

# Secretary of State Audit Report

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## Oregon Department of Education: Clearer Communication, Consistent Use of Results and an Ongoing Commitment to Improvement Could Help Address Testing Concerns

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### Executive Summary

Our audit responds to House Bill 2713 (2015), developed with input from the State Auditor. It called for a Secretary of State audit to review the impacts of the statewide summative assessment on Oregon's public schools, and make recommendations for improvement.

Through a series of surveys, site visits and interviews, we learned many schools faced challenges in the first year of administering the new Smarter Balanced test, including adjusting to the demands on staff and school resources. Some reported fewer challenges in the second year.

Some educators are concerned that certain student populations may experience more negative impacts than others. Some also told us that a more comprehensive assessment system would be useful.

### Oregon introduced Smarter Balanced in 2015

The Smarter Balanced assessment is a new test introduced by the Oregon Department of Education to all public schools in the spring of 2015. Smarter Balanced tests 3<sup>rd</sup> - 8<sup>th</sup> graders and 11<sup>th</sup> graders in math and English language arts near the end of the school year. The test assesses students' progress toward meeting Oregon's college- and career-ready standards, the Common Core State Standards. Smarter Balanced requires more time and depth of knowledge than the previous test.

### There is not clear agreement on the test's purpose

The Smarter Balanced test is intended to provide a measure for accountability, data to identify achievement gaps, and information about whether students meet standards overall, and many value these purposes. We also heard from educators who feel the test should be more useful in the classroom. However, other tools may be better suited for that purpose. The Oregon Department of Education could take a more active role in communicating about the test's purpose.

## **The results of the test are not used consistently**

Schools, school districts and the state use Smarter Balanced test results inconsistently, and sometimes not at all. Educators told us that it would be easier to use results if they received them sooner. Many reported that additional guidance on how to use results would be helpful. Some also reported that a more comprehensive assessment system would be useful.

## **Many reported test administration challenges**

Educators described schoolwide challenges in the first year of administering Smarter Balanced. Testing did not just affect the classrooms that were actively testing, but could also place additional staffing and resource demands on the entire school. However, some said there were fewer challenges in the second year.

Testing took away from other duties of school and school district personnel. Some schools hired additional staff or substitutes specifically for testing. Testing also tied up computer labs for months at some schools. Time spent taking and preparing for the test took away from instruction time.

## **Some student populations may experience more negative impacts than others**

Standardized testing may affect certain student groups more than others. Despite having accommodations, we heard concerns that the test's greater use of technology and language may increase the risk that some students will not be able to demonstrate their abilities accurately. Students who take longer to complete the assessment may miss more instruction time.

Students in special education, English Language Learners, and students with less exposure to technology and typing may be particularly affected.

## **Recommendations**

We recommend that the Oregon Department of Education improve communication, foster consistent use of results and continue its commitment to improve test administration. Our specific recommendations can be found on page 18 of the report.

## **Agency Response**

The full agency response can be found at the end of the report.

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## Background

### The federal government requires a test aligned to standards

An annual test aligned to rigorous, statewide education standards is one of several requirements to receive federal funding. Last year, the federal government provided over \$300 million to Oregon schools and districts to serve low-income and disadvantaged students.

Since the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2002, states have been required to test every student enrolled in a public school in English language arts (ELA) and math annually in grades 3-8 and once in high school.

The Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 has changed conditions to receive federal funding, but the testing requirement remains. Oregon must still have at least 95% participation on the statewide assessment to meet federal guidelines. The state must also rate schools according to student participation and achievement on the annual exam.

The Oregon Department of Education (department) is responsible for these tests and preparing reports to the federal government showing how Oregon complies with federal law. But many of the decisions about testing logistics are made by Oregon's 197 school districts and 1,200 schools where students are tested.

### Smarter Balanced is aligned with the Common Core State Standards

In 2010, the Oregon State Board of Education adopted the Common Core State Standards in ELA and math. These standards expect more from students than the former standards. Oregon's previous assessment, the Oregon Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (OAKS), was not designed to measure against these standards, so a new assessment was needed in these subjects.

In the 2014-15 school year, Oregon joined 17 other states in administering a test developed by the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC). Eleven other states and Washington D.C. administered a test designed by the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC). Both Smarter Balanced and PARCC tests were developed by consortiums of member states. The other 21 states used a variety of assessments, including those purchased from other vendors.

The purpose of these types of tests is to provide a measure for accountability, data to identify achievement gaps, and information about whether students meet standards overall. For example, Smarter Balanced can provide information to districts about disparities in academic achievement between different groups of students, so the district can direct

resources where they are most needed. The test can also be used as one measure of a student's progress toward college-and career-ready standards, but is not intended to guide individual students' instruction or be used for student placement.

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*Smarter Balanced assesses more challenging content standards and contains a wider variety of questions, tasks, and problems than traditional multiple-choice tests.*

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Smarter Balanced assesses more challenging content standards and contains a wider variety of questions, tasks, and problems than traditional multiple-choice tests. This allows students to demonstrate analytical writing, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills along with their knowledge of facts. SBAC maintains a pool of field-tested questions that make up the test given to member states. These questions are developed by educators and content experts.

The test consists of a computer adaptive section and a performance task in each of the tested subjects. The computer adaptive section offers harder or easier questions based on a student's answers to pinpoint their achievement level. The performance task presents students with a common topic or problem then requires them to answer questions and perform tasks such as writing and research.

