

October 30, 2016

Dr. Steve Canavero
Nevada Department of Education
700 E. Fifth Street
Carson City, NV 89701

Dear Dr. Canavero:

We at the National Network of State Teachers of the Year are delighted to share with you the state-specific findings from our research study, *Still on The Right Trajectory: State Teachers of the Year Compare Former and New State Assessments*. Please accept our heartfelt thanks for your willingness to share the Nevada assessment with us for the purposes of this study. Attached to this letter is a brief report that provides a comparative analysis of the Nevada assessment and Smarter Balanced that is deeper than what we provided in the national report.

In this study, we focused on the important issue of assessing our students' learning through standardized, summative assessments. Utilizing research-based methodologies and practices including Evidence Centered Design, Webb's Depth of Knowledge, and survey instruments designed for this study, we convened two panels to examine six assessment instruments. Each study panel was composed of State and National Teachers of the Year and Finalists for State Teacher of the Year. Each panel examined three assessments: two state-specific assessments and one consortia instrument. Each teacher spent at least 20 hours training, taking the tests, reviewing the tests for complexity, and sharing their analysis through a survey and a focus group discussion.

Working with our study partners, EducationCounsel on the policy side and Clowder Consulting on the science end, we are eager to share our findings. As detailed in the national report, across the six assessment evaluated, participating teachers felt that Smarter Balanced represented an overall step forward on four dimensions:

1. The new consortium assessment remains a better reflection of the range of reading and math knowledge and skills that all 5th grade students should master;
2. The new consortium assessment still is designed to include items that better reflect the full range of cognitive complexity in a balanced way at the 5th grade level.;
3. The new consortium assessment still better aligns with the kinds of strong instructional practices these expert teachers believe should be used in the classroom at the 5th grade level, and thereby better supports great teaching and learning throughout the school year;

4. While the new consortium assessment is still more rigorous and demanding, it is grade-level appropriate.

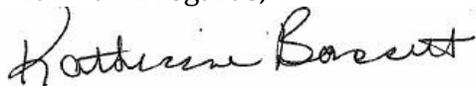
Overall the teachers who examined the Nevada assessment and Smarter Balanced tests believe that the Smarter Balanced assessment represented a significant step forward.

We are providing you with a full data set in the Appendix that compares the results of the Nevada assessment with the Smarter Balanced test so that you can see, point by point, what this panel of expert teachers thought about each. It is important to note, however, that one limitation of our study is that participating teachers only examined one Smarter Balanced form (intended for a student at the 60th percentile of performance). Students either above or below the 60th percentile would have seen a different assessment.

At NNSTOY, we believe that educators should always be at the table when education policy is being crafted, debated, or modified. As professionals, we know the most about what is likely to directly impact students and the work in the classroom, both positively and negatively.

We are excited to share this paper with you and look forward to working with you in bringing the voice of educators to the policy process.

With warm regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Katherine Barrett". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

CEO, NNSTOY

State Report: Nevada

In November of 2015, NNSTOY and its partners released *The Right Trajectory*, a report in which we asked some of our nation's best teachers to examine previously used state assessments and the PARCC and Smarter Balanced assessments at the grade 5 level

through the lenses of rigor, appropriateness, and alignment with what is taught in classrooms. Our findings clearly showed that, in the view of these teachers, the new assessments were better measures of student learning. We wanted to continue this work a year later, focusing on Western states that use the Smarter Balanced assessments. In this report, some state-specific data for Nevada will be provided to supplement the addendum to the national report, *Still on the Right Trajectory*.

Nevada provided access to the 2014 state assessment sample items and materials for review as part of this study. The state now participates in the Smarter Balanced consortium assessments. In this supplemental report, data from only the panel in which Nevada and Smarter Balanced assessments were reviewed will be presented. This is in contrast to the national report, in which data from all state assessments were combined, as were the data from the two consortium assessments.

What we found is clear and compelling: There was consensus across participating teachers and from all forms of evidence and feedback that Smarter Balanced represents an improvement and the right trajectory in which to move in regard to summatively assessing student knowledge. In particular, and as elaborated in the national report, evidence gathered from participating state teachers of the year support the following related findings:

The new assessment better reflects the range of reading and math knowledge and skills that all students should master. While no summative assessment can capture the full range of knowledge and skills reflected in college and career ready (CCR) teaching and learning, there was clear consensus among the teachers that Smarter Balanced better reflected and measured those expectations, including higher-order skills. For example:

"This test measures an appropriately broad sampling of the ELA/Math knowledge and skills in instruction in an excellent 5th grade classroom."

