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# Governance Brief

## Supporting Student Achievement, Issue 1: Student Assessment System in Flux

California's Standardized Testing and Reporting program—STAR—is scheduled to sunset in July 2014. Changes to the Academic Performance Index (API) are mandated by statute. The Common Core State Standards are beginning to be implemented, with new tests in math and English-language arts (ELA) that are different in both structure and content from current tests. The State superintendent of public instruction (SPI) and many others look at this as an opportunity to modify the state's system of academic assessments.

### Background

In the next few years, California education will undergo several important changes in how it assesses student learning. In August 2010, California adopted the Common Core standards, to be implemented in the 2014-15 school year. As adopted, the standards call for deeper learning, problem solving and critical thinking in order to prepare California's children for college and career in a competitive, global economy.

In June 2011, California joined the Smarter Balance Assessment Consortium (SBAC), a multistate consortium convened to develop computer-based assessments aligned to the Common Core in ELA and math. The assessments mirror the rigor of the new standards by utilizing extended response and technology-enhanced items, as well as performance tasks that allow students to demonstrate critical thinking and problem-solving skills. The federal grant that funds the SBAC work requires that the assessments be operational in the 2014-15 school year. In addition, California's STAR program is scheduled to sunset in July 2014, and in anticipation, the Legislature directed the SPI to develop recommendations for a new statewide assessment system.

If the adage is true that what gets tested is what gets taught—if resources are focused on the goals that are

measured—then the proposal for the new student assessment system has broad implications for the future of California K-12 education.

### California's Current Student Assessment System

The current assessment system in California includes the STAR tests, the California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE), the California English Language Development Test (CELDT), the Physical Fitness Test (PFT), and the California High School Proficiency Examination (CHSPE). The STAR program itself has four components that assess student proficiency in California's content standards:

#### CSBA Delegate Assembly Survey: *Early Results*

With a response from 106 of 280 Delegate Assembly members (37 percent), the survey indicates strong agreement on two key elements of the state's next assessment system.

- 70-93 percent agree that the content should focus on core academics: English Language Arts, Math, Science and Social Studies.
- 83-93 percent agree that the purpose of the test should be to measure year-to-year individual student growth against grade level standards.

*Delegates were split on the idea of sampling. Fifty percent indicated that all students should be tested in all content each year, while the other 50 percent recommended testing a sampling of students on all content, or all students on a sampling of content.*

- the California Standards Test (CST) measures student's achievement of standards in ELA, math, science and history-social science;
- the California Modified Assessment (CMA) is administered to students with disabilities and measures achievement against modified content standards in ELA, math and science;
- the California Alternate Performance Assessment (CAPA) is administered to students with significant cognitive disabilities who are unable to take the CST or CMA, and assesses achievement against content standards in ELA, math and science; and
- The Standards-based Tests in Spanish (STS) is a primary-language assessment in Spanish which measures student achievement in reading/language arts and math.

The STAR program is the foundation of the state's current system, and is composed of ELA and math tests every year in grades 2-11; science tests in grades five, and every year in grades 8-11; and social science tests in grades eight, 10 and 11. In addition to the content standard assessments, the Early Assessment Program (EAP) is an assessment of student's college readiness, and is included in the CST booklet for ELA, High School Summative Mathematics, and Algebra II.

## The Next Generation of Assessments

The STAR system is scheduled to sunset on July 1, 2014. SBAC's computer-adaptive Common Core assessments that will replace STAR's ELA and math components will be a significant departure from STAR's paper and pencil, multiple-choice tests. The SBAC tests will include selected response, short constructed response, extended constructed response, task performance, technology-enabled and technology-enhanced items. These response types more accurately assess critical thinking and problem-solving skills. The SBAC system includes both summative assessments—administered at the end of a unit of instruction to measure learning and effectiveness of instruction—and optional formative (diagnostic) and interim assessments for local and school use. The summative assessments are to be administered during the last 12 weeks of school and can be used for school, local educational agency (LEA), state and federal accountability purposes. The optional formative and interim assessments will be available for local use to provide information about student progress and to inform instruction. The system includes an online reporting system that will provide assessment results and measure progress toward mastery of the Common Core for students, parents, teachers and administrators.

The use of technology and the greater complexity of test items in the SBAC assessments have both advantages and disadvantages. The SBAC assessments will measure greater cognitive processes than the current assessments like critical thinking and problem solving, which are skills students need for success in the 21st century global economy. The tests will also measure learning on a continuum of knowledge, which makes it possible to measure individual student and cohort growth over time. However, the use of technology will require significant financial investments by school districts, and the use of more complex responses will increase testing time.

