability to infer, analyze, compare/contrast, synthesize, evaluate, or critique information presented or the author’s reasoning” as well as “evidence of understanding of written language use” (SBAC, p. 33).

Claim #2 (Writing): Students can produce effective and well-grounded writing for a range of purposes and audiences.

- “To communicate effectively, students need to understand why they are writing—for what different purposes and for what audiences. Writing develops the ability to generate, organize, make sense of, and deeply understand information in order to produce new ideas and insights. Writing Next (Graham & Perin, 2007) and its successor, Writing to Read (Graham & Hebert, 2010), argue convincingly for increasing the amount of time that students engage in writing and for teaching writing strategies and processes that have students create texts and write about and reflect on what they are reading” (SBAC, p. 36).
- “Writing dispositions/habits of mind (or the ways writers approach writing) include engagement through making connections among ideas; persistence in grappling with challenging ideas and texts; an understanding of the responsibility to incorporate ideas of others, giving proper attribution; flexibility with approaches and styles to match purpose; and the utilization of metacognitive skills to reflect on one’s development as a writer” (SBAC, p. 36).
- The following assessment targets inform the Total Writing score: write and revise brief narrative texts, write and revise brief informational/explanatory texts, write and revise brief opinion/argument texts, language and vocabulary use, and editing. Students must demonstrate their “rhetorical skills and knowledge” through purpose and organization, evidence and elaboration, and conventions.

Claim #3 (Listening and Speaking): Students can employ effective speaking and listening skills for a range of purposes and audiences.

- “Success in college coursework and careers depends heavily on the ability to communicate effectively—demonstrating active listening, interpersonal communication, and the ability to integrate oral/visual/graphic information. ‘Besides having intrinsic

value as modes of communication, listening and speaking are necessary prerequisites of reading and writing’ (Fromkin, Rodman, & Hyams, 2006; Hulit, Howard, & Fahey, 2010; Pence & Justice, 2007; Stuart, Wright, Grigor, & Howey, 2002)” ([SBAC](#), p. 43).

- “Stressing listening comprehension and discussion/speaking communications develops students’ ability to process more complex information than they may be able to read or even write about, especially at the elementary and middle grades” ([SBAC](#), p. 43).
- The following assessment target informs the Total Listening and Speaking score: listen and interpret information delivered orally.

Claim #4 (Research and Inquiry): Students can engage in research and inquiry to investigate topics, and to analyze, integrate, and present information.

- In order to be college and career ready, the Common Core recommends students acquire “both the ability to gather, synthesize, and evaluate information from multiple texts and, when appropriate, the ability to build on the ideas of others through collaboration and explorations of diverse perspectives” ([SBAC](#), p. 46).
- “Today, a myriad of both print and non-print information is available globally. Students need to know how to filter information, evaluate the credibility of sources, detect and challenge the underlying assumptions, and make thoughtful decisions based on their analysis of what is relevant to the topic, issue, or problem being explored. These skills are important for college and career success, as students and employees are asked to move past obvious or surface-level interpretations and use literacy skills to make sense of and respond to the written, visual, and verbal information they encounter” ([SBAC](#), p. 46).
- The following assessment targets inform the Total Research and Inquiry score: interpret and integration information, analyze and evaluate information and sources, and use evidence.

Because of all this, “[e]ducators should anticipate that many students, even those who are accurate and fluent, might not fare well on these assessments” (Wixson & Lipson, 2012). Similarly, “[h]igher expectations are likely to result in even greater variability in student performance” (Wixson & Lipson, 2012). In their article “Relations Between the CCSS and RTI in Literacy and Language,” Wixson and Lipson explain why this is the case.

Key Takeaways:

- Since the SBAC is a comprehensive assessment of literacy, students skilled in accuracy and fluency still might underperform.
- Complex literary and informational texts are vital components of a strong literacy program.
- Literacy skills are essential for becoming an informed, active citizen and contributing member of the workforce.

