

## Tough Questions on Smarter Balanced Assessment, Measured Progress and Testing

### BACKGROUND

#### *What is the Smarter Balanced consortium?*

The Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (Smarter Balanced) is a multi-state organization working together to develop next-generation assessments that accurately measure student progress toward college and career readiness. The Smarter Balanced assessment is a computer adaptive year-end assessment where each student's test is customized based on his or her performance throughout the test. The new assessment will be used for state and federal accountability purposes beginning in the 2014-2015 school year.

The Smarter Balanced system:

- Aligns with the Montana Common Core Standards in English language arts and mathematics;
- Focuses on supporting teachers' instructional practice and implementation of new standards;
- Provides a comprehensive reporting system on classroom practices and student progress for teachers, administrators, students and parents;
- Ensures every student is able to show what they know and can do to meet new standards; and
- Offers classroom formative assessment processes and tools as well as computer adaptive interim and summative assessments.

Montana is a governing state participant in the Smarter Balanced consortia, means representatives from our state participate in all Smarter Balanced decisions. More than 200 Montanans have participated in this effort at different levels as individuals—using their expertise to do everything from assisting in the development of test questions to setting cut scores.

---

#### *Given the problems that Montana schools experienced with the testing, how reliable are the test results?*

Montana is participating in a study that will help us understand how technical challenges some schools and students faced while taking the test may have affected students' performance.

We have confidence that the majority of students who took the test didn't experience interruptions or glitches.

That study is being done by the Center for Assessment, and will be paid for by Smarter Balanced. It will also include Nevada and North Dakota, which faced similar technical challenges.

***Will OPI be able to use 2015 as the baseline, or will 2016 become the baseline for the SBAC test?***

The results of that Center for Assessment study will help the Office of Public Instruction (OPI) determine if the 2015 test scores will become our baseline.

***When will we get the test scores? What is the hold up?***

The Office of Public Instruction expects to have test scores this fall. However, given the technical challenges some students faced in taking the test, Montana is participating in a study that will help us understand how those glitches may have affected students' performance.

We have confidence that the majority of students who took the test didn't experience interruptions or glitches.

That study is being done by the Center for Assessment, at no cost to Montana, and will also include Nevada and North Dakota.

Another reason test score data has been held up is because Montana's testing vendor, Measured Progress, is using an open-source platform that requires additional programming to move Montana's data into a data warehouse.

***What happens to a school or district if the school/district doesn't meet the 95 percent participation threshold?***

The U.S. Department of Education (USED) could choose to sanction Montana and other states that didn't reach the 95 percent participation threshold as required under the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) law. OPI hasn't yet received guidance from USED on how it plans to proceed.

It has been Superintendent Denise Juneau's intention to hold schools harmless.

***Other states have already started releasing preliminary test scores, including Idaho, Oregon and Washington. Each state shows low proficiency in ELA and even lower proficiency in Math. Why aren't kids doing better?***

This is the first year of a brand-new test that is aligned to standards that began being implemented in Montana classrooms in 2011. The test is harder. It's more comprehensive. Unlike fill-in-the-bubble paper-pencil tests you may remember, students are now required to apply their knowledge in a way that more resembles real life. They're asked to think critically. They're asked to be fluent in concepts – that is to explain an idea inside and out.

As with any new test, we expect students' proficiency will only improve as they get more comfortable with the process.

This year marks the beginning of a new kind of student proficiency assessment. Montana, like most of the country, is creating a new baseline for measuring student success. This assessment is meant to compliment the work teachers already do to measure their students' progress.

***How many students were able to participate in the SBAC assessment?***

Out of 76,000 possible student test takers, more than 62,000 participated in the test. That's an 82 percent participation rate. That's a commendable participation rate given schools had the option to test. This tells us that school leaders and teachers want to learn from this new assessment.

About 15 percent of schools chose not to test.

Most schools chose to try and test as many students as possible, and our data reflects that.

***How much has Montana paid to administer the SBAC test this year?***

Montana will pay Measured Progress \$1.33 million this year for the 2015 Smarter Balanced assessment. OPI is in a five-year contract with Measured Progress worth \$6.62 million. That contract began Oct. 1, 2014.

