

PERFORMANCE MATTERS

News from the CSDE Performance Office



Volume 5 | Issue 2 | April 2020

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Academic Growth in Middle Schools

Prior to COVID-19, CSDE staff had in-depth conversations with three middle schools that demonstrated noticeable improvements in Smarter Balanced growth. This issue captures their reflections on the factors contributing to this growth. The three schools are:

- Eli Terry Jr. Middle School (ETJMS), a Grade 6-8 school in Plymouth;
- Clark Lane Middle School, a Grade 6-8 school in Waterford; and
- Old Saybrook Middle School, a Grade 5-8 school in Old Saybrook.

Though it lengthens this issue, we hope that you will take the time to read about their experiences and glean some lessons to apply in your own school. Please stay safe and healthy!

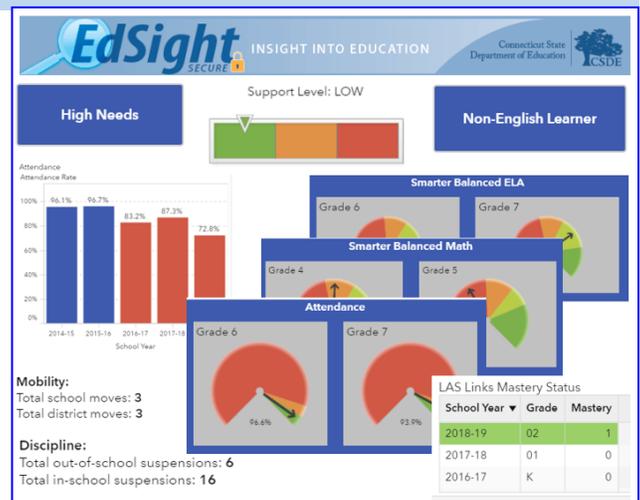
CSDE Supports During COVID-19 for Families and Educators

Visit [COVID-19: Resources for Families and Educators](#) for the most current information. This site is updated multiple times each week. Key resources pertaining to Performance topics include:

- [Attendance Guidance](#)
- [Assessment/Accountability federal waiver approval](#)
- FERPA/Data Privacy: [Temporary Flexibilities](#) and [Considerations](#)
- [College Board website - AP/SAT](#)
- [Grading, Grad Requirements](#)

Student Summary Available on EdSight Secure

The newest report in EdSight Secure is the Student Summary report. This report contains longitudinal, cross-domain data about an individual student. Domains are comprised of enrollment, attendance, and assessment (including LAS Links). This report also includes indicators used in the Early Indication Tool (EIT) such as suspensions, mobility (both school and district moves), and course failures (for students in the upper grades). In addition to accessing the Student Summary report directly for an individual student, a user can double-click on a student record in the EIT student data tabs. The Student Summary provides a school or district with access to historical information for a student one day after the student has been



registered in the Public School Information System (PSIS). A feature that allows the user to identify newly enrolled students will be available in the near future.

The Relationship between Student Participation on the Smarter Balanced Interim Assessment Blocks and Student Growth on the Smarter Balanced Summative Assessment

Over the past five years, an increasing number of districts across Connecticut have begun to use the Smarter Balanced IABs with their students. While assessment alone is not an instructional intervention, there is growing interest among educators to know if student performance on the interim assessments predicts performance on the summative assessments. However, given the wide variety of standardized and non-standardized ways in which districts use the IABs, it is currently not feasible to conduct a predictive analysis with the available data. Therefore, the CSDE decided to study if participation in the interim assessments has any relationship to improved performance on the summative.

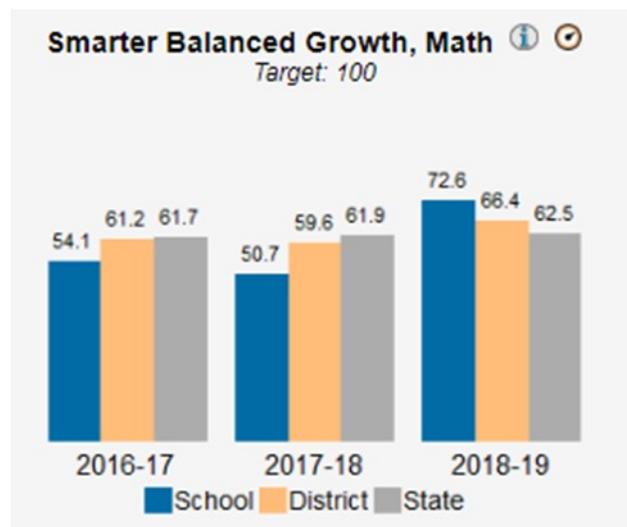
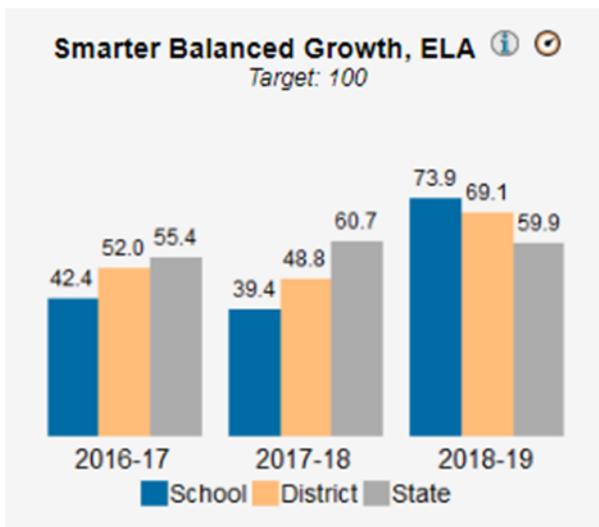
Phase 1 of this study explores the relationship between ‘sustained participation’ in the IABs and growth on the Smarter Balanced vertical scale score on the end-of-grade summative assessment from 2017-18 to 2018-19.

‘Sustained participation’ is defined as a student who participates in at least four different IABs in a subject area during the school year. Since the IABs cover only a portion of the content standards, participation in four different IABs is considered to represent reasonable coverage of the breadth of the standards and is therefore a suitable standard for examination of growth on the end-of-grade summative score. Moreover, administration of four or more different IABs during the school year may be representative of a more systematic integration of the IABs into the curriculum.

Future phases of this study will compare the item pools between the IABs and the summative assessments. The studies will explore the relationship between participation in specific IABs and their relationship to improvements in claim scores and/or aggregate assessment target performance. The full report is available on [our web site](#).

Greater Student Independence Leads to Strong Academic Growth in Plymouth

Eli Terry Jr. Middle School (ETJMS), a Grade 6-8 school in Plymouth, showed dramatic academic growth on Smarter Balanced in English language arts and mathematics in 2018-19. The results caught the attention of the CSDE Performance Office. Local school leaders, especially those serving students in the middle grades, want to know more about what is working to accelerate student achievement in other communities. Given this ongoing need, the CSDE contacted Superintendent Semmel to learn more.



On a February afternoon, after a full school day, educators from ETJMS and the district office hosted a discussion with CSDE staff to explain their coordinated approach to improvement. ***continued on page 3***

Greater Student Independence Leads to Strong Academic Growth in Plymouth (cont.)

Dr. Semmel shared that as students transitioned from Grade 5 to Grade 6, ELA and math performance declined. The unacceptably low scores generated a collective sense of urgency to change course. Teachers and administrators observed that their middle school students lacked independence. The educators believed that if they could change their instructional practices to foster greater independence among their students, learning would improve. This immediate goal was important, but they also understood that the hard work of teaching students to take control of their learning would provide long-term benefits well beyond middle school.

In their effort to foster greater student independence, educators at this school studied and implemented Fisher and Frey’s Gradual Release of Responsibility (GRR) Instructional Framework¹. The GRR framework requires that teachers transfer responsibility for learning from teacher to student with appropriate supports along the way by establishing clear learning objectives (i.e. purpose); modeling expert thinking; promoting peer collaboration; and providing guided instruction. The figure above shows the four phases of GRR. The authors explain that while every lesson should include all components,

the order of implementation in a particular lesson should be decided by the teacher based on what makes sense for that day.

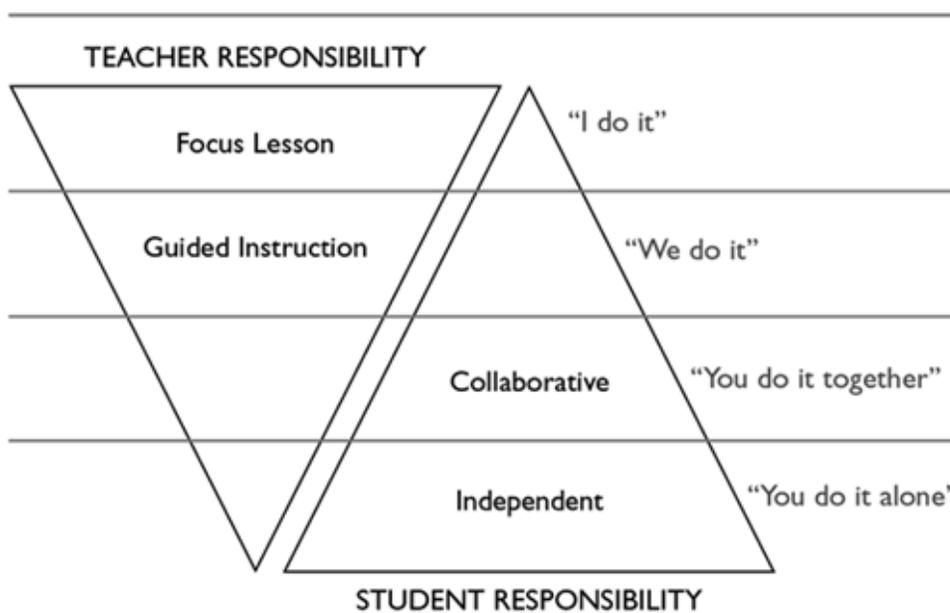
During initial implementation, ETJMS educators knew that given where most students were starting with regard to independence, appropriate scaffolding would be necessary. With

this in mind, teachers broke apart the standards and developed mini lessons with direct instruction for students. Through this process, learning targets were clear for students. Students understood what they were supposed to be learning and ways to demonstrate success.

Last year, to promote greater independence and increase student-led learning, teachers committed to limiting direct instruction to 12 minutes of the typical 50-minute class period. Teachers continually self-assess on this measure and the components of GRR. They have sharpened their focus to continually ask—What are the students doing? When students are doing all the work,

rather than the teacher, there is a lot more evidence of what students understand. The increased evidence allows teachers to more effectively provide appropriate support to improve learning, creating a productive, self-sustaining formative assessment process.

All staff use a rubric referred to as the



Student Independence Walk Through Template. The rubric has six parts: Classroom Structures & Resources; Focused Instruction; Guided Practice; Collaborative Learning; Independent Practice; and Habits of Mind. Specific student and teacher actions are included for users self-assessing and peers

who are observing. When peer educators visit classrooms, they provide targeted feedback to the teacher by focusing on one part of the template during a visit. Everyone at ETJMS has been very open to feedback from observers. This willingness to reflect and change based on self-assessment and feedback from others had to be developed over time. The educators credit their daily interaction with talented instructional coaches who understand the work and a supportive administration that respects and trusts staff.

ETJMS has important structures in place to allow the transformation of

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¹Fisher, D., & Frey, N. (2008). Releasing Responsibility. *Educational Leadership*, 66(3), 32-37.

Greater Student Independence Leads to Strong Academic Growth in Plymouth (cont.)

their instruction to take hold and be effective. One of the key structural pieces is scheduling common time for teachers to meet and plan together daily. Every core teacher on staff has a period for meeting with peers daily. Additionally, ELA and math coaches meet with teachers individually every week and visit classrooms daily. This promotes a greater sense of transparency and collegiality. Every action is a deliberate step toward improving teaching and learning.

The educators shared that success was not immediate. They were disappointed when 2017-18 Smarter Balanced results were released. They knew how hard they had worked to make significant changes to daily instruction and raise expectations for their students. They were seeing students develop greater independence, and learning gains were obvious at the classroom level, but their state assessment results had not changed commensurately. Regardless, the ETJMS team knew the changes they made were improving student learning, so they forged ahead by adhering to their plan and committing to continuous improvement.

These educators were not ready to abandon their new practices that they had worked so hard to implement. Instead, they turned to their students for help. The principal, Angela Suffridge, approached the Student Council. She explained that she did not believe that Smarter Balanced results accurately reflected all of the learning that was happening at ETJMS and she was seeking their ideas regarding how to gain the support of all students to take the assessment seriously and do their best work.

The middle school student body is organized into groups similar to a system with a variety of homerooms. However, at ETJMS, each grouping is referred to as a “family.” The student representatives for each family posed the issue to their peers and conducted a survey to identify preferences. Collectively, the students advocated for taking the assessment in small groups, preferably by family. This was not the staff’s preference, but they honored the students’ choice.