The test requires that students demonstrate their knowledge through more writing than previous tests. Written responses are scored by hand.

In the first year of implementation, the performance task was preceded by a classroom activity, which has since been eliminated in response to concerns about testing time.

## With new tests, state expenditures have increased

### 2013-14 costs include:

- OAKS reading, math, science, social sciences and 11<sup>th</sup> grade writing
- English Language Proficiency Assessment
- Kindergarten Assessment

### 2014-15 costs include:

- OAKS science and social science
- Smarter Balanced math and ELA
- English Language Proficiency Assessment
- Kindergarten Assessment
- 12<sup>th</sup> grade retest in OAKS reading, math, and writing

In the 2013-14 school year, the department paid nearly \$5.2 million to support most statewide tests, including OAKS. The majority (\$4.5 million) was for a contract with vendor American Institutes for Research (AIR).

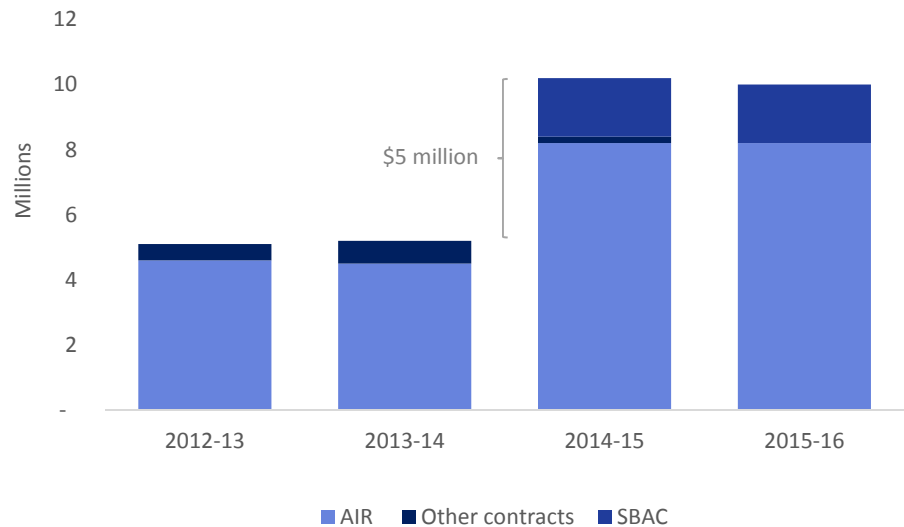
In the 2014-15 school year, after the transition to Smarter Balanced, the department paid nearly \$10.2 million to test the same subjects under the new standards (See Figure 1).

Of this amount, nearly \$8.2 million went to AIR for test delivery, scoring and reporting results for the Smarter Balanced tests, as well as the English Language Proficiency Assessment and the OAKS science and social sciences tests. This includes supporting the computer platforms for test delivery and reporting. Just over \$1.8 million went to the SBAC for membership fees, which includes the pool of Smarter Balanced test questions and technical documents such as blueprints, item and content specifications, accessibility manual, and reports. About \$200,000 went to another contract to hand score the OAKS writing retest opportunity.

The AIR contract increased primarily due to hand scoring the Smarter Balanced assessment, which required written responses at all grade levels and in both ELA and math. The contract also included printing and

distributing Kindergarten Assessment materials and supporting an OAKS retest opportunity offered to 12<sup>th</sup> graders during the transition year.

**Figure 1: Contract payments to support most statewide tests**



## Statewide test results are a measure of school performance

School accountability systems can ensure that every student has access to a high-quality education. One function of a school accountability system is to gather information and report on the performance of schools and districts. In accordance with federal requirements, the primary measure Oregon uses in this system is performance on annual, statewide standardized tests. This is an example of performance measurement.

Organizations that systematically use performance measurement information to facilitate learning and improvement can deliver better outcomes. Using measurement information is part of the broader performance management framework, and organizations that do not follow the principles below may risk not achieving their goals or losing trust from the public. We considered the following principles when gathering information about impacts of the test and developing recommendations:

- Establishing meaningful goals that are aligned with desired results
- Communicating performance transparently and purposefully
- Ensuring that data is accurate and useful for users
- Using data to inform decisions
- Using information to continuously improve
- Recruiting supportive leaders and champions
- Ensuring sufficient resources and expertise
- Demonstrating improvement and communicating success

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## Audit Results

Many in the education community have concerns about the new Smarter Balanced test and the trade-offs associated with administering it in schools.

Through a series of surveys of district superintendents, parents and educators, site visits at public schools, and focused interviews, we learned that many schools faced challenges in the first year of administering the new Smarter Balanced test. Some are concerned about how certain student populations experience the test.

Impacts of testing, such as lost instruction time, might be considered a worthwhile trade-off, if the purpose and benefits of the test are clear. Some we spoke with valued testing for its role in addressing achievement gaps and some valued the rigor of the new standards.

Many also shared their ideas for improvement with us. These highlight steps the department can take to help achieve Oregon's education goals, while working to reduce negative impacts of these tests on schools.

We completed our audit in response to House Bill 2713, passed during the 2015 Legislative Session, with input from the State Auditor. The bill called for an audit reviewing the impacts of the statewide summative assessments on Oregon's public schools, and making recommendations for improvement. Due to timing, most information we report is from the first year of administering Smarter Balanced, with additional information from early in the second year of testing. Some reported fewer challenges in the second year.