## The SPI's Recommendations for the Future of California's Assessment System

In response to the legislature's request for recommendations, the SPI was required to consult with specific stakeholder groups including the Statewide Assessment Reauthorization Work Group, on which Martha Fluor, CSBA past president, and Susan Heredia, former director-at-large, Hispanic, represented CSBA. On January 8 of this year, the SPI released a report including 12 recommendations, summarized here:

1. **Suspend portions of the STAR program assessments and adjust the API to reflect that**—the SPI recommends suspending all non-federally mandated assessments in the 2013-14 school year to facilitate the transition to a new assessment system. A proposal on test suspension is wending its way through the legislative process and has mixed reviews from the education community.
2. **Beginning in the 2014-15 school year, fully implement the SBAC ELA and mathematics assessments**—for districts unable to implement the computer adaptive tests, a paper and pencil option would be available for up to three years.
3. **Use the grade 11 SBAC ELA and mathematics assessments as an indicator of college readiness**—this proposal would replace the EAP tests included in the CST booklets with the SBAC assessment in grade 11.
4. **Develop and administer science assessments aligned to new science standards, once adopted**—the Next Generation Science Standards are scheduled for adoption by the State Board of Education (SBE) in fall 2013. The proposal indicates that the new tests would be administered in grades 5, 8 and once between grades 10-12.
5. **Develop or use multistate consortia alternate assessments in ELA, mathematics and science for students with severe cognitive disabilities**—in 2013, California withdrew from the National Center and State Collaborative (NCSC), a consortium respon-

sible for developing alternate assessments aligned to alternate standards for students with cognitive disabilities. California anticipates developing its own assessments, which may incorporate some aspects of the NCSC proposal.

6. **Determine the continued need and purpose of academic assessments in languages other than English once the SBAC assessments are operational**—the SBAC ELA and math assessments will include primary language supports and accommodations for English Learners. SBAC is currently analyzing results from pilot tests of parallel-translation tests and drop-own glossary style tests.
7. **Assess the full curriculum using assessments that model high-quality teaching and learning activities**—the SBAC assessments are scheduled to assess Common Core standards in ELA and math and the Next Generation Science Standards, once they are adopted. California has an opportunity to develop an assessment system that thoughtfully considers what should be tested, who should be tested, and how the results will be used.
8. **Invest in interim, diagnostic and formative tools**—SBAC has created an item bank and formative tools that California can provide to LEAs for voluntary local use.
9. **Consider alternatives to the CAHSEE**—the CAHSEE was not included in the SPI's considerations about STAR reauthorization. The SPI recommends using the SBAC high school assessments in ELA and math to minimize testing redundancy.
10. **Explore the possible use of matriculation examinations**—many countries use summative assessments to measure prerequisite knowledge for matriculation into the next unit of study or the necessary skills for career readiness. The SPI recommends that California consider the benefits—to students, LEAs, higher education and businesses—of introducing such examinations.
11. **Conduct comparability studies**—these studies will compare student performance on the STAR tests with the SBAC assessments in order to interpret the results of the new assessments relative to past performance.
12. **Maintain a continuous cycle of improvement of the assessment system**—it is important to continue collecting data and information to evaluate the utility of the system and to ensure the system remains valid and reliable.

The CDE has already engaged in several activities to assist in the transition to a new assessment system. California

is participating in small-scale trials, pilot testing and field testing of the SBAC assessments. In May 2013 a pilot and practice test opened for one year for use by any district, teacher, parent or student to become familiar with the online form of the SBAC assessment.

Over the next several months, California will continue to make important decisions about K-12 statewide assessments. Over the next year, the Legislature will create a new assessment system and make decisions about which tests will be required and whether or not some tests will be suspended during the transition year. The Legislature will discuss funding allocations for implementation and administration of the SBAC assessments, and will determine what role the SBE will play in ongoing test development and contract approval. Several important issues must still be addressed, including decisions about:

- Developing assessments for other academic content, if any, and determining how often they will be assessed, who will take them and how often, and how the results will be used;
- Developing items or assessments to measure career readiness and determining which skills and competencies will be assessed and how often, how that will impact the learning for all students, who will take the assessments, and how the results will be used; and
- Continuing the CAHSEE or using existing assessments to measure readiness for high school graduation.

## Implications of a New Assessment System

Implementation of a new student assessment system has several important implications, including impacts on California's academic and career/technical curriculum; the academic accountability system; and students, teachers and district staff, and governing board members.

**Impacts on curriculum**—The SBAC assessments measure only content standards in ELA and math, with science assessments forthcoming. Just as the current STAR program has been criticized for narrowing the curriculum to only the content that is tested, the plan for the new assessment system must strike a balance between the time and expense that assessments require with the reality that resources will be spent on the goals that are measured. The impact is twofold:

1. Instructional time will be prioritized to include academic content areas that are assessed. The ongoing conversation about which other content areas to test, how often, and how the tests will be used will inevitably shape the academic curriculum.
2. Career-readiness assessment could drastically reshape educational programs. The SBAC assess-

ments claim to measure college and career readiness for all students, yet the assessments only include academic content. In order for the assessments to measure college readiness, foundational career-ready skills and competencies would need to be assessed, and therefore taught to all students.

