

Interpretation and Use of Scores and Achievement Levels

States in the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (Smarter Balanced) will report scores on its assessments in several ways, which can serve different purposes for their stakeholders. **Scale scores** are the basic units of reporