

Back-to-School Assessment Playbook

**Using the Smarter Balanced
Assessment System to
Improve Student Learning**



smarter
BALANCED 
Beyond Standard

Smarter Balanced offers a balanced assessment approach, putting teachers and students on a path to progress throughout the school year. Tools for Teachers and Interim Assessments are free for members to use in support of high-quality instruction that lifts students to end-of-year targets.

The Smarter Balanced Assessment System has three main components: Summative Assessments, Interim Assessments, and Tools for Teachers.

Summative Assessments provide data and information for policymakers and

stakeholders that can be used to support fairness and help prioritize additional resources. Teachers, families, and students can use Summative Assessments to support conversations about educational goals.

Interim Assessments give educators information they can use to inform instruction well before they see a report of yearly results. The Interim Assessments match the style and rigor of the Summative Assessments, so educators can see how near students are to the target goals. Interim Assessments can be administered in a standardized way to help students become familiar with the format and tools of the Summative Assessment. Interim Assessments can also be used in other ways, such as:

- ✎ Displaying selected items through a service provider's item viewer,
- ✎ Solving items collaboratively in class on white boards,
- ✎ Incorporating peer feedback with brief writes or performance tasks, or
- ✎ Using a test item as an entrance or exit ticket to check students' prior knowledge or how well they've understood a lesson.

Tools for Teachers is a website where educators can find teacher-created and vetted learning resources that address the same skills targeted in the Interim Assessments. The resources and strategies in Tools for Teachers can be accessed in two ways:

- I. The Interim Connections Playlist associated with interim topics can be accessed via a link in the Smarter Reporting System. (Check with your service provider if you use their reporting system.)
- II. By searching a key word or standard on the Tools for Teachers website to supplement your curriculum with extra support and differentiation on a tested skill or concept.

"I like to use the Interim Assessment in my classroom three times a year. You can break them into pieces ... and kids can see consistent progress ..."

ELA Teacher, Washington

Returning to School

This Playbook explains how to make the Smarter Balanced Assessment System work for you. Note, the system is flexible to use so you can create a custom plan for high-quality instruction tailored to your academic focus. Here are some examples of how the Smarter Balanced Assessment System can support your goals and needs.

- 🔗 Members, or State Education Agencies, may use this document to support policies and the development of their training materials that, in turn, support school districts, or Local Education Agencies.
- 🔗 Local Education Agencies may use this Playbook to learn about resources that are available to support their instructional program plans.
- 🔗 Curriculum and instructional leaders may use this Playbook as a resource to help develop plans for the assessment processes educators will use during instruction.
- 🔗 Organizations that advocate for high-quality instruction may use this document as part of their advocacy efforts to disseminate information regarding best practices.

“I use Interim Assessment Blocks to understand where my students are at academically and see what areas they might need more support around and what areas they excel in.”

ELA Teacher, Nevada

As you begin a new school year, use this Playbook to plan how you will use the Smarter Balanced Assessment System. The Playbook includes three sections.

- I. Choosing and Using the Right Resources
- II. Teaching and Measuring Learning Goals
- III. The Unique Role of the Interim Comprehensive Assessment (ICA)



Choosing and Using the Right Resources

Given that high-quality instruction includes embedded assessment, Smarter Balanced offers a variety of formative assessment and instructional resources teachers can use according to their classroom needs.

Balance Assessment with Informed Instruction

Tools for Teachers offers high-quality Instructional Resource lessons created by and for teachers to supplement curriculum or reteach important skills. Formative Assessment Strategies and Accessibility Strategies are built into the lessons and can be used independently to make any curriculum more powerful. Tools for Teachers also offers Interim Connections Playlists that align instruction to interim results as well as professional learning resources.

The strategic use of Interim Assessment Blocks (IABs) and Focused Assessment Blocks (FIABs) throughout the year offers actionable information about students' performance on assessed standards to help teachers adjust their instruction. Each interim is associated with an Interim Connections Playlist (ICP) that provides a performance progression describing what students know/can do at the different scoring levels (below, near, above standard). The ICP also include links to Instructional Resource lessons that offer support for topics on the associated interim. Note, the Interim Connections Playlists can be accessed via a link on the Smarter Reporting System or directly through the Tools for Teachers search feature. Educators may use the Interim Assessments and the Interim Connections Playlists together or independently to best suit their teaching and learning goals.

Smarter Balanced Resources Support Grade-Level Instruction

Consistent with recommendations from Council of Great City Schools, Student Achievement Partners, and The New Teacher Project (TNTP), grade-level knowledge should be the priority so students can access grade-level content in subsequent years.

