

# Still Learning From the Past: Drawing on California's CLAS Experience to Inform Assessment of the Common Core

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## About the California Collaborative on District Reform

The California Collaborative on District Reform, an initiative of the American Institutes for Research, was formed in 2006 to join researchers, practitioners, policymakers, and funders in ongoing, evidence-based dialogue to improve instruction and student learning for all students in California's urban school systems.

## Introduction

The Common Core State Standards represent an exciting step forward for California, and for the nation as a whole, in supporting instruction that can better prepare students for college and career success. Concurrent with the transition to the new standards, the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC), of which California is a governing member, is introducing a new, large-scale assessment system in 2015 that aligns with the Common Core. The SBAC assessments aim to capture student learning in a deeper and more authentic way than the state's previous assessment system—the California Standards Test (CST). This is not the first time California has transitioned to a new system of academic standards, instruction, and assessment. In particular, potential parallels exist between the SBAC assessments and the short-lived California Learning Assessment System (CLAS) of the early 1990s. As educators embrace the challenges associated with assessment of the Common Core, it is instructive to learn from the CLAS experience, both to build on its successes and to avoid the mistakes that led to its demise.

In September 2012, the California Collaborative on District Reform released a brief that drew connections between assessment efforts tied to the Common Core and the CLAS. Reflecting on both the successes and failures of the CLAS, *Learning From the Past* identified four key lessons that should inform current activities related to Common Core implementation and assessment.<sup>1</sup> The standards and assessments landscape has evolved dramatically since the 2012 brief was published, and education leaders have taken steps to avert some of the problems that undermined the CLAS. Nevertheless, key challenges remain.

The goal of this brief is to chart the progress that has been made since we released the original brief in 2012, while also highlighting areas that remain in need of attention as the state continues to develop and implement student assessment systems around the Common Core. In doing so, we emphasize the importance of assessment not solely as an external accountability tool, but as an essential component of implementing the Common Core. As the first administration of the SBAC assessments begins in spring 2015, the brief will be most effective if read as a set of considerations for improving the ways in which educators at all levels can respond to evidence of, and develop better approaches to, improving student learning.

## The Story of the CLAS

In 1991, Senate Bill 662 charged the California Department of Education (CDE) with developing the CLAS to replace the California Assessment Program (CAP) as the statewide testing system. The transition stemmed from a desire to address important limitations of the CAP, including a lack of alignment with instructional content, failure to produce individual student scores, and a pure multiple-choice format that critics argued did not fully capture student cognitive performance (Cohen & Hill, 2001; Cronbach, Bradburn, & Horvitz, 1994). The new system was aligned with the California Frameworks<sup>2</sup> of the time, which stressed students' ability to master underlying skills and subject matter content knowledge and apply them to real-world circumstances. Designed to test all of California's students in Grades 4, 8, and 10 in mathematics, writing, science, and social studies, the CLAS originally had three major purposes: (1) to measure what students were being taught, as

delineated by the California Frameworks; (2) to comprehensively assess mastery of curricular content with both performance tasks and multiple-choice items; and (3) to provide individual student test scores, as well as schoolwide and districtwide scores, as mandated by the authorizing legislation.

California administered the CLAS statewide in 1993 and 1994, assessing students with a combination of multiple-choice items and open-ended questions that asked students to respond to literary passages or provide written or graphical explanations of how they arrived at a particular mathematics solution. Student scores fell into one of six performance levels in each of the four subject areas. While the CLAS featured only an external summative assessment in the two years it was administered, it was designed to eventually feature curriculum-embedded assessments and student performance portfolios that would compile individual student work over time and contribute to a more comprehensive measure of what students knew and were able to do.

Shortly after the first CLAS administration in 1993, opposition emerged around controversial reading texts and open-ended item topics that critics charged were invasive of students' thoughts and feelings. The criticism mounted as children who traditionally did well on the state's standardized tests received substantially lower scores on the CLAS (Kirst & Mazzeo, 1996; McDonnell, 1997). At the same time, a confluence of technical issues raised concerns about the quality and appropriateness of the assessment and its continued viability. Problems included large sampling errors, an inability to provide individual student test scores due to the test's matrix sampling approach, a mismanaged administration



## Data Sources

To better understand the CLAS experience, we drew on the books and articles, technical documentation, and news accounts available from the period. In the spring of 2012, we also interviewed policymakers, assessment experts, practitioners, and researchers who had been involved with or closely observed the CLAS efforts. These interviews allowed us to develop a fuller understanding of what happened with the CLAS, and to identify lessons that may be relevant to current assessment efforts. When consensus appeared to exist across interviewees, we report the viewpoint or experience without attribution. When perspectives were not uniform, however, or when a point of view was particular to a specific individual, we provide more detail about where that perspective came from in order to provide context for that point of view.

process, and cost constraints that prevented the state from grading all of the tests (Cronbach, Bradburn, & Horvitz, 1994). Political factors—including the absence of a constituency supportive of the CLAS, limited public engagement and communication, and conflicting stakeholder priorities—enabled this criticism to gain momentum (Kirst & Mazzeo, 1996; McDonnell, 1997).

