



Increasing the Relevance of Performance Tasks

for Educators and Students

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Exploring a New Path

Consistent with its vision for an education system that supports all students on a path to progress, the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium is committed to exploring innovations that support improvements in teaching and learning. As with many aspects of education, the pandemic created an additional sense of urgency regarding the need for states to revisit systems of assessment to ensure that they meet the current needs of policymakers, district and school administrators, teachers, parents, and students.

One path of innovation under consideration is a version of a “through-year” assessment that provides information about student learning during the academic year. Nathan Dadey and Brian Gong at the Center for Assessment define through-year assessment as “those assessments administered multiple, distinct times across a school year, designed to support both annual summative determinations of proficiency and at least one additional goal.” (Marion, 2021). As foundational research regarding through-year assessments, Smarter Balanced released three papers that examine elements of through-year assessments, including alignment with instruction (Cole, 2022), the practical impact of through-year assessment for local education agencies (LEAs) (New Teacher Center, 2022), and purposes, design, development, evaluation (Dadey & Gong, 2023). These papers described the range of options and challenges that states must consider when they design a through-year system.

Based on these papers and through discussions with the California State Board of Education (SBE) and the California Department of Education (CDE), Smarter Balanced began to explore how to make changes to the system that might mitigate some issues that have been identified, including end-of-year test length and the desire for information that can support student learning during the school year as well as teachers’ learning and reflection about students’ progress, thus supporting educators to accelerate student learning throughout the school year.

To further add to the consortium’s knowledge base on through-year assessment, Smarter Balanced collaborated with the CDE and the SBE to explore whether performance assessment tasks for the summative test can be administered during the school year in a way that informs both instruction and assessment, including:

- Educators can embed the Smarter Balanced performance tasks into their instruction to increase the relevance of the data elicited so that it is more useful to educators as they help students improve their learning;
- Professional learning that is embedded into an LEA’s existing professional learning processes, can utilize the Smarter Balanced performance tasks to support educators in emphasizing higher-order thinking skills in their instruction; and
- Performance Tasks can ultimately be used and scored in a manner that would allow them to be included in summative information.

This brief summarizes the information gathered from the investigation. In addition, it describes planned future research to inform decisions regarding the implementation of performance tasks as part of a through-year approach to summative assessment.

Promoting Higher-Order Thinking Skills in Instruction

Smarter Balanced assessments were groundbreaking in bringing performance assessment into a large-scale summative assessment that was able to meet the rigorous technical requirements of reliability and validity required by the No Child Left Behind Act and subsequent Every Student Succeeds Act as well as numerous state education accountability laws and regulations. The Smarter Balanced performance tasks are designed to:

- Measure the higher-order thinking skills described by states’ college and career-ready content standards.
- Serve as a signal to educators regarding the knowledge and skills students need to learn to have a full range of choices for their education and careers post high school.

This investigation focused on how the use of the Smarter Balanced performance assessments, which engage students in applying their knowledge and skills to address real-world problems, can help educators better meet the needs of their students. These skills can be referred to as deeper learning competencies and can be defined as follows:

- 1** master core academic content,
- 2** think critically and solve complex problems,
- 3** work collaboratively,
- 4** communicate effectively,
- 5** learn how to learn, and
- 6** develop academic mindsets (William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, 2013).

Research on performance assessment has found that it promotes deeper learning, builds students' social-emotional skills, and enables students to demonstrate college and career readiness. In addition, research shows that using performance assessment in a formative way provides important benefits to teachers, including improved alignment of curriculum, instruction, and assessment, reflection on instructional practices, and stronger relationships with students and among teachers (Mair, Adams, and Burns, 2020). The Building Educator Assessment Literacy (BEAL) project was designed to improve instruction by implementing comprehensive applied training to improve educators' understanding of both performance assessment itself and how it relates to instruction. As part of the BEAL project, WestED found that when educators engage in professional learning that focuses on scoring and discussing the Smarter Balanced performance tasks, educators report an increased appreciation of the value of the tasks as well as a better understanding of how to address deeper learning in the classroom (Arnold, 2016).

Based on the above foundational research and toward the goal of increasing the value of the performance tasks as described above, the Smarter Balanced Demonstration of Concept Study: Using Embedded Performance Tasks for Learning (DOC) study was conducted in 2021–22.

