



# Educator Feedback

FIRST YEAR OF SMARTER BALANCED ASSESSMENT

# Introduction

*“I’m not against assessment, but changes are desperately needed here. This is not what’s best for students.”*

**Oregon educators want all students to succeed, and we know appropriate use of assessments is key to this success.**

Educators have voiced great concern that the overuse of state standardized assessments is negatively impacting our students. With the first administration of the new “Smarter Balanced” Assessment (SBA) behind us, Oregon educators are weighing in on the need for Oregon to implement a balanced system of assessment that informs the day-to-day learning of students.

**The message from educators is loud and clear:**

- Preparation for and administration of the Smarter Balanced Assessment (SBA) takes away from valuable classroom time
- There are significant equity concerns, especially for students with special needs
- Technical issues impact results
- Students and teachers across Oregon do not have equal access to the resources necessary for success

The Oregon Education Association has been working closely with the Governor’s office, the Chief Education Office and the Oregon Department of Education to build an assessment system that works for everyone—an assessment system

that identifies inequities, helps to close gaps and, importantly, sets students up for success. So far, a team of educators and policy leaders have met, made recommendations, sought feedback and laid out a comprehensive vision for how we move forward toward a system where no one feels the need to opt-out, and instead has the information they need to achieve our common goal of meaningful student learning.

Educator voice has been key to this process, so after the SBA was administered at the end of the 2014-15 school year, the Oregon Education Association conducted a survey seeking feedback from educators about their own, and their students’, experience with the assessment. The response was overwhelming—over a thousand educators from across the state of Oregon responded with their thoughtful evaluation of the administration of the SBA, their students’ experience, and the impact on student learning.

The OEA has used the comments to guide our priorities and it has reaffirmed our dedication to improving assessments in Oregon. The alarming pattern of inconsistencies, technical difficulties, and other underlying problems with the administration of the assessment demands action.

We invite you to review the key findings, and read the unvarnished opinions of the 1,279 education professionals who responded. Their dedication to their students shine through in the candid answers compiled here as an addendum.





## *How is the Smarter Balanced Assessment administered?*

**When most adults think of the term ‘standardized test,’ they think of their own experience: a quiet classroom, a No. 2 pencil, and filling in bubbles on an answer sheet. Today’s students have a much different experience.**

There are two subject areas addressed by the Smarter Balanced Assessment: mathematics and English (the English Language Arts or ELA). Both are conducted on a computer in two segments. In the first, the test taker drags and drops words and equations, chooses multiple choice answers, highlights passages, and uses online tools like a calculator. In the second, the student is assigned a performance task to demonstrate research, writing, and analytic skills, and completes the task using the computer. Test-takers navigate instructions on their own, regardless of their age and reading ability—test administrators, in most instances teachers, are generally not

allowed to offer clarification even if asked.

Using computers gives rise to some important issues. First, the assessment depends on the user’s keyboarding skills, and general familiarity with using the school’s technology. Not only does the available technology vary school to school, but individual student’s exposure to technology varies greatly by age, socioeconomic background, accessibility and the regularity with which computer skills are practiced. Second, testing must take place during a certain period over a fixed number of days. Educators must coordinate limited computer lab space and equipment to accommodate a large number of students over a limited amount of time. Any delays caused by technical or software failures, absences or illness can wreak havoc on the schedule and cause a stressful exam environment for students.

Most schools now have a testing coordinator—a person whose job it is to look at the technology, schedule the classes into the technology for blocks of time, and pull students who

have not completed the test out of their other classes when the space becomes available. Some better resourced schools have designated assessment coordinators, but often this is a duty that falls to an existing school employee—counselors, instructional coaches, assistant principals, technology teachers—reducing the time they are able to spend with students.

Children with special learning needs can be particularly affected. In prior tests, teachers could choose a variety of universal accommodations for all students such as printing out reading passages. However, SBA eliminated these universal accommodations for all students and instead, accommodations must be written into a student’s individual education plan (IEP). Now, students need to be identified and accommodations made early on, before the test is available, so educators are often asked to identify students and their necessary accommodations based on a practice test that may not resemble the actual assessment. And, students without IEPs but who would benefit from some accommodations no longer have access to them.