**Impacts on the accountability system**—California’s API relies heavily on student assessments. Although recent legislation (SB 1458, Steinberg) limits the use of assessments included in the API to no more than 60 percent, assessments will continue to compose a significant portion of the index. The new assessment system will significantly impact the state accountability system in the following ways:

1. Assessments that are valid for measuring student and cohort growth will provide more accurate student growth results for use in the accountability system. The STAR tests were designed to measure individual student achievement and cohort achievement against standards. The STAR tests were *not* designed to measure individual student growth or to measure the effectiveness of the LEA in educating students. The SBAC assessments, however, measure student progress along a continuous scale and therefore provide valid and reliable results for student growth that can be used in the accountability system.
2. The new assessments measure different skills and shift the purpose of the educational system. In addition to limiting the use of academic assessments in the API, SB 1458 calls for the inclusion of valid, reliable and stable measures of college and career readiness, indicating the belief that California’s education system should produce students prepared for multiple paths after high school. The SBAC computer-adaptive assessments measure new skills, such as technological proficiency, critical thinking, and problem solving. The use of these assessments in the accountability system shifts the priorities and expectations of the entire educational system.

**Impacts on local educational systems**—the biggest impact of implementation of a new accountability system is, of course, on the students and local educational systems.

- **Student achievement**—Implementation of assessments that require the use of technology and measure critical thinking and problem solving, and will require classroom instruction to emphasize analysis and evaluation, and other 21st century skills. The optional formative and interim assessments, in addition to the capacity of the assessment to measure learning along a continuum of knowledge, could be helpful for diagnostic purposes and improving instruction. These instructional changes,

and the capacity of the system to provide regular feedback to instructors and staff, can benefit students and assist LEAs in closing achievement gaps.

- **Conditions of children**—Although the SBAC assessments have distinct advantages for teaching and learning, they may put already-underprivileged students at a greater disadvantage. Students who do not have access to technology at home may not be as successful on computer-adaptive tests. Although the SBAC assessments include primary-language supports, it remains to be seen how English learners will fare on the exams.
- **Governance**—Although the suspension of non-federally mandated assessments would relieve pressure on LEAs during the transition to the new system, boards will need to make difficult decisions about the allocation of resources. Governance teams, district staff and instructors are already transitioning to the new Common Core standards in ELA and math. The new format for the SBAC tests places additional stress on systems that are already strained. Technology will need to be purchased and maintained. Teachers and students will need skill development for administering and taking exams on a new platform. Districts with limited internet access and limited devices will need to invest in infrastructure, and it is still unclear what the consequences will be for those who are unable to implement the computer-adaptive tests within the three-year time frame. Staff time will need to be allocated for exams that are used and scored locally. Significant time will be needed to educate the community about changes in the test and scoring comparability.
- **Funding**—So far, no additional funds have been specifically allocated for implementation of the SBAC assessments; however, the legislature has passed a 2013-14 budget that includes \$1.25 billion over two years to be allocated on a per-student basis for districts and county offices to begin the necessary preparation of teachers, technology and curricula. This is approximately a third of the estimated \$3.1 billion needed.

The CSBA Board of Directors, Superintendents Advisory Council and Delegate Assembly have begun a series of discussions to consider CSBA’s priorities regarding

- the implementation of the SBAC assessments
- the development of assessments for other academic content
- the development of assessment on CTE/Career-ready content

## Questions Boards Should Be Asking

1. What will be the implications for our students and our district in the first year of administering the new test?
2. How should we best allocate new one-time resources to prepare our students to take the new SBAC assessments in spring 2015?
3. How will we ensure that all students have the technology skills needed for equitable performance on the tests?
4. How can we best communicate the upcoming changes in the assessment and accountability system to our parents and greater community?
5. If the non-mandated tests are suspended in 2013-14, might we still want to give them because we have other uses for those results?

- California's Early Assessment Program: Its Effectiveness and the Obstacles to Successful Program Implementation  
<http://www.stanford.edu/group/pace/cgi-bin/wordpress/californias-early-assessment-program-its-effectiveness-and-the-obstacles-to-successful-program-implementation>

Public Policy Institute of California

California's Changing K-12 Accountability Program  
[http://www.ppic.org/main/publication\\_quick.asp?i=1043](http://www.ppic.org/main/publication_quick.asp?i=1043)

## Resources:

### CSBA

Workshops at CSBA's Annual Education Conference and Trade Show December 2013  
<http://aec.csba.org>

Governance & Policy Resources—Assessment  
<http://www.csba.org/GovernanceAndPolicyResources/StudentAchievement/Assessment.aspx>

### CDE

SSPI's Recommendations Report for Transitioning to a Future Assessment System  
<http://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/tg/sa/documents/suptrecrpt2013.pdf>

SSPI's Recommendations Report  
<http://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/tg/sa/documents/suptrecrptjan13.pdf>

CDE Statewide Pupil Assessment System information  
<http://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/tg/sa/ab250.asp>

California Department of Education Assessment Information website  
<http://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/tg/sa/>

### Other

Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE):

- How Next-Generation Standards and Assessments Can Foster Success for California's English Learners  
[http://www.wested.org/online\\_pubs/resource1264.pdf](http://www.wested.org/online_pubs/resource1264.pdf)