PROFICIENCY-BASED LEARNING TASK FORCE

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INTRODUCTION

Proficiency-based learning is not a new concept—not one that is foreign in today's educational world. Such common strategies as attorney's passing their bar exam, teenagers getting their drivers license, or employees getting raises in their jobs for exemplary work, are all examples of people demonstrating proficiency. Exempting the minimum age requirement for a driver's license, these measures are based on the quality of learning, not the time spent learning.

The time-based, credit-bearing system in place today in schools across the country does not operate in this manner, basing progress of students largely on time spent in classrooms. Admirably, we expect similar levels of high academic achievement from each student. Problematically, we expect these levels of attainment to be realized within the same time period. It is as if we expect all students to run a marathon in the same time as the winners of the Boston Marathon—an impossibility that no one argues. Conversely, if our goal is quality (i.e., finishing the marathon), we have to acknowledge that it will take different amounts of time to realize this goal.

Historically, when problems arise with our desires for all students to deepen their learning within the same time period, we have maintained our commitment to common time and acquiesced to different levels of performance. We have implemented courses with different expectations for learning, we have created assessments that expect less learning from some, and we have created grading systems that pass students even in the face of learning gaps.

The time to change these past decisions is now. The Common Core State Standards initiative has laid the foundation for clear learning standards that are necessary to implement proficiency-based learning. State departments of education are realizing the power of such learning and have either passed supporting state policy or are deep into exploring various options. And the national cry to prepare all students for college and careers—equitably and at deep levels of learning—is simply not attainable if we continue to remain tied to seat time and willing to compromise learning quality.

BACKGROUND ON THE TASK FORCE

At the urging of several state commissioners of education, the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium made a decisive move to engage member states in a conversation regarding proficiency-based learning and the state-level student assessment system under development by Smarter Balanced. Although the framework and initial development efforts had not been necessarily aligned with proficiency-based learning, it had become clear to the staff and leadership of Smarter Balanced that proficiency-based learning is a significant interest and intent of member states.

Paul Leather, deputy commissioner of education for New Hampshire, has served as the task force chair; David J. Ruff, executive director of the Great Schools Partnership and coordinating director of the New England Secondary School Consortium, has served as the facilitator for the group. Tony Alpert, chief operating officer for SBAC, has served as a liaison with SBAC and provided insight from the perspective of the Consortium. Stuart Kahl, principal and founder of Measured Progress, has provided technical expertise and insight into these deliberations.

The states of Colorado, Hawaii, Iowa, Kansas, Maine, Michigan, Missouri, New Hampshire, North Dakota, Ohio, Oregon, South Carolina, South Dakota Vermont, Washington, and West Virginia have explored these concepts through this task force. In addition, staff from two national foundations and several national organizations are involved in these discussions. Participants have engaged through five webinars as well as discussions and work between gatherings.

This paper does not represent the full breadth of ideas from each state, nor has any state endorsed these ideas. Also, the ongoing work of the task force remains an open question as while great insight has been generated, the work is far from finished.

COMMON PRINCIPLES OF PROFICIENCY-BASED LEARNING

The definition of proficiency-based learning is surprisingly aligned across the states, putting aside different wording for similar meanings. In literature on this subject, state policy (either contemplated or enacted), and educator conversations, people describe this effort using such terms as proficiency-based learning, competency-based learning, standards-based learning, performance-based learning, and even personalized learning. While personalized learning is often used both in this context and more broadly, the other four terms are used interchangeably. The following principles appear to underpin proficiency-based learning across these states:[1]

[1] This definition owes much to *It's Not a Matter of Time: Highlights from the 2011 Competency-based Learning Summit* written and compiled by Chris Sturgis, Susan Patrick, and Linda Pittenger. Numerous states referenced this work when defining

1) **Students advance upon demonstration of mastery of content, 21st century skills, and dispositions that prepare them for college and careers.**
The pace of learning is based upon demonstrated readiness to move on to new learning. Instead of waiting idly for others, students can engage in new learning as they are ready. Students who are momentarily struggling with new learning are provided the opportunity to attain this learning, rather than be artificially promoted with little hope of acquiring the expected knowledge or skills.

2) **Learning standards are explicit, understood by students, and measurable.**
In order for students to lead and own their learning, each student needs to understand what is expected for learning. Once learning targets are clear, students can create multiple ways that enhance, substitute, and go beyond the learning overseen by a teacher and provided within a classroom. And these standards must integrate content areas as appropriate, mirroring life outside of formal education and supporting a basic commitment of the Common Core to integrate multiple content areas beyond ELA and math.