Montana also paid the Smarter Balanced consortium \$727,000 in membership dues and test development. However, Smarter Balanced has given Montana a \$375,596 membership credit for a delay in the interim test, and for late delivery of the open-source platform.

It's important to note that the Smarter Balanced test, including summative, interim and formative assessments, costs less per-student than Montana's previous statewide assessment. The new test costs \$27 per student. Montana's previous test was \$32 per student.

***Why are we paying that bill when the test rollout was so fraught with problems?***

The Office of Public Instruction is weighing its options when it comes to our contract with Measured Progress.

As of July, the OPI has withheld payment to Measured Progress until the vendor delivers our student data.

The technical challenges we faced this year were a result of open-source software that our vendors used which was created by AIR (American Institutes for Research). During Montana's 2014 field test, we were able to use AIR's proprietary software, which worked flawlessly. However, the state couldn't afford AIR's multi-million-dollar price tag to use that proprietary software for the 2015 assessment. So, we contracted with Measured Progress and Smarter Balanced, who in turn contracted with AIR to use an open-source version of its proprietary software. That's what created the technical challenges – the conversion of data from AIR's open-source system into Measured Progress' system.

***Other states have decided to leave the Smarter Balanced consortium, is Montana going to stay in the consortium?***

The Office of Public Instruction is currently a member and governing-state participant with Smarter Balanced. The OPI isn't talking about leaving the consortium.

Montana's governing-state status means representatives from our state participate in all Smarter Balanced decisions. More than 200 Montanans have participated in this effort at different levels as individuals—using their expertise to do everything from assisting in the development of test questions to setting cut scores.

Montana educators from K-12 and higher education have participated in workgroups which address topics such as: item development, formative assessment practices leadership and professional learning, math assessment, ELA assessment, accessibility to assessment, and technology. Additionally, 173 schools participated in a pilot of the test in 2013, and all Montana schools participated in the field test in 2014.

---

## Montana's 2014-2015 Smarter Balanced Assessment (SBAC) Timeline

- Sept. 30, 2014** The open-source testing platform was to be available to Measured Progress from the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) by this date.
- Oct. 1, 2014** The Office of Public Instruction signed a five-year contract with Measured Progress Inc. for the administration of the SBAC assessment in English/language arts and math for grades 3-8 and 11. Measured Progress will use the open-source platform designed by the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium based on proprietary software from AIR.
- March 12, 2015** Measured Progress informs the Office of Public Instruction that the SBAC test delivery system is not ready to begin testing. Measured Progress is still receiving bug fixes from AIR.
- March 13, 2015** The Office of Public Instruction and Measured Progress delayed opening of the SBAC testing window by one week.
- March 18, 2015** Scheduled opening of the SBAC testing window.
- March 22, 2015** The Office of Public Instruction notified school leaders that the SBAC testing window would not open as scheduled March 25.
- March 25, 2015** The Office of Public Instruction notified school leaders that because of technical challenges, testing vendor Measured Progress was unable to open the SBAC assessment window as planned.
- March 26, 2015** The Office of Public Instruction notified school leaders that the SBAC testing window would open March 30. OPI also notified districts that the window had been extended through June 12.
- March 31, 2015** Superintendent Denise Juneau submitted a federal waiver request from accountability determinations for 2014-2015.
- April 7, 2015** The Office of Public Instruction notified district Title I leaders that Superintendent Juneau had requested an "accountability pause" waiver from the U.S. Department of Education. This accountability pause would waive Adequate Yearly Progress determinations based on tests administered in the

2014-2015 school year. Instead, AYP would be determined based on SBAC participation, graduation rates and attendance rates.

