

2020

Back to School

Assessment Playbook



Using the Smarter Balanced
Assessment System to
Improve Student Learning

High-quality instruction requires that teachers consider individual students' home experiences, academic background, needs, and abilities. To support all students in an equitable way, educators need a system that they can use as they adapt their instructional plans to the diverse needs of their students throughout the academic school year.

This Playbook describes how educators may use Smarter Balanced resources, such as Tools for Teachers and Interim Assessments, to support high-quality instruction using the formative assessment process.

There are various uses of this document, and these uses will differ based on an organization's focus.

“...the [interims and Tools for Teachers] empowers students as learners because it gives them the tools to be successful in life... It helps them with problem-solving skills, it helps them to be critical thinkers, it helps them to synthesize and analyze. These are all skills that they need to be college and career ready and also be ready in the future.”

High School English Teacher, Hawaii

- State Education Agencies (SEAs) may use this document to support policies and the development of their training materials that, in turn, support Local Education Agencies.
- Local Education Agencies (LEAs) may use this Playbook to learn about resources that are available to support their instructional program plans.
- Curriculum and instructional leaders may use this Playbook as a resource to help develop plans for the assessment processes educators will use during instruction.
- Organizations that advocate for high-quality instruction may use this document as part of their advocacy efforts to disseminate information regarding best practices.

An Assessment System to Inform Teaching and Learning

The following three Smarter Balanced system components inform teaching and learning:

- **Tools for Teachers** is a user-friendly collection of instructional and professional learning resources that supports the formative assessment process and is designed to save teachers time.
- **Interim Assessments** are tests that teachers can use as part of their formative process to adjust their instruction and better meet their students' needs. In addition to the traditional administration, in which students take a test independently, Interim Assessments may be used in a nonstandardized manner by:
 - ▷ displaying items to a class using a service provider's item viewer,
 - ▷ conducting instructional activities, such as eliciting evidence from students, using white boards,
 - ▷ incorporating peer feedback while administering brief writes or performance tasks, or
 - ▷ using an item to set up students working in small groups.
- **Summative Assessments** provide data for policymakers and stakeholders to support equity and to provide information that can be used to help prioritize additional resources. Parents and students can use Summative Assessments to support conversations with teachers about students' educational goals.

Returning to School

This Playbook describes how educators can use Smarter Balanced resources to plan and improve their instruction so that it best meets the needs of their students as they return to school in fall 2020. Use this document to understand:

- Smarter Tools for Teachers in support of grade-level instruction, and
- Smarter Balanced Interim Assessment Blocks to inform instruction so that it best meets the diverse needs of students.

This Playbook includes the following sections:

- I. Choosing and Using the Right Resources
- II. Teaching and Measuring the Highest Priority Content
- III. The Unique Role of the Interim Comprehensive Assessment (ICA)

“You can see where your students are and take the data from it [interim assessments] and then teach them what they need to know so we can later make some improvements or some adjustments. You can see it working because the students are making growth based on that.”

ELA Teacher, Delaware



Choosing and Using the Right Resources

Smarter Balanced offers a variety of Interim and Formative Assessment resources that teachers can use based on their needs and the needs of their students. These resources are designed to be used independently or to work together so that teachers can best align the resources to meet their purposes.

Emphasize Instruction with the Support of Tools for Teachers

Most educators would agree that the disruption to schooling in 2020 likely resulted in uneven access for students to the remaining grade-level content, and that underrepresented students were disproportionately affected by the school closures. Given that high-quality instruction includes embedded assessment, it is more important than ever to focus first on high-quality instruction that incorporates formative assessment strategies.

Tools for Teachers saves teachers time by providing high-quality resources that are aligned with the content standards. Teachers can find lessons and activities based on the intended content, or they can supplement existing lessons to fill in curriculum or to address the specific needs of their students.

As a support to the formative process, the strategic use of Interim Assessment Blocks throughout the year may provide additional information to help teachers adjust their instruction when necessary to better address their students' needs. Interim Assessment Blocks provide actionable data for teachers, and Tools for Teachers provides instructional resources that align with the content assessed by Interim Assessment Blocks.

Emphasize Grade-Level Knowledge and Skills to Accelerate Learning

Consistent with recommendations from [Council of Great City Schools](#), [Student Achievement Partners](#), and [TNTP](#), grade-level knowledge should be the priority so students have an opportunity to access grade-level content in subsequent years.

“The thing that I see working about the interim assessments is just putting tools into teachers’ hands that are going to provide opportunities for their students to be successful.”