In response, the CDE made several modifications to the 1994 CLAS administration—such as incorporating the public into the teams developing the assessment, prohibiting questions that addressed moral or religious beliefs, and requiring the circulation of sample tests prior to administration—but these actions came too late to stem the growing opposition (Cohen & Hill, 2001; McDonnell, 1997). In 1994, Governor Wilson vetoed legislation that would have provided funding to reauthorize the assessment system, arguing that it departed from its original goal of producing individual student scores. In doing so, he effectively ended the CLAS after only two administrations.

## Lessons for the Common Core

In the original *Learning From the Past* brief, we identified four key lessons for educators to consider as the state adopts new approaches to assessment: (1) make immediate and sustained efforts to build

teacher capacity; (2) anticipate and respond to potential questions and controversy surrounding assessment content and format; (3) understand and address technical and administrative challenges around assessment development, administration, and scoring; and (4) build support for new instructional and assessment efforts through a clear strategy of public engagement. For each of these lessons, this updated brief provides a short summary of the original brief's content, highlights the developments that have taken place over the past two years, and identifies areas requiring continued attention moving forward.

## Teacher Capacity Building and Engagement

**Lesson from the CLAS: Make immediate and sustained efforts to build teacher capacity.** Like the California Frameworks of the early 1990s, the Common Core demands more from students than the previous “mile-wide, inch-deep” California standards, and it therefore requires teachers to teach in new ways. As teachers make these shifts in instruction, support for capacity-building efforts is critical to facilitating effective student learning. One strategy for building teacher knowledge and skills is to pursue effective assessment practices (both formative and summative). For example, the CLAS

**Table 1: Comparing CLAS and Smarter Balanced Assessments**

Preceding Assessment Content and Format		
	Before CLAS	Before SBAC
Test Name	California Assessment Program (CAP)	California Standards Test (CST)
Years Administered	1972–1990	1998–2013
Standards Alignment	Weak alignment with the California Frameworks <sup>3</sup>	Aligned with the California Content Standards
Grades Tested	3, 6, 8, 10	2–11
Subjects Tested	Reading, mathematics, and writing; content areas of science, history, and literature	English language arts (ELA) for Grades 2–11; mathematics for Grades 2–7; science for Grades 5, 8, and 10; history for Grades 8 and 11; end-of-course assessments for mathematics, science, and history
Format	Multiple choice, with open-ended items gradually introduced to the Grade 12 test	Multiple choice, with a writing component in ELA for Grades 4 and 7
Transition to New Standards and Assessments		
	CLAS	SBAC
New Student Expectations	California Frameworks adopted in the late 1980s and early 1990s “[The] frameworks have several overarching concepts in common including critical thinking and conceptual understanding, problem-solving based on real-life problems, meaning-centered rather than memorization-oriented learning opportunities, active learning which makes connections to student’s experiences, collaborative learning and interdisciplinary learning” (Carlos & Kirst, 1997).	Common Core State Standards adopted in August 2010 “The [Common Core] standards are designed to be robust and relevant to the real world, reflecting the knowledge and skills that our young people need for success in college and careers ... [They] include rigorous content and application of knowledge through high-order skills” (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2012).
New State Assessment	CLAS put into law through Senate Bill 662 in 1991  “Educators and testing experts looked to the [CLAS] as an exemplar for new forms of more authentic student assessment ... The tests were tied to state curriculum frameworks that stressed the ability to understand underlying principles and to apply them to real-world problems, as well as to master subject matter knowledge” (McDonnell, 1997, p. 5–6).	California approved the use of SBAC assessments through Assembly Bill 484 and signed a memorandum of understanding in September 2014 with SBAC for use of the assessments.  “Smarter Balanced assessments will go beyond multiple-choice questions to include extended response and technology enhanced items, as well as performance tasks that allow students to demonstrate critical-thinking and problem-solving skills. Performance tasks challenge students to apply their knowledge and skills to respond to complex real-world problems” (Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium, 2012).
New Assessment Content and Format		
	CLAS	SBAC
Standards Alignment	Aligned with the California Frameworks	Aligned with the Common Core State Standards
Years Administered	1993–1994	Field test conducted in spring 2014; full test administration to begin in spring 2015
Grades Tested	4, 8, 10	3–8, 11
Subjects Tested	Reading, writing, mathematics, science, and social studies	ELA and mathematics
Format	Multiple choice, constructed response, and performance tasks  Fixed form, paper-and-pencil testing	Multiple choice, constructed response, and performance tasks  Fixed form and computer adaptive testing (with paper-and-pencil testing available through 2016–17)
Unit of Measurement	Schools (employing matrix sampling)	Individual students
Assessment Development		
	CLAS	SBAC
Governance	Managed by the CDE	Consortium of 20 states as governing members
Item Development	Items developed within the CDE	Item development subcontracted to CTB/McGraw Hill, which leads a team of assessment experts

Sources: Cohen & Hill, 2001; Wilson, 2003; <http://www.smarterbalanced.org/>



experience suggests that developing performance tasks and reviewing student work can provide valuable avenues for teachers to understand what the Common Core demands of students, while simultaneously revealing important gaps in student knowledge. The goal of any capacity-building strategy, however, is not mere preparation for new assessment items and tasks, but helping teachers understand the standards and how to teach them.

