

March 2015

Dear Editor:

On Tuesday, March 17, 2015, the Vermont State Board of Education unanimously voted to suspend the use of Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) scores for the 2014-2015 school year for the purpose of annual school evaluation determinations. These English Language Arts and Mathematics assessments were developed to measure student mastery of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), which were adopted in 2010.

We believe standardized tests play an important but limited public assurance role in education. Well-designed tests can help evaluate greater equity of outcomes for our students. Educators can use tests to set realistic targets for improvement. Test scores can be a trigger for detailed evaluation to learn what schools are doing very effectively or to help identify strategies schools can use to get better. However, there are real limitations of what can be concluded about learning based on test scores, particularly in the first years of new tests and standards. Students this spring will be tested as if they had Common Core-aligned curricula for their entire educational career.

With these new tests come implementation challenges for both schools and students.

We commend schools for their extensive investments and preparations to administer these tests via computer, as is required. While schools have secured sufficient capacity and internet access for testing, we should not confuse this with equity across the state. Districts with more access and whose students have more familiarity with technology will find it easier to administer these tests. Will the tests measure reading and mathematics or will they measure computer access and literacy? Over time, the computer adaptive tests will likely be better than their predecessors as they hold strong promise for individualizing and testing knowledge in applied settings. This is an improvement from other tests, yet it is a substantial change and, therefore, SBAC scores cannot be compared with earlier NECAP scores.

We must view the testing program in the broader context of education in Vermont.

In addition to the CCSS, Next Generation Science Standards were adopted in June 2013, and Education Quality Standards in December 2013. Concurrently, the Vermont Legislature passed Act 77, creating flexible pathways with required Personalized Learning Plans for all students in 7th-12th grade. The entire state is working towards Act 166, which provides universal access to PreKindergarten. Many districts are experiencing increasing fiscal stress and declining enrollments, which have opened difficult conversations. There are all worthy initiatives and great challenges.



Therefore, The Vermont State Board of Education will not use SBAC scores for the 2014-2015 school year for the purpose of annual school evaluation determinations.

Until students' education has been guided by the new standards and schools have practiced administering and interpreting SBAC, the results will not support reliable and valid inferences about student performance and should not be used as the basis for any consequential purpose. Unless empirical studies confirm a sound relationship between performance on the SBAC and critical and valued life outcomes ("college and career-ready"), test results should not be used to make consequential judgments about schools and students.

Stephan Morse, Chair of the Vermont State Board of Education