3) **Assessments—formative, interim, and summative—measure and promote learning.**
Assessment cannot be seen as a final event with an unchangeable scorecard. Conversely, assessment is a powerful learning tool that identifies areas of success and areas for deeper effort—both for the teacher and each student. As a measure of progress—similarly to a dieter watching a scale over several months—assessment results demonstrate progress and ultimately attainment of goals more so than a single measurement at the end.

4) **Demonstration of learning uses a variety of assessment methods including in-depth performance assessments that expect application of learning.**
Neither a single assessment nor a single assessment methodology will suffice for demonstrations of proficiency. This does not imply that certain assessment methods are never used, but rather, that the full and rich expectations of the learning standards require a variety of assessment methods to fully measure student proficiency. In-depth performance assessments must be incorporated into the learning experience to ensure student readiness for college, careers, and citizenship in our communities. Importantly, state assessments—which may be aligned with high stakes judgments for students—should not hinder the development and integration of deep, rich, and thoughtful curriculum and instruction or formative assessments that focus on the skills and dispositions necessary for college and career readiness.

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proficiency-based learning. In addition, several states referenced the work of the Council of Chief State School Officer's Innovative Lab Network and the efforts undertaken by this group both regarding state accountability and personalized learning.

5) **Instruction is personalized, flexible, and adaptable to students needs—both initially and as required by ongoing student learning.**
The instructional practices employed by teachers need to vary depending upon the content and the learning styles of students. Even within a common curriculum, different students learn in different ways requiring different strategies. Importantly, different instructional strategies for different student must not result in different and inequitable learning outcomes for different students. In addition, as needed and undertaken rapidly, teachers need to employ new and different instructional strategies to support students when initial strategies fail to assist students in learning specified outcomes.

6) **Students both direct and lead their learning even as they learn from and with others—both within and outside of school.**
While the guidance and wisdom of teachers is critical to student success, students simultaneously need to take increasing control of their learning. Thoughtful teachers will not follow each student throughout his or her life, requiring each student to become an independent learner. Furthermore, it is impossible for a single teacher to create the perfect learning environment for each individual student without significant student ownership. Finally, while teachers will continue to play an oversight and coordination role, learning does not stop at the doors of the schoolhouse. Proficiency-based learning recognizes—and promotes—learning that takes place outside of the school building and school day, realizing that in our technological world, our students have learning opportunities ready and available almost anywhere and anytime. Proficiency-based learning recognized the learning that students make outside of school interventions.

7) **Grading is used as a form of communication for students, parents, and teachers—not control or punishment.**
Communication between students, parents, and teachers concerning student learning remains vital to deep learning; grading provides a means to enrich this communication. Grading that is based on demonstrated learning—not homework completion, class preparation, or class participation, among other things—provides the opportunity for students, parents, and future teachers to understand what students know and are capable of doing. Schools may choose to enhance grading with additional comments or grades on habits of work, but these are separate and understandable, providing information that students can use to increase proficiency.

WHAT A PROFICIENCY-BASED LEARNING SYSTEM PROVIDES

As learning is a process that changes almost daily for each student, the key to any efficient educational system is information regarding learning. Task force members reported a host of ways that they would hope students and teachers would respond to student needs in a proficiency-based learning environment; below are the most common and consistent expectations for a quality proficiency-based learning system:

1) **Information** on student learning—not compliance—**must be timely and focus on specific standards** enabling a) teachers to vary learning approaches to meet student learning needs; and b) students to take ownership of their learning.

2) **The data on student learning must be "trusted" by teachers, students, and parents**. The notion of data being "trusted" includes but goes beyond the usual technical requirements of assessments. Many state assessments demonstrate technical quality, but for whatever reason, are not trusted or valued by educators. Data from a proficiency-based learning system must be trusted to ensure use.

3) The system needs to **leverage alignment of instruction and curriculum** to common and defined learning outcomes. State standards have been in use across the country for 25 plus years—and teachers have always had learning standards for their classrooms—but most state standards have failed to move beyond pressuring curriculum alignment. Efforts to implement the Common Core must move beyond curriculum alignment to instructional change and enhancement.