Smarter Balanced: 67% of participating teachers strongly agreed or agreed.
Nevada: 31% of the teachers strongly agreed or agreed.

Smarter Balanced includes items that better reflect the full range of cognitive complexity in a balanced way. Teachers found that items on the Smarter Balanced assessments required a variety of levels of cognitive demand, whereas the prior assessment was characterized as

lacking questions that demanded higher levels of cognitive complexity from students. For example:

“This test strikes a balance between the number of items that require recall responses and responses that require higher-level cognitive skills.”

Smarter Balanced: 85% of participating teachers strongly agreed or agreed.

Nevada: 15% of the teachers strongly agreed or agreed.

The new assessment better aligns with the kinds of strong instructional practices these expert teachers believe should be used in the classroom, and thereby better support great teaching and learning throughout the school year. Teachers found that the new test was more representative of what excellent instruction, both in content and delivery, looks like in well-taught classrooms. For example:

“Preparing students for this test would require meaningful lessons and learning, beyond skill and drill practice.”

Smarter Balanced: 100% of participating teachers strongly agreed or agreed.

Nevada: 38% of the teachers strongly agreed or agreed.

“The distribution of content on the test is representative of excellent instruction at the 5th grade level.”

Smarter Balanced: 92% of participating teachers strongly agreed or agreed.

Nevada: 38% of the teachers strongly agreed or agreed.

A clear trend that emerged through the project was that Smarter Balanced, more than the previous state assessment, increases the rigor of thinking required to demonstrate achievement. More teachers thought mid- and high-performing students would find it easier to get items correct on the previous assessment than Smarter Balanced. However, “easy” is not the intrinsic goal of education. One teacher commented, for example:

Excellent teaching includes high levels of rigor, thinking, processing, and investigation. The Smarter Balanced Assessment is the only assessment of the three to require this of students consistently.

The decision by states to raise the rigor of standards to reflect the level of performance needed to prepare students for college and careers inherently means that the expectations of new assessments aligned to those CCR standards would be higher; it is important, however, that they are also developmentally appropriate to the tested grade level. A strong majority of the teachers found the range and depth of content on Smarter Balanced to be appropriate for 5th grade students (the grade reviewed in this study). Smarter Balanced was also seen as an improvement over the prior state test on this front. For example:

“The range of content on the test is grade-level appropriate.”

Smarter Balanced: 77% of participating teachers strongly agreed or agreed.

Nevada: 62% of the teachers strongly agreed or agreed.

“The depth of content on the test is grade-level appropriate.”

Smarter Balanced: 100% of participating teachers strongly agreed or agreed.

Nevada: 23% of the teachers strongly agreed or agreed.

Another important feature of the assessments explored in this study was authenticity, how well they authentically engaged students. The teachers felt the Smarter Balanced assessments did a better job at drawing on more realistic aspects of students’ background to foster engagement. For example, one teacher shared:

A lot of the Smarter Balanced questions made that personal connection, just as you mentioned. But also, built upon it and so they are high interest. You know, we talk about high interest novels, high interest reading, and high interest articles. I think that the other state assessment made an effort doing that and had some visuals and that type of thing as well that helped support that. But, I really believe that the Smarter Balanced kind of hit. If I was a fifth grade student reading these, I'd want to read most of them

These findings illustrate the broader lesson: participating teachers consistently saw the state movement to the consortia assessments as a positive development.

It is important to note that our study design was meant to go deep into the new and prior assessments with a small number of great teachers. Though we collected and examined various data, this is largely a qualitative, exploratory study. It is not a random sample of teacher opinion. It is not a technical analysis of alignment or validity. And it does not consider some critical issues, such as accommodations for students with disabilities or English language learners. These other issues likely merit separate study.

