

# Smarter Balanced

Assessment Consortium:

## Findings From Virtual Focus Groups Among Parents

National PTA | Edge Research | February 2022



# Introduction: Research Objectives and Background

The Smarter Balanced assessment system is a suite of assessment tools and resources serving a member-led consortium covering 13 states, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and Bureau of Indian Education in order to help educators gauge student academic progress and support teachers as they improve student learning. In 2021, National PTA and Smarter Balanced collaborated on a project to better understand how to help close the assessment system literacy gap with parents and meet the needs of parents around assessment reporting. National PTA working in partnership with Edge Research, sought to examine how parents prefer to receive information about their child’s academic progress and whether the Smarter Balanced system, score reports, and standardized year-end assessments are accessible and useful for families.

## Methodology

Edge Research and National PTA conducted 5 virtual focus groups among parents of 3rd–8th graders, a total of 29 parents—21 women and 8 men—between November 4–11, 2021. Participants represented a mix of age, gender, geographic area, locality (urban, suburban, small/town rural), and socioeconomic status. Race and ethnicity demographics included 7 White, 10 Black/African-American, 8 Hispanic, and 4 Asian/Pacific Islander individuals. Specifically:

- 1 parent group among 6th–8th grade; mixed race/ethnicity; Eastern SBAC states
- 1 parent group among 3rd–5th grade; mixed race/ethnicity; Western SBAC states
- 1 parent group among 3rd–5th grade; Black/African American; mix of SBAC states
- 1 parent group among 3rd–5th grade; mixed race/ethnicity; small town/rural
- 1 parent group among 6th–8th grade; Hispanic/Spanish-speaking; mix of SBAC states with focus on Western states

# Results: Parent Mindset

Parents already have a lot on their plates and want simple actions and quick informational resources they can use on their own, without teacher support. **Any direct-to-parent resources should help parents independently better support and understand their child’s learning.**

Teachers are key to communicating the purpose of the state test and can damage the legitimacy of the test if they share any personal, negative perspectives, or opinions with parents. It is important to help parents understand the purpose of the state test. Reinforce that it is not the only measure—or meant to tell the whole story—but rather one of many measures that should be reviewed with others to give parents a more complete picture. Furthermore, it is important for parents to understand the appropriate uses of different assessments. For example, formative to support daily classroom teaching and learning, interims to gather informal information about learning throughout the year, and summative to help state and federal leaders understand patterns of progress and identify helpful supports.

## The Start of School Year 2021–2022

Returning to in-person classes, parents are mostly optimistic and report their children are more engaged and excited to learn. However, many also express trepidations and are particularly concerned with how their children are adapting to changing health policies, protocols, and procedures.

## A Return to In-Person Learning

Coming off remote learning, most parents want to remain highly involved with their child’s education and desire information that will help them to better support their child during the year. They want tools, resources, and information that enable them to be active participants—they predominantly lauded these features of SBAC tools and score reports.

## Gauging Academic Performance

Parents rely heavily upon feedback and communication from teachers about their child’s progress and expressed interest in receiving progress reports that provide actionable information on where their student excels or needs help, clear indicators of progress over time, and how their student or school compares to others by school, district, and nationally.

## Testing

**Many respondents saw value in the tools they reviewed** (the Interim Assessment Suite, IAIP, and SmART) as ways to check on progress during the school year and get a head start on preparing for year-end exams. However, parents cautioned against over-testing and want teachers to be actively involved in the process. Others admitted this information “exceeded” what they would likely review/use.

**1** Year-End State Tests: **Parents need a better way to connect the dots between what happens in the classroom and the year-end state tests.** Most parents reviewed their children’s year-end state test results. Parents appreciated that these tests provided an easy way to compare their child’s academic progress with other students and to see subject areas where their child may need more help. However, the study also revealed that the presentation of year-end state test results can be confusing for some parents, and that parents may be less likely to regularly review their child’s year-end test results if those results are inconsistent with their child’s grades or if their child’s teacher minimized the importance of test results as a measure of academic progress.

**2** Benchmark and Interim Tests: **Standardized assessments, including interim or benchmark tests, can be an afterthought** in terms of gauging academic performance, and several respondents pushed back against putting too much stock in test results. Instead, parents rely most heavily on interactions with their children and teacher communications.

### Key Takeaways of Parent Mindset on Testing:

- Currently, neither statewide test results nor interim tests reside in the top tier of resources parents use to determine academic performance.
- Most participants report consistently reviewing year-end state test results but illustrate varying degrees of reliance on the measure.
- “Benchmark” and “interim” tests are not as familiar to parents. Certain benchmarking tools, in addition to homework, might work well although students could still not perform well on the summative test. While most interims or benchmarks do not reflect the full breadth and depth of the standards, the end-of-year assessments do.