4) Data produced by the system needs to provide an **understanding as to why students are both succeeding and/or not succeeding**. Such information would enable teachers and students to know how to learn differently, not simply the success or failure of current activities.

5) Student learning growth needs to be defined on **a criterion-referenced continuum (a learning progression).**[2]

6) The data produced by the system should **enhance communication regarding learning between** teachers, students, and parents, employing grading systems that are clear and readily understandable. Our current grading systems appear to provide information, but specific understandings of student capacities are relatively limited within current grading practices.

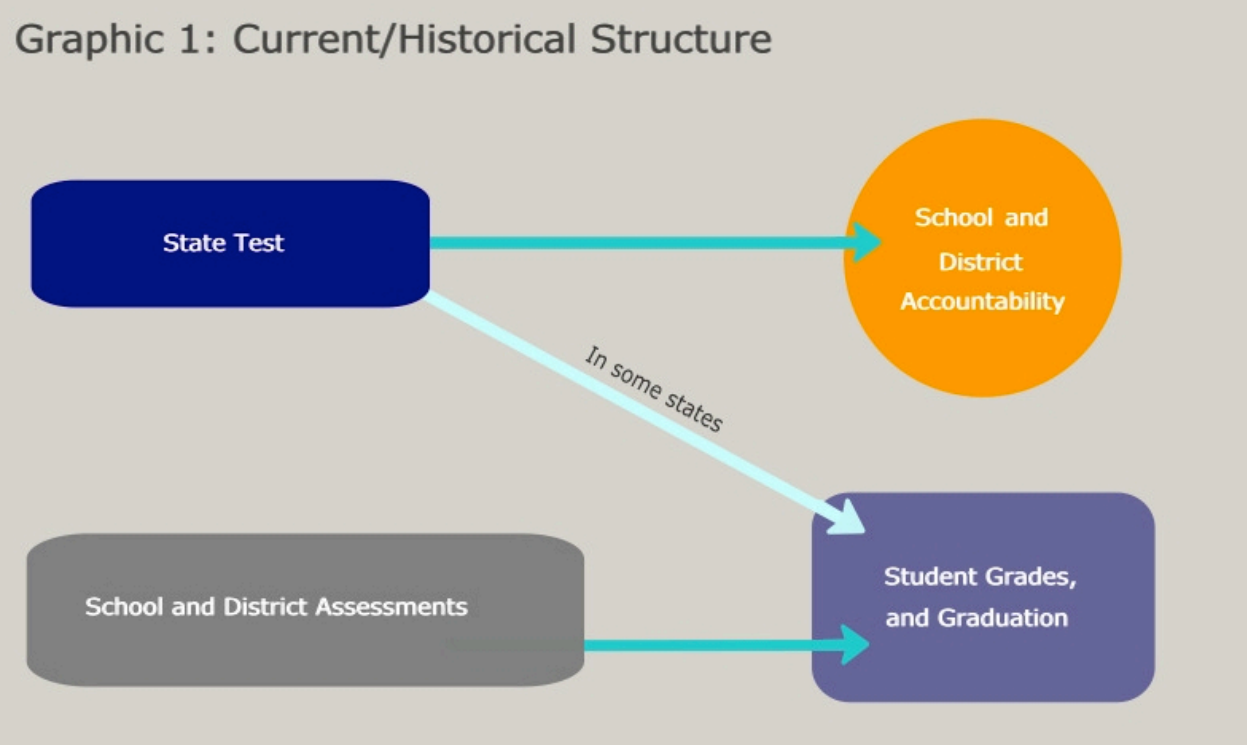
7) The requirements of the proficiency-based learning system must **seamless align with the needs, expectations, and entry criteria for higher education**.

[2] Frederic A. Mosher from the Consortium for Policy Research in Education notes increasing applications of learning progressions in *The Role of Learning Progressions in Standards-Based Education Reform*, a resource receiving significant attention from several states involved in this task force.

Aligning Smarter Balanced Assessments with Proficiency-Based Learning

Certainly, schools can and will implement proficiency-based learning regardless of the state assessment practices that might be employed, but aligning the needs of proficiency-based learning and state assessments can certainly enhance instruction and curriculum and ultimately student learning. It appears that such an alignment is possible to a limited but helpful extent in the near future as the SBAC assessments come on line. Looking longer term, it appears that ongoing development can create deeper alignment and further enhance learning.