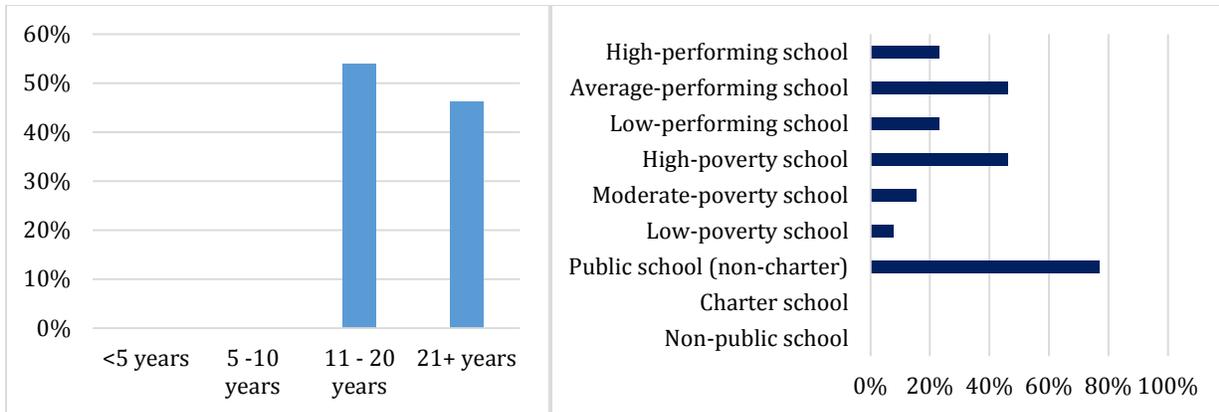
Further, there are many important issues in the current state assessment transition beyond the quality of the assessments themselves, such as instructional support and professional development. However, some teachers felt more confident in the alignment between the CCR assessment and their classroom instruction and *plans* for improving instruction as a result of their participation in the study. As one participating teacher said:

I think one big takeaway for me is that as teachers we've been brutalized by assessment in certain areas. I think that this really gave us [a chance] to look at what an assessment can be and what it can do and how it can really be part of your classroom so that teaching to the test wouldn't be a negative. If the test was really intelligently designed, it should be what you're doing. So, I think it really changes the conversation and I think that with teachers being in the forefront of policy right now, or hopefully, I think this is the one that will have the most improvement to our actual profession.

In sum, the evidence from this group of state teachers of the year – comparing the new consortia assessments to former state assessments – clearly indicates that Nevada is on the right track. Whatever pathways the state takes from here, these excellent teachers agreed that they should stay the course with regard to improving the quality of state assessments to promote CCR teaching and learning, consistent with the criteria above.

Demographics

The samples of teachers who participated in this study were too small to make statistical significance testing of the data useful; however, the data offer some consistent and interesting patterns. The teachers on the panel where the Nevada and Smarter Balanced assessments were reviewed included two teachers from Nevada. There were nine female and four male teacher on this panel. The panelists identified themselves as Caucasian (11 panelists), African American (1 panelist), and multi-racial (1 panelist). All panelists held the master's degree. The charts below present additional data on the panelists' years of teaching experience and school teaching context.



Methodology and Results

The participants were a panel of teachers, all of who have been recognized for excellence in classroom practice as State Teachers of the Year or Finalists. Teachers were selected based on their rich teaching experiences, which they could draw upon to evaluate the assessments. The panel examined two prior state assessments and one new consortia assessment. These reviews took place over two days. For this panel, there were two Nevada State Teachers of the Year or Finalists participating. The remainder of the panel consisted of State or National Teachers of the Year or Finalists with knowledge of the content taught at the 5th grade level in either English Language Arts or Mathematics.

This was a mixed methods study with four main activities that the teachers participated in on site: responding to a pre- and post-study survey of attitudes towards assessment; assigning the test items to a Webb DOK level; completing a more holistic review of the assessments when completing a survey developed for this study; and participating in a focus group discussion about the assessments examined.

Survey items appear in the center of the tables below. The teachers in this study were trained in Webb DOK primarily to assure that they engaged deeply with the assessment items through a consistent lens. The focus of this report will be on survey and the holistic evaluation of the assessments.

The survey consisted of two major components, with different response scales. The first asked participants to evaluate whether, in their judgment as an expert teacher, the assessments had “enough” of the quantity being described in the survey item. The response scale was: “More than needed”; “Enough/About right”; and “Less than needed”. The results are presented below in Table 1 for Nevada and Smarter Balanced, in two formats. The percentage of teachers who responded in each category for each assessment is shown. The percentages are shaded so that values of 50% or greater are blue.

In addition, the categories were coded as follows:

- More than needed = 3
- Enough/About right = 2
- Less than needed = 1

These values were averaged and the mean score is shown in Table 1 for each assessment as well.

The second asked participants to evaluate whether they “agreed” with statements describing the assessments in various ways in the survey item. The response scale was: “Strongly agree”; “Agree”; “Disagree”; and “Strongly disagree”. The results are presented below in Table 2 for Nevada and Smarter Balanced, in the same two formats as above and with the same shading protocol. The categories were coded as follows:

- Strongly agree = 4
- Agree = 3
- Disagree = 2
- Strongly disagree = 1

These values were averaged and the mean score is shown in Table 2 for each assessment as well.