Of course, none of these efforts will come to fruition without the support of teachers themselves. Districts can encourage teacher engagement by voicing a strong commitment to the Common Core and its associated means of improving instruction; strong messaging throughout the system can counteract efforts to undermine the change. Given the rapid implementation timeline and the time required for adult learning to take place, capacity-building efforts should aim to maximize teachers' levels of preparation when new state assessments begin, while also approaching implementation as a developmental process that will continue well beyond 2015.

**Developments since 2012.** Consistent with a statewide policy trend towards greater local discretion in educational decision making, Common Core implementation in California has largely been left in the hands of districts. This enables each district to tailor its approaches to best meet the needs of its own communities, but it can also lead to inconsistency in the strategies and supports each district develops and receives. Consequently, districts vary widely in the quality and extensiveness of their capacity-building efforts. Although some evidence suggests that "early adopters" have made important progress (e.g., Knudson, 2014), others are just beginning their implementation efforts (McLaughlin, Glaab, & Carrasco, 2014).

The state has provided some resources to facilitate teacher learning. For example, the state legislature appropriated \$1.25 billion in the 2013 budget and \$400 million in the 2014 budget for districts to spend specifically on Common Core implementation, and one of the three accepted targets for the new funding was capacity building. In addition, SBAC has developed a "Digital Library" in an effort to provide states with a platform for sharing best practices and materials. This library provides California's K–12 teachers with access to videos, articles, instructional tasks, and other resources that have been vetted for quality. To bridge the gap between standards, materials, and a meaningful curriculum, the state has also adopted new curriculum frameworks for mathematics and English language arts (ELA)/English language development (ELD). These tools may help teachers and administrators understand the new standards and lead students to mastery.<sup>4</sup>

#### **Areas for continued attention moving forward.**

As districts adapt to the new set of standards and prepare for the demands of a new assessment system, they have appropriately turned their attention to issues such as technological preparation and instructional materials. Along with these important elements of system capacity, persistent attention to growing teacher knowledge and skills remains a high priority. After all, it is the integration of challenging standards, quality curriculum, and high-quality classroom instruction (informed by effective assessment practices) that creates the conditions for effective student learning. Infrastructure that supports teacher and administrator learning will be a key component of district efforts in 2014–15 and beyond.

Despite the various resources that have emerged to support teaching and learning, the extensive professional development infrastructure that

characterized California in the early 1990s (including robust subject matter projects and state-supported professional development days) has been greatly reduced. Local districts bear primary responsibility for addressing teacher capacity needs and wide variation exists in their preparation to do so. Although the context has changed since the time of the CLAS, local educators can take advantage of certain conditions created as a result of transitioning to the Common Core.

First, widespread use of the Common Core creates opportunities for collaboration across systems. Establishing networks of educators from different districts to tackle shared problems has the potential to accelerate system learning. The California Office to Reform Education (CORE)—which has engaged district teams in issues of standards, assessment, and instruction, and has brought together groups of teachers and leaders to develop formative assessment modules—and Math in Common—which has engaged district teams in professional development, building leadership capacity, and developing strong plans for implementing the Common Core in mathematics—are two examples of districts collaborating around shared challenges in the transition to new standards.<sup>5</sup> As the CDE navigates its new role in a more decentralized state education system, it can play a part in encouraging and facilitating the expansion of cross-district collaboration. The California Collaborative for Educational Excellence (CCEE)—a new entity created in 2013 as part of the legislation for the Local Control Funding Formula that has some responsibilities for building district capacity but has yet to fully define its role—could provide another vehicle for connecting districts in this way.

Second, districts can learn from early implementers and leverage work already underway in districts

around the state and across the country. This may include adapting instructional materials from other settings that are further along in the implementation process. In addition, a growing body of research focused on Common Core implementation efforts<sup>6</sup> can help document the promising approaches and challenges associated with building teacher capacity. Mechanisms for sharing best practices and lessons learned can also help accelerate the learning process within districts. Although the SBAC Digital Library and CCEE may provide the components necessary for this kind of sharing and learning, it remains to be seen if and how they will support the overall capacity-building effort.<sup>7</sup>

## Assessment Content and Format

**Lesson from the CLAS: Anticipate and respond to potential questions and controversy surrounding assessment content and format.** The criticism that grew around controversial item content and novel item formats within the CLAS suggests that the SBAC assessments' new and unfamiliar features could attract similar public scrutiny and discomfort. This time around, districts—with the help of state and county communication networks and resources—can help avoid unnecessary controversy by responding to concerns proactively, and by remaining as transparent as possible in order to alleviate concerns. Districts can also communicate clearly about the value of performance tasks, constructed-response items, and technology-enhanced items by sharing examples of standards and tasks aligned with the Common Core with teachers, parents, and community members. (For an example, please see the text box on page 9). In addition to proactive communication, educators would be wise to anticipate and prepare for potential controversy that may arise as stakeholders learn about the differences between the SBAC assessments



and the CSTs. Districts and school staff must be well versed not only in the details about timing and reporting for the new assessment, but also in its purpose and potential benefits, as they are likely to be the first point of contact with families and community members seeking clarity about the new state assessment.