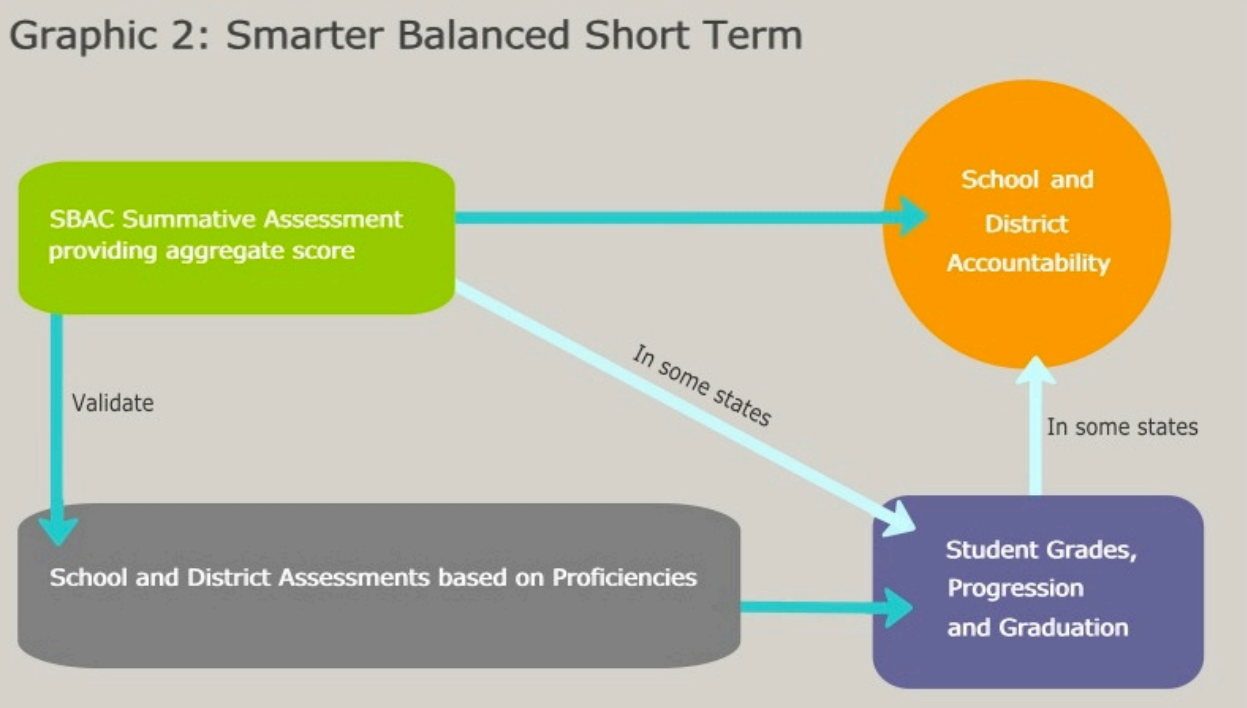
Currently, state assessments and proficiency-based learning efforts do not tend to support each other (see graphic 1). Numerous schools are currently implementing proficiency-based learning and operating within current state testing requirements. In these cases, the state test is used for school and district accountability; in some cases, test scores are also used as part of the high school graduation decision when students are required to demonstrate proficiency on state tests in order to graduate.



In the near future, the Smarter Balanced assessments could enhance this reality (see graphic 2). In these cases, the summative assessments would still be used for school and

district accountability as determined by individual state policy. However, these assessment could be used to validate the quality and alignment of the local school and district assessments. If local school and district assessments predict different results than are shown in the Smarter Balanced summative assessments, this could demonstrate a weakness in quality in the local assessments. Local assessments would be the determinant for students "moving on when ready", not the Smarter Balanced assessments. (Although the majority of states involved in the task force have spoken against using the Smarter Balanced assessments for purposes of graduation or student progression, ultimately this would remain a decision to be made by states and or individual schools and districts.) Finally, student grades, graduation, and progress could be used as part of the school and district accountability system again as determined by each state.

The system outlined in Graphic 2 could be implemented as the Smarter Balanced assessments come on line in 2014/15.



As the Smarter Balanced assessments are further developed and the interim assessments are developed and expanded, a deeper relationship is possible (see Graphic 3). In this situation, the SBAC summative assessments and the school and district assessments continue to play essentially the same role. However as the interim assessments are developed, these could play an increasingly large role in the system. The intention is to use the interim assessments instructionally to indicate student learning prior to students engaging with the summative assessments. However, as the number of interim

assessments expands, these can actually become more secure and be used locally to determine student progression. Given as students are ready and as determined by teachers and students, the secure interim assessments can be used to demonstrate student capacity and readiness to move on to further learning. In addition, these assessments could be used as a validity check for locally developed assessments.