Table 1: Nevada and Smarter Balanced: "Enough" Items

Nevada				"Amount" items	Smarter Balanced			
Less than Needed	Enough/About right	More than Needed	Mean Score (1 to 3)		Less than Needed	Enough/About right	More than Needed	Mean Score (1 to 3)
0%	23%	77%	2.8	Items that require recall, such as identification, labeling, calculating, defining, and reciting.	8%	85%	8%	2.0
15%	62%	23%	2.1	Items that require application of skills, such as graphing, categorizing, organizing, predicting, and estimating.	15%	77%	8%	1.9
85%	15%	0%	1.2	Items that require students to demonstrate strategic and extended thinking skills, such as investigation, analysis, and design.	8%	85%	8%	2.0
15%	54%	31%	2.2	Cognitive demand for low-performing 5 th grade students	8%	54%	38%	2.3
38%	54%	8%	1.7	Cognitive demand for mid-performing 5 th grade students	0%	77%	23%	2.2
100%	0%	0%	1.0	Cognitive demand for high-performing 5 th grade students	31%	69%	0%	1.7

8%	8%	85%	2.8	Items that require 5th grade students to demonstrate basic knowledge of concepts.	15%	77%	8%	1.9
17%	33%	50%	2.3	Items that surface information about 5th grade student performance at the lower ability levels to inform my instructional strategies.	23%	69%	8%	1.8
15%	46%	38%	2.2	Items that low-performing 5th grade students would be expected to get right.	54%	38%	8%	1.5
31%	38%	31%	2.0	Items that low-performing 5th grade students would be expected to get wrong.	15%	38%	46%	2.3
62%	38%	0%	1.4	Items that surface information about 5th grade student performance at the middle ability levels to inform my instructional strategies.	15%	85%	0%	1.8
31%	38%	31%	2.0	Items that mid-performing 5th grade students would be expected to get right.	15%	85%	0%	1.8
38%	54%	8%	1.7	Items the mid-performing 5th grade students would be expected to get wrong.	15%	62%	23%	2.1
92%	0%	8%	1.2	Information about 5th grade student performance at the high ability levels to inform my instructional strategies.	31%	62%	8%	1.8

54%	8%	38%	1.8	Items that high-performing 5 th grade students would be expected to get right.	17%	67%	17%	2.0
85%	8%	8%	1.2	Items that high-performing 5 th grade students would be expected to get wrong.	38%	62%	0%	1.6
23%	46%	31%	2.1	Number of items that require application of skills needed to distinguish mid-performing from low-performing 5 th grade students.	15%	77%	8%	1.9
77%	23%	0%	1.2	Number of items that require complex thinking skills needed to distinguish high-performing from mid-performing 5 th grade students.	8%	77%	15%	2.1
69%	31%	0%	1.3	The number of items that are above 5 th grade-level.	23%	62%	15%	1.9
15%	46%	38%	2.2	The number of items that are below 5 th grade-level.	46%	46%	8%	1.6
83%	17%	0%	1.2		31%	69%	0%	1.7

Table 2: Nevada and Smarter Balanced: “Agree” Items

Nevada						Smarter Balanced				
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean Score (1 to 4)		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean Score (1 to 4)
8%	62%	23%	8%	2.3	Students are required to integrate a variety of knowledge and skills from a single domain.	0%	23%	46%	31%	3.1
15%	46%	38%	0%	2.2	Students are required to transfer knowledge from different domains.	0%	8%	77%	15%	3.1
17%	58%	25%	0%	2.1	Students are required to integrate a variety of knowledge and skills from different domains.	0%	8%	75%	17%	3.1
31%	38%	23%	8%	2.1	This test provides sufficient opportunity to evaluate students' ability to communicate in writing.	0%	62%	38%	0%	2.4
31%	38%	31%	0%	2.0	This test provides sufficient opportunity to evaluate students' ability to show their reasoning when solving a problem or arguing a case.	0%	15%	69%	15%	3.0
31%	54%	15%	0%	1.8	This test strikes a balance between the number of items that require recall responses and responses that require higher-level cognitive skills.	0%	15%	69%	15%	3.0