Smarter Balanced Interim Assessments are designed to measure grade-level knowledge and skills based on detailed test blueprints and specifications. Smarter Balanced works with educators, students, and experts in the field to design and continue to review the assessment system and make it transparent. This includes fairness and sensitivity reviews of Smarter Balanced assessments. All test items receive rigorous vetting to ensure that they are valid and reliable, and as possible, reflect Smarter Balanced's research into topics of interest to students.

“The thing that I see working about the Interim Assessments is just putting tools into teachers’ hands that are going to provide opportunities for their students to be successful.”

Middle School Principal, Oregon

The Interim Assessments include an array of accessibility resources to improve the access students have to grade-level content and increase the accuracy of information that teachers get from the results of the tests. All Smarter Balanced assessments are designed so that all students—no matter their accessibility needs and preferences—can participate meaningfully in the tests and demonstrate what they know and can do. The Interim Assessments include all the accessibility resources that are available in the Summative Assessment to allow for consistent accessibility supports across the two types of assessments. Smarter Balanced accessibility resources include over 60 embedded in the testing platform or locally-provided resources that are stratified into three tiers. (1) Universal tools (e.g., digital notepad, scratch paper) are available to all students based on student preference and selection. (2) Designated supports (e.g., translated glossary, color overlays) are available to students for whom a need has been indicated by an educator or team of educators (along with the student and their family) familiar with the student’s instructional needs. (3) Accommodations (e.g., braille, closed captioning) are available to students with a documented need noted in an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) or Section 504 Plan. Accessibility resources give students an opportunity to show what they know so teachers get an accurate and actionable picture of all students’ at grade-level learning. Smarter Balanced regularly adds more resources to the Interim Assessments so that teachers can continue to meet their students’ individual needs.

Tools for Teachers supports and scaffolds instruction with grade-level content standards by including:

- 🔗 Language Goals to support English learners as well as other students who may benefit
- 🔗 Success Criteria so that students understand what is expected of them
- 🔗 Ideas for differentiation for extra support and challenge activities
- 🔗 Scripted questions to support new teachers and substitute teachers
- 🔗 Depth of Knowledge (DOK) levels to ensure skills are approached with adequate rigor
- 🔗 Formative Assessment Strategies to elicit what students know and can do so just-in-time adjustments can be made, and
- 🔗 Accessibility Strategies to ensure all students can participate in the lesson activities.

Using Formative Assessment with Instruction

Teachers can begin capturing information about what students know and can do by incorporating formative assessment strategies from Tools for Teachers into their Tier 1 instruction. These strategies can give teachers a quick picture of students' understanding before, during, or after a lesson.

Begin Instruction

Tier 1 Curriculum
and **Tools for
Teachers
Formative
Assessment
Strategies**



Smarter Balanced
**Interims (IABs or
FIABs)**



Informed Instruction

**Tools for
Teachers Interim
Connections
Playlists**
for next
instructional
steps

For a more granular view of students' understanding, teachers can use IABs or FIABs. During the implementation of a multi-day lesson or unit, a teacher may want to select and administer a Smarter Balanced Interim Assessment that is aligned to the content of instruction to gather information about what students are learning and what they need to know.

Interim Assessments can be leveraged during the school year to best align with locally determined needs and scheduled with local guidance. Interim Assessments can provide information alongside other data sources to help the teacher assess the rigor and approach of their Tier 1 instruction as well as to supplement instruction to meet their students' individual needs. Teachers can find a collection of Tools for Teachers instructional resources aligned to the IABs and FIABs on the associated Interim Connections Playlists. The Interim Connections Playlists also contain the academic language used in the assessments. Teachers can include this language in their Tier 1 instruction so that students can move seamlessly between language of instruction and the language of assessment.

When deployed systematically, a feedback loop of formative assessment data and adjusted instruction is a proven way to keep students on track to meet end-of-year performance targets.



Teaching and Measuring Learning Goals

Part of Smarter Balanced's mission is to support assessment literacy by helping educators understand the performance targets and rigor students will face on the Summative Assessment. School districts, or Local Education Agencies, can use this information to make decisions about what content to prioritize.

Teachers can use the [Smarter Content Explorer](#) to review the assessed targets that cover the content standards. They can also review the test blueprints with range-level achievement descriptors, evidence statements, and item types.