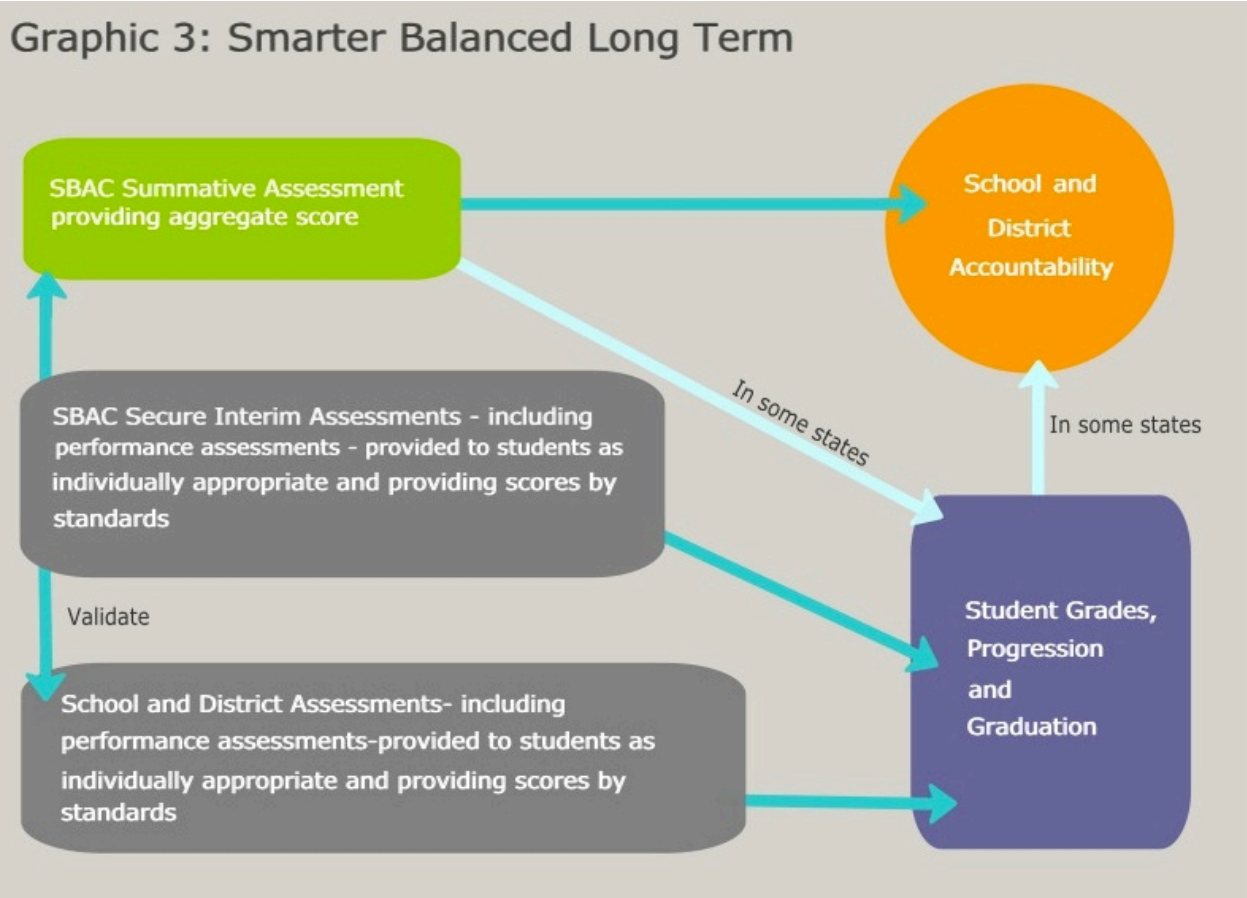


Table 1 outlines the characteristics of each of these components.