# Results: Teacher Tools Review

## Reactions to Interim Assessment Suite (IAS)

Parents would find value in the “snapshot” information that the Interim Assessment Suite could provide. Parents react positively to monitoring progress and addressing areas of struggle via “snapshots” throughout the year; year-end test results are too late to make changes. Some contend that “more information is always better.” However, a few parents cautioned against over-testing or teaching to the test. Some reiterated their preference for teacher feedback over test scores.

## Reactions to Sample Item Website/SmART

The Sample Item Website/SmART could help to connect classroom work with the year-end test. However, some parents view this information as overkill or data they would not feel comfortable using. Sample questions can give their students a head start in studying for year-end tests. It offers another way to understand whether students are meeting expectations. However, the tool should include next steps so as not to overwhelm teachers and to give parents guidance as to how to best use it. The tool only works if the teacher is interested and involved. It adds too much work for some parents or parents would use the information incorrectly. Such a tool reinforces parent concerns about undue emphasis on testing.

# Results: Score Report Review

## Overarching Findings

Parents are looking for actionable reports that clearly identify what specific academic areas need work and how to improve them. Above all, score reports must be actionable for parents: identify what specific areas need work and how to improve them. Parents also value indicators of their students' progress over time but not necessarily predictions on how students might perform in subsequent tests based on those results. Several respondents expressed interest in how their student or school compares to others by school, district, and nationally.

## Reactions to Score Report Components

- 1** Level Descriptors: Overall, respondents found Level Descriptors clear, but they shared several concerns. **Some parents, especially those who struggled in school themselves, expressed concern about the greater impacts and implications of lower levels on their children.** Several respondents questioned why 3rd–8th grade students would connect to college readiness. Others added that college is not necessarily a goal for everyone. A few parents expressed hesitancy towards putting students into different levels and the use of conditional verbs invite uncertainty.
- 2** Reactions to Mid-Atlantic State Test Result Report: This report deploys a level identifier and a thermometer with color coding that parents found clear. The report also uses a progress graph, which parents noted easily gauged change in the student results over time. The report also deployed a topic area performance summary which provided important context for parents but also confused some parents. Several found the amount of text information overwhelming. Parents indicated it was helpful to have a link for additional resources to support their child.
- 3** Reactions to the Western State Test Result Report: This report deploys a color-coded bar graph that represents the students' results over multiple school years. Respondents appreciated seeing yearly progress and felt the color coding works as intended. However, the accompanying explanation generated confusion and frustration as it uses ambiguous language about predictive outcomes (i.e., “if this student were to test again”). In this report, an additional checkbox graph identified if a student was above, at/near, or below the standard across three concepts. Parents liked the specific skill identification but questioned how to make this information actionable or how to reconcile the scores in the bar graph with the checkbox. A few parents expressed a desire to see comparisons to other schools and districts.

# Conclusions

This study reinforces the idea that year-end assessments and progress reports can be valuable tools for parents in understanding and supporting their children’s academic progress. However, reports of student academic progress need to adopt parent-friendly language and must be actionable for parents by clearly identifying what specific areas need work and how to improve them.

Moreover, the study revealed what we have always known to be true—that teachers are essential partners and trusted messengers when it comes to conveying information about academic progress to parents.

Teachers are essential partners and trusted messengers when it comes to conveying information about academic progress to parents.

We must ensure that teachers are equipped to clearly understand, value, and appropriately communicate the purpose of assessments and provide support to help them explain to parents both student results and how they plan to utilize those results in the classroom. Teacher assessment system literacy, we believe, is just as important as parent literacy in understanding the role of assessments.

National PTA remains firm in its belief that assessments play a vital role in measuring student progress, so parents and educators have the best information to support teaching and learning, address learning gaps, improve outcomes, and ensure equity for all children. While one test should never be the sole determinant of a student’s academic or work future, testing serves as one important tool that can be used in a comprehensive assessment system to evaluate and assess student growth and learning and provide parents with a more complete picture of their child’s academic progress.

National PTA<sup>®</sup> comprises millions of families, students, teachers, administrators, and business and community leaders devoted to the educational success of children and the promotion of family engagement in schools. PTA is a registered 501(c)(3) nonprofit association that prides itself on being a powerful voice for all children, a relevant resource for families and communities, and a strong advocate for public education. Membership in PTA is open to anyone who wants to be involved and make a difference for the education, health, and welfare of children and youth. For more information, visit [PTA.org](https://www.pta.org).