

Frequently Asked Questions: Smarter Balanced Assessment

What is the Smarter Balanced assessment?

Smarter Balanced is South Dakota's statewide assessment in English language arts and math. It is administered every spring to students in grades 3-8 and 11. The test was developed by the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium, a group of 22 states, including South Dakota. More than 100 South Dakota educators served on Smarter Balanced work groups as the test was being developed.

Why is this assessment important?

The assessment is an academic check-up that tells parents and teachers whether a student is on track for college and career readiness. Readiness begins with clear, consistent standards and high expectations for what students should know and be able to do in English language arts and math from kindergarten through 12th grade.

For the first time ever, South Dakota high school students can use their state assessment scores to demonstrate they are college ready. All six of the state's public universities will accept Smarter Balanced scores within Levels 3 and 4 as evidence that students are ready for entry-level, credit-bearing courses.

How do I interpret my student's test scores?

Student scores on the Smarter Balanced assessment fall within one of four achievement levels (1, 2, 3, 4). Smarter Balanced scores in the higher ranges (Levels 3 and 4) are considered proficient; students should be aiming for these levels. Scores in these ranges demonstrate not only more thorough understanding of the standards, but the ability to apply knowledge. Scoring within Levels 3 and 4 indicates students are on track to be college and career ready.

How are results used?

Parents and students can use results to understand student performance, and to identify areas of need. Teachers use results to adjust their instruction. Schools use results to identify patterns related to student achievement. South Dakota's public universities will use the results to determine placement for incoming students.

Is this assessment an improvement over the previous state assessment?

Yes. This assessment requires students to apply knowledge. There is more to it than multiple choice and filling in bubbles. Writing is required at every grade level. New question types and performance tasks ask students to demonstrate an array of research, writing and problem solving skills. This means assessment scores provide a more meaningful picture of student performance.

I've heard student scores have gone down. Is that true?

The new assessment measures student mastery of more rigorous standards, so student performance on Smarter Balanced should not be compared to performance on the Dakota STEP, the former state assessment. Any time a new test is introduced, there will be a period of adjustment as students become familiar with the new concepts being assessed. It would be more accurate to compare Smarter Balanced results to South Dakota students' past performance on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, which has long been a challenging test.

If you must compare Smarter Balanced and Dakota STEP results, expect to see a drop in the number of students demonstrating proficiency (Levels 3 and 4). This should not be cause for alarm; it means we are challenging students and preparing them for the rigors of postsecondary education and careers in today's world.