### The test purpose and benefits are not always clear

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*"ODE has provided many documents that are intended to explain the purpose and validity of [the test]. I would encourage them to continue to develop these materials as I feel that districts are still struggling with student, parent, and community 'buy in'..."*

*-District Survey Respondent*

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#### ***There is not clear agreement on the purpose of Smarter Balanced***

Not everyone agrees on the purpose of the Smarter Balanced test, with some we spoke to focusing on the test as a measure of how individual students are performing and others focusing on it as a gauge of systems-level goals, such as school accountability and addressing achievement gaps.

Parents told us that they would like more information about the purpose of the test. Some teachers asked why the state requires a test that is not useful in the classroom. Several superintendents reported that they would like more tools to communicate about the purpose of the test with teachers and parents.

The department could clarify its message about the purpose of the test and take a more active communications role. At times, department staff focused on promoting the benefits to individual students and the test's alignment to higher standards, and less on the equity and accountability purposes of the test. Department staff also told us that they rely on districts and principals

to have conversations with teachers and parents about the test, which creates a risk that these groups receive inconsistent messages.

While it can be challenging to communicate with large constituencies across the state, the department has made efforts to connect directly with teachers and parents. Staff in the department's assessment team have toured the state to talk with teachers about the assessment. More recently, the department held community forums around the state to gather input from teachers, parents and community members about future policy changes.

Additional communications may require a larger investment of resources. The California Assessment Director told us that their state made a significant financial investment to ensure a smooth transition to Smarter Balanced. Many of their efforts have focused on communications, including contracting early to develop a communications plan, holding press events, and meeting monthly with representatives from large constituency groups.

***Smarter Balanced results are not consistently used in ways that provide clear benefits to everyone***

Smarter Balanced results are not used consistently throughout the education system. Survey respondents identified current and potential limitations to using data, such as untimely results, uncertainty about how to use results, different skill levels in interpreting data, and a lack of complimentary resources. Some were unsure how they would use Smarter Balanced results, since the first year of results are most useful in providing a baseline to show student growth.

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*"It would be better if we could get the results sooner. This would allow us to make decisions earlier..."*

*-Principal Survey Respondent*

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We heard cases where results have not been available to administrators in time to make decisions about budgets and resource allocation. Superintendents and principals who responded to our survey said that more timely results would help them use the results to make decisions for the following school year. The department expects districts will receive results more quickly in the second year of testing.

Some survey respondents said they are able to use the results to inform district or school improvement, while others said they need more information about what the scores mean, as well as results over multiple years, before they will be able to use them effectively. Without consistent use of results, opportunities to make improvements in schools and districts may be missed.

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*"We use the data to try and determine areas of strengths and weaknesses in our curriculum and make adjustments accordingly."*

*-Principal Survey Respondent*

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As part of its school improvement efforts, the department works with about 90 schools and their districts on improvement plans and interpreting data, including Smarter Balanced results, and would like to expand their efforts to work with more districts on data interpretation.

Principals and teachers said they would find the results more useful if they included more detailed information. Individual student reports have an overall score in both math and ELA, and in a few general areas within those

subjects. Educators would like more information about whether students are able to apply specific concepts.

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*“It would help if there were easier ways to access the scores for individual concepts--like supporting claims or understanding the main idea--rather than the easy-to-access reading score.”*

*-Teacher Survey Respondent*

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Detailed student achievement data could be used to look at classes or schools and identify possible areas for intervention. For example, if many students scored lower in fractions than other math concepts, a school might look for supplemental instruction materials about fractions or offer professional development in that area.

The department and districts can generate more detailed reports when annual Smarter Balanced results are available through the state’s online system. These reports break down a subject area into more detail to show how groups of students performed on specific concepts. Greater awareness and access to these reports could be helpful to principals and teachers.

***Comprehensive assessment systems provide a wider range of information***

In education, various types of assessments can provide different types of information. Formative, interim, and summative assessments are three common types (See Figure 2).

**Figure 2: Three types of assessment in a comprehensive assessment system**

Formative	Interim	Summative
Regular classroom practices that teachers use to understand how a student is learning to inform instruction	Periodic check-ins used to identify gaps in learning and help to track progress throughout the year	A test used to measure a level of performance at the end of any instruction period
Examples: Observation, class activities, homework, quizzes	Examples: Midterms, chapter tests, benchmark exams	Examples: Final exams, Smarter Balanced, OAKS

These three types of assessments can be combined to form an assessment system that could serve systems-level purposes and include tools that educators find beneficial. In a comprehensive system, summative results can point toward useful formative resources. Interim tests can give benchmarking information that show which standards students need to focus on before taking the summative assessment.

Some survey respondents felt that formative and interim assessments provide information that is more useful to teachers in guiding instruction than statewide summative assessments. Some expressed a greater trust in teacher assessment of student performance than in standardized test scores.

Currently, the state does not provide access to common formative and interim assessments, and availability of these types of resources varies across districts. Some districts have adopted standard interim assessments. Others have not, leaving it up to individual schools to acquire or develop them.



A budget note in House Bill 5008 (passed in 2013) prohibited the department from purchasing the full Smarter Balanced assessment package, which includes formative and interim resources. This bill provided some funding for district-selected interim assessments, but it was not sustained after the first year.

Of states administering Smarter Balanced, only Oregon and one other state do not use the full assessment package. Education officials in Washington and California said that having the complete assessment system has been beneficial in their states.

Although OAKS was a summative assessment, students had up to three opportunities to pass and received results immediately. These factors enabled schools to administer the first opportunity early in the year and use the results for benchmarking. Because Smarter Balanced is only conducted once, near the end of the school year, schools and districts may feel they are missing results they previously used to guide instruction and make decisions.

