Dear Mike, Ilene, Lupita, and Keric,   July 20, 2015

As I think you all know, last month's meeting of the California Collaborative on District Reform provided an opportunity for district leaders to share their experiences with the first official administration of the Smarter Balanced assessment. Ilene Straus was present and made note of the points raised, but she also invited the Collaborative staff to compile the districts' feedback in order to share it with the State Board of Education and with the California Department of Education. We apologize for the delay in getting this information to you – our staff has culled it from the transcripts of the meeting and from additional memos from a couple of the districts. The information has been grouped into several key themes that arose during the discussion or in these documents.

We should begin by acknowledging the meeting participants' overwhelming support for the Smarter Balanced assessment system as a significant advance over previous state tests. At the same time, the participants recognized that we are still in the early stages of a learning process as the state transitions to the new system. In the spirit of that learning and continual improvement, Collaborative members made the following suggestions with respect to assessment administration and reporting:

1. ***Include sufficient detail in summative assessment reports to inform improvement efforts***. Early reactions to the SBAC summative assessment reports indicate that the level of information available to districts is not yet sufficiently detailed to inform local decision-making and instruction. Data at the lowest level possible, at the standard and student level, would grant teachers and administrators specific feedback on student performance. Additionally, standard-level data would allow educators to identify "problem areas" that they could address through classroom instruction, student interventions, and strategic supports. More detailed data could also serve as a validity check for districts' own assessments. Finally, as the assessments become increasingly aligned with the UC and CSU systems, more specific feedback to districts will allow educators to help their students become college ready, as defined by our own state universities.

2. ***Enhance the flexibility of interim assessments to meet local needs***. Although districts and schools statewide follow the same set of standards, the scope and sequence of curricula to address those standards can vary widely across districts. However, because the content of SBAC interim assessments appears to be predetermined and static, these assessments may not align with the progress a classroom has made at particular points during the year. By allowing educators the ability to craft their own assessments from a larger bank, SBAC would enable districts to tailor the interim assessments to better measure students' progress vis a vis the curriculum to which they have been exposed. Additionally, some participants in the meeting noted that the time required for teachers to score the interim assessment is cumbersome and unrealistic, making the tool less effective.

3. ***Expand access to the Digital Library content and usage information***. District leaders encouraged SBAC and CDE to make it possible for them to see which teachers are accessing SBAC curriculum resources through the Digital Library. As it currently stands, administrators are unable to analyze and monitor teacher usage. Making this information available would help administrators make educated decisions about professional development efforts to drive teacher learning.

   Additionally, granting access to supporting organizations, such as teacher credential programs and technical assistance providers, would allow for better preparation for incoming teachers and more detailed and applicable teacher support.

4. ***Ensure validity and reliability through ongoing vigilance with respect to accessibility***. To ensure that test performance is indeed reflective of student skill and knowledge, any potential confounds must be identified and addressed. For instance, some participants raised a concern that the language-rich mathematics items may adversely impact English learners (ELs) if the items capture students' language skills rather than their mathematics skills. SBAC has taken proactive steps to ensure that the math items appropriately capture the knowledge and skills from a range of backgrounds, English speakers and English learners alike, and have even tagged mathematics items for language complexity. Nevertheless, district leaders' experiences with the first administration suggest that this issue merits ongoing close scrutiny.

   Likewise, to address the potential for the digital divide impacting assessment performance, the state may consider attending to issues of typing and/or computer literacy as part of standard test preparation and analysis. For a model of how the state might assess the impact of the digital divide, one of the assessment experts in the meeting suggested current efforts underway with NAEP to analyze the influence of students' access to and familiarity with various forms of technology on their performance.

   Participants also raised the possible impact of both the timing of the assessment administration and the time required to take the test. During the first year's administration, many high school students were also sitting for the ACT and SATs, subjecting them to a heavy testing period. And while the SBAC assessment is untimed, which is a benefit to some students, others may find the assessment to be unduly taxing, resulting in fatigue and poorer test scores.

5. ***Address technical aspects of the system that have created confusion among users***. We encourage the California Department of Education to actively solicit feedback from districts about their experiences with the assessment system. Here we highlight some of the challenges that emerged in this administration:

   - The web interface made it difficult for some users to distinguish between the practice, interim, and summative versions of the SBAC assessment system. Participants noted that in some cases, students have taken the wrong test. This proved frustrating for administrators, teachers, and students alike and prevents data accuracy.

- Some districts have encountered technical difficulties with the Testing Operations Management System (TOMs). Administrators have found it to be difficult to add new students to the TOM system. There has also been delay with the communication between CALPADS and TOMs, causing delays in student testing.
- By accessing student records in the aggregate rather than individually, administrators could avoid the inefficient and time-consuming process of checking records one at a time (in the case of making sure the testing accommodations planned for each student are correct).

We thank you for your time and attention to these matters as we all work toward the betterment of the assessment system and the improvement of our services to our students.

Sincerely,

Jennifer O'Day
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