Of course, attention must be given not only to perceptions of quality, but also to quality itself. Along with ensuring consistent communication about the assessment's qualities, the assessment itself must contain well-constructed questions that accurately measure students' knowledge and skills. District leaders should therefore educate themselves about SBAC's approaches to ensuring validity and reliability so that they are prepared to answer questions and respond to concerns.

**Developments since 2012.** The design principles that guide SBAC's work seek to ensure fairness and rigor in the new assessment system. Information from the SBAC website indicates that item writers had to undergo training in issues of bias and sensitivity (Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium, n.d.b). Assessment developers must also measure each test item against a checklist specific to these issues before including it in an interim or summative assessment (Munson & Parton, 2013).

In spring 2014, SBAC administered a statewide field test of the new assessment that was designed to expose educators and students to the new system. Going beyond efforts in other states, which administered the field test to only a sample of students and schools, California expanded the field test to include all students in tested grades. This approach sought to give students, teachers, and administrators a chance to experience the new assessments in a low-stakes context so they would have a better idea of what they would entail.

It also enabled educators to identify any problems that needed to be addressed prior to the operational test in spring 2015.

An October 2014 report from the Educational Testing Service (ETS) on California educators' experiences using the new assessment relied on survey and focus group data to identify some early reactions to the SBAC assessments. Data about student experiences may shed particular light on the challenges ahead, as parent responses are likely to stem directly from students' reports about taking the new assessment. Classroom teachers who responded to the ETS survey reported than an average of 34 percent of students responded positively to the field test experience, but that 24 percent of students responded negatively. In addition, survey respondents overall reported that an average of 49 percent of students reacted positively to the new types of test questions, but that 30 percent of students reacted negatively. The performance task also produced split reactions: 31 percent of students reacted positively and 31 percent reacted negatively (Educational Testing Service, 2014). If student experiences with the operational assessment in 2015 are consistent with those in 2014, the survey results suggest that parental questions and frustrations are likely to emerge.

#### **Areas for continued attention moving forward.**

Although the SBAC item design guidelines are absolutely necessary for ensuring assessment quality, the CLAS experience and growing opposition to the Common Core in some states suggest that some level of criticism about item content may nevertheless materialize. Likewise, constructed responses, performance tasks, and technology-enhanced items that depart from the exclusively multiple-choice format of the CSTs may prompt discomfort among parents and community members unfamiliar with these item types. SBAC

has taken positive steps towards transparency by publishing sample assessment items on its website, but past experience suggests that the nature and focus of any opposition will likely not truly emerge until after the test is released and enters the public consciousness. The ETS survey results indicate that perceptions of the new item formats may be negative among a sizeable minority of students. As schools and districts approach the first assessment administration in spring 2015, leaders at all levels—from the state to counties to local districts and schools—must prepare to strategically engage with parents and other stakeholders about negative feedback. Part of this messaging should highlight the changes and benefits of the novel test content and format. Using actual assessment items as a foundation for this kind of communication can help with the process. Honing the ability to anticipate and address concerns as they arise may help educators avoid one of the bigger struggles of the CLAS effort.

## Technical and Administrative Challenges

**Lesson from the CLAS: Understand and address technical and administrative challenges around assessment development, administration, and scoring.** Two decades of experience with standards-based reform and testing have enabled the field to anticipate and address many of the specific technical issues that contributed to the downfall of the CLAS. Nevertheless, the CLAS experience suggests that with a novel, large-scale assessment system, problems associated with administration and scoring are likely to arise and will be difficult to predict. Districts and schools will need to anticipate and proactively identify and respond to these challenges as they emerge. This includes resource

challenges and limitations related to an expensive transition to new standards and assessments, all of which need to be recognized and addressed. Careful performance task design—including linguistic and cultural considerations or modifications—is also essential to ensuring the validity and fairness of testing. As districts navigate various implementation costs, they can benefit from requesting explicit communication from the state about exactly what it will be supporting.<sup>8</sup>

**Developments since 2012.** A pilot test in spring 2013 and a field test in spring 2014 enabled SBAC and districts alike to identify and address technical issues that might negatively impact the administration process. Furthermore, with resources such as free bandwidth tests, a technology strategy framework, and a help desk available during test administration, SBAC has taken steps to address any new errors that may emerge during the first operational assessment in spring 2015. In addition, the accommodations described earlier for students with disabilities seek to provide all students with access to test materials and enable them to demonstrate their knowledge.