31%	62%	8%	0%	1.8	Students are required to demonstrate complex thinking skills, such as experimentation, analysis, and synthesis.	0%	0%	77%	23%	3.2
38%	62%	0%	0%	1.6	This test is more cognitively demanding than is warranted for the 5th grade level.	0%	62%	38%	0%	2.4
0%	31%	62%	8%	2.8	This test is less cognitively demanding than is warranted for the 5th grade level.	15%	69%	15%	0%	2.0
46%	31%	23%	0%	1.8	Items on this test are consistent with what excellent 5th grade Math/ELA teachers ask their students to know and do.	0%	23%	69%	8%	2.8
23%	38%	38%	0%	2.2	Preparing students for this test would require meaningful lessons and learning, beyond skill and drill practice.	0%	0%	77%	23%	3.2
31%	46%	23%	0%	1.9	One criterion for a high-quality assessment is that the assessment allows students to transfer their learning to new situations and problems. This test meets that criterion.	0%	23%	62%	15%	2.9
23%	46%	31%	0%	2.1	This test measures an appropriately broad sampling of the ELA/Math knowledge and skills in instruction an excellent 5th grade classroom.	0%	33%	58%	8%	2.8
15%	46%	38%	0%	2.2	Excellent 5th grade instruction generally aligns with the content measured on this test.	0%	8%	85%	8%	3.0

23%	23%	54%	0%	2.3	This test measures the most important knowledge and skills to be taught in an excellent 5th grade Math/ELA classroom.	0%	23%	69%	8%	2.8
23%	31%	46%	0%	2.2	This test measures the learning outcomes that I would set for student learning in 5th grade classes.	0%	8%	85%	8%	3.0
0%	15%	46%	38%	3.2	Certain item types are emphasized more heavily on the test than is warranted for the grade level.	0%	69%	31%	0%	2.3
0%	38%	38%	23%	2.8	Certain content areas are emphasized more heavily on the test than is warranted for the grade level.	0%	85%	15%	0%	2.2
0%	38%	38%	23%	2.8	I would give more emphasis to certain content areas in 5th grade classes than the test does.	0%	69%	23%	8%	2.4
15%	46%	38%	0%	2.2	The distribution of content on the test is representative of excellent instruction at the 5th grade level.	0%	8%	85%	8%	3.0
31%	46%	23%	0%	1.9	The depth of content represented on the test is grade-level appropriate.	0%	0%	92%	8%	3.1
23%	15%	62%	0%	2.4	The range of content represented on the test is grade-level appropriate.	0%	23%	69%	8%	2.8
15%	54%	31%	0%	2.2	One criterion for a high-quality assessment is that the assessment is designed to measure whether underlying concepts have been	0%	8%	85%	8%	3.0

					taught and learned, rather than reflecting mostly test-taking skills or reflecting out-of-school experiences. This test meets that criterion.					
31%	38%	31%	0%	2.0	If I backwards-mapped a 5 th grade lesson against items like those on this test, it would help inform my lesson plan and guide me toward high quality instruction.	0%	0%	77%	23%	3.2
15%	23%	62%	0%	2.5	I would like to use formative assessments built using items from this test in a 5 th grade classroom.	0%	0%	62%	38%	3.4
0%	31%	62%	8%	2.8	The optimal formative assessments that I would give to 5 th grade students measure concepts not addressed by this test.	0%	92%	8%	0%	2.1
8%	23%	62%	8%	2.7	If used for formative assessment, items on this test would help me make decisions about instruction.	0%	0%	85%	15%	3.2
25%	25%	50%	0%	2.3	Student results from this test would give me valuable information about how students are learning.	0%	8%	83%	8%	3.0
0%	46%	54%	0%	2.5	The item types on this test are aligned with the skills they appear to be designed to measure.	0%	8%	92%	0%	2.9
31%	46%	23%	0%	1.9	This test provides a satisfactory balance between selected-response items and constructed response/performance-based items.	0%	31%	54%	15%	2.8

15%	69%	15%	0%	2.0	Low-performing students would find it easy to get most of the items on this test correct.	46%	54%	0%	0%	1.5
0%	8%	85%	8%	3.0	Mid-performing students would find it easy to get most of the items on this test correct.	8%	62%	31%	0%	2.2
0%	0%	46%	54%	3.5	High-performing students would find it easy to get most of the items on this test correct.	8%	15%	69%	8%	2.8
23%	54%	23%	0%	2.0	Low-performing students would generally perform well on this test.	38%	62%	0%	0%	1.6
0%	0%	92%	8%	3.1	Mid-performing students would generally perform well on this test.	0%	46%	54%	0%	2.5
0%	0%	54%	46%	3.5	High-performing students would generally perform well on this test.	0%	0%	69%	31%	3.3
8%	77%	15%	0%	2.1	Students would likely be authentically engaged in items from this test.	0%	38%	62%	0%	2.6

The purpose of this study was to examine the responses of some of our nation's best teachers in regard to questions about existing state assessments and the new consortia tests in terms of their item complexity and alignment with what is currently taught in 5th grade classrooms. The detailed data presented herein highlight the specific assessment formerly given in your state and the new consortium assessment to offer some insights for your consideration. We trust that these data will prove useful.