Table 1: Characteristics of Components

	SBAC Summative Assessments	SBAC Interim Assessments	SBAC Secure Interim Assessments	Locally Developed Assessments	Commercial Assessments used Locally
Could this be used as a measurement for Graduation?	Yes in some states; most task force members leaned away from this usage.	No	Yes	Yes	Yes

	SBAC Summative Assessments	SBAC Interim Assessments	SBAC Secure Interim Assessments	Locally Developed Assessments	Commercial Assessments used Locally
Could this be used as a measurement for School & District Accountability?	Yes	No	No	No	No
Is the assessment secure?	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
Are the results comparable across students, schools or districts?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Only within a single school or district	Yes
Is the measure aligned with the Common Core?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Locally Determined	Unknown
When is the assessment given?	Within testing window determined by the state	As determined by teacher, school, and/or district	As determined by teacher, school, and/or district	As determined by teacher, school, and/or district	As determined by teacher, school, and/or district
Can students retake the assessment?	No	As determined by teacher, school, and/or district	As determined by teacher, school, and/or district	As determined by teacher, school, and/or district	Potentially, but in accordance with local contract
Do all students take the test at the same time?	Yes	As determined by teacher, school, and/or district	As determined by teacher, school, and/or district	As determined by teacher, school, and/or district	Probably, determined by teacher, school, and/or district

SUGGESTIONS FOR NEXT STEPS

The webinar participants discussed numerous potential next steps and, during the September 20, 2012 webinar, prioritized next steps. Participants were asked to prioritize actions that they felt would be most helpful in supporting efforts within their states to implement proficiency-based learning. Participants did have these options ahead of time and in some cases had been able to hold internal conversations regarding this prioritization, but these priorities should not be misconstrued as official endorsements. This prioritization process did not take into account the capacity of Smarter Balanced to undertake any of these, nor did the prioritization take place within a review of contractual obligations of Smarter Balanced. Process-wise, the participants were asked to identify their

top two priorities from a potential list. This initial voting resulted in overwhelming support for the two top priorities. After removing these two, the participants were asked to identify their next three top priorities. This resulted in the identification of two additional next steps by a majority of respondents. Finally, we have included all potential next steps as all of these did receive votes of support.

The top two priorities are:

1) Prioritize increasing the number of assessments available in the SBAC interim assessment bank in order to make these "secure."

   Smarter Balanced has already established a structure for and started developing interim assessments. The interim assessments have the capacity to provide a deeper level of diagnostic information that can be used to impact instructional practice. In addition, these assessments will provide early indications of student achievement that will later be measured through the summative assessments. However, the current development plans may not create a large enough assessment item bank to increase the security of these assessments for use with students to demonstrate proficiency. It appears that the development structure for the interim assessments will work if we can increase the numbers of assessment tasks in order to ensure that they are secure. Smarter Balanced should prioritize increasing the number of interim assessment items now to meet the rapidly approaching needs of the states.

2) Form a working group of experts and state representatives to create a formal SBAC document that creates a detailed framework on how to implement proficiency-based learning and use the SBAC assessments to support this effort. Publish this as an appendix in the SBAC workbook by June 2013.

   The Task Force was able to unearth numerous issues concerning the alignment of proficiency-based learning and the Smarter Balanced assessments, and through this, to provide some feedback for consideration by Smarter Balanced concerning priorities and future assessment development. However, the task force was not able to create a more detailed framework for this effort due to the brevity of time, the ongoing development of Smarter Balanced assessments, and the necessity of additional expertise.

   To this end, the Task Force recommends a working group with additional experts and state representatives to dig into the details of this system and create a generic model that outlines how formative assessments and secure interim assessments could be used as a way to support the identification of student level mastery decision. This model would outline the grain levels of the learning standards, show how secure interim assessments could be used, demonstrate how students engage in these assessments, outline the quality requirements of local assessments,

and identify the level of assessment understanding required by teachers—among other details to be determined.

This work should be completed by June 2013.

The next two priority items are:

1) Stay apprised of ongoing work to develop learning progressions and research how the ongoing development of SBAC assessments could be aligned with this work.

   During its work, the Task Force explored how developing work on learning progressions could assist proficiency-based learning and potentially be used as a organizational construct for the Smarter Balanced assessments. While this work holds great promise, feedback from experts in this arena demonstrated that the necessary learning progressions have not yet been identified clearly or robustly enough to be used at this time as an organizational construct for state assessments.

   However, this concept retains high potential and remains of high interest to Task Force members. As this work continues, Smarter Balanced should stay apprised of these developments to revisit this decision. At some point in the very near future, Smarter Balanced may be able to align assessments along a learning progression, creating an opportunity to measure student growth along this progression over time, rather than simply noting that students are on, beyond, or behind grade level expectations at a particular time.