A particular set of challenges emerges around the assessment of English learners (ELs), however. Given that proficiency in English directly impacts ELs' ability to demonstrate knowledge and skills using English, it is essential to distinguish between language that is and is not related to the assessment content (construct-relevant and construct-irrelevant language, respectively; Abedi & Sato, 2007). To address this issue, SBAC assessment developers have deliberately incorporated EL needs into item design, and training and guidelines for task development—facilitated by an advisory committee assembled to address EL-specific issues—aim to address



## The Potential of New Item Formats

A comparison of two sample assessment items demonstrates the way in which novel item formats can help probe deeper levels of student understanding. The fifth-grade California Content Standards in mathematics ask students to “solve simple problems, including ones arising in concrete situations, involving the addition and subtraction of fractions and mixed numbers ... and express answers in the simplest form” (California Department of Education, 2009, p. 3). The Common Core State Standards in mathematics include a similar expectation for fourth-grade students: “Students develop understanding of fraction equivalence and operations with fractions ... Solve word problems involving addition and subtraction of fractions referring to the same whole and having like denominators, e.g., by using visual fraction models and equations to represent the problem” (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & CCSSO, 2010, p. 30). Figure 1 illustrates how the CST assessed students’ understanding of this standard.

**Figure 1: California Standards Test Fifth-Grade Mathematics Item**

$$2 \frac{1}{3} + 4 \frac{1}{2} = \quad \text{A) } 6 \frac{1}{6} \quad \text{B) } 6 \frac{1}{5} \quad \text{C) } 6 \frac{2}{5} \quad \text{D) } 6 \frac{5}{6}$$

Source: California Department of Education, 2009

The item, more an exercise than a problem, offers four forced responses, from which students select one correct answer. From those responses, the student can employ test-taking strategies to eliminate possible responses. For example, if a student has only the slimmest understanding of common denominators, the answer options already tell the student that the common denominator of halves and thirds is either 5 or 6; the student can successfully eliminate two responses (and increase the odds of selecting the correct response to 1 in 2) by recognizing that the common denominator comes from multiplying the two denominators ( $3 \times 2$ ) rather than adding them ( $3 + 2$ ). The student need not demonstrate any conceptual understanding of what it means to add two mixed numbers, nor apply this knowledge to a real-life situation.

In contrast, a sample SBAC item (Figure 2) demands a deeper level of conceptual understanding to demonstrate mastery of a similar standard.

**Figure 2: SBAC Sample Mathematics Item**

**43328**

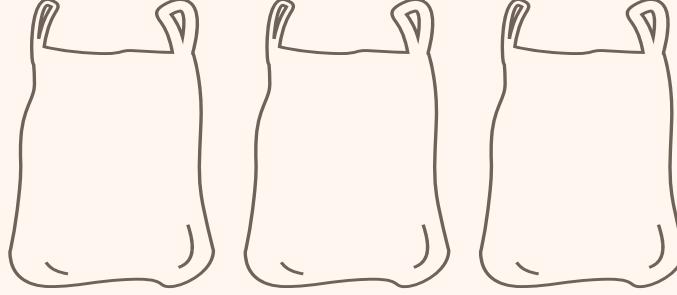


Jared is testing how much weight a bag can hold. He plans to put juice bottles into three bags. He wants each bag to have a total weight within the given range.

- Drag juice bottles into each bag so that the weight is within the given range.
- Leave the bag empty if the given range is not possible using juice bottles.



$3\frac{5}{8}$  lb



Between 6 lb and 7 lb      Between 10 lb and 11 lb      Between 14 lb and 15 lb

Source: Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium, n.d.c.

Unlike the CST item, the SBAC item offers no forced responses. Rather than evaluate the minor differences among a set of predetermined choices based only on a small set of common errors or misconceptions, students tackling items like this must grapple with an open-ended prompt. The item itself requires not only that students add (or multiply) mixed numbers, but that they apply their understanding to determine which weights a particular combination of cans falls between. In the process, the item requires students to compute or estimate with mixed numbers to essentially solve three related problems: identifying the number of cans that will fit in a bag that can hold six to seven pounds, a bag that can hold 10 to 11 pounds, and a bag that can hold 14 to 15 pounds. To do so successfully, students must repeat their calculations for each of the three scenarios, making it much more difficult to answer the question simply through guesswork or process of elimination.

issues of sensitivity and bias (Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium, n.d.b). Perhaps most notably, the mathematics assessment provides translated glossaries with an audio component in eleven languages and dialects, while the ELA assessment provides all students with embedded glossaries containing construct-irrelevant terms (M. Chia, personal communication, October 27, 2014; Solano-Flores, 2012).<sup>9</sup> These efforts provide some evidence that SBAC is taking steps during item design—including incorporating linguistic and cultural considerations or modifications—to ensure the validity and fairness of testing this subpopulation.

Regarding assessment scoring, California has secured a contract with ETS to administer, score, and report the results of the assessment (Fensterwald, 2014)—an indication of improved preparation compared with the state's efforts with the CLAS. Nevertheless, the state must attend to providing information in assessment reports that provides educators with actionable data that can inform improvement. As technological advances enable SBAC to pursue the expanded use of computer scoring, tensions around the fairness of student scores, especially on essay responses, could also emerge as an issue.

Information from the spring 2014 SBAC field test provides some insight into the degree to which the assessment design and accommodations have appropriately addressed any technical and administrative issues. According to the 2014 ETS report, California's readiness for the online operational test in spring 2015 appears to be high. Moreover, responses suggest that the field test helped to prepare school systems for this year's operational test. Despite positive reports overall, however, some survey responses highlight areas that require continuing attention. For example, 36 percent of survey respondents reported that they were only minimally or somewhat ready for the

operational SBAC test. At the local education agency level, 30 percent of respondents reported that the technology infrastructure was strained or inadequate for the field test. In addition, half of the survey respondents overall reported that some testing functions did not work during the field test, and 63 percent reported having problems with freezing, timing out, or other interruptions during testing. In addition to the functionality of the assessment itself, administering the assessment has implications for other normal classroom activities. Eighty-three percent of survey respondents reported that the test administration interfered with other school computer activities.

The California-specific feedback from the ETS supplements an October 2014 report from SBAC, which released some of the informal feedback it had received in response to the multistate field test administered in spring 2014. The report addresses additional concerns around technology and test administration. For example, educators across a variety of contexts worry about students' endurance and experience with the new test format and hope that it does not get in the way of demonstrating their understanding of the material.<sup>10</sup> Anecdotal evidence also suggests that the typing requirements for some item types exceed students' levels of preparation (Baron, 2014).

**Areas for continued attention moving forward.** The most pressing area of concern may be addressing the issues that arose during the 2014 field test. The education community should not interpret any problems encountered as an indictment of the new assessment system. Indeed, a fundamental purpose of the field test was to shed light on any technical issues so that districts, the state, and SBAC developers would have ample time to address them before spring 2015. Armed with clear information about gaps in preparation, local education systems must act to address these



problems in the narrow window of time before the operational test begins.

The field test experience also identified other technical concerns about the test. For example, the typing requirements raise questions about whether typed responses will appropriately capture content mastery or whether they will simply reflect a student's typing skills. District leaders should be prepared to answer questions like these as they emerge from parents and community members.

Moving forward, the state—as a governing member of SBAC—should take a proactive role in addressing any remaining challenges with the statewide assessment, including addressing any known concerns before administration begins and responding to unanticipated challenges when they emerge. Responsibility also falls on the districts' shoulders. District leaders should act to address any technical limitations encountered during the field test. In addition, as the face of the new assessment for students and parents, district and school leaders should be prepared to answer any questions that emerge about test administration, including its level of difficulty, reliability, and validity for diverse student subgroups. (The state can also play a useful role in coordinating these responses.)

new reforms requires expectations that allow for imperfection and improvement. School leaders and teachers can serve as agents for communication, and opportunities to work with the new standards are essential to building the knowledge these individuals will need to serve as conduits to the larger community. By closely monitoring reactions to the new standards and assessments, districts can correct misconceptions, resolve technical flaws, and articulate the rationale behind their efforts to improve instruction and student learning.

**Developments since 2012.** The CLAS experience suggests that there could be opposition not only to the new assessments, but also to the student expectations that underpin them. Indeed, since the state has yet to administer the full SBAC assessments, the general public's primary exposure to the new assessments has come through the Common Core itself. By and large, support for the new standards remains strong nationwide, as evidenced by the 43 states that have adopted them (Common Core State Standards Initiative, n.d.). Nevertheless, four states that previously adopted the Common Core have since reversed their decisions (Ujifusa, 2014), and some organizations, such as the Republican National Committee, have characterized the Common Core as "an inappropriate overreach [by the federal government] to standardize and control education" (2013). Others have expressed concern about the way in which state accountability systems have incorporated the new standards, describing the implementation process as rushed and voicing concerns that the Common Core is merely another vehicle to promote high-stakes testing (Álvarez, 2014).

Organized opposition to the Common Core has yet to gain similar traction in California, in part because of a stronger base of political support for the standards. In June 2014, for example, more than 300 non-profits, community-based organizations, research organizations, and other education partners

## Politics and Communication

**Lessons from the CLAS: Build support for new instructional and assessment efforts through a clear strategy of public engagement.** The clearest lesson from the CLAS experience is the need to create a constituency of support for the Common Core and its associated assessments. A concerted public engagement effort can build understanding in advance and address misinformed criticism before it gains momentum. At the same time, communication efforts should seek to mitigate the threat of overpromising; adjusting to these

signed a statement of support for the Common Core (Children Now, 2014). Perhaps more importantly, the leaders of California's higher education institutions publicly endorsed the standards in a letter to the State Board of Education, affirming their commitment to aligning college requirements and courses with the "transforming promise of these new standards" (Harris, Napolitano, Soares, & White, 2014).