Professional Learning Embedded into Existing Process

During the 2021–22 school year, Smarter Balanced collaborated with the New Teacher Center (NTC) on the DOC study that collected preliminary evidence from English language arts/literacy (ELA) and mathematics teachers from elementary, middle, and high schools in two California school districts (Val Verde Unified School District and Upper Lake Unified School District). The DOC study was also designed to evaluate the feasibility of an LEA determining when to administer a performance task based on their local context, and to explore the viability of delivering the performance task portion of the assessment in the classroom during the school year rather than in the end-of-the year test. As part of the professional learning provided with the DOC study, NTC also provided guidance to participating educators regarding how to utilize the Integrated Deeper Learning Resources (IDLR) that were developed for this study. (See Appendix for an example.)

IDLRs are designed to be used as part of educators’ instructional planning to support classroom instruction by:

- Attending to local contexts by incorporating students’ “ways of knowing” to better level the playing field and provide all students better access to the content of the instruction. Ways of knowing is the term used to refer to the variety of ways in which individuals make sense of the world, and which are shaped by personal background and experience (Biernacki, 2022).
- Helping teachers better understand the standards and content covered in performance tasks to support the teaching/learning cycle.
- Teaching and engaging students in accessing the higher-order thinking skills associated with performance tasks.

Teachers participated in the study by:

- Attending four virtual **professional learning** sessions designed to deepen teachers’ understanding of the cognitive demands required by the performance tasks and support the identification and adoption of aligned instructional strategies.
- Implementing a **Integrated Deeper Learning Resource (IDLR)** designed to help educators support their students’ learning of the higher-order thinking skills measured by the performance tasks while attending to students’ ways of knowing.
- Administering and scoring a **performance task**.
- Reflecting on their experiences in **surveys and focus groups**.

Caveats and Constraints

Due to participating LEA constraints, the LEA selected a window in which all educators administered the performance task. Therefore, educator flexibility in the timing element of the study was not specifically addressed. In addition, in this study, the Interim PT was used as a proxy for the Summative Assessment Performance Task because it is readily available to teachers. The Interim and Summative performance tasks share the same design specifications. The only differences are that teachers may view the Interim Assessment tasks and conduct hand-scoring for those tasks as required using Smarter Balanced-supplied rubrics, while the Summative Assessment tasks are not visible to teachers and are scored independently. Finally, this study examined how performance tasks might be better utilized within an assessment in the context of the current federal law regarding assessments and accountability. If there is additional flexibility in the law, then other models might be viable as well.

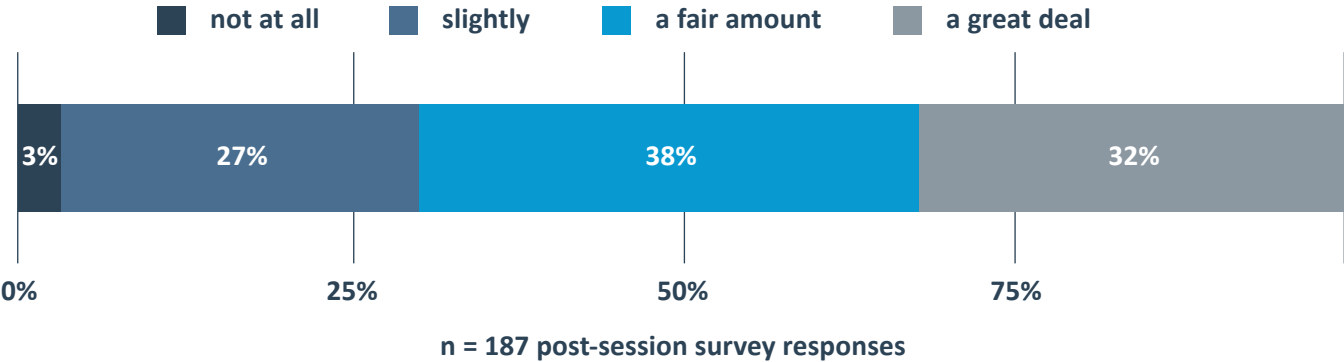
Key Findings

While the DOC study was challenged by lower-than-anticipated participation due to the pandemic and the consequences it created for the education system, as described below, the study yielded valuable insights about embedding summative assessment performance tasks throughout the year as part of instruction that can serve to guide future investigations. Overall, teachers described that the interim assessment performance tasks can be useful for planning their instruction and support their instructional decisions. More than 85% of teachers surveyed said they felt that using performance tasks during classroom instruction rather than in the end of the year test would support their understanding about what students know and can do, inform their understanding of the state standards, and support their instructional decision making.