# Summary of Results

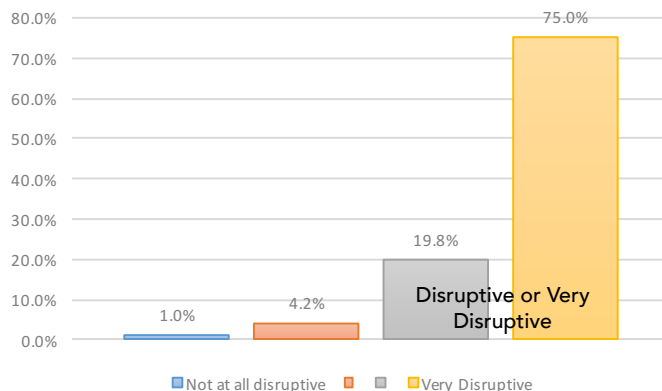
## Lost Classroom and Instructional Time

**95% of educators who responded to the survey reported that preparation for and administration of the Smarter Balanced Assessment significantly disrupted the student learning process.**

Teachers who responded to the survey were nearly unanimous in their opinion that the administration of the SBA had a very disruptive impact on school activities. Students lost instruction time in core subject areas such as reading and math, as well as classes not directly related to the SBA, like history, art, and social studies.

**94.8% of respondents characterized the SBA as disruptive or very disruptive on the school day.**

### Impact on the School Day

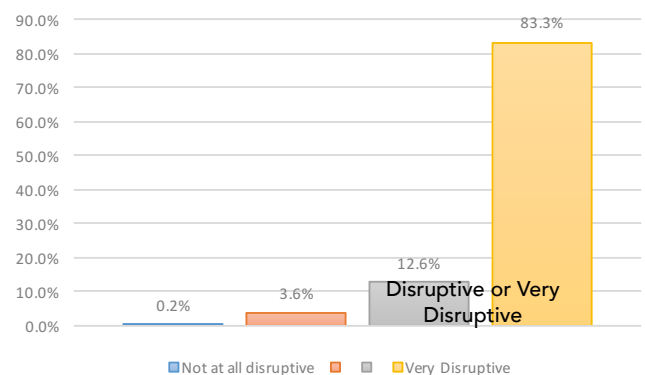


“Due to the test my **students lost a week and a half of instruction** time in US history. We lost a whole unit on WW2. I think this is an unacceptable loss for students.”

“Administering the Smarter Balanced Assessment at our school **consumed our computer lab for two months.**”

**95.9% of respondents characterized the SBA as disruptive or very disruptive on other programs and facilities such as the use of computer labs, library access, and classroom time in non-tested subjects.**

### Impact on Other Programs



**Loss of instructional time was the top concern expressed by hundreds of teachers.**

- Teachers reported spending 16+ hours of class time on preparation plus an additional 8+ hours on each test.
- Delays were caused by multiple types of technical and software failures, and limited access to computers.
- The prep time, tests, and additional delays ate into an already short school year.

**Teachers, parents and students received the results too late to be helpful**

- Results of the Spring 2015 Smarter Balanced Assessment were not released before the end of the school year making teachers feel like the test had no utility for guiding instruction or evaluating student progress over time.

The expenditure of classroom time in test prep and administration is a heavy price to pay—particularly in Oregon. Over the course of their K-12 educational careers, Oregon students receive about one year less instructional time than the national average.



## *Educators Speak Up*

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“Testing consumed our third to fifth grade instruction **from spring break through the middle of May**. It disrupted our math schedule and as soon as it was over, our students had to start taking district assessments.”

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“We are narrowing the focus of education to teaching to a test and test results. We want an increase in graduation rate, but are taking out the projects, **getting rid of the high-interest, hands-on classes that keep kids focused and motivated.**”

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“The worst thing about this experience was the wasted instructional time. My students were scheduled to take it immediately following Spring Break. Then after the test, we had 2 days of school and then the kids were off for 3 days for parent conferences. **By the time we were able to resume regular instruction, they had not had reading instruction in almost a month!**”

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“Smarter Balanced Assessment disrupted classes campus-wide. Students in AP and regular courses were negatively impacted as **lost instruction time caused their grades to drop.**”

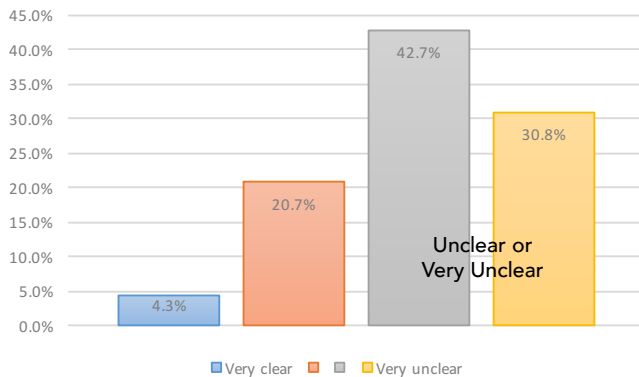


# Interrupted Students' Learning

**Students experienced frustration due to unclear instructions, technical failures, and inadequate training with the equipment. Teachers were not provided uniform or adequate preparation to proctor the exams.**

- The majority of teachers (over 73%) reported that students found the SBA test instructions unclear and poorly worded.

## Clarity of Student Instruction



- Survey respondents reported that their students were anxious, frustrated, lost motivation, or were overwhelmed. (221 written comments)
- Equipment and software failures caused delays and confusion, and teachers were concerned that this negatively affected student performance. A majority of respondents (68%) reported that students were booted off of the assessments by the software and/or had trouble logging in after a break. Other common technical issues included trouble with the audio settings and malfunctioning software. More than a third of respondents reported that students lost work due to computer/software crash.
- Even students who have significant exposure to technology at home were impacted because the school technology is so far behind current technology, students did not know how to use it (Ten year old iMacs, for example, don't offer touch screen technology.)

“The way the questions were given to the students was very confusing. **I had many students who were having a hard time telling the difference between the directions and the questions.** Since I was prohibited from helping them, many questions were missed because of poor test design.”

“At times we had computer problems, **the computers would freeze**, power would go out, the test was in Spanish but needed to be in English.”

“The whole time I was administering the test **I walked from computer to computer trying to fix technical difficulties.**”

“Students had **trouble viewing the test** because the 13 inch screen was too small.”

**Students from under-resourced schools struggled more with the technology and format, and have a lot to lose.**

“Our training by the district was not sufficient. We were told in a meeting some general information about the format of the test, but **we did not have the opportunity to look at the test on line or practice setting it up for students.**”

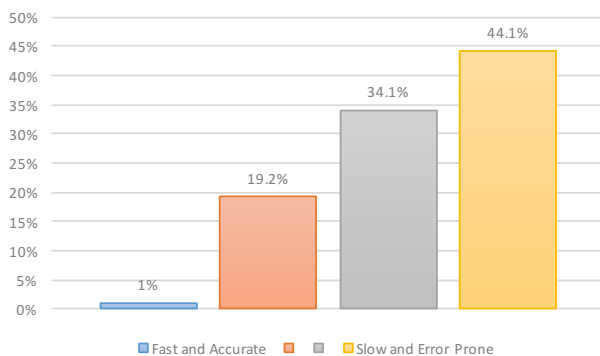
- Teacher responses reveal that the test format was unfair for students who do not have regular access to computers at home or because their schools are not well-equipped.
- Teachers expressed concern that students who do not have easy and consistent access to computers at home or school cannot keep up with other test takers who do.

“Students were not assessed as much for their level of **competency in math as they were for computer skills.**”

“It is completely ridiculous to evaluate students, and eventually teachers, with a test that asks students to respond using a keyboard when **so many of our classrooms do not have technology**...a majority of our students are practicing writing and expressing their understanding using pencil and paper.”

**Most teachers (78%) reported that many students did not have the keyboarding skills necessary to allow them to take the test efficiently.**

### Student Keyboarding Skills



“The tests themselves are unfair. **Students like mine who do not have regular access to computers are at a clear disadvantage.** Students with daily access to computers for written language and math activities are comfortable working with the interface encountered during testing.”

“It was so frustrating in a **96% poverty school to give up so much instruction time to testing** when the behind the scenes work did not seem to be in place from the state and district.”

“Some of my students did not know how to create lines on the computer to complete diagrams. It was a technology issue that **caused them to get the answer wrong.**”

**Assessments were hard to manage for students who are high performing as well as struggling students. Low performance in some skills meant that demonstrating competence in other areas was compromised.**

■ Teachers reported difficulties experienced by students at both ends of the academic performance spectrum.

“Some of the questions required a **higher than third grade reading level [for 3rd grade test]**, which suggests that scores on the math assessments were affected significantly by the reading level of the students taking the test.”

“Most students **finished the performance task in under thirty minutes**, and they said it was a joke because if you didn’t know the first question, you couldn’t complete the rest of the assessment.”

“**It was difficult to keep students occupied when they finished.** There was no plan for students who finished early...”

“**The test is too long and many students just quit trying after a while.** Even bright students who were really trying became very tired about an hour in and just stopped caring.”