Support from both parties and multiple policy leaders also remains strong (despite an October 2013 resolution from the California Republican Party stating that the Common Core will "water down" academic expectations; Evers & Jordan, 2013). For example, the decision to suspend state testing for accountability purposes through Assembly Bill (AB) 484—despite pressure from the federal government to continue administering the CST in spring 2014—helped to create a safer environment for teachers to transition to a new set of student expectations. The requirement for all schools and districts to participate in the SBAC field test—an expansion from the original plan to administer the practice assessment at only a sample of schools—also gave districts and schools exposure to the content and technical requirements of the new assessment system before having to administer the live assessment for the first time. An appropriation of \$1.25 billion in the 2013 budget and \$400 million in the 2014 budget provided additional financial resources for developing infrastructure and building capacity for Common Core implementation.<sup>11</sup> Lastly, the state's provision of full access to the SBAC Digital Library signals support for the comprehensive set of strategies needed to embrace a new set of standards.

Despite these promising commitments, evidence of diminishing public support suggests the need for concentrated efforts to inform and engage the public about both the standards and the new assessments. For example, a 2014 poll conducted by Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE) and the University of

Southern California (USC) Rossier School of Education revealed a sizeable increase in the percentage of California voters who do not agree that California should move forward with Common Core implementation (Polikoff et al., 2014).

Identifying where people learn about the Common Core may help to explain their reactions. In a nationwide survey administered in the spring of 2014, for example, more than half of the respondents reported that they heard about the Common Core through the media (e.g., TV, radio, social media) while fewer than 30 percent reported hearing about it through school communications or education professionals (Bushaw & Calderon, 2014). When asked about communication efforts in regards to the new standards in fall 2013, California school districts reported that less than half had communicated with students, 40 percent had spoken with community members, and less than one third had communicated with local media or local business leaders (California County Superintendents Educational Services Association, 2013). Within this context, the diminishing public support for the new standards revealed in the PACE/USC poll is perhaps less of a surprise. With non-educators driving the messaging around the Common Core as the first SBAC administration approaches, the window of opportunity for educators to craft the narrative around implementation of the Common Core is rapidly disappearing.

Although both the CDE and SBAC previously released communication toolkits for districts to customize and use to engage their communities in supporting the new standards, there is little evidence to suggest that local educators have deployed these widely. More recently, however, an online communications toolkit sponsored by the Californians Dedicated to Education Foundation was created to raise awareness about the Common Core and provide educators with access to high-quality Common Core resources.<sup>12</sup> Other organizations, such as the Silicon

Valley Education Foundation, have developed similar resources to help educators communicate with parents.<sup>13</sup> Supplementing these educator- and parent-focused efforts, Children Now is working with Lucas Public Affairs to develop a strategy intended to create a positive narrative in the media, educate the public about the Common Core and SBAC, and respond to any direct criticism of the standards and/or assessments that emerges.<sup>14</sup>

### **Areas for continued attention moving forward.**

The statements of support from the collection of Californian organizations and all four major institutions of higher education in the state reflect a commitment to the new standards among stakeholder groups in California. In particular, the statement from California's higher education leaders may lend legitimacy to the movement, especially for parents (although it is not clear that this support has been well publicized). Their perspective may carry more weight once the first year of SBAC assessment results are available, which will raise public awareness and the value of respected public opinion.

By passing AB 484, California avoided the controversial association between test scores and accountability that has plagued political and public support for the standards in other states. Despite the relative stability of California's implementation efforts, however, education leaders cannot lapse into a false sense of security. The SBAC assessments are a significant departure from the last decade and a half of state testing (both in terms of item format and the level of rigor it entails), and it is probable that during the first round of assessment, fewer students will reach the proficiency level achieved during the last CST administration in 2013. Given that it may take educators and students some time to transition, a strong foundation of support is essential to the state's achievement and student growth.

Messaging needs to be consistent, and it needs to come from trusted voices at many levels of the system. Emerging communication efforts in

California may help the state to move in the right direction. Proactive and reactive communication efforts were largely absent during the CLAS effort, and they may help to shape perceptions in California about the new standards and assessments around instruction and student learning, rather than politics and power. In addition to efforts to educate the public about the Common Core and its associated assessments, however, district leaders should also anticipate and respond to criticism that emerges when SBAC testing actually begins.

Awareness of plans and timelines for Common Core implementation has increased substantially since we first released this brief in 2012. Nevertheless, many important questions remain unanswered. For example, what is the state's role in developing and administering additional assessments for students in science, social studies, and the arts? Perhaps of greatest concern to districts and schools, how will the state's accountability system incorporate the new assessments and other local and state measures that promote high-quality instruction and continuous improvement? To better position the entire state to prepare for and implement a range of efforts around the new standards, leaders at the state level should articulate and demonstrate an ongoing plan through funding and policy commitments and a communications strategy that make these clear to educators at the local level.

