

Vermont State Board of Education
Statement and Resolution on Assessment and Accountability

Adopted August 19, 2014

The Vermont State Board of Education is committed to ensuring that all students develop the knowledge, capabilities and dispositions they need to thrive as citizens in their communities, higher education and their careers in the 21st century. The Board of Education's Education Quality Standards (EQS) rules aim to ensure that all students in Vermont public schools are afforded educational opportunities that are substantially equal in quality, and enable them to achieve or exceed the standards approved by the State Board of Education.

These rules were designed to ensure continuous improvement in student performance, instruction and leadership, so that all students are able to develop high levels of skill and capability across seven essential domains: literacy, mathematics, scientific inquiry and knowledge, global citizenship, physical and health education and wellness, artistic expression, and transferable 21st century skills.

To achieve these goals, educators need to make use of diverse indicators of student learning and strengths, in order to comprehensively assess student progress and adjust their practice to continuously improve learning. They also need to document the opportunities schools provide to further the goals of equity and growth.

Uniform standardized tests, administered across all schools, are a critical tool for schools' improvement efforts. Without some stable and valid external measure, we cannot evaluate how effective we are in our efforts to improve schools and learning. Standardized tests – along with teacher-developed assessments and student work samples -- can give educators and citizens insight into the skills, knowledge and capabilities our students have developed.

What standardized tests can do that teacher developed tests cannot do is give us reliable, comparative data. We can use test scores to tell whether we are doing better over time. Of particular note, standardized tests help monitor how well we serve students with different life circumstances and challenges. When used appropriately, standardized tests are a sound and objective way to evaluate student progress.

Despite their value, there are many things tests cannot tell us. Standardized tests like the NECAP and soon, the SBAC, can tell us something about how students are doing in a limited set of narrowly defined subjects overall, as measured at a given time. However, they cannot tell us how to help students do even better. Nor can they adequately capture the strengths of all children, nor the growth that can be ascribed to individual teachers. And under high-stakes conditions, when schools feel extraordinary pressure to raise scores, even rising scores may not be a signal that students are actually learning more. At best, a standardized test is an incomplete picture of learning: without additional measures, a single test is inadequate to capture a years' worth of learning and growth.

Along a related dimension, the American Psychological Association wrote:

“(N)o test is valid for all purposes. Indeed, tests vary in their intended uses and in their ability to provide meaningful assessments of student learning. Therefore, while the goal of using large-scale testing to measure and improve student and school system performance is laudable, it is also critical that such tests are sound, are scored properly, and are used appropriately.”

Unfortunately, the way in which standardized tests have been used under federal law as almost the single measure of school quality has resulted in the frequent misuse of these instruments across the nation.

Because of the risk of inappropriate uses of testing, the Vermont State Board of Education herewith adopts a series of guiding principles for the appropriate use of standardized tests to support continuous improvements of learning.

1. The Proper Role of Standardized Testing – The purpose of any large scale assessment must be clearly stated and the assessments must be demonstrated as scientifically and empirically valid for that purpose(s) prior to their use. This includes research and verification as to whether a student’s performance on tests is actually predictive of performance on other indicators we care about, including post-secondary success, graduation rates and future employment.

In addition, standardized test results should be used only in concert with a diverse set of measures that capture evidence of student growth and school impact across all important outcomes outlined in the Education Quality Standards.

2. Public Reporting Requirement - It is a state and local obligation to report on the quality of the schools to the citizenry. Standardized testing is part of this reporting obligation. The state board encourages local public reporting of a diverse and comprehensive set of school quality indicators in local school, faculty and community communications.
3. Judicious and Proportionate Testing - The State Board of Education advocates for reducing the amount of time spent on summative, standardized testing and encourages the federal government to reduce the current requirements for annual testing in multiple subjects in every grade, 3-8, and then again in high school. Excessive testing diverts resources and time away from learning while providing little additional value for accountability purposes.
4. Test Development Criteria - Any broad scale standardized assessment used in the state of Vermont must be developed and used appropriately in accord with the

principles adopted by the American Educational Research Association, the National Council on Measurement in Education, and the American Psychological Association.

