

MYTHBUSTERS: Busting the Top 10 Myths about Smarter Balanced Assessments

May 2014

MYTH #1: Smarter Balanced test questions are unproven, so it's impossible to know if they're measuring what they should.

FACT: This spring Smarter Balanced is administering a [field test](#) – or a “practice run” – to more than three million students across the country to make sure the assessment and its technology work as intended, the questions accurately measure what students know and can do and that everything goes as planned.

- Through the field test process Smarter Balanced is ensuring that teachers, school administrators and students are prepared for the actual test that will begin in most states in the spring of 2015.
- Smarter Balanced leaders will use what they learn from the field test to improve the actual test.
- For more than a year the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium's website has included “[Sample Items and Performance Tasks](#)” which ensure the test questions align to the state standards.
- Smarter Balanced began conducting its field test on March 25, 2014. It will run through June 6, 2014.

MYTH #2: Smarter Balanced test questions are a secret – no one has seen them, so how can we trust them?

FACT: Smarter Balanced tests are designed to gauge what students know and what they can do based on college- and career-ready state standards in mathematics and English language arts.

- The assessments are aligned to [the standards](#), and the standards are available to the public. So, if teachers and students focus on learning that is based on the standards, then the students will be prepared for the tests.
- In the spring of 2013 Smarter Balanced created and released full-length “[Practice and Training Tests](#)” to show the types of questions students will see on the actual test.
- Smarter Balanced also publicizes its “[Sample Items and Performance Tasks](#)” to help teachers, administrators and policymakers prepare for implementing the next-generation assessments.

MYTH #3: Smarter Balanced assessments are stressful and do not benefit students.

FACT: Smarter Balanced tests measure how well students are learning the skills, knowledge and critical thinking that employers and colleges say are most necessary for success after high school. This important snapshot lets students – and their parents, families and educators – know if they are on track to successfully achieve the next step in their education or career journey.

- To create an accurate snapshot, Smarter Balanced will be “harder” than most tests students take now. But students will have questions that reflect classroom assignments – such as writing assignments and multi-step math problems – and not random multiple-choice questions.
- Smarter Balanced provides students, parents and educators with more immediate results of student performance.
- Smarter Balanced formative assessments are administered near the beginning of the school year and results are returned quickly, so teachers can use information to support students individually and help them stay on track.
- Teachers can use that same information to modify lessons and instruction to better meet all students' needs.
- While not encouraged, parents can opt for their child not to take any state test, including Smarter Balanced. But choosing the opt-out option means that students would not know if they are on track to advance to the next step in their education or career journey.

- Smarter Balanced high school assessments are designed to determine whether students have the skills and knowledge to succeed in first-year college courses. This means that eventually students bound for community or four-year college will not need to pay for and take separate course placement tests.

MYTH #4: Smarter Balanced does not benefit educators – it ties their hands and limits their approach to teaching.

FACT: Smarter Balanced provides teachers with important information and on-demand resources that, among other things, can be used to determine if their students are on track to meeting the standards and what help or additional time is needed if they are not on track.

- Smarter Balanced is building a “[Digital Library](#)” that will provide teachers with online training modules, exemplar units and teacher-submitted resources. These tools are designed to provide educators with strategies and practices to enhance day-to-day instruction.
- Smarter Balanced requires students to write extensively, explain their thinking and solve multi-step problems. This gives educators important information that can be used to develop creative lessons and identify effective instructional approaches.

MYTH #5: Educators from my state were not involved in the development of Smarter Balanced.

FACT: Thousands of K-12 educators and hundreds of faculty from state colleges and universities—a much greater number than were involved in developing most prior state tests—worked together from across every state involved in Smarter Balanced to develop the most appropriate test questions for each subject and grade.

- Each state involved in Smarter Balanced has educators from K-12 and higher education who serve on State Leadership Teams. These teams have a direct hand in developing the test.
- More than 1,400 K-12 teachers are now helping to generate the resources for the Digital Library.
- Dozens of educators from Smarter Balanced states, along with up to 250,000 K-12 educators, higher education faculty and parents, will lead the process of setting achievement levels that separate the assessment’s four performance levels.

MYTH #6: Smarter Balanced assessments are technology-based and schools that don’t have the technology to administer the assessments will be at a severe disadvantage.

FACT: Transition time has been built in to allow schools to prepare for the administration of the assessments. Paper and pencil tests are still available.

- Many states currently administer some or all of their statewide assessments by computer.
- To help schools transition to the new tests, Smarter Balanced is offering paper and pencil versions of the test for the first year, so no district or school will be held to a disadvantage.
- Smarter Balanced has been working closely with states to help them prepare for and work with schools to successfully transition to the next-generation assessments. The assessments are specifically designed to work with computing resources already in schools.

MYTH #7: The federal government plans to use Smarter Balanced to collect and analyze private data and information on students.

FACT: States control the data. Moreover, state officials that comprise Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium’s governing body approve all assessment decisions, including the use of test data. Smarter Balanced leaders have established strict data privacy policies that work to protect students.

- [Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium’s](#) data privacy policies ensure that individual states—not private testing vendors or the federal government—control all of their student data. Smarter Balanced will not share student identifiable data of any kind with the federal government unless state leaders give their authorization.
- Just like with current state assessments, Smarter Balanced will adhere to all federal and state privacy laws, including the [Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act \(FERPA\)](#). Additionally, the [Higher Education Opportunity Act \(HEOA\) of 2008](#), [No Child Left Behind \(NCLB\)](#) legislation amending the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the [Education Reform Sciences Act of 2002](#) and the [Individuals with Disabilities Education Act \(IDEA\)](#) all prohibit the creation of a federal database with students’ personally identifiable information.
- If anything, the privacy policies governing Smarter Balanced are more robust than those covering other off-the-shelf tests administered by states.

MYTH #8: Smarter Balanced assessments are far more expensive than current state tests and not worth it.

FACT: Although some states will likely pay a little more for the Smarter Balanced assessments, they are actually cheaper for most states. Over the years of implementation, Smarter Balanced costs will decrease thanks to the technology component of the exam.

- Smarter Balanced end-of-year summative assessment is estimated to cost \$22.50 per student.
- The full suite of summative, interim and formative assessments is estimated to cost \$27.30 per student.
- These [costs](#) are less than the amount that two-thirds of the Consortium’s member states currently pay.
- Unlike state-specific tests, Smarter Balanced enables comparisons across states. It also benefits from many states working together to design a next-generation assessment that addresses first-generation concerns in an affordable way.

MYTH #9: Smarter Balanced assessments put English language learners (ELLs) and students with disabilities at a disadvantage.

FACT: Like any state assessment, the Smarter Balanced assessments will have [accommodations](#) for English language learners and students with disabilities.

- Smarter Balanced includes “Universal Tools” such as an English Dictionary, English Glossary, keyboard navigation, writing tools and a zoom.
- The assessment also includes “Designated Supports” like color contrast, text-to-speech and translated test to assist students with vision impairments and English language learners.
- The assessment has embedded accommodations such as American Sign Language and Braille, to name a few.
- Smarter Balanced is working with states and recognized experts to ensure all students have the accessibility and accommodation features needed for a positive and productive testing experience.

MYTH #10: Smarter Balanced assessments are too long and take too much time away from instruction and learning.

FACT: The time students will spend taking the Smarter Balanced assessments represents less than one percent of the approximately 1,200 hours students spend in classrooms each school year.

- Smarter Balanced assessments include writing and performance tasks at each grade, which take longer but provide a clearer, deeper understanding of what students have learned.
- Smarter Balanced is a key element of teaching and learning in the classroom.