Use the **Smarter Content Explorer** to deeply understand the knowledge and skills covered by the targets assessed in a **Smarter Balanced Interim Assessment Block**



Choose the right Interim Assessments based on the blueprints available in the **Content Explorer** or based on the items in the **Smarter Interim Assessment Item Portal**

Flexibility to Prioritize Content

The Smarter Balanced Assessment System was designed to help educators collect and act on evidence of student learning of college- and career-ready standards. Educators can use a variety of Smarter Balanced resources to help them prioritize and integrate Interim Assessments into their planned instructional scope and sequence for the year.

For example, teachers can use the Interim Assessment Item Portal (IAIP) available in Tools for Teachers to view selected individual assessment items to tailor content covered by an Interim Assessment, so it better aligns with the sequence of their instruction. With the ability to view assessment items, educators can better understand assessment content to guide year-long planning and expose students over time to like-items they may experience on the Summative Assessment.

An Exemplar: Mapping the Interim Assessments Based on Learning Goals

Smarter Balanced interim assessments can be used to inform instruction, while maintaining a rigorous formative assessment process. They are aligned to the same state content standards as the Smarter Balanced Summative Assessment and can be mapped to any curriculum to ensure students are able to meet grade-level expectations. See the [Interim Assessment Overview](#) for more information. However, for educators who wish to prioritize or emphasize specific content, [Student Achievement Partners](#) (SAP) has recommendations for [Priority Instructional Content in English Language Arts/Literacy and Mathematics](#) to help educators focus learning on foundational concepts at each grade level to reinforce the overall coherence of college- and career-ready standards.

Tables 1 and 2 show how Smarter Balanced Interim Assessments Blocks (IABs) and Focused Interim Assessment Blocks (FIABs) align with Student Achievement Partners' major work focus at each grade for educators who want to map assessments to a prioritized instructional scope.

Table 1 shows F/IABs aligned with Student Achievement Partners' major work for mathematics for grades 3–8.

Table 1. Mathematics

Grade	SAP Major Work Focus	Smarter Balanced Interim Assessments Aligned to SAP Major Work Focus**					
3	SAP Grade 3 Focus Document	Properties of Multiplication and Division Time, Volume, and Mass	Multiply and Divide within 100 Number and Operations—Fractions	Operations and Algebraic Thinking* Linear and Area Measurement	Multiplication and Division: Interpret, Represent, and Solve	Measurement and Data*	Four Operations: Interpret, Represent, and Solve
4	SAP Grade 4 Focus Document	Fraction Equivalence and Ordering Place Value and Multi-Digit Whole Numbers	Fractions and Decimal Notation Number and Operations—Fractions	Four Operations: Interpret, Represent, and Solve	Number and Operations in Base Ten*	Build Fractions from Unit Fractions	Multi-Digit Arithmetic: Place Value and Operations
5	SAP Grade 5 Focus Document	Operations with Whole Numbers and Decimals	Add and Subtract with Equivalent Fractions	Number and Operations in Base Ten*	Number and Operations—Fractions*	Place Value System	Volume Concepts
6	SAP Grade 6 Focus Document	The Number System* Rational Number System	Divide Fractions by Fractions Algebraic Expressions	Expressions and Equations* One-Variable Expressions and Equations	Dependent and Independent Variables	Ratios and Proportional Relationships	One-Variable Expressions and Equations
7	SAP Grade 7 Focus Document	Ratios and Proportional Relationships	The Number System	Equivalent Expressions	Expressions and Equations*	Algebraic Expressions and Equations	
8	SAP Grade 8 Focus Document	Congruence and Similarity	Proportional Relationships, Lines, and Linear Equations	Analyze and Solve Linear Equations	Expressions and Equations I*	Functions	Geometry*

*Tests denoted with an asterisk are IABs. Tests without an asterisk are Focused Interim Assessment Blocks. **Major work as defined by Student Achievement Partners

ADDITIONAL SUGGESTIONS

-  Use the [Sample Items Website](#) (SIW) and the [Interim Assessment Item Portal](#) (IAIP) as a resource for formative assessment, such as entrance/exit tickets, that can be used with any instruction.
-  Use assessments in non-standard ways during instruction, such as modeling, metacognitive discussions, and differentiated group or partner work to support and enhance learning.

Table 2 describes text-based learning objectives for English Language Arts/Literacy as recommended by Student Achievement Partners. Rather than isolating each of these skills, educators should look for opportunities to engage their students in activities that reinforce these 14 foundational standards. Items on these Interim Assessments assess this collective body of standards, except for two standards, which are best observed directly by the teacher:

-  RF.4: Describes students' abilities to read with fluency throughout the grade levels, which may include aspects in lower grades such as phonics, decoding, and syllabication.
-  SL.1: Describes students' abilities to engage in a variety of effective collaborative conversations.

In addition, two standards (RI.10 and RL.10) describe year-end skills to read and comprehend information and literary texts. These standards underpin each test question found on the reading interims because test questions draw upon grade-level text. While no individual item in the Smarter Balanced assessment is aligned to these specific standards, the collective body of items in the reading claim inherently address them.

Table 2. English Language Arts/Literacy

Grade	SAP Learning Objectives	Smarter Balanced Interim Assessments Aligned to SAP Learning Objectives**		
3-11	Provide sequences of questions that engage students deeply with the text and build understanding. Cultivate a student's ability to read carefully and grasp information—both what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from text.	Read Literary Texts*	Read Informational Texts*	Performance Task*
3-11	Use text-based questions to focus on academic and domain-specific words.	Read Literary Texts*	Read Informational Texts*	Language and Vocabulary Use
3-11	Within writing opportunities, address students' ability to demonstrate command of writing and conventions.	Editing	Performance Task*	Write and Revise Narrative Texts Write and Revise Informational/Explanatory Texts Write and Revise Opinion/Argumentative Texts
3-11	Participate in research tasks where students explore multiple texts and auxiliary resources to build knowledge on a topic.	Research: Interpret and Integrate Information Research: Analyze Information and Sources Research: Use Evidence	Performance Task*	Research/Inquiry*
3-11	Encourage students to cite specific text evidence when supporting their own points in writing. Evaluate others' use of evidence.	Read Literary Texts*	Read Informational Texts*	Performance Task*
3-11	Provide a variety of text-dependent writing and speaking task options for students to express their comprehension, knowledge, and skills.	Write and Revise Narrative Texts Write and Revise Informational/Explanatory Texts Write and Revise Opinion/Argumentative Texts	Listen/Interpret	Performance Task*

*Tests denoted with an asterisk are an Interim Assessment Block. Tests without an asterisk are Focused Interim Assessment Blocks.

**Learning Objectives as defined by Student Achievement Partners

ADDITIONAL SUGGESTIONS

- Use the Interim Performance Tasks as opportunities to support reading and writing across content areas.
- Use the reading passages in the interims and assessment items as an opportunity for close reading and additional formative assessment evidence.
- Use the [Smarter Annotated Response Tool](#) (SmART) to better understand how student responses to performance task items are scored on Smarter Balanced assessments and support writing instruction. The rubric linked to annotated student samples can help teachers, students, and families understand grade-level expectations. These materials can be used in process writing lessons for revision, self-assessment, and peer assessment.



The Unique Role of the Interim Comprehensive Assessment (ICA)

Most of the Smarter Balanced Interim Assessment Blocks (IABs) were designed for students to complete within a class period. This design supports teachers embedding the IABs between instruction for a multi-day lesson. Interim Comprehensive Assessments (ICAs), however, were designed to measure a broader set of content and provide a high-level overview of students' strengths and areas in need of improvement.

Some local agencies have found ICAs to be helpful:

- As a source of information if a student is new to the state and educational records are not available,
- When prioritizing the allocation of additional instructional support, and
- As a mid-year check to determine progress.

While student responses to the items from an ICA might be leveraged as part of the formative assessment process, it is more likely that the IABs will better meet educators' needs at the beginning of the school year.

The diagram below describes the cases in which an ICA and IAB are likely most useful.

Interim Comprehensive Assessment (ICA)

- Students new to the state whose educational record is incomplete.
- A mid-year progress check.

Interim Assessment Blocks (IAB)

- Small sets of test questions from the IABs may be used during instruction as part of a teacher's formative assessment process.
- Tests may be administered partway through instruction in support of the formative assessment process, and teachers can use the Interim Connections Playlists in Tools for Teachers to access resources aligned with the test results.
- Tests may be administered at the end of a unit as part of a teacher's process to determine if students have learned the skills identified by the content standards.

Conclusion

The Smarter Balanced dynamic system of tools was designed in consultation with educators from across the nation to help inform teaching and learning. However, in response to changing needs, teaching and learning continue to evolve at a greater rate than they have in the past. The consortium of Smarter Balanced member states will engage in a continuous improvement process to help address the emerging needs of both educators and students in utilizing formative and Interim Assessment resources.

Special thanks to Student Achievement Partners for its contribution to this document.