The educators also examined other practices that could be preventing students from accurately demonstrating their knowledge and skills. It had been standard practice to administer STAR assessments before Smarter Balanced. However, the educators noted that the strategies students use to be successful on STAR are quite different than what may lead to success on Smarter Balanced. STAR is a timed test, so students attempt to move quickly through the assessment in an effort to respond to as many questions as

possible. Smarter Balanced, on the other hand, is untimed. Teachers knew that students were not taking full advantage of the untimed nature of Smarter Balanced. Students were not taking the time to carefully respond and check their work. To ensure that students would not rush when taking Smarter Balanced, all tests were scheduled to be completed over two days. Given this scheduling change, no one was in a position to rush. Additionally, administration of STAR was moved later in the school year so that students would not mistakenly apply STAR-specific strategies out of a sense of familiarity and routine when taking Smarter Balanced. The small group approach coupled with shorter assessment sessions and reminders to slow down yielded positive benefits for everyone.

Parents report being pleased with their children’s experience at ETJMS. In Fall of 2019, 158 parents responded to a [survey](#) including questions about school climate, the learning environment, and the school’s communication efforts. Parents overwhelmingly report that they feel welcome at the school (96.2%), their children are challenged to meet high expectations (86.2%), and they know how their children are doing before receiving a report card (93.6%).

The experienced educators at ETJMS shared that the climate and culture at their school has improved over the last few years. There is a strong belief that they are in this together. The “family” concept used to create smaller communities for the students of ETJMS has carried over to all staff. Homeroom responsibilities are not just for core teachers. Everyone has “family” responsibilities. The coordination and cohesion are obvious. Several of the newer staff members contrasted their experience to positions they held in other districts. They explained that the relationships at ETJMS are qualitatively different. They feel valued and supported. Whether their time with peers is structured or informal, there is a strong sense of connectedness. Staff and students believe they have room to improve, and there is a universal willingness to grow through honest and supportive feedback. ☺

Thoughtful, Collaborative Implementation of Rigorous Curriculum Spurs Mathematics Growth at Clark Lane Middle School

During the 2015, 2016, and 2017 school years, Clark Lane Middle School math achievement was low at every grade, and less than half of the students were meeting their Smarter Balanced growth targets. The administration and teachers knew that it was not a matter of working harder; everyone was doing their best. Their students were scoring among the lowest in the district and only slightly above state averages. The results were discouraging, but it served as a call to action to change what they were doing. As a team, they undertook an in-depth review of how math was being taught so that problems could be identified and addressed to ensure that students were leaving middle school prepared for the work of high school and beyond.

The review process started with a look at vertical alignment by sending a team to the elementary schools where achievement and growth were stronger to see how math instruction was implemented at that level. In addition, the Clark Lane team took a close look at the math interventions that were in place for students and their effect on learning and closing achievement gaps. This intensive review led to the realization that a change in the materials utilized for the teaching and learning of math as defined in the curriculum and state standards was needed. Furthermore, the building administration understood that this was not going to be an easy transition, and teachers were going to need support to be successful. The administration requested through the Waterford Board of Education that the Math Instructional Coach position be expanded from half-time to full-time. Ultimately, the Board approved this request and the Clark Lane Middle School community engaged in a multi-year plan that resulted in significant gains in both math achievement and growth.

The first phase of this plan was a pilot process to identify quality math programs that could be successfully implemented at Clark Lane Middle School. This process began with looking at programs used by other successful school districts and analyzing the features of the most highly rated programs ranked by [Ed Reports](#). Only the top-tiered instructional resources were considered for piloting. These resources met the expectations of the CT Core Standards for alignment of focus, coherence, and rigor as well as with the mathematical practices. In addition, these resources had high usability ratings. In order to achieve

this rating, the materials had to be well-designed to facilitate student learning and enhance a teacher's ability to differentiate and build knowledge within the classroom. Three programs were piloted and ultimately, Illustrative Math (IM) was selected by the staff for adoption. While the pilot process commenced, educators at Clark Lane simultaneously engaged in a school-wide focus on tiered intervention support, which led to an increase in student outcomes.

The second phase of the plan was implementation. Their new standards-aligned curriculum required important shifts for students and teachers. The students were expected to work independently and in groups to solve problems, reason about the math, identify connections, and share their understanding. In short, they became responsible for the heavy lift of the learning. In order to cultivate this type of engagement in the learning, the teachers shifted the structure of lesson delivery by providing direct instruction at the end of the lesson rather than at the start. This approach turned their typical 57-minute period structure on its head. Throughout the class now, the teachers facilitate discussions by circulating around the room, synthesize ideas to foster a deeper understanding of lesson objectives, and provide tier 1 supports to clear up misunderstandings. They estimate that no more than 25 percent of a typical class is comprised of the teacher talking. The focus is on students thinking and talking.