- April 10, 2015** Smarter Balanced notified the Office of Public Instruction it would receive a \$127,870 membership credit for a delay in delivering the interim test.
- April 14, 2015** Service interruptions prevented some students from logging on to the SBAC test, and caused some students to be dropped during testing.
- April 15, 2015** Superintendent Juneau gave districts the flexibility to choose whether to administer the SBAC after sustained technical challenges disrupted class instruction time in some schools.
- April 15, 2015** Measured Progress released a statement acknowledging delays with administering the SBAC test and informing the public it was working "around the clock" to deliver the assessment to schools in Montana, Nevada and North Dakota.
- April 15, 2015** The Office of Public Instruction alerted districts that vendor Measured Progress was unable to deliver the SBAC assessment and recommended a pause in testing until April 17.
- April 20, 2015** Superintendent Juneau thanked district superintendents and principals for their patience during the challenging rollout of the SBAC assessment and announced a reopening of the testing system.
- April 23, 2015** Measured Progress released a statement apologizing for the delays and technical challenges students faced in taking the SBAC test, saying delivering the assessment on an open-source platform is "new and unprecedented, and there were bound to be some initial challenges."
- April 27, 2015** The Office of Public Instruction alerted districts that vendor Measured Progress was having another isolated service outage, and that testing resumed within the same day.
- May 20, 2015** The Office of Public Instruction received a letter from the U.S. Department of Education waiving the accountability requirement tied to the SBAC under No

Child Left Behind. Montana, like many other states, have a one-year accountability pause granted by USED.

- June 4, 2015** The Office of Public Instruction notified school district leaders that Superintendent Juneau's accountability pause waiver request had been granted.
- June 12, 2015** The SBAC testing window officially closed.
- June 14, 2015** Smarter Balanced notified the Office of Public Instruction it would receive a \$247,726 credit for failure to deliver the open-source testing platform by the contract deadline.
- June 19, 2015** The Office of Public Instruction released SBAC participation data showing nearly 82 percent of Montana students took the assessment.
- July 2015** The Office of Public Instruction is withholding payment to Measured Progress until the vendor fulfills its part of the contract by delivering student SBAC scores.
- July 6, 2015** The Office of Public Instruction sent an email to district superintendents and principals after Washington, Oregon and Idaho released SBAC results to let school leaders know Montana doesn't yet have data to share.
- July 15, 2015** SBAC test results were initially expected by July 15. Continued technical challenges have pushed a results release into late fall.
- September 2015** The Office of Public Instruction planned to send individual student SBAC test results to parents in September. Continued technical challenges have pushed a results release into late fall.
- Fall 2015** The Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium is contracting with the Center for Assessment to study how technical challenges in delivering the 2014-2015 test may have impacted student performance. North Dakota and Nevada student data will also be analyzed.
- November 2015** Estimated release of SBAC scores.



Montana  
**Office of Public Instruction**  
Denise Juneau, State Superintendent

Office of Public Instruction  
P.O. Box 202501  
Helena, MT 59620-2501  
406.444.3095  
888.231.9393  
406.444.0169 (TTY)  
opi.mt.gov

Aug. 19, 2015

Montana school leaders,

As you begin the 2015-2016 school year, you may be wondering why last year's Smarter Balanced assessment results haven't been delivered to your test coordinators.

The simple answer is because the Office of Public Instruction doesn't yet have that test data.

We hope the timeline and talking points linked below will give you a better sense of what happened during the 2015 assessment window. This toolkit should also better prepare you to address questions from your local boards of trustees, teachers, parents and students.

The OPI is still working through challenges of analyzing data and preparing for this school year's test with the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) and Measured Progress.

We have no plans to leave Smarter Balanced or to find a new testing vendor, however, the OPI has stopped payment to Measured Progress until the 2014-2015 test results have been delivered. In addition, the consortium has started work on implementing a four-step plan aimed at addressing the technical challenges we faced last year. That plan includes an independent evaluation to study the quality and performance of the open source test delivery platform and a review of student test results to understand how technical challenges may have impacted student performance.

Thank you for all of the hard work you've done to transition Montana's public school students away from an outdated statewide assessment, to a new test that will become a better measure of how well students are prepared for college and careers. Certainly it is not the only measure, but one we know you're anxious to learn from.

Please direct any media questions about Smarter Balanced, Measured Progress and the test to OPI's communications director, Emilie Ritter Saunders.

Thank you,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Denise Juneau".

Denise Juneau  
Superintendent of Public Instruction