

UEN Supports Smarter Balanced Assessment System

Background: The 2013 Education Reform effort addressed Iowa's state assessment of reading mathematics and science, requiring that the tests previously administered be used, until July 1, 2016, at which time the State Board of Education could again presumably determine the state assessment. HF 215 also required the Iowa Department of Education (DE) to convene a task force to review and make recommendations for a statewide assessment of student progress. The task force was required to recommend a state assessment that is aligned to the Iowa common core standards and is, at a minimum, valid, reliable, tested and piloted in Iowa. The task force was required to consider costs to school districts and the state to provide and administer tests and the technical support necessary to implement. The task force, including UEN representatives and members of every educational role group, did its job, with a very rigorous and scientific process. In a nearly unanimous vote of the task force members, 20:1, members recommended moving to the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) suite of assessments, including both the summative tests used for accountability and the formative assessment and instructional tools to help teachers support students throughout the school year. The task force report is found here: <https://www.educateiowa.gov/documents/boards-committees-councils-and-task-forces/2015/01/2014-12-31-iowa-assessment-task-force>

Current Situation: On Sept. 17, 2015, the State Board of Education initiated rules in preparation to begin the process of implementing SBAC for mathematics and English-language arts, with the intended first administration of the test statewide in spring of 2017. The 108-day period of public comment follows. Also critical to understand, Iowa has not been approved for a waiver from NCLB requirements. UEN school leaders are concerned that Iowa schools and the state will have difficulty meeting federal expectations regarding alignment between our Iowa Core standards and the state test Iowa has been using. Additionally, the task force is in the process of reconvening to consider an appropriate state science assessment following the State Board of Education's adoption of new science standards.

UEN Support: The UEN member districts have a long-standing legislative priority calling for an assessment aligned to the standards schools teach. UEN has opposed using a norm-referenced test for our state accountability plan. UEN school leaders look forward to the change in our state test, knowing it will provide to our teachers information to change instruction. A summative test at the end of the year does not necessarily help the grade-level teacher with the student tested. Information comes back to the district too late, after the student has moved on to another grade and another teacher. Having the suite of assessment tools, including the formative assessments, the online digital library and the professional development for teachers included in the task force recommendations, allows teachers to diagnose what students know and can do, and change instruction along the way based on that information.

Key components of the SBAC system that improve learning for students:

- The SBAC system is a computer adaptive test, with prior answers determining subsequent questions. Standards mastery for students at both ends of the learning spectrum will be better identified. Students are less frustrated with the test and more engaged. Iowa students interviewed after participating in the piloting of the SBAC tests confirmed their preference for this test format.
- Online test taking provides timely information back to district, teachers and the students.
- The suite of formative tools and digital library of instructional lessons, both tied to standards, help teachers tailor instruction to the needs of students. The use of the formative tools, including which questions are asked of students, is left to local districts to determine. Teacher teams will likely build common formative assessments based on the standards they are working on with their students when they need them.

- The system's ability to focus on what students know also takes away the age-old argument that schools can't be held accountable because the test doesn't assess what is taught. Instead, supports and expectations will align appropriately to standards required to be taught.
- SBAC includes performance tasks, requiring students to engage higher levels of thinking to demonstrate their mastery of the tasks required. Those are primarily the parts of the test that take a little longer for students to complete. The SBAC doesn't have a time limit, which allows students who may require more time to truly demonstrate their ability.
- Development of the test Involved Iowa educators and students. The tests recommended by the task force were required to be piloted in Iowa. Likewise, thousands of lessons in the digital library have been submitted by Iowa educators. Iowa educators, administrators, school board members, AEAs, curriculum directors, the business community and parents were included in the 21-member task force. Task force members, including those from UEN districts, were very strongly behind the recommendation. The one dissenting voice was a parent who admittedly didn't like standardized testing of any kind.

Change is difficult and there will be bumps in the road. UEN leaders do not naively expect everything to unfold easily in the world of school improvement and assessment with this big change. It is critical that the state recognize and support school district technology needs in order to administer the test online. Some districts may need a lengthened test window or an option to initially deliver the test with paper/pencil (although along with that option, the computer adaptive nature of the test is lost). Educators and students need time to learn how to administer and take the test. Communication with parents, the public, and state leaders will be challenging if Iowa experiences the proficiency dip other states have seen. With a more rigorous test, aligned to higher expectations, it is intelligent to anticipate the dip. UEN leaders urge the State Board of Education to advocate for and the legislature and governor to provide support for the additional costs districts will incur in implementing this test. Iowa has the benefit of learning from other states that pioneered SBAC assessments, lessening the potential challenges through clear expectations of the test provider Iowa chooses, determined by an RFP process. Lastly, misinformation and misunderstanding has clouded the conversation. Continued efforts at communicating about the purpose of assessment and how SBAC furthers learning for students, while complying with federal accountability requirements, will be ongoing.

STRONG SUPPORT for SBAC: THE UEN supports the Assessment Task Force recommendation, encourages the State Board of Education to move forward as the temporary legislative prohibition on their action is effectively repealed July 1, 2016. Beginning this process now, rather than waiting until the 2016-17 school year, will provide everyone with more time to define and digest the actions necessary to move forward intelligently, in the best interest of students.

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