By not offering comprehensive assessment resources, the state may be missing an opportunity to realize the benefits of an effective performance measurement system and better support educators with tools they find useful.

### ***Some feel the test receives too much emphasis***

While some told us they value the rigor of the higher standards, we also heard concerns the test is overemphasized.

Emphasis can include the time teachers and students spend taking and preparing for the test. It can also include feelings of stress or pressure to do well. The state and district accountability systems and the possible use of test results in teacher evaluations can also create pressure.

The test is intended to provide a measure for accountability, data to identify achievement gaps, and information about whether students meet standards overall, but the benefits that come from gathering this information may take time to develop as schools and districts use them in improvement efforts. We heard skepticism that test results are being used to address systemic problems, such as achievement gaps.

Some feel there are not clear benefits to the students and educators most affected by the test because the results are not well-suited to inform instruction or individual educational decisions at the student level.

These, as well as other factors, may have contributed to a sense of distrust and lack of buy-in. Additional factors may have included uncertainty during the first year of administration; a lack of understanding or readily available information on how the test was developed, what the questions look like, and how the test is scored; criticism of sample test questions; and disapproval of standardized testing in general.

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*“Return more instructional time to students by placing less emphasis on state testing and shortening the test.”*

*-Teacher Survey Respondent*

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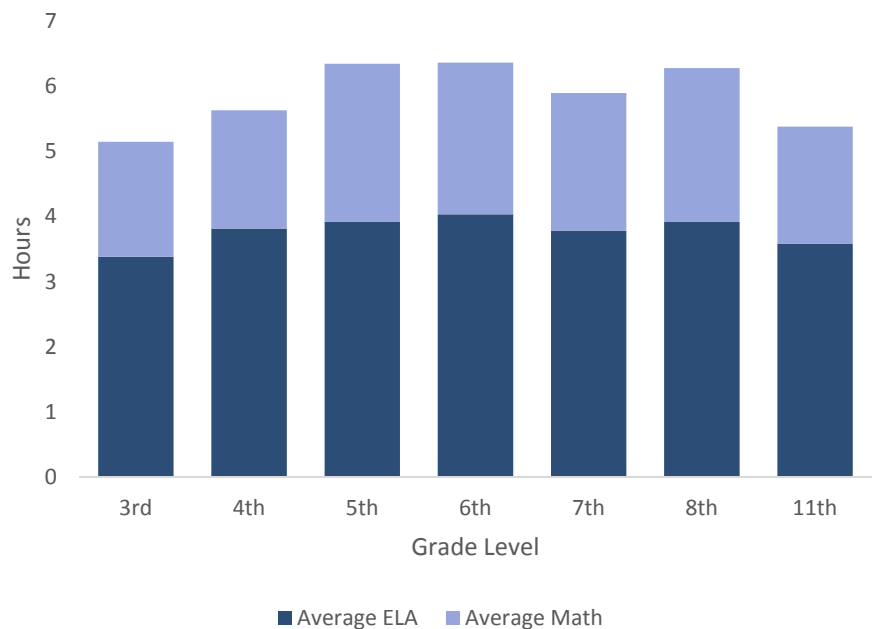
Parents and students across the country have expressed dissatisfaction with the way standardized tests are used in the education system. Oregon law allows families to opt out of Smarter Balanced by submitting a form. Where large number of students opt out, the results may be less useful for informing decisions about schools and districts. Differences in demographics between students who opt out and the whole student population may skew comparisons of student subgroups. Opt-out groups are active in many states, including states administering tests other than Smarter Balanced.

## The test demands more time and depth of knowledge

Because it assesses critical thinking and problem-solving skills required by the Common Core State Standards, the Smarter Balanced test is complex. This complexity leads to a test that can be time consuming.

Smarter Balanced is designed as an untimed test and students are given as much time as they need to complete it. According to 2014-15 department data, in the first year, students spent an average of around four hours on the computer taking the ELA portion of the test and two hours on the math section (See Figure 3).

**Figure 3: Oregon Average Smarter Balanced Test Time - 2014-15 School Year**



There are students who take longer than the averages described above. Department data indicates nearly 90% of students finished the ELA section within six and a half hours and the math section within four hours. However, multiple survey respondents reported students taking even longer; one teacher estimated students taking between 18-23 hours.

Understandably, with so much time invested in the test, many are interested in receiving individual students' results. In order to offer those results in detail, the test must ask more questions of each student, making it longer. A shorter test, focused solely on the health of the system, would provide less precise individual results.

## Many reported challenges with test administration

### ***Schools faced challenges in the first year of administering the new test***

Educators described schoolwide challenges in the first year of administering Smarter Balanced. Testing did not just affect the classrooms that were actively testing, but could also place additional staffing and resource demands on the entire school. However, some said there were fewer challenges in the second year.

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*"...It took more time during staff meetings to train for and be prepared for the testing..."*

*- Teacher Survey Respondent*

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Coordinating and administering the test takes staff time. This includes supervising students who finish early or opt out of testing. Some principals hired new staff or substitutes, while others said they absorbed increased staffing needs with existing staff. Staff may be taken from other duties, including teachers, administrators, instructional coaches, librarians, counselors and specialists.

Annual training is required for proctors who administer statewide assessments, mainly teachers but also others such as teaching assistants, substitutes and specialists. This training sometimes displaces professional development on specific subjects or other instructional topics. Discussing test administration can take up meeting time at schools.