   We would urge that the working group noted above should both stay aware of this work and explore how the results from the Smarter Balanced assessments—both summative and interim—could be used as data to help inform the development of learning progressions. The cross state data that will be generated by the Smarter Balanced assessments will create a tremendous source of data on student learning that could help clarify the progressions of learning that student travel.

2) Increase the bank of performance assessments for use both as summative and interim assessments.

   Smarter Balanced intends to create a bank of performance assessments; the Task Force strongly endorses this intention and would encourage that this become a priority. Assessing the full breadth of the Common Core will require the use of performance assessments.

The following four ideas all generated interest although at varying levels for different states:

1) Urge schools and districts to align proficiency-based learning clearly with the Common Core in the content areas of mathematics and English/language arts.

As schools have moved forward with implementation of proficiency-based learning, one of the first steps is to determine the learning standards on which students are expected to show proficiency. However, in many cases, the learning standards do not directly align with the Common Core creating a curriculum alignment problem with the Smarter Balanced Assessments. Smarter Balanced has an opportunity through their influence to urge states to be explicit about the necessity of creating a proficiency-based learning system that aligns with the Common Core in the areas of mathematics and English/language arts. Learning Standards in other content areas will vary by state and potentially by school based on the local context.

2) Create as broad a window of testing as possible (upwards of eight months as is the case in Oregon) with the ability for students to engage individually in the summative assessments when they demonstrate readiness, not on a uniformed time schedule common across the state, the school, or the district.

Early on, the Task Force identified time as a significant issue for the alignment of proficiency-based learning and state assessments. While proficiency-based learning operates on a student timeline, noting when students have demonstrated proficiency and then moving on to new learning, state testing occurs on a predetermined date that has limited opportunity to align with the actual learning level of students. Students who "partially meet" expectations today could very well "meet" expectations in a year. Furthermore, students who "partially meet" expectations in grade four, could experience significant learning over the ensuing year and, as the levels of proficiency have increased, again test at the "partially meet" level in the ensuing year.

One strategy to better align state testing with student readiness is to create a broader window. With enough assessment items, this window could allow students to engage with various assessments when ready providing a more accurate picture of student capacity.

3) Create a position paper on how states could incorporate proficiency-based learning into school accountability structures.

While the summative assessment results will certainly play a role in state accountability models, other data points supported by proficiency-based learning—student readiness, being on track, and graduating—could also be a valuable addition to measure school effectiveness. Consequently, these measures could be used as part of a state-level school accountability structure. Doing so would incentivize schools to meet students where they are in the learning growth and provide benefits for students

who actually graduate. This position paper would not be detailed enough to meet the context of each state, but more to demonstrate how this might best be incorporated.

4) Create an on-line norming process for scorers of the interim assessments.

One of the promises of proficiency-based learning is the development of clearer and more accurate reporting of student learning. As has been well documented, an "A" in one class does not necessarily mean the same as and "A" in the classroom next door. As schools increase use of secure interim assessments, ensuring reliable scoring of these assessments—particularly with increased performance assessments—becomes paramount to ensure consistency across students and teachers. Smarter Balanced could take a relatively small number of interim assessments and create an on-line norming process for these assessments. Teachers would then engage with these assessments to become "certified" as a scorer. While teachers would not be certified on each individual assessment, creating such a system would increase consistency across these assessments, and, as an added benefit, increase the assessment literacy of teachers who will also be creating and deploying additional classroom based assessments.

KEY QUESTIONS DISCUSSED BY THE TASK FORCE

The work of the Task Force operated around a series of questions posed to the group. These questions and accompanying answers are shown below. These answers were used to develop the graphics shown above and impacted the prioritization of next steps. Please note, these answers have not been endorsed by all members or the states or organizations for which they work but are presented as a compilation of the discussions.

1) Within a proficiency-based system, should the Smarter Balanced assessments be used as a) only a measure of school accountability without using them as individual student demonstrations of learning; b) as one piece of information in a host of summative assessments that determine when students are ready to move on; or c) as the single summative assessment that determines when students are ready to move on?