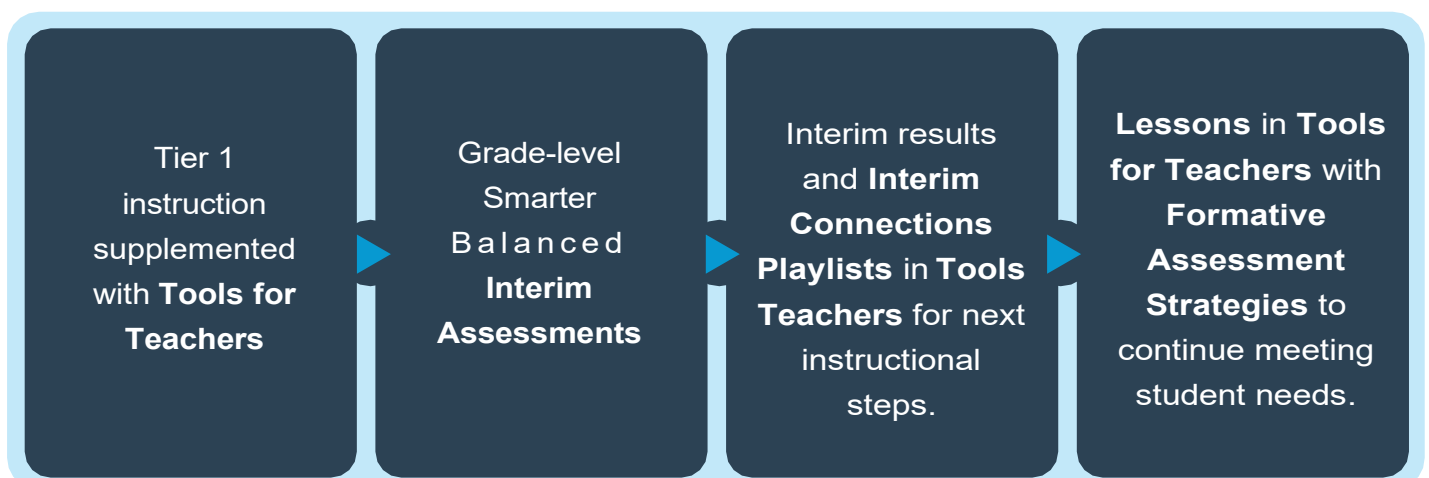
Questions & Answers

Can Smarter Balanced Interim Assessments measure knowledge and skills from a student's prior grade?

The primary purpose of the Smarter Balanced Interim Assessments is to support instruction. For example, when choosing which Interim Assessment to use, an educator may select assessments aligned to the students' enrolled grade or outside of the enrolled grade (above or below), depending on which might be the best tool to measure students' knowledge and skills.

While this flexibility is intentional to support a variety of different scenarios, educators should use great caution when considering assessments that target below grade-level content given that instructional time is limited during the year and grade-level content requirements alone are significant. Additionally, the support that students need to successfully engage with the grade-level content is often more nuanced and better understood through focused tasks or discussions than by administering an entire Interim Assessment.

A possible model that emphasizes grade-level content and helps address students' specific needs regarding content from prior grades is:



Can the Smarter Balanced Interim Assessments be used before instruction starts?

As described above, the preferred process is to use formative assessment strategies to gain insights following instruction. However, teachers may instead select and administer a Smarter Balanced Interim Assessment that is aligned to the skills included in their upcoming units. This may be helpful to inform lesson planning so that teachers are better able to meet students' diverse instructional needs.

As described below, a teacher may administer an Interim Assessment, then use the data provided to analyze students' scores and student responses to items, including a distractor analysis. In addition, the teacher may also use the Interim Connections Playlists to plan next instructional steps to address specific students' needs.



How is the purpose of the Interim Assessments different from the Summative Assessment?

The Interim Assessments are designed to be resources that teachers use to adjust instruction and help students accelerate their learning. By strategically using the Interim Assessments to gather detailed information about what students know and can do throughout the year, educators can make evidence-based instructional decisions that accelerate student learning toward achieving proficiency in grade-level content.

The Summative Assessment is an end-of-year test designed to serve as a signal of high-quality instruction, support policymakers' decision making, provide comparable information across schools and districts within a state, and support accountability systems. These are critical uses, and they help ensure that the educational system attends to the educational needs of all students and clearly communicates its progress in helping all students achieve college and career readiness.

In what ways are the Interim and Summative Assessments similar?

Some significant elements of design exist that are common among the Smarter Balanced Interim and Summative Assessments:

-  Items were written and reviewed for fairness and bias in the same manner.
-  Items were written and reviewed for accuracy, content alignment, and grade-level alignment in the same manner.
-  Items were field tested in the same manner at the same time.
-  Items were calibrated and placed on the same scale; and
-  Items include the same accessibility features and resources.

In addition, Smarter Balanced Interim Comprehensive Assessments have similar blueprints to the full-form Summative Assessments.