- While the difficulties with accommodations originated with the SBA, those problems were perpetuated by inadequate support from the school districts, with some educators who responded to the survey reporting that they would have appreciated more comprehensive training.
- One issue was that teachers did not have reliable information to give to parents about their student. More than half of those teachers who had administered the SBA to students with IEP or 504 plans responded that they received lower levels of support from their district.

## Inconsistent Accommodations

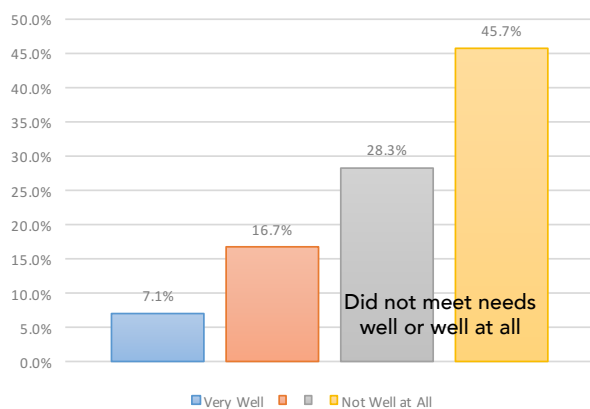
**Students with specific academic needs are not being served well. An overwhelming majority of survey participants (74%) responded that the SBA did not meet the needs of students who require student-specific accommodations. ”**

“This was **heartbreaking**, watching students who are supposed to have accommodation flounder and fail because of this test.”

“The rules for accommodations changed and continued to change, **making it difficult to keep parents and staff informed.**”

“**I anticipate the lowest scores ever** for kids that learned a lot this year.”

Ability of SBA to meet required accommodations for students' IEP or 504 plans



“Many accommodations that were listed on students' IEPs did not work as needed.”





# Moving Forward

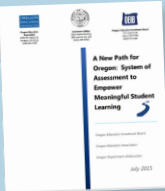
## A Better Path

**Many educators who participated in the survey appreciated the rigor of the test, and even the methods. Most of the negative reaction was associated with how the assessment was administered, and concern over how the results will be used.** For example, one educator wrote, “Students didn’t get test results that they can use for improvement, or that staff can use to diagnose and help us with classroom placement for next year, or remedial work for the remainder of the year.”

These sentiments are not uncommon among educators, which is why OEA is so committed to working together with the Governor’s office, the Chief Education Office and the Oregon Department of Education to design a new system of assessment which will promote student learning.

The following recommendations are a selection from the document “A New Path for Oregon,” developed by members of Oregon Education Association, Oregon’s Chief Education Office, Oregon Department of Education, and school district advisors.

- Implement the “Student Assessment Bill of Rights” in classrooms.
- Create a task force to audit assessments, including how much classroom time is devoted to them.
- Examine all assessments for cultural, linguistic and developmental appropriateness to accommodate the learning needs of all students.
- Research the possibility of administering fewer assessments while ensuring the availability of accurate, yearly disaggregated data for all student groups.
- Develop, fund and implement differentiated professional development for all educators and assessment users.



Learn more about  
OEA’s proposal and  
recommendations:

**[oregoned.org/stay-informed/student-assessment](http://oregoned.org/stay-informed/student-assessment)**

Good assessments should be used to guide instruction, and help teachers understand where their students are excelling and where they need more work. In a balanced system of assessment more emphasis and resources are needed to support assessments that guide day-to-day learning.



## Better Resources

### **Creating the schools our children deserve requires changes to the SBA, but those changes alone are not sufficient.**

One of the important themes communicated by this survey was the lack of adequate resources in our schools: it is clear from the comments that staff, technology, training, and increased instructional time are all crucial to student learning and success.

If our collective goal is to give children the education they deserve, to assess their learning in a way that helps them learn and thrive, then we must shift our priorities. The more we hear from educators, parents and students, the better we understand the issues facing our public schools. We cannot lose focus on what is important—our students' hopes and dreams, and our own hopes and dreams for our students.

The resources exist for us to provide our students with what they need—up-to-date technology that works and is available to all students; art, music, PE, libraries and health services; more time to learn; one-on-one attention. We know very well what works to increase educational outcomes, and we must make these investments available to all students regardless of the zip code.

The original purpose of the survey was to gain educator perspective on the administration of the Smarter Balanced Assessment. We hope the results of the survey add another piece of data as Oregon moves toward a system of assessment that provides greater support for student learning. We are thankful for the honest feedback that came from this survey, and would hope that educators, policy makers and community leaders will use the information in positive and productive ways to improve the teaching and learning environment of Oregon students.







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