5. Value-added scores – Although the federal government is encouraging states to use value added scores for teacher, principal and school evaluations, this policy direction is not appropriate. A strong body of recent research has found that there is no valid method of calculating “value-added” scores which compare pass rates from one year to the next, nor do current value-added models adequately account for factors outside the school that influence student performance scores. Thus, other than for research or experimental purposes, this technique will not be employed in Vermont schools for any consequential purpose.
6. Mastery level or Cut-Off scores – While the federal government continues to require the use of subjectively determined, cut-off scores; employing such metrics lacks scientific foundation. The skills needed for success in society are rich and diverse. Consequently, there is no single point on a testing scale that has proven accurate in measuring the success of a school or in measuring the talents of an individual. Claims to the contrary are technically indefensible and their application would be unethical.

The use of cut-off scores reports findings only at one point on a statistical distribution. Scale scores provide significantly more information. They allow a more valid disaggregation of scores by sub-group, provide better measures of progress and provide a more comprehensive view of achievement gaps.

7. Use of cut scores and proficiency categories for reporting purposes - Under NCLB states are required to report school level test results in terms of the Percentage of Proficient Students. The federally mandated reporting method has several well-documented negative effects that compromise our ability to meaningfully examine schools’ improvement efforts:
 - Interpretations based on “percent proficient” hides the full range of scores and how they have changed. Thus, underlying trends in performance are often hidden.
 - The targets established for proficiency are subjectively determined and are not based on research. Interpretations based on “percent proficient” also lack predictive validity.
 - Modest changes to these subjective cut scores can dramatically affect the percent of students who meet the target. Whether a cut score is set high or

low arbitrarily changes the size of the achievement gap independent of the students' learning. Thus, the results can be misleading.

So that we can more validly and meaningfully describe school- and state-level progress, the State Board of Education endorses reporting performance in terms of scale scores and standard deviations rather than percent proficient. We will comply with federal requirements, but will emphasize defensible and useful reporting metrics.

8. The Federal, State and Local Obligation for Assuring Adequacy and Equality of Opportunity – Much as the state must insure a high quality education for all children, the school must be provided with adequate and equitable resources from the federal, state and local governments and must use these resources wisely and judiciously. Thus, any report on a school based on the state's EQS standards must also include a report on the adequacy of resources provided by or to that school in light of the school's unique needs. Such evaluations shall address the adequacy of resources, the judicious use of resources and identify any deficiencies.

Resolution on Assessment and Accountability Vermont State Board of Education

WHEREAS, our nation and Vermont's future well-being relies on a high-quality public education system that prepares all students for college, careers, citizenship and lifelong learning, and strengthens the nation's and the state's social and economic well-being; and

WHEREAS, our nation's school systems have been spending growing amounts of time, money and energy on high-stakes standardized testing, in which student performance on standardized tests is used to make major decisions affecting individual students, educators and schools; and

WHEREAS, the overreliance on high-stakes standardized testing in state and federal accountability systems is undermining educational quality and equity in the nation's public schools by hampering educators' efforts to focus on the broad range of learning experiences that promote the innovation, creativity, problem solving, collaboration, communication, critical thinking and deep subject-matter knowledge that will allow students to thrive in a democracy and an increasingly global society and economy; and

WHEREAS, it is widely recognized that standardized testing is an inadequate and often unreliable measure of both student learning and educator effectiveness; and

WHEREAS, a compelling body of national research shows the over-emphasis on standardized testing has caused considerable collateral damage in areas such as narrowing the curriculum, teaching to the test, reducing love of learning, pushing students out of school, and undermining school climate; and

WHEREAS, high-stakes standardized testing has negative effects for students from all backgrounds, and especially for low-income students, English language learners, children of color, and those with disabilities; and

WHEREAS, the culture and structure of the systems in which students learn must change in order to foster engaging school experiences that promote joy in learning, depth of thought and breadth of knowledge for students; therefore be it

RESOLVED that the Vermont State Board of Education requests that the Secretary of Education reexamine public school accountability systems in this state, and develop a system based on multiple forms of assessment which has at its center qualitative assessments, does not require extensive standardized testing, more accurately reflects the broad range of student learning, decreases the role of compliance monitoring, and is used to support students and improve schools; and

RESOLVED, that the Vermont State Board of Education calls on the United States Congress and Administration to accordingly amend the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (currently known as the "No Child Left Behind Act") to reduce the testing mandates, promote multiple forms of evidence of student learning and school quality, eschew the use of student test scores in evaluating educators, and allow flexibility that reflects the unique circumstances of all states; and

RESOLVED that the Vermont State Board of Education calls on other state and national organizations to act in concert with these goals to improve and broaden educational goals, provide adequate resources, and ensure a high quality education for all children of the state and the nation.