

MEMORANDUM

TO: School Administrators, Board Members, Educators and Parents
FROM: Rebecca Holcombe, Secretary of Education
SUBJECT: Understanding Why We Test
DATE: August 11, 2015

The Agency has received several requests from school leaders to provide a rationale for statewide testing, one that can help address questions from students, teachers, parents and the community. To that end, we offer the following:

Statewide assessments provide information on students' mastery of state standards.

States adopt standards to provide a consistent set of learning goals for all students in all schools. These standards are our operational description of what we want our students to know and be able to do, and what level of proficiency we think they need to have to thrive in civic and economic life.

A recent report by the National Conference of State Legislatures indicates that 20% or more of first-year college students are required to take at least one remedial course, and that number approaches 40% for African-American, Hispanic and low-income students ([NCSL](#), 2015). These first-year students who are required to take remedial courses are also twice as likely to drop out of college without a degree. Vermont adopted the Common Core State Standards, in part because these standards were developed to address the concern that too many students graduate from high school lacking the basic reading, writing and mathematics skills they will need to succeed in college and in the workplace. Common standards give us a shared way to talk about the progress of all our students, in all regions, towards goals in English language arts and mathematics.

The Smarter Balanced Assessment, administered in schools across Vermont for the first time this Spring, was developed to assess student mastery of Common Core State Standards. To be very clear, the purpose of the test is **not** for student tracking or to discourage them from considering college as an option, but to provide our systems with feedback on whether and how students are progressing towards the goals we have set for them. Because students in all schools participate in the same assessment, we receive statewide data on student performance that allows us to evaluate overall progress statewide with respect to mastery of standards, as well as performance gaps between different, substantively important groups of students, such as students living in poverty and their more affluent peers, and students with and without disabilities. Without standardized assessments we would not have clear evidence suggesting

that our schools systematically struggle to reach and support the learning of our boys in poverty. Without these assessments, any inequities are hidden, and thus likely to be left unaddressed.

Statewide assessments can provide useful information for comparing student achievement:

- in the same subject and grade level across school years;
- between student groups; or
- in comparison to statewide benchmarks

Statewide standardized assessments should **not** be used to compare student achievement for any consequential purpose:

- across different subjects and different grade levels; or
- across testing groups with too few students to provide for valid inferences (Hollingshead and Childs, 2011)¹.

Schools use a wide variety of assessments, but for the most part, locally developed assessments do not have the reliability and technical qualities necessary to support valid inferences about the progress and performance of schools, and about specific groups of students within those schools. Our statewide assessments will help us assess the success of our efforts to close performance gaps.

The Smarter Balanced Assessments provide Vermont with an innovative and high-quality system for gathering and reporting information on implementation of our state learning standards.

Unlike some corporate testing solutions, the Smarter Balanced Assessments represent the cooperative effort of more than half of the states, and in the future it will reside at a major university (UCLA) for on-going development, improvement and validation. It improves on previous generations of standardized tests for several reasons:

- The computer delivery system will produce results that are more precise than our current assessments, in less time.
- A variety of embedded digital tools improve the assessment experience for all students, but for students with disabilities and students with special assessment needs in particular because of a wide variety of accessibility tools that are embedded in the computer test delivery system.
- Because it is a computer adaptive test, no student should have the experience of taking a test on which she or he could not answer a single question, or on which she or he was able to answer every question.

¹ Recently, Hollingshead and Childs (2011) found that comparisons of testing results are accurate when schools have a minimum of 81 students taking exams, but are even more trustworthy when the group is greater than 160.

- The Smarter Balanced Assessment system was field-tested with 4.4 million students in 16.5 thousand schools across 22 states and the U.S. Virgin Islands. So, we are confident the Smarter Balanced Online Test Delivery System will function as intended, and will correct many of the issues we've had with our current assessments.

Nearly every institution that serves the public, both public and private, is monitored against quality standards, using uniform assessment tools.

It's hard to think of a human enterprise that is not evaluated periodically against common standards and success criteria. While scores on standardized tests by no means capture all the learning we care about, and do not determine life outcomes, they are one measure of the outcomes that result from our investment of education dollars. We have a public assurance responsibility to provide our citizens with data they can use to reflect on the education we buy with our tax dollars. Our schools and the Agency believe that there are other critical learning outcomes that are not captured by these scores. We also need to look at other measures of these other outcomes. However, this does not mean we can't gain insight on the skills of our students or the impact of our investments and programs by looking at test data. Without transparency, we will struggle to make progress.

Now that we have a better test, it's time to create a better accountability system.

When you ask individuals who say they are against testing why they are opposed, what you often learn is that their problem is not with testing *per se*, but with how tests are being used. They believe it is unfair to judge the quality of a school based exclusively on reading and math results from a standardized test. They object to the notion that 100% of students must demonstrate the ability to read, write and solve math problems on grade level, even when many of those students have documented learning problems and when the standards are set so high that we'd expect half the students in the highest performing nations in the world to fail to score as proficient. Critics often believe that evaluating teachers based on test scores is unfair and may drive good teachers from the profession, or at the very least, penalize them for choosing to work with the students who need their skill and expertise the most. In other words, critics are often opposed to how tests have been used for accountability purposes, rather than to the tests themselves. The Agency of Education is sympathetic to these concerns, and asks all our educators and parents and community members to help us keep our focus on powerful, engaged learning across all critical outcomes in our [Vermont Education Quality Standards](#).

Under Federal law, we are now required to label **all** our schools "low performing," because every single student in every single school is not scoring as "proficient." We are confident that if every student did score as proficient, we would instead be told our tests were too easy. Please help us reject simplistic labels, and instead, hold us accountable for keeping our students engaged and positive about learning, and for supporting them and guiding them as they demonstrate greater and greater levels of proficiency across all critical outcomes. In addition,

please help us preserve appropriate uses of these tests as a tool to help our parents and educators improve learning, rather than supporting inappropriate uses of these tests that might actually undermine our goal of high quality, engaging teaching and learning for every child.

Please direct your comments or questions to State Assessment Director, Michael Hock (Michael.Hock@state.vt.us or (802-479-1288).