Integration of Language and Literacy

A critique of the Grade Expectations for Vermont’s Framework of Standards and Learning Opportunities lead to Vermont’s adoption of the Common Core. CCSS for ELA “provide an integrated view of literacy and language,” which includes reading, writing, speaking and listening, and language (Wixson & Lipson, 2012).

The CCSS-ELA document describes mature, effective readers in the form of a ‘vision’ of what it means to be literate in the 21st century (p. 3) and a ‘portrait’ of what students who are college and career ready in ELA ‘look like’ (p. 7). The vision statement emphasizes that students who meet the ELA standards ‘readily undertake the close, attentive reading that is at the heart of understanding and enjoying complex’ texts, and ‘habitually perform the critical reading necessary to pick carefully through the staggering amount of information available today.’ Furthermore, ‘they actively seek the wide, deep, and thoughtful engagement with high-quality literary and informational texts that builds knowledge, enlarges experience, and broadens world views.’ (Wixson & Lipson, 2012)

The authors go on to describe how the “emphasis on college and career readiness in the CCSS-ELA raises the bar for what students are expected to know and be able to do at every level of K–12 schooling. This is most evident in terms of more attention to *higher order skills, increased content knowledge, and ability to engage with complex texts*” (Wixson & Lipson, 2012). The integrated model of ELA “contrasts sharply with the heavy emphasis that has been placed on *reading* in recent years...When reading is part of an integrated model, the emphasis changes dramatically from the ‘big 5,’ “ and moves away from “an overemphasis on decoding to increased attention to comprehension of and learning with and from oral and written language” (Wixson & Lipson, 2012).

Wixson and Lipson caution that if assessments like SBAC “do a credible job of capturing the content of the CCSS, many existing measures will not be effective predictors of reading achievement as defined by the CCSS-ELA” (Wixson & Lipson, 2012). The authors explain that “ELA assessments [like SBAC] will cover a wider range of knowledge and skills using a variety of measures” to better assess student achievement as a result of “the increase in both the breadth and depth of knowledge and skills to be assessed” (Wixson & Lipson, 2012). In other words, a low score on the ELA portion of the SBAC does not necessarily mean that a student cannot read or write proficiently.

Key Takeaways:

1. The Common Core State Standards’ emphasis on career and college readiness requires higher order skills, increased content knowledge, and the ability to engage with complex texts that exceeds proficiency in phonics, phonemic awareness, vocabulary, fluency, and reading comprehension alone.
2. Because of the depth and breadth of what is covered by the ELA SBAC, a low score on the assessment does not necessarily indicate that a student cannot read or write proficiently.

3. CCSS represent higher expectations for K-12 students when compared to the previous Vermont Grade Expectations for English Language Arts.

Resources

Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts (n.d.). [*Students Who are College and Career Ready in Reading, Writing, Speaking, Listening, and Language*](#).

National Council of Teachers of English (2018, July 17). [*A Call to Action: What We Know About Adolescent Literacy*](#).

National Council of Teachers of English (2019, November 7). [*Definition of Literacy in a Digital Age*](#).

National Council of Teachers of English (2018, October 25). [*Literacy Assessments: Definitions, Principles, and Practices*](#).

National Council of Teachers of English (2019, December 5). [*The Act of Reading: Instructional Foundations and Policy Guidelines*](#).

Peterson, A. (2020, March 23). [*Literacy is More than Just Reading and Writing*](#). National Council of Teachers of English.

Pimental, S. and Liben, M. (2021). [*Reading as Liberation – An Examination of the Research Base*](#). Achieve the Core.

Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (2015). [*Content Specifications for the Summative Assessment of the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects*](#).

Student Achievement Partners (2020). *Early reading assessment guidance for 2020-2021*. <https://achievethecore.org/page/3296/2020-21-early-reading-assessment-guidance>.

Wixson, K., and Lipson, M. (2012). [*Relations Between the CCSS and RTI in Literacy and Language*](#). *The Reading Teacher*, 65(6), 387-391.