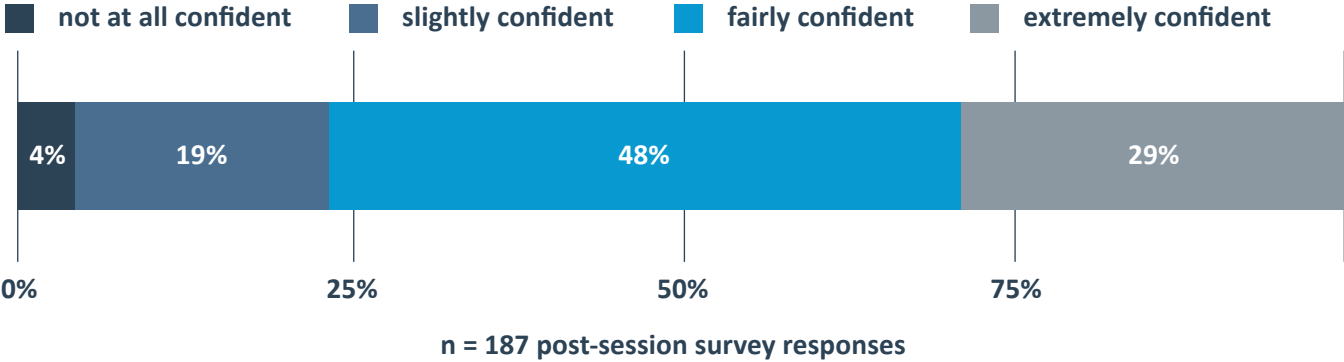
Research on performance assessment has found that it promotes deeper learning, builds students' social-emotional skills, and enables students to demonstrate college and career readiness.

As shown below, following training, 70% of teachers felt that the instructional resources and performance tasks were useful to inform lesson planning, and 77% felt confident they could use performance task data to inform instructional decisions:

To what extent do you value the instructional resources and performance tasks we discussed today as a method to inform unity and lesson planning?



How confident are you that you can use performance task data to inform instructional decisions?



Teachers noted in their feedback how the experience was helpful to them and their students, as well as what they would like to see more of in the future:

“I talked [with students] about what I saw in the evidence. It gave me a chance to say what I saw that was good and not and emphasize what I expect to see.”

“It takes time to dive deeply into unpacking the student thinking, and the information is valuable to guide instruction.”

“It is important to use the rubric to truly guide the scoring of the questions. The exemplars were very helpful in calibrating the scoring of the questions. I will be reviewing rubrics and expectations with my students in the coming weeks.”

“I will use informational texts to help students add key details with their narrative writing.”

“I see myself exposing my students to more tables to become more familiar with making meaning of the information they are given.”

“It would be helpful to have more PT opportunities utilizing all the big ideas in math.”

Additional Key Findings

- Teachers rated the professional learning sessions that helped them understand how the performance tasks are scored and what is expected of students as the highest. They also described that the process of using and scoring performance tasks is valuable as an instructional tool.

“This process allowed us to better understand how to evaluate student writing using the rubric, and how SBAC writing is scored. It also highlighted the importance of team calibration. Thank you!”

- There were differences across the content areas regarding when teachers prefer to measure students’ progress in learning higher-order thinking skills. Math teachers preferred to administer the Interim Assessment performance task in mid-to-late spring, but ELA teachers saw benefits to administering performance tasks earlier in the year, if the skills align with the unit they are teaching.

- Teachers reported that the IDLR assisted in identifying strategies they can use to support their students toward greater success in demonstrating their higher-order thinking skills.

“The lesson plans [IDLRs] that were given, gave me ideas on how to implement in my classroom with my own content.”

“Students need time and exposure to completing math tasks. Allowing them to collaborate initially is a great way to communicate their ideas and solve problems together prior to completing a full Math Performance Task.”

- Some teachers reported wanting shorter IDLRs that can be more easily integrated into limited class time and would like more guidance on how to help students transition from the collaborative structure of the IDLR to demonstrating their skills independently. Some also mentioned how using the Interim Assessment performance tasks and associated IDLR requires considerable planning to ensure the activity is meaningful for students.

“[I would like] more activities like the IDLR, smaller activities that break down the process so we could build their understanding throughout the year.”

“There is a lot in here for me to unpack and digest to be able to use this in my classroom. This is a lot more than a typical lesson.”

“I’m comfortable with the modeling process [in the IDLR] but I don’t feel confident that I can get this done in the 60 minutes that are estimated.”

Key Issues

Some teachers found the information they encountered new and complex, while others who were already familiar with the Smarter Balanced performance tasks noted that some of the sessions they attended included information about which they were already aware. Professional learning should therefore be differentiated according to educators’ previous experience with Smarter Balanced performance tasks. The range of readiness is reflected in these comments:

“Awesome session.”