Middle School Principal, Oregon

Smarter Balanced Resources in Support of Grade-Level Instruction

Tools for Teachers is designed to support teachers in:

- finding resources that align with the grade-level content standards; and
- using formative assessment as part of their processes of determining whether students are benefiting from the instruction or whether students need different content or varying strategies to access the content.

Similarly, each Smarter Balanced Interim Assessment is designed to measure grade-level knowledge and skills based on blueprints and specifications. The Interim Assessment test questions and associated passages undergo significant review by educators. The Interim Assessments were tailored by groups of teachers to emphasize the content they determined to be the most important. To make the content even more relevant, teachers can review each Interim Assessment item (and their students’ answers to the item content from the Smarter Balanced Interims), so that they may interpret student results based on the content they determine to be a priority.

The Interim Assessments include an array of accessibility resources to improve the access students have to grade-level content and increase the accuracy of information that teachers get from the results of the tests. For most students, grade-level Interim Assessments, rather than tests aligned with the prior grade’s content standards, will provide the most actionable information for teachers in support of their students’ learning.

Use Interim Assessments to Support the Formative Process

Teachers can use Tools for Teachers to support their formative assessment strategies while engaging in grade-level instruction. Leveraging formative tools and resources, such as Tools for Teachers, is essential because, when deployed systematically, they provide educators with detailed information about student performance on specific aspects of content.

Begin Instruction

Grade-level
instruction and
Tools For Teachers



Grade-level
Smarter Balanced
**Interim Assessment
Blocks (IAB)**



Informed Instruction

Use data from IABs
for continued
grade-level
instruction, and **Tools
for Teachers**

During the implementation of a multi-day lesson or unit, a teacher may want to select and administer a Smarter Balanced Interim Assessment that is aligned to the content of instruction in order to gather information about what students are learning and what they need to know.

Interim Assessments can be leveraged in ways that best align with locally determined scope and sequence guidance. They can provide information that can be paired with educators' other data sources to help the teacher determine, as noted in the third step of the graphic, whether to adjust the instruction or otherwise take different steps to meet their students' needs.



Teaching and Measuring the Highest Priority Content

Local Education Agencies (LEAs) must make decisions about what content to prioritize for the 2020–21 school year. Smarter Balanced provides resources that are designed to help with that decision-making process.

Teachers can use the [Smarter Content Explorer](#) to learn how the targets assessed on Interim Assessments cover the content standards. They can also find the test blueprints and range-level achievement descriptors on the website.

Use the Smarter **Content Explorer** to deeply understand the knowledge and skills covered by the targets assessed in a Smarter Balanced Interim Assessment Block



Choose the right Interim Assessments based on the blueprints available in the **Content Explorer** or based in the items in the Smarter **Item Catalogue**

Flexibility to Prioritize Content

The Smarter Balanced assessment system was designed to help educators collect and act on evidence of student learning of college and career ready standards. Educators can use a variety of Smarter Balanced resources to help them prioritize and integrate Interim Assessments into their planned instructional scope and sequence for the year.

For example, teachers can use the [Smarter Item Catalogue](#) to search by content standard (and other options) to learn which items—and associated Interim Assessments—are available that measure the content standard(s) that they plan to teach.

An Exemplar: Mapping the Interims Based on Local Priorities

State content standards include important content that students should learn. However, the ongoing disruptions may require educators to prioritize or emphasize specific content. While there are many different approaches to prioritizing grade-level content, [Student Achievement Partners \(SAP\)](#) developed recommendations for [2020–21 Priority Instructional Content in English Language Arts/Literacy and Mathematics](#) to help educators make decisions about the highest priority content and to create space for the additional support that students are likely to need.

Tables 1 and 2 show, for each grade, which Smarter Balanced Interim Assessments Blocks align with Student Achievement Partners’ list of prioritized content. These Interim Assessments Blocks can be used as measures to help teachers adjust their instruction, while maintaining a rigorous formative assessment process. The tables serve as exemplars for demonstrating how the Smarter Balanced Interims may be mapped to prioritized instructional scope.

Table 1 shows the Interim Assessment Blocks aligned with the Student Achievement Partners’ prioritized content (Major Work) for mathematics for grades 3–8.

Table 1. **Mathematics**

Grade	Major Work	Smarter Balanced Interim Assessments Aligned to the Major Work**						
3	Multiplication and Division of Whole Numbers and Fractions	Multiplication and Division: Interpret, Represent, and Solve	Properties of Multiplication and Division	Multiply and Divide within 100	Number and Operations in Base Ten	Number and Operations—Fractions		
4	Multiplication and Division of Whole Numbers and Fractions	Four Operations: Interpret, Represent, and Solve	Fraction Equivalence and Ordering	Fractions and Decimal Notation	Number and Operations in Base Ten*	Number and Operations—Fractions		
5	Multiplication and Division of Whole Numbers and Fractions	Operations with Whole Numbers and Decimals	Add and Subtract with Equivalent Fractions	Number and Operations in Base Ten*	Number and Operations—Fractions*	Measurement and Data*	Geometry*	
6	Ratios and Proportional Relationships, Early Expressions and Equations	Ratios and Proportional Relationships	Divide Fractions by Fractions	One-Variable Expressions and Equations	Dependent and Independent Variables	The Number System*		
7	Ratios and Proportional Relationships; Arithmetic or Rational Numbers	Ratios and Proportional Relationships	The Number System	Equivalent Expressions				
8	Linear Algebra and Linear Functions	The Number System	Proportional Relationships, Lines, and Linear Equations	Analyze and Solve Linear Equations	Expressions & Equations II	Functions	Expressions and Equations I*	Geometry*

*Tests denoted with an asterisk are Interim Assessment Blocks. Tests without an asterisk are Focused Interim Assessment Blocks. See the [Interim Assessment Overview](#) for more information. ** Major work as defined by Student Achievement Partners

ADDITIONAL SUGGESTIONS

- Use the [Sample Items Website](#) as resources for instructional activities for remote learning as described on the website for [Remote Teaching and Learning](#).
- Use additional available Interim Assessments to support and enhance learning.

Table 2 describes where teachers should focus their text-based work according to learning objectives for English Language Arts/Literacy as prioritized by Student Achievement Partners. Rather than isolating each of these skills, educators should look for opportunities to engage their students in activities that center on these 14 standards. Items on these Interim Assessments assess this collective body of standards, with the exception of two standards, which are best captured in purely formative contexts:

- **RF.4:** Describes students' abilities to read with fluency throughout the grade levels, which may include aspects in lower grades such as phonics, decoding, and syllabication.
- **SL.1:** Describes students' abilities to engage in a variety of effective collaborative conversations.

Two standards (RI.10 and RL.10) describe year-end skills to read and comprehend information and literary texts. These two standards underpin each test question found on the reading Interim Assessment Blocks (IABs) because these IABs include test questions that draw upon grade-level text. While no individual item in the Smarter Balanced assessment is aligned to this specific standard, the collective body of items in the reading claim inherently address these standards.

Table 2. **English Language Arts/Literacy**

Grade	Learning Objectives	Smarter Balanced Interim Assessments Aligned to the Learning Objectives**		
3-11	Provide sequences of questions that engage students deeply with the text and build understanding. Cultivate student's ability to read carefully and grasp information—both what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from text.	Read Literary Texts*	Read Informational Texts*	Performance Task*
3-11	Use text-based questions to focus on academic and domain-specific words.	Read Literary Texts*	Read Informational Texts*	Language and Vocabulary Use
3-11	Within writing opportunities, address students' ability to demonstrate command of writing and conventions.	Editing	Performance Task*	Write and Revise Narrative Texts Write and Revise Informational/Explanatory Texts Write and Revise Opinion/Argumentative Texts
3-11	Participate in research tasks where students explore multiple texts and auxiliary resources to build knowledge on a topic.	Research: Interpret and Integrate Information Research: Analyze Information and Sources Research: Use Evidence	Performance Task*	Research/Inquiry*
3-11	Encourage students to cite specific text evidence when supporting their own points in writing. Evaluate others' use of evidence.	Read Literary Texts*	Read Informational Texts*	Performance Task*
3-11	Provide a variety of text-dependent writing and speaking task options for students to express their comprehension, knowledge, and skills.	Write and Revise Narrative Texts Write and Revise Informational/Explanatory Texts Write and Revise Opinion/Argumentative Texts	Listen/Interpret	Performance Task*

*Tests denoted with an asterisk are an Interim Block. Tests without an asterisk are Focused Interim Blocks. See the [Interim Assessment Overview](#) for more information. **Clusters as defined by Student Achievement Partners

ADDITIONAL SUGGESTIONS

- Use the Interim Assessment Block Performance Tasks as opportunities to integrate activities during reading and writing instruction, using passages from the [Sample Items Website](#) as additional texts to help students build knowledge of the topic under study from curricular materials.
- Use the reading passages in the Interim Assessments as an opportunity for close reading and additional formative assessment evidence.
- Use passages from the [Sample Items Website](#) as additional instructional activities for remote learning as described in [Remote Teaching and Learning](#).



The Unique Role of the Interim Comprehensive Assessment (ICA)

Most of the Smarter Balanced Interim Assessment Blocks were designed for students to complete within a class period. This design supports teachers embedding the Interim Assessment Blocks between instruction for a multi-day lesson. Interim Comprehensive Assessments, however, were designed to measure a broader set of content and provide a high-level overview of students' strengths and areas in need of improvement.

Therefore, Interim Comprehensive Assessments (ICAs) may be helpful:

- as a source of information if a student is new to the state and educational records are not available;
- when prioritizing the allocation of additional instructional support, and
- as a mid-year check to determine progress.

While student responses to the items from an Interim Comprehensive Assessment might be leveraged as part of a formative process, it is more likely that the Interim Assessment Blocks will better meet educators' needs at the beginning of the school year.

The diagram below describes the cases in which an Interim Comprehensive Assessment and Interim Assessment Block are likely most useful.

Interim Comprehensive Assessment (ICA)

- Students new to the state whose educational record is incomplete.
- A mid-year progress check.

Interim Assessment Blocks (IAB)

- Small sets of test questions from the IABs may be used during instruction as part of a teacher's formative assessment process.
- Tests may be administered partway through instruction in support of the formative process and teachers can use the Connections Playlists in Tools for Teachers to access resources aligned with the test results.
- Tests may be administered at the end of a unit as part of a teacher's process to determine if students have learned the skills identified by the content standards.

Conclusion

Smarter Balanced was designed in consultation with educators from across the nation to help inform teaching and learning. However, in response to changing needs, teaching and learning continues to evolve at a greater rate than it has in the past. The consortium of Smarter Balanced member states will engage in a continuous improvement process to help address the emerging needs of both educators and students in utilizing formative and interim resources.

Special thanks to Student Achievement Partners for its contribution to this document.

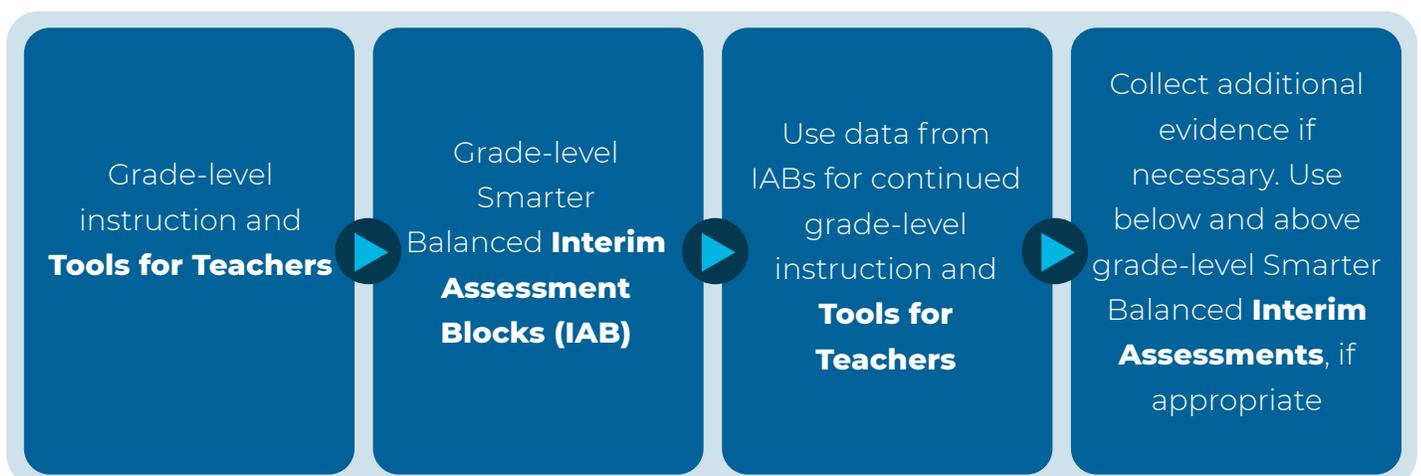
Questions & Answers

Can Smarter Balanced Interim Assessments measure knowledge and skills from a student's prior grade?

The primary purpose of the Smarter Balanced Interim Assessments is to support teachers' formative processes. For example, when choosing which content meets their students' needs, an educator may select an Interim Assessment or items from an Interim Assessment aligned with the content standards for students' enrolled grade-levels, above-grade-level, or below grade-level.

While this flexibility is intentional to support a variety of different scenarios, educators should use great caution when considering assessments that target below grade-level content given that instructional time is limited during the year and grade-level content requirements alone are significant. Additionally, the support that students need to successfully engage with the grade-level content is often more nuanced and better understood through focused tasks or discussions than by administering an entire Interim Assessment.

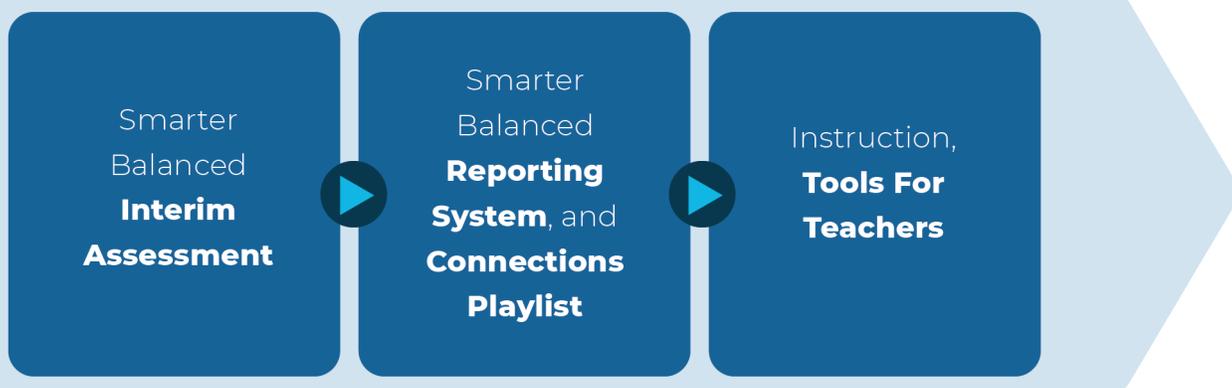
A possible model that emphasizes grade-level content and helps address students' specific needs regarding content from prior grades is:



Can the Smarter Balanced Interim Assessments be used before instruction starts?

As described above, the preferred process is to use formative assessment strategies to gain insights following instruction. However, teachers may instead select and administer a Smarter Balanced Interim Assessment that is aligned to the skills included in their upcoming units. This may be helpful to inform lesson planning so that teachers are better able to meet students' diverse instructional needs.

As described below, a teacher may administer an Interim Assessment, then use the resources in the reporting system to analyze the test scores and student responses to items. In addition, the teacher may also use the Connections Playlists to inform instruction and to address specific students' needs.



How is the purpose of the Interim Assessments different from the Summative Assessment?

The Interim Assessments are designed to be resources that teachers use to adjust instruction and help students accelerate their learning. By strategically using the Interim Assessments to gather detailed information about what students know and can do throughout the year, educators can make evidence-based instructional decisions that accelerate student learning toward achieving proficiency in grade-level content.

The Summative Assessment is an end-of-year test designed to serve as a signal of high-quality instruction, support policymakers' decision-making, provide comparable information across schools and districts within a state, and to support accountability systems. These are critical uses and help ensure that the educational system attends to equity and clearly communicates its progress in helping all students achieve college and career readiness.

In what ways are the Interim and Summative Assessments similar?

Some significant elements of design exist that are common among the Smarter Balanced Interim and Summative Assessments:

- Items were written and reviewed for sensitivity and bias in the same manner.
- Items are written and reviewed for accuracy, content alignment, and grade-level alignment in the same manner.
- Items were field tested in the same manner at the same time.
- Items were calibrated and placed on the same scale; and
- Include the same accessibility features and resources.

In addition, Smarter Balanced Interim Comprehensive Assessments have similar blueprints as the Summative Assessments.

Will an Interim Comprehensive Assessment predict student performance on the Summative Assessment?

If a student took an Interim Comprehensive Assessment at the end of the school year then, on average, that student would achieve a similar score on the Summative Assessment given no additional instruction and equal motivation on both tests (within the margin of error of the student's Interim Assessment).

This would be a case in which the Interim Comprehensive Assessment predicts the score on the Summative Assessment extremely well.

However, there are other circumstances where the Interim Comprehensive Assessment would not perform as a solid predictor of performance on the Summative Assessment. As an example that is expected and encouraged: if a student did not know the content mid-year, and learned a significant amount after taking the test, then the Interim Comprehensive Assessment would be a poor predictor of the spring summative assessment.