These changes that resulted from the implementation of a problem-based, standards-aligned, rigorous curriculum would not have been possible without the systematic and intense efforts of the Math Instructional Coach. The Math Instructional Coach was instrumental in providing the necessary supports to implement the new curriculum and instructional model with fidelity and to sustain the momentum that was building. He tapped into all resources available to him including becoming a member of a national IM consortium led by Phil Daro, a lead writer of the Common Core State Standards for Mathematics. Through monthly virtual meetings with consortium members, the Instructional Coach developed a deep understanding of the new program and learned alongside others across the country who were in the midst of implementation. These insights allowed him to better prepare to support his team and to anticipate their needs.

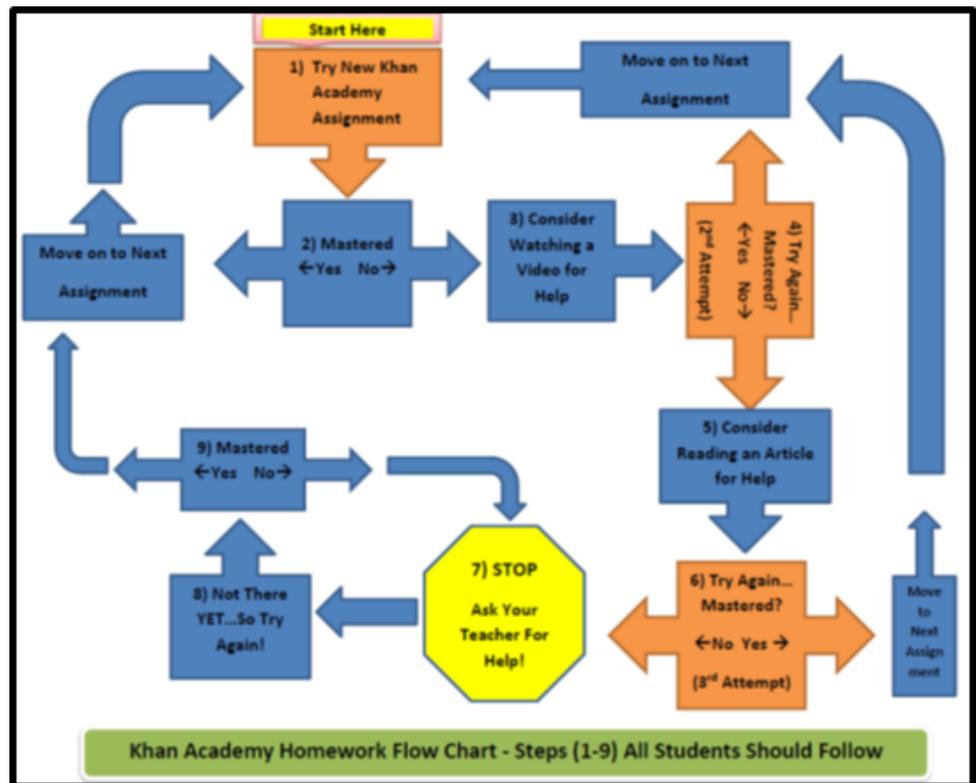
Thoughtful, Collaborative Implementation of Rigorous Curriculum Spurs Mathematics Growth at Clark Lane Middle School (cont.)

The Math Instructional Coach designed a schedule to get into each math teacher’s classroom daily during the first year of implementation. This enabled him to model, co-teach and provide feedback to the teachers on the implementation of their lessons and units. Furthermore, the coach trained teachers on the new resources and more importantly utilized facilitated release time to preview and plan every upcoming unit with the teachers in real-time. Through weekly professional learning community time, the Math Instructional Coach was able to have frequent discussions with the teachers and address concerns about pacing and prioritizing content and lessons.

In the third phase of their plan, Clark Lane Middle School educators capitalized on the partnership between IM and Khan Academy as a means of formative assessment. In 2018, Khan Academy worked with experts at IM to create materials tightly aligned to the curriculum. The alignment allows teachers to easily select a few key items daily for students to complete online as homework. These items and the accompanying materials available through Khan Academy support and reinforce the in-class learning. When completing the homework, students receive instant feedback so they are able to determine immediately whether they understand the content. No one has to wait until the next day when homework is turned in or reviewed during class. This brings an increased sense of transparency to homework. Students cannot hide or look past their errors, and teachers can see on their end through the teacher tools of Khan Academy who needs additional support. This ongoing formative assessment process has led to improved support for tier 1 instruction.

Clark Lane staff recognized the importance of partnering with families to ensure that significant changes in mathematics classrooms could be successful. Their new approach to instruction would require that students take greater responsibility for their own learning, there would

not be a traditional textbook, technology would be used as a tool to support learning, and all assignments could continue to be reworked and resubmitted so that all students have the opportunity to demonstrate mastery. Through Waterford’s Parent Academy, Clark Lane teachers explained the change directly to families and addressed concerns, especially related to the incorporation of technology. Using the flowchart below, teachers explained the process a student should follow



when completing homework using Khan Academy. The steps show when students should consult resources available through the platform and the fact that when misunderstanding persists, the student should ask a teacher for help. Staff communicated clearly that they want student homework time to be productive and not unnecessarily frustrating. This was reassuring to parents and was helpful in garnering family support for the program.

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Thoughtful, Collaborative Implementation of Rigorous Curriculum Spurs Mathematics Growth at Clark Lane Middle School (cont.)

Now that Clark Lane Middle School is in the third-year of implementation, teachers feel like they have a solid routine in place. Sometimes the pace of the learning seems slower, but the teachers acknowledge that students are building a solid foundation. Students are more independent, confident in their thinking, and willing to share their thoughts with and receive feedback from their peers.

While Clark Lane Middle School's overall experience with this change has been successful, implementation was not without challenges. Beginning last summer and continuing through this year, the Mathematics Instructional Coach has worked closely with special education staff who are supporting students with disabilities in the classroom. Many of the students who need additional support are still working on building the stamina necessary to engage in the mathematics conversations and have the appropriate level of perseverance. The special educators have de-

signed specific tools for use in class and conduct targeted skills sessions outside of the standard mathematics class to provide extra support and reinforcement for students.

In an ideal world, teachers at Clark Lane Middle School would have had the materials a year in advance, there would have been more structured professional learning opportunities, and they could have partnered with other districts implementing the same curriculum. None of those were possible. Instead, they leveraged their strong sense of community, collective commitment to their students, the support of school and district leaders, and their talents to make this set of changes effective in improving student engagement and outcomes. The teachers at Clark Lane Middle School emphasize the importance of being a learner along with the students. "We don't have all the answers and that is okay. We can make mistakes together." 🌀

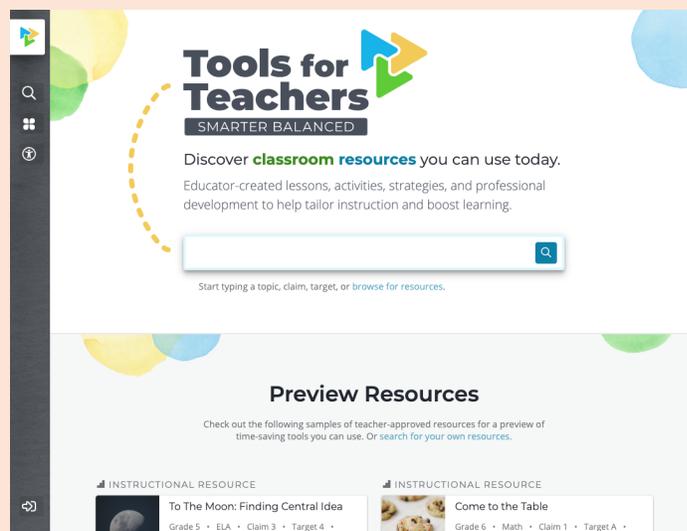


Smarter Balanced Tools for Teachers is Launching!

On June 16, 2020, Tools for Teachers Preview is launching with a grand opening in September 2020! Tools for Teachers is an easy-to-use web application featuring lessons and activities designed to move students toward college and career readiness. Created with the assistance of hundreds of educators, Tools for Teachers helps educators reflect on where students are in their knowledge and take action on next steps to meet learning goals.

Tools for Teachers Features

- * Responsive, accessible instructional resources aligned to learning standards
- * Interactive Connections Playlists that link [interim assessments](#) (learning checks) to differentiated instructional resources
- * [Formative assessment strategies](#) embedded in every instructional resource
- * Embedded accessibility strategies for use in the classroom



Old Saybrook Middle School Shows Promising Improvements in Academic Growth

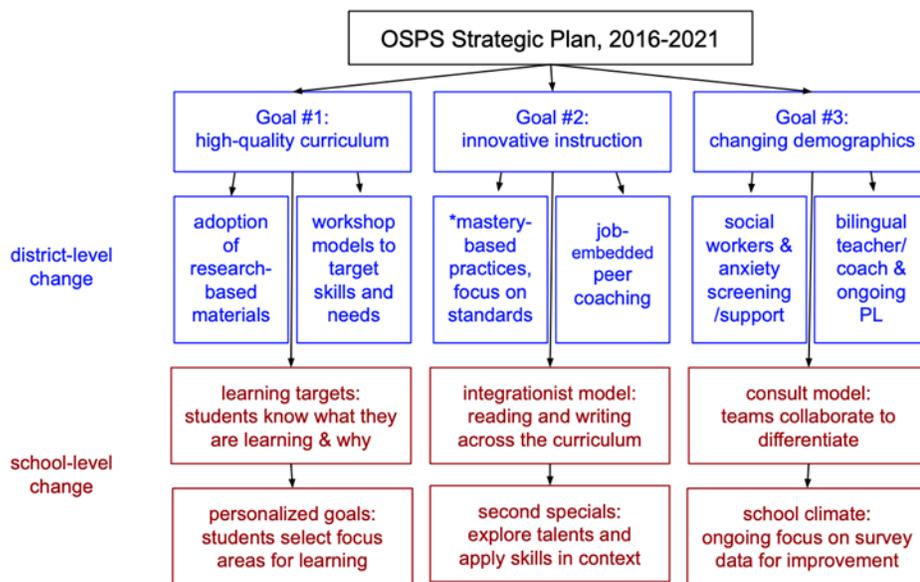
When the 2018-19 accountability results were released in January 2020, the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) identified Old Saybrook Middle School as a School of Distinction for its high academic growth on the Smarter Balanced assessments in English language arts (ELA), not only for the All Students group but also for students with high needs. Similar improvements in academic growth on the Smarter Balanced assessments were also evidenced in mathematics. To better understand the factors that might have contributed to these results, the CSDE reached out to superintendent Jan Perruccio and curriculum director Amity Goss.

Jan and Amity were quick to point out that their story is not one of some exciting or flashy “magic bullet” intervention; instead it is a series of incremental, intentional, and focused activities that are aligned to their

[strategic plan](#). These activities were centered around the following three pillars from their strategic plan:

- Designing and implementing research-based, high quality curriculum;
- Strengthening innovative instructional practices; and
- Providing differentiated academic and social/emotional supports.

They took the message from the CSDE to heart to not be swayed by one year’s test score results, and to instead focus on the long term work necessary to improve curriculum and instruction. They are in the fourth year of their strategic plan and it appears that their sustained focus on some of the following key initiatives is beginning to pay dividends (see figure below).



* Standards are embedded in assessments and grading.

1. Promoting Reading/Writing across the Curriculum through “Integrationists”: In the past, reading and writing were a double-block. With the increased emphasis on informational text and non-fiction reading in the Common Core State Standards, the district eliminated the double block and instead repurposed certified English teachers to serve as “integrationists” and co-teach with other content area teachers. For example, an 8th grade Science teacher working through the scientific inquiry or research process now has an ELA integrationist working alongside them to infuse the ELA research and writing standards into the lessons. Similar integrations occur in social studies, and mathematics. After

Old Saybrook Middle School Shows Promising Improvements in Academic Growth (cont.)

successful implementation of the integrationists in Grades 6 through 8, the district is now considering rolling this out in Grade 5. Elimination of the double-block also allowed students to take more “specials” which resulted in greater student engagement.

2. Supporting Classroom Teachers through Instructional Specialists and Coaches:

To implement curriculum with fidelity, classroom teachers often benefit from coaching support. The district achieved this end in a budget-neutral way by first dismantling a more traditional “department leader” position and in its place, soliciting applications from teachers (through 0.2 FTE release time) interested in serving as instructional specialists. There is one instructional specialist per content area. These specialists have regular teaching assignments for 80% of their time, but use the remaining 20% to support their peers. They help with implementing lessons, sharing best practices, and collaborating around vertical alignment of the curriculum. Also part of this team of instructional specialists is a full-time dedicated Math coach. The district committed to this position due to serious concerns about their mathematics performance. The guiding framework for coaching is the district’s Theory of Action for Advancing Learning, which is based on the Common Core of Teaching (CCT). This year’s work focused heavily on Domain 3 which created opportunities for great coaching conversations.

3. Providing for the Professional Growth of Instructional Specialists:

The district partnered with the Connecticut Center for School Change to provide training in peer coaching to the instructional specialists. The district also collaborated with Central Connecticut State University’s 092 administrator preparation program to offer many courses, onsite, at the school district. Eight educators, many of whom were instructional specialists, took advantage of this leadership development opportunity. It allowed them the convenience of attending classes in Old Saybrook after the school day. The district also benefited because many participants aligned their work in the 092 program to the change initiatives being implemented in the district. The district’s collective bargaining agreement covered some of the tuition costs for participants. All in all, it was a true win-win arrangement.

4. Encouraging Student Ownership of Learning and Assessment:

One of the key culture shifts over the past few years has been the emphasis on making learning objectives explicit to all students so that they know what they are expected to learn and why they need to learn it. This expectation is embedded in the curriculum and has resulted in students increasingly taking ownership of their learning. The district also designed the administration of the Smarter Balanced assessment to be more

student-friendly instead of just adult-friendly; while in the past, the testing would have been completed in a single session, the teachers now split the administration into at least two sessions. This reduces student fatigue while sending the message that it is OK to work through the assessment in a calm, thoughtful manner. Moreover, students were encouraged to think of the state assessments not as a stressful obligation, but more as an opportunity to *apply* in a different setting, what they have learned.

5. Participatory Approach: Ongoing consultation with teachers has been at the core of all key changes that have been implemented over the past few years. District leaders did not claim to be the experts, and sought teacher input to guide their decisions. For instance, no new curriculum was adopted without extensive reviews by teachers, and successful pilot implementation in the classroom to make sure that it would work for Old Saybrook Public Schools. This learning culture is beginning to permeate the entire district. It is now considered OK for teachers to feel comfortable admitting that they may not be the expert, but that they can learn.

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Old Saybrook Middle School Shows Promising Improvements in Academic Growth (cont.)

6. Differentiated Supports: A focus on recognizing and meeting the needs of all learners has propelled more students to success. Two social workers now serve Old Saybrook’s students and their families, helping to connect them to local resources like mental health services and financial supports. Old Saybrook is also home to an increasingly linguistically diverse population, now served by a bilingual teacher and tutor. The bilingual teacher is a resource to families and a coach to teachers, in addition to her teaching responsibilities. A second bilingual teacher is requested in the Board’s budget for 2020-21. Old Saybrook has also partnered with Southern Connecticut State University’s Training for All Teachers program to provide teachers with training in high-quality instructional

practices that support students learning English.

Jan and Amity are very appreciative of the support and patience shown by the Board of Education. This has allowed for systemic changes to take hold in the district. The district leaders continue to be guided by the Board’s strategic plan which serves as a decision-making umbrella. Having worked in fast moving, “initiative-driven” districts in the past, Jan and Amity see their work in Old Saybrook as a “giant multi-year chess game”. They are focused on building self-sustaining, systems and processes that will not be reliant on specific personalities or people in order for the district to achieve continued excellence. The CSDE wishes Old Saybrook the very best. 🌀

Summative Assessments Canceled for School Year 2019-20

The Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) submitted a [waiver](#) to the United States Department of Education (USED) on March 20, 2020, in regard to federal assessment and accountability requirements. The CSDE has received approval from the USED that Connecticut can begin to implement the provisions in this waiver, which includes no summative testing (Smarter, NGSS, CT SAT, CTAA, and CTAS) and no Next Generation Accountability for the 2019-20 school year.

The CSDE is aware that many students use the no-cost Connecticut SAT for college placement. The CSDE is

working closely with the College Board to offer interested grade 11 students the opportunity to take the SAT on a weekend administration at no cost. More details will be shared with schools as soon as they are available.

Additionally, the administration of the Connecticut Physical Fitness Assessment is canceled for the 2019 – 20 school year. The CSDE will not be collecting or reporting any Physical Fitness Assessment results for the 2019-20 school year, including assessments that have already been administered.

Performance vs. Growth Bubble Plot on EdSight

There is a new interactive data visualization tool available on [EdSight](#) (under *Performance* —> *Smarter Balanced*). It is called the “[Performance vs. Growth Bubble Plot](#).”

The display contrasts a district’s or school’s performance on statewide summative assessments in English language arts and mathematics with growth in those subjects. Performance is reported in terms of the performance index (Indicator 1 of the Next Generation Accountability System) and growth is the average percentage of growth target achieved (Indicator 2 a-d). Users can generate visuals based on all grades combined or select a single grade of interest. Filters can be applied to create a variety of displays including mapping the performance and growth of students with high needs relative to their non-high needs peers.