Several suggested that outside proctors could improve test administration and reduce the staff demands on schools.

Access to shared resources and space, such as computers, libraries and computer labs, can also present a challenge during testing. Some reported that testing tied up computers for months. We heard that having at least one computer for every student can be helpful.

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*"The computer lab is no longer available from March-June for anything other than testing."*

*-Principal Survey Respondent*

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In addition, test preparation and administration may have reduced available instruction time. For example, some teachers reported spending extra class time preparing students to navigate the new format.

The impact from these challenges could include less instruction time, fewer support services, and less access to common resources for all students during testing.

This could be the case with any annual statewide test. But since the test was new and could take longer for students to complete, some reported a much more significant disruption than in the past.

On the other hand, some reported that the new test takes up similar or less class time as OAKS, since students can only take it once per year. Additionally, since OAKS was also on the computer, Oregon schools may

have been better prepared for Smarter Balanced than schools in other states that had previously administered paper and pencil tests.

Technical issues remained in the computer platform in the first year and into the second year. We heard multiple reports of computers freezing and accommodations, such as text-to-speech, not working properly. When that happens, proctors are not always able to stop the test to address the technical error, and can only encourage the student to do their best to continue the test. This can be stressful, especially when students and proctors are not clear if work will be lost.

The department contracts with Intermountain Educational Service District in Eastern Oregon to take calls and problem-solve with test proctors. Reports of technical issues are passed on to the vendor, AIR, to fix. We heard that this process may address problems one at a time, but may not always fix problems system-wide.

In addition to difficulties administering the test, there was also uncertainty in the first year. We heard that uncertainty about what the test would look like or how long it would take left some teachers and administrators feeling unprepared. One test coordinator told us that his school did not hear about what had or had not worked from schools that piloted the assessment.

All of these factors may have contributed to the negative perceptions and feelings of anxiety or pressure that we frequently heard.

***Schools do not always understand test administration guidance or have access to information about best practices***

The department sets requirements for secure and valid testing to ensure that each student has a fair opportunity to demonstrate his or her abilities, and school districts are fairly rated for state and federal accountability. The current requirements were also in place for OAKS. The department provides guidance on these requirements through a test administration manual and training modules. However, these materials are long and complex, and we heard it can be difficult to find specific information.

Many report the level of security expected during testing leads to disruption and stress, and some said the requirements, such as ensuring that no one enters the testing area, and restricting interactions with students to the phrase “do your best,” are not reasonable within a school environment.

School test coordinators must report any deviation from the rules as an impropriety or test irregularity. This includes situations outside a proctor’s control, such as technical errors, which can be common in the first year of a new test. We heard the process for documenting an impropriety has resulted in a large amount of paperwork and additional administration. The department currently has plans to streamline this process in time for the next administration of Smarter Balanced.

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*“...The test coordinator and instructional coach have spent a lot of time researching answers to questions about things that are not clear in the manuals.”*

*-Teacher Survey Respondent*

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*“...I walk by kids who are frustrated because they can't even find the directions ... When they ask me for help I have to respond with a verbatim response, 'It's important to do your best' ...”*

*-Teacher Survey Respondent*

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The requirement prohibiting teachers and other proctors from looking at test questions may have created anxiety among some school staff. Teachers who would like to provide feedback to improve the new assessment based on things they heard from students or inadvertently saw on screens may fear that knowing about test questions could lead to repercussions, including the possible loss of their teaching license.

Accessibility resources for eligible students have been an area of particular concern (See Figure 4). Information about which resources are available to which students is not well-known by all teachers and administrators, including Special Education teachers. Some teachers felt that all students could benefit from designated supports, such as printing sections of the test, but were hesitant to offer them too broadly. Teachers were also concerned they may be unnecessarily restricting students from using assistance they should be eligible for.

**Figure 4: Accessibility Resources**

Universal Tools	Designated Supports	Accommodations
Available to all students	Available to students for whom a need has been identified by school personnel familiar with each student's needs and testing resources	Available to students with a documented need noted in an Individualized Education Program (IEP) or 504 plan
Examples: digital notepad, scratch paper and a highlighter tool	Examples: a pop-up translated glossary, print on request, and the ability to take the test in a separate setting	Examples: Braille, closed captioning, and the use of a scribe

It takes time for teachers to decide which supports and accommodations are appropriate for each student, and to input them into the testing system. Available supports and accommodations have changed multiple times, including in the middle of the school year. Clear information about these changes does not always reach teachers and staff, and this has led to additional uncertainty.

In one region, school districts have communicated about test administration questions and shared best practices for several years. The department has been available to this group for information sharing. However, the department could do more to facilitate the sharing of best practices across all regions.

***Preparedness, resources and priorities vary within and between districts***

The State Board of Education adopted the Common Core State Standards in 2010 and the Smarter Balanced assessment in 2013. Readiness for the rollout of the Smarter Balanced assessment was inconsistent. District readiness includes early adoption of Common Core-aligned curriculum, teacher training, and resources to support test administration.

Some districts implemented Common Core-aligned curriculum or offered training in teaching to the new standards earlier than others. Other districts still have curricula that are not well aligned to the standards. In general, the amount of time dedicated to teacher professional development can vary. Training related to assessments and assessment literacy competes for time and resources with other topics and education priorities.