In general, states are looking to use the Smarter Balanced assessments predominantly as a measure of school accountability but with the ability to also use the results to inform student readiness to move on to new learning. The majority of states are not interested in—and even leery of—using Smarter Balanced assessment as the single summative assessment that determines when students are ready to move on. The determination of student readiness to move on

to new learning would normally be made using local assessments—commercial or locally developed—rather then state summative testing results. Individual student results from the local assessments and the state summative assessments would need to be compared to ensure alignment between these tests, and, in some cases, the individual student state summative assessment results could be used in conjunction with the local assessments to deepen understanding of student learning and note student readiness to move on. The role of secure interim SBAC assessments appear to offer a Smarter Balanced option that could be used to determine student readiness.

2) How can student engagement with Smarter Balanced assessments be spread over time so that students engage with these assessments when various formative assessments demonstrate that students are indeed ready to perform well on these assessments?

A majority of states supported a significant increase in the window of testing (6 – 9 months) that is available for student engagement with the testing, allowing teachers and students to access this window individually and as locally determined, and dividing the test into smaller testing units based on specific learning outcomes. Students would engage with the assessment when various local assessments—locally developed, commercially developed, or as part of SBAC interim assessments—indicate that students will successfully demonstrate learning of the standard. This does raise an issue of ensuring that every student in grades 3 – 8 is assessed annually. With such an open window, student mobility could easily become an issue as students could enroll in a school midyear and never appear ready for the state test—or leave midyear having never taken the test.

3) How will local assessments operate? What happens when local and summative state assessment results don't match?

Building off of the responses to question 1, local assessments would be used to determine student readiness to progress, not summative state assessments. The summative state assessment results would be compared to local assessment results as one of several quality control checks on the local assessments. Singular cases of mismatches would probably not elicit much of a response; larger or universal mismatches would most likely instigate a review of the quality and appropriateness of the local assessments.

4) How will students show growth if we remove the norm-referenced characteristic of grade level expectations?

The Task Force was not able to create a full answer to this question, a reality caused by the lack on final thinking regarding learning progressions. If learning progressions could be created, instead of noting that students "meet" or "exceed" standards, students could be placed on a stage in the learning continuum. Growth could be demonstrated to students, parents, and teachers when a student moves from one stage to another. This would replace the current system where students can "meet" standards in a content area for several years, but neither students nor parents have an understanding of the actual difference between "meets" in the third grade and "meets" in the sixth grade. However, such a system would entail a couple of wrinkles. Most notably, instead of having a single notation of meets or doesn't meet, student results would note stages of learning on several key-learning progressions within a single content area. So while growth on a single learning progression would be easier to understand, overall growth could become a bit more complex.

5) Even as we acknowledge that different students learn at different paces, how will we ensure that students who are not demonstrating success are provided the necessary support to succeed—and not unintentionally allowed to lag behind what they could achieve? How can we ensure that a personalized system is equitable?

Again, caught in the current work of developing learning progressions, the Task Force did not finalize an answer for this question. One option could be to track achievement of the stages of the learning progression by the age (in years and months) at which a student achieved the specific stage. By keeping an average age for each stage, teachers, students, and parents could easily determine if a student is on track—a feature valued by parents and students that can get lost in a proficiency-based learning system. This same system could be used to identify achievement gaps by race, ethnicity, ELL, special education, gender, or socioeconomic class. For example, if all students reach a specific stage on average at 12 years three months, but students eligible for free or reduced lunch reach this stage at 13 years 7 months, schools and states would be able to identify—and attend to—a learning gap. Finally, states and schools could implement a system that is triggered when a student falls behind in a stage by a certain time period, formally initiating an academic support system that could operate in addition to daily supports provided by teachers in classes. However, ensuring the success of support requires both cultural changes and support for instructional practices, a desired outcome of proficiency-based learning but in most cases beyond the scope of the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium.

6) How will assessment methods vary to ensure integration of high-quality and academically rigorous performance assessments?

In order to make assessments both a measurement of achievement and a learning experience, a proficiency-based system needs to incorporate performance assessment. Furthermore, performance assessments are perhaps not the only way but certainly the most insightful way to measure many of the higher order thinking skills noted in the Common Core. Implementing this will require teachers to become scorers of student work, requiring training and some system of moderation with limited double scoring.

SUMMATION

The significant participation in this Task Force demonstrates both the interest and the potential power of implementing proficiency-based learning. Combining state interest with the commitment of Smarter Balanced to meet the needs of member states has created genuine commitment to this idea. It is clear that proficiency-based learning holds great promise and that we can find ways to align this effort with state level assessments.