

Q: What is achievement level setting?

A: Achievement level setting, also known as standard setting, is the process for establishing one or more threshold scores on an assessment, making it possible to create categories of performance. Smarter Balanced Governing States approved a three-phase design for achievement level setting:

- An Online Panel (October 6–17) allowed thousands of K-12 educators, higher education faculty, parents, and other interested parties to participate virtually in recommending achievement levels.
- An In-Person Panel (October 13–19) with educators and other stakeholders working in grade-level teams deliberated and make recommendations for the thresholds of the four achievement levels.
- The Cross-Grade Review Committee (October 20), a subset of the In-Person Panel, examined recommendations across all grades to consider the reasonableness of the system of cut scores.

In November 2014, members of the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium voted to approve initial achievement levels for the mathematics and English language arts/literacy (ELA) assessments that will be administered in 17 states and one territory during the 2014-2015 school year. The achievement levels, along with scale scores that also will be reported, will help teachers and parents understand student performance and needs for support

Q: Who participated in the achievement level setting process?

A: All Smarter Balanced states were actively involved in setting these new achievement levels. Teachers, parents, higher education faculty, business leaders, and other community members from all of the Smarter Balanced states took part in a highly inclusive, consensus-based process that asked participants to closely examine assessment content to determine threshold scores for each achievement level. Educators who work with English language learners and students with disabilities also were included to help ensure that the achievement levels are fair and appropriate for all students. In addition to the nearly 500 in-person panelists, more than 2,500 people volunteered their time to participate in the online panel.

Q: How will these new achievement levels be used?

A: The achievement levels serve as a starting point for discussion about the performance of individual students, and of groups of students, in mathematics and English language arts. There are other methods that students, teachers and parents can also use to help evaluate the academic progress of students and schools, such as scale scores, growth models, and portfolios of student work.

Q: When will these new achievement levels go into effect?

A: Once adopted by member states, these achievement levels will appear on score reports for assessments administered this school year.

Q: We hear that score results are going to drop dramatically. Does this mean students and schools are failing or doing worse than before?

A: Because the new content standards set higher expectations for students—and the new tests are designed to assess college and career readiness using these content standards as a benchmark—expectations for student achievement are higher than they used to be. Based on projections from the Smarter Balanced field test conducted in 2014, it is likely that fewer students will score at the higher achievement levels on the assessments, especially for the first few years. Results should improve as students have more years of instruction based on the new standards.

It's important to keep in mind that the tests have changed and are measuring different things—such as whether students are developing critical-thinking and problem-solving skills. Because we have raised expectations, fewer students are likely to meet those expectations initially.

These results do not necessarily mean that schools are performing worse or that students are learning less. Rather, we now have a more accurate measure of where students are on the path to success, based on the higher standards we set to ensure that students are challenged and prepared to compete nationally and globally. Think of it as a fresh start, a new baseline.

Q: What kind of change in results can states expect with higher standards and these new assessments?

A: As students have more years of instruction aligned to new standards, results typically improve. For example, in Kentucky, the first state to begin using the Common Core standards, student test scores went down at first. But, over the next four years as teachers and students worked to meet higher standards, the percentage of high school graduates meeting the state's benchmark for college and career readiness increased from 34 percent to 62 percent. There also have been impressive gains in ACT scores in Tennessee since adoption of more rigorous standards. And in California, where students have taken an early assessment of college readiness and participated in 12th grade courses to improve their preparation since 2007, the proportion of students needing remediation at the California State University has dropped from 56 percent to 43 percent.

Q: Why are these tests measuring college preparedness when college isn't right for everyone?

A: To be ready for success after high school, all students need to master skills such as critical-thinking, analytical writing, and problem solving. Smarter Balanced assessments have been specifically developed to measure these real-world skills that students will need when they graduate, whether they are headed into a traditional degree program or postsecondary career training.

Q: What does this mean for teacher evaluations and school accountability?

A: Each state determines individually how to use student assessments results. It is important to remember that changes in test results do not necessarily mean that teachers or schools are performing worse or that students are learning less. While many in the public are just now hearing about the Common Core for the first time, educators have been applying the standards for years in classrooms across the country. We are already seeing results in improved student performance.

Q: What kind of oversight was there for the achievement level setting process?

A: Smarter Balanced states approved the achievement level setting plan. Members of the media, technical experts, parents and community members were invited to learn more by actively participating in the Online Panel.

Smarter Balanced engaged an external auditor, an Achievement Level Setting Advisory Panel and its standing Technical Advisory Committee to review the Achievement Level Setting process and recommendations before they were presented to the states for approval. The auditor and both advisory panels certified that Smarter Balanced conducted a valid process that is consistent with best practice in the field.

Q: Based on the field test data, what are projections for test results in my state?

A: Valid state-level projections are not available. The Smarter Balanced field test was designed to measure the difficulty and quality of the assessment items and to project outcomes for all students across the entire Consortium. Students were not sampled to be representative of any state, but instead to represent the demographic characteristics of students across the entire Consortium. Therefore, projections of student results from the field test are only valid for the Consortium as a whole and cannot be interpreted on a state-by-state basis. Publishing individual state projections from the field test would create incorrect conclusions and would constitute an irresponsible use of these data.

Q: Why should we trust computer-based tests?

A: The Smarter Balanced assessments will provide a more accurate measure of a student's knowledge and skills than tests that just asked students to pick the right answer from a multiple-choice list. The Smarter Balanced assessment system capitalizes on the ability of well established computer-adaptive technology. This approach individually tailors the test for every student so that each test question improves the accuracy of the student's scores across the full range of the achievement continuum.

Computer-adaptive tests also will be more secure than paper-and-pencil assessments, allowing schools more flexibility in how they schedule testing so it is less disruptive to instruction and less taxing on students.

Because the assessments are administered online, teachers, principals, and parents can receive results in weeks, not months. Faster results also mean that teachers can quickly use the information from optional interim assessments to check student progress and plan instruction during the year.

Q: What is this test going to tell me that I don't already learn from others?

A: A lot. Smarter Balanced assessments offer significant improvements over tests of the past, including essay writing at every grade, and new performance tasks that ask students to demonstrate an array of research, critical thinking and problem solving skills to respond to real-world problems. These state-of-the-art tools will help schools do a better job of both measuring student achievement and identifying where students need help.

Q: How do the new Smarter Balanced achievement levels compare to NAEP?

A: Smarter Balanced projections for student achievement closely align with how students have performed historically on NAEP. The achievement levels also generally align with the results of a comprehensive research study on college preparedness conducted by the National Assessment Governing Board, the oversight body for the National Assessment of Educational Progress (see <https://www.nagb.org/what-we-do/preparedness-research.html> for more information).

Q: What's the next step?

A: The Achievement Level recommendations are now in the hands of states and territories, and subject to their specific approval processes. Over the coming months, member states will present these achievement level recommendations to the policy-making entities that have the authority to formally adopt achievement levels. This authority most typically rests with the state board of education. Moving forward with the new levels, teachers, students and parents will be better prepared to work together to address areas for improvement and make sure student needs are met.