“I wish this last session could have been longer. I will use the resources in the playlist for future instruction.”

“Great refresher.”

“This [topic] is something we have spent a lot of time on in our district planning teams, so a lot of this honestly felt like a rehash of concepts already covered.”

A key issue raised by teachers is the importance of knowing ahead of time what the instructional activity and performance task would be and having the latitude to fit the task into the right context or unit during their instructional year rather than having to administer it at an externally determined time when it might disrupt the flow of another unit. As noted earlier in the context of the DOC study, participating districts decided on a specific time when the activities would take place throughout the district. The disjunctures between the units being taught and the timing of the tasks were noted by many teachers as a concern:

“The [interim assessment] performance assessment would [normally] be connected, but right now they are doing the activity on financial literacy and then the performance assessment is on learning styles. It just seems like a lot of topics thrown at them. My class is doing a rhetorical essay and now I’m going to say we’re going to stop and do this. My concern is that we’re just throwing all these things at them, we have no control over content, but here we are giving them different topics.”

“The timing was a little abrupt. My team would love to have this information at the beginning of the school year to better incorporate these lessons into our units.”

“I would have liked more autonomy in deciding when to give these.”

Because administration of the performance tasks as part of a secure summative assessment requires considerable planning and technology resources, school districts—rather than teachers or school administrators—may decide when performance tasks are administered. Therefore, successfully embedding secure performance tasks into instruction requires that district leaders establish a consultative process for school administrators and teachers that helps them gain insight into both performance task content and grade-level scope and sequence so the district can ensure that students have been instructed in the relevant content before assessment.

Across grade levels, topic areas, and professional learning facilitators, teachers had differing views about the value of the different activities, tasks, and training. Deeper analysis of this feedback will support learning how to incorporate the features of more successful IDLRs and training experiences into others.

Successfully embedding secure performance tasks into instruction requires that district leaders establish a consultative process for school administrators and teachers that helps them gain insight into both performance task content and grade-level scope and sequence so the district can ensure that students have been instructed in the relevant content before assessment.

Recommendations for Future Investigation

- Elicit more information from educators regarding how to improve the assessment system to accelerate student learning. Specifically, elicit information about the different needs of elementary, middle, and high school educators as well as how the content areas might differ.
- Collect additional data. The study had a limited scope of participants and would benefit from an expanded scale with more teachers and school districts to better address the range of needs that exist across the Smarter Balanced Consortium membership.
- Focus professional learning more on enabling teachers to connect the higher-order knowledge and skills measured by the performance task with their curriculum and/or instructional scope and sequence and how to apply those connections as part of their day-to-day instruction.

While limited in scope due to the limited participation, these studies provide useful preliminary results suggesting the potential for administering summative assessment performance tasks in a manner that better aligns with teachers' instruction. The studies suggest several key elements that must be addressed for the through-year approach to succeed, including:

- Ensure the timing of assessment administration aligns with curriculum and/or the scope and sequence of instruction. This will need to be supported with resources to help district leaders, working in partnership with school leaders and teachers, to appropriately schedule and support the administration of performance tasks.
- Differentiate professional learning to support teachers with varying levels of experience with the Smarter Balanced performance tasks. This would include differences in understanding the task content and cognitive demands, and in making the instructional shifts needed to support students.
- Embed a continuous improvement process to evaluate, refine, and continuously improve professional learning and instructional resources over time.

The Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium deeply appreciates California educators' contributions to this study. We look forward to using these results and future insights from California educators and educators from across the country to drive innovations in assessment to continually improve and support the teaching and learning process.

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Appendix A: Sample Performance Tasks

The [Smarter Balanced Sample Items Website](#) contains sample performance tasks for both math and ELA. For an example of each, please see this [Sample ELA High School PT](#) and [Sample Math High School PT](#).

Performance tasks measure a student’s ability to demonstrate critical-thinking and problem-solving skills. They challenge students to apply their knowledge and skills to respond to complex real-world problems. They can be best described as collections of questions and activities that are coherently connected to a single theme or scenario. These activities are meant to measure capacities such as depth of understanding, writing and research skills, and complex analysis, which cannot be adequately assessed with traditional assessment questions. The performance tasks are taken on a computer (but are not computer adaptive) and will take one to two class periods to complete.

Appendix B: Accessing Integrated Deeper Learning Resources

To see an Integrated Deeper Learning Resource, log in to the [Smarter Balanced Tools for Teachers Website](#).