### **CDE Resources**

For the latest information from the CDE about the work of the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium and the California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress, visit <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/tg/sa/smarterbalanced.asp>

Interested parties can also sign up to receive weekly e-mail updates from the CDE by sending a blank e-mail to [subscribe-caaspp@mlist.cde.ca.gov](mailto:subscribe-caaspp@mlist.cde.ca.gov).

# Conclusion

As California embraces a new system of academic standards, instruction, and assessment, it enters familiar territory. The use of multiple modes of assessment (including performance tasks and technology-enhanced items), tight alignment between assessments and expectations for student learning, and an emphasis on assessment for formative (as well as summative) purposes all mirror the state's priorities as it transitioned to the CLAS in the early 1990s. Technical and political challenges ultimately led to the CLAS's termination after only two administrations, and promising developments in assessment and professional development failed to impact policy and practice on a deep and lasting level. Strategic early steps in California have helped the state to proactively address some of the pitfalls that undermined CLAS efforts, but important lessons remain, and with a limited amount of time to prepare for the first operational SBAC assessments and public reaction to the test, some of those lessons may be especially urgent. In line with our original brief in 2012, we recommend that districts (1) build the infrastructure for ongoing teacher capacity building; (2) anticipate and respond to potential controversy surrounding assessment content and format; (3) understand (and push the state to proactively address) technical and administrative challenges around assessment development, administration, and scoring; and (4) build a constituency of support for new instructional and assessment efforts through a clear strategy of public engagement. The Common Core holds tremendous promise as a tool to better prepare students for success after high school graduation. By acknowledging the critical role of assessment in capturing student learning and informing instructional decisions, and by positioning themselves to develop and implement assessments effectively, districts can create an environment that allows them to fulfill this promise for students.

## NOTES

1. The original September 2012 brief, which includes additional background about the CLAS and the lessons we originally identified, is available at <http://cacollaborative.org/publication/learning-past-drawing-californias-clas-experience-inform-assessment-common-core>.
2. The California Frameworks, which were adopted in the late 1980s and early 1990s and have been updated several times since, outline the knowledge and skills students are expected to learn in each core subject area, with an emphasis on high-order thinking, real-world problem solving, and active and meaning-centered learning opportunities (Carlos & Kirst, 1997).
3. See McDonnell (1997) for a discussion of the lack of alignment between CAP and the state frameworks.
4. The State Board of Education adopted the new framework for mathematics in November 2013 and the new framework for ELA/ELD in July 2014, meaning that the first full administration of the SBAC assessments will take place during the same academic year that districts first have an opportunity to implement the framework.
5. For more information about CORE, please visit <http://coredistricts.org/>. For more information about Math in Common, please visit <http://collaborate.caedpartners.org/pages/viewpage.action?pageld=7704426>.
6. For example, the Center for Education Policy has released a series of briefs specific to progress and challenges in Common Core implementation dating back to 2011. This series is available at <http://www.cep-dc.org/index.cfm?DocumentTopicID=1>. For more California-specific information, please refer to the June 2014 PACE report, *Implementing Common Core State Standards in California: A Report from the Field* (McLaughlin, Glaab, & Carrasco, 2014).
7. A January 2015 EdSource article about the Digital Library, for example, suggests that use is not yet widespread and that early feedback about the resources is mixed (Fensterwald, 2015, January 8).
8. For example, four California districts have argued in a reimbursement request to the state that it should cover the expenses associated with administering computer-based tests (Fensterwald, 2015, January 29).
9. At a webinar in September 2014 hosted by the Alliance for Excellent Education, SBAC representative Jacqueline King spoke about the translation modifications available. She gave the example of a mathematics problem that asks students to calculate the area of a playground. The translation of "playground" would be available but "area" would not be, since it is a construct-relevant term. The full webinar is available at <http://all4ed.org/webinar-event/oct-6-2014/>.
10. Estimated test-taking times for mathematics and ELA CSTs were approximately five to six hours, depending on grade level (California Department of Education, 2013). Estimated test-taking times for SBAC assessments are approximately 7 to 8.5 hours, also depending on grade level (Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium, n.d.a).



11. Governor Brown's proposed budget for 2015, released in January 2015, would allocate an additional \$1.1 billion to support the implementation of new standards, including the Common Core, the state's ELD standards, and the Next Generation Science Standards.
12. For background on the Californians Dedicated to Education Foundation Common Core campaign and access to the toolkit, visit <http://cdefoundation.org/what-we-do/common-core/>.
13. For background on the Silicon Valley Education Foundation's work with the Common Core and access to the communications toolkit, visit <http://www.embracethecore.com/>.
14. Children Now and Lucas Public Affairs engaged in a similar partnership to support the successful development and passage of California's new resource allocation system, the Local Control Funding Formula, which is designed to improve equity while enabling local education leaders to make decisions in the best interests of their students and communities.

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