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*"Because we are nearly 1:1 using chrome books, students are able to test in their classrooms. There is little impact..."*

*-District Survey Respondent*

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We heard that Smarter Balanced places more demands on a school's technology than previous assessments. While some schools and districts had adequate technology prior to the start of Smarter Balanced, others have spent resources adding or upgrading technology. We heard the timing of the rollout, following a recession, could have limited districts' abilities to ensure adequate technology in time for testing. The Oregon Parent Teacher Association (PTA) reported more schools asking the PTA for money for technology.

Smarter Balanced testing must occur within the last third of the school year, but the length and timing of the testing window is determined by the district. Where there continue to be unmet technology, lab space, bandwidth or infrastructure needs, districts may need to schedule a wider testing window, with some students testing in early spring, and others testing near the end of the school year.

Testing students earlier in the year means that teachers may have to compress classroom instruction, so that they are able to get through all of the material before testing begins. However, testing students near the end of the school year may affect when schools receive results.

## **Some student populations may experience more negative impacts than others**

### ***Impacts can vary based on school characteristics***

Schools may face different impacts associated with testing based on whether they receive federal Title I funds, whether they are a dual language program, and the grade levels they teach.

Many schools face pressure to improve math and ELA test scores. Title I schools, which have high percentages of students in poverty, may face greater pressure because of accountability requirements associated with federal funding. We heard from some teachers that pressure to prepare students for the test by improving math, reading, and technology skills makes it challenging for schools to dedicate time and resources to other subjects and enrichment opportunities.

Several teachers and principals we surveyed noted that they have lost Title I-funded reading and math intervention time during testing because they reallocated staff to meet the demands of the assessment.

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*"...Our testing coordinator is also our Title 1 teacher, so she gets pulled away from reading groups if teachers that are testing need her help..."*

*-Teacher Survey Respondent*

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Oregon has many dual language immersion programs where students in younger elementary grades are taught core subjects primarily in a language other than English, with instruction in English increasing in later years.

Both the ELA and math sections of Smarter Balanced require written responses. We heard that elementary students in dual language programs may have difficulties showing their ability on the math section because they have been taught math in the partner language. This may reflect poorly on the school's rating.

Another concern raised for dual language programs is that while they are testing, it can be challenging to schedule their classes to ensure students are receiving the appropriate mix of instruction in both English and the partner language, which can undermine their bi-literacy goals.

The grade levels taught at the school may also affect their experiences with the assessment. Elementary schools are most likely to experience difficulties getting their students ready to use the technology and may need to teach keyboarding skills and other computer tools used on the test. Additionally, many educators are concerned that the new test may not be appropriate for younger children, with language and technology requirements that they are not developmentally ready to meet.

Both elementary and middle schools have multiple grades that need to be tested, and may experience negative impacts related to wider testing windows and lack of space or technology. In contrast, in high school, a single grade level is tested (11<sup>th</sup>), so fewer students take Smarter Balanced at the same time.

As with OAKS, students in high school can use a passing score on the test to demonstrate they have mastered the Essential Skills, which is a requirement for graduation. Some high schools may work with students to put together work samples that demonstrate their mastery of the essential skills. Once they have met this requirement, there are fewer incentives for them to take Smarter Balanced and the school may be penalized for low test participation.

### ***Impacts can also vary depending on student population***

Proponents of summative assessments value how the results may draw attention to inequities for historically underserved populations. In order for summative assessments to provide useful information, students who take them need to be able to demonstrate their abilities accurately. If a student's individual circumstances prevent them from doing their best work on the assessment, the results may not be as useful in identifying achievement gaps or areas for program improvement. Smarter Balanced offers accommodations and supports that are intended to ensure that students are able to demonstrate their abilities accurately, but some educators are concerned that accommodations do not address all impacts.

We heard concerns from educators about how some student populations may experience the test differently than other students, including concerns about students missing additional services or instruction, students experiencing additional stress, negative impacts to students' self-esteem, and concerns about whether Smarter Balanced is fair for all students. Educators told us that they have questions about the fairness and validity of the test.

Many of the teachers who answered our survey expressed concern that students from lower income households may have less exposure to technology at home. Additionally, students may take the test on a device they are not used to, for example on a computer when they usually use an iPad in the classroom. We heard concerns that students who struggle with the technology may not be able to adequately demonstrate that they know the material on the test.

Students identified as English Language Learners take more standardized tests than other students. In addition to Smarter Balanced, they are required to take an annual statewide English language proficiency test and may take additional school and district assessments. Some educators were concerned that students learning English were missing more instruction time than their English speaking peers.

Students are required to generate written responses at all grade levels in both the ELA and math portions. This may present an extra challenge to English Language Learners, and students with dyslexia or language impairments.

Students who receive Special Education and Title I services may experience more negative impacts than others as a result of the test. These services may become unavailable during test time, as the spaces, computers, and staff members devoted to these services are used to support the assessment.

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*"...If my ADHD child uses the amount of time she really needs, she would fall behind in her regular classroom work."*

*-Parent Survey Respondent*

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Even when a student is eligible for a support or accommodation (see Figure 4 on page 13), they may not use them. This could be because they do not know where on the computer to find the tools or because they do not want to be seen by others as needing the supports. These students may also lose additional instruction time so that they can learn to navigate the accommodations before testing begins. After the test starts, their teachers are not able to help due to testing rules.

If an accommodation does not function properly, and cannot be addressed while the student is taking the test, this may lead to additional stress for both the student and the proctor.

A few accommodations make the test longer for students who use them. For example, a student who is visually impaired may take significantly longer if the test is read to them, and may miss out on classroom instruction as a result. Other students have challenges that accommodations cannot fully address, such as anxiety or attention



disorders. These challenges are not unique to Smarter Balanced, but they may be exacerbated by the length of the test.

Federal guidelines require students to be tested at grade level. When a student is working well below grade level, they may be faced with test questions beyond their level of understanding. Several educators, including Special Education teachers, reported students giving up and randomly clicking through the test. Additionally, because the test is only designed to measure whether a student meets grade level standards, it may be challenging to see any growth these students make, if that growth leaves them still working below grade level.

We heard a variety of opinions about opting these students out. On one hand, the test could be creating unnecessary anxiety and lowering self-image. On the other hand, some feel their needs will be ignored if the school is not being held accountable for raising their scores. Additionally, opting out one particular population may skew a school's results, and could mask achievement gaps.

When we spoke with civil rights and advocacy groups, a common sentiment is that there needs to be some form of assessment to hold schools accountable for ensuring that every student has access to a high-quality education. However, as the above concerns illustrate, some student populations may experience more negative impacts than others. When impacts fall hardest on vulnerable populations, it is important to find ways to minimize those impacts.

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## Recommendations

In order to better achieve the goals of Oregon’s school accountability system, support educators, and decrease negative impacts of the test on schools and students, we recommend that the Oregon Department of Education:

- Clarify the purpose of the statewide summative assessments.
- Identify and expand communication efforts that have been successful.
- Provide additional information to the public regarding the development, content, validation and scoring of the Smarter Balanced assessment.
- Provide additional guidance on the use of test results to districts and schools.
- Continue to work with AIR to provide results in a timely manner.
- Continue to identify and expand opportunities to use summative assessment data, in conjunction with other data sources, for systems improvement.
- Consider opportunities to expand the use of formative and interim assessments and/or de-emphasize the focus on summative assessments.
- Continue to work with AIR and SBAC to address technical issues such as computers freezing and accommodations not working properly.
- Streamline and improve test administration guidance, especially related to accessibility resources and scheduling.
- Formalize mechanisms for school-level educators to provide feedback that can improve future testing.
- Facilitate sharing of best practices by encouraging regional sharing and highlighting examples.
- Continue to identify and incorporate opportunities to reduce individual impacts in collaboration with the SBAC.

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## Objectives, Scope and Methodology

This audit responds to House Bill 2713 (2015), which called for an audit of the use of statewide summative assessments developed by a multistate consortium. During development of the bill, the State Auditor provided input to ensure directives in the bill were feasible and answered legislative questions. In accordance with the bill, our audit objective was to gather information on the impacts of the summative assessments on Oregon schools, identify potential problems with other performance measurement systems, and make recommendations on improving statewide summative assessment processes, effects and outputs.

We focused our audit on the impacts of the Smarter Balanced assessment on Oregon public schools. We did not audit the content of the assessment. Our identification of potential problems with other performance measurement systems focused on a review of best practices needed to avoid potential problems or risks to performance measurement systems.

Due to timing, most of the information we gathered was regarding the first year of administering Smarter Balanced for most schools, with additional information from the beginning of the second year of testing. Schools that participated in field-testing administered the test one additional year.

To address our audit objective, we interviewed representatives from the Asian Pacific American Network of Oregon, Chalkboard Project, Coalition of Communities of Color, Confederation of Oregon School Administrators, Decoding Dyslexia, Disability Rights Oregon, Family and Community Together, Higher Education Coordinating Commission, Intermountain Education Service District, National Down Syndrome Congress, Northwest Down Syndrome Association, Northwest Evaluation Association, Northwest Regional Education Service District, Oregon Education Association, Oregon Parent Teacher Association, Oregon Save Our Schools, Oregon School Boards Association, Parents Across America Oregon, Region One Assessment Consortium, Stand for Children, and Teachers Standards and Practices Commission. We interviewed several education experts and representatives from various school districts and four other states.

We interviewed multiple Oregon Department of Education staff members in the Office of Assessment and Accountability and Office of Deputy Superintendent of Public Instruction. We interviewed leadership from the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium and the Oregon Chief Education Office.

We conducted site visits at six Oregon public schools. The schools were judgmentally selected to obtain a diverse sample in terms of geography, student population, grade levels, test participation, poverty level and preparation for adopting Common Core State Standards. The information gathered at these site visits cannot be generalized to all Oregon schools, due to the sample size and selection process.

We conducted surveys of district administrators, principals, educators and parents. The district administrator and principal surveys were distributed through email lists obtained through the Oregon Department of Education. The educator survey was distributed through an email list obtained from the Teachers, Standards and Practices Commission. A link to the parent survey was distributed through the Oregon Parent Teacher Association newsletter and Facebook page.

We received 5,072 responses to the educator survey, 799 responses to the parent survey, 376 responses (31% response rate) to the principal survey, and administrator responses from 95 school districts out of 197 total districts (48%). We did not calculate response rates for the educator and parent surveys, as the total populations are unknown. The educator survey distribution list (approx. 59,500) contained people not actively teaching in Oregon and the parent survey was shared on Facebook. Due to the risk of response bias, we presented the survey results as a summary of perspectives and did not generalize to the larger population.

We reviewed documentation related to the Smarter Balanced assessment including contracts, communication plans, training materials and manuals.

We researched potential problems with performance measurement systems. We identified that if organizations do not effectively use performance measures to inform decisions and improve results, it could lead to potential problems, such as not delivering improved results for the public or losing public trust. The audit team reviewed principles related to the use of performance measures for better results. The team considered these principles when gathering information and developing recommendations.

We conducted this performance audit in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objective. We believe that the evidence obtained and reported provides a reasonable basis to achieve our audit objective.

Auditors from our office, who were not involved with the audit, reviewed our report for accuracy, checking facts and conclusions against our supporting evidence.



# Oregon Department of Education

Kate Brown, Governor

Office of the Deputy Superintendent

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September 8, 2016

Oregon Secretary of State

ATTN: Sheronne Blasi, Performance Audit Administrator, Audits Division

255 Capitol St. NE, Suite 500

Salem, OR 97310

Dear Ms. Blasi:

This letter provides a formal response to the Secretary of State Audit Report for House Bill 2713 (2015). First and foremost, I want to commend the Secretary of State audit team for their thoughtful and comprehensive approach to collecting information, synthesizing results, and producing the final report. We appreciate the opportunity to assist in data collection and review efforts. Moreover, we believe the report provides key insights that will enable us to further improve the state testing system. Ultimately, we are committed to continuous improvement actions that lead to improved student outcomes, and believe this report captures important information that will assist us with those goals.

Based on the feedback provided by survey participants included in the report, as well as the overall recommendations, the Oregon Department of Education (ODE) will take the following actions:

1. Communication

We will connect with school district leaders and education partners to determine additional communication needs relative to the statewide assessment system. Specifically, we will ask what additional resources would be useful in their local efforts to communicate the purpose of statewide summative assessments with students, parents, and community members. Furthermore, we will establish additional communication channels to provide information and resources in the most timely and effective manner possible. In addition, we will conduct an internal review of the technical documentation that explains how the tests are organized, aligned to academic content standards, administered, scored, and reported, to ensure consistency and accessibility of critical information to schools and educators. Lastly, we will provide additional information on test administration training protocols and ODE help desk support structures in place to support test administrators during the state testing window. We will begin these actions immediately and complete them by February 1, 2017.

2. Technical Assistance

We will continue to work with our test delivery partner, American Institutes for Research, to identify opportunities to improve the turnaround time of summative assessment results back to school districts. It is important to note that the feedback provided as part of this report is based on the first operational year (2014-15) of Smarter Balanced English language arts and math tests in Oregon. ODE made significant improvements in test results delivery time in the second year of administration (2015-16). For example, most test results were scored and returned to school districts no later than 14 days from the time a test was completed, with many scores returned within a matter of days. In fact, more than 99 percent of the tests that were started prior to May 15, 2016 were returned to school districts by June 1, 2016. This represents a significant improvement over the turnaround time in the first year when ODE and its test vendor were in the process of implementing the new scoring and reporting specifications for the Smarter Balanced assessments.

In addition to improving test result delivery times, ODE is leading two assessment literacy projects designed to increase local capacity for performance-based and formative assessment practices. These initiatives are consistent with the language in the report recommending increased emphasis on assessment tools and resources beyond statewide summative assessments. The overarching goal of these projects is to provide resources which support high quality local assessment practices that can be freely used by any educator to identify individual students' progress and inform instruction practices in real-time. There are currently 16 school districts participating in pilot projects begun during the 2016-17 school year, and ODE intends to scale these projects up and move toward statewide implementation in the 2017-19 biennium. More information about these projects is available at <http://www.ode.state.or.us/search/page/?id=5503>

3. **Balanced Assessment System**

This report highlights the importance of assessment systems that enable educators to collect evidence in a variety of ways to support student learning throughout and across school years. This information is consistent with information and feedback provided by other groups, including the Oregon Education Association (“A New Path for Oregon: System of Assessment to Empower Meaningful Student Learning”), the House Bill 2680 Work Group, and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) Standards and Assessment Work Group. Therefore, we are actively pursuing opportunities to engage with education partners to clarify the role played by different types of assessments (formative, interim, and summative). We will provide resources and capacity-building for Oregon schools in using both formative and interim assessment practices as well as statewide summative assessment results. This will allow local educators to both inform instructional decisions at the individual student level and engage in meaningful evaluation of program effectiveness to drive improved student outcomes for Oregon students. In addition, ODE will actively seek the resources necessary to provide these tools statewide in the 2017-19 legislative session.

We greatly appreciate the opportunity to collaborate with the Secretary of State on this important work. If you have any questions or require additional information, please do not hesitate to contact Dr. Derek Brown, Assistant Superintendent of Assessment and Accountability ([derek.brown@ode.state.or.us](mailto:derek.brown@ode.state.or.us)) at (503) 947-5841.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Salam Noor". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Salam" and last name "Noor" clearly distinguishable.

Salam Noor, Ph.D.  
Deputy Superintendent of Public Instruction  
Oregon Department of Education

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## About the Secretary of State Audits Division

The Oregon Constitution provides that the Secretary of State shall be, by virtue of her office, Auditor of Public Accounts. The Audits Division exists to carry out this duty. The division reports to the elected Secretary of State and is independent of other agencies within the Executive, Legislative, and Judicial branches of Oregon government. The division is authorized to audit all state officers, agencies, boards, and commissions and oversees audits and financial reporting for local governments.

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### Audit Team

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This report, a public record, is intended to promote the best possible management of public resources. Copies may be obtained from:

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phone: 503-986-2255

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The courtesies and cooperation extended by officials and employees of the Oregon Department of Education during the course of this audit were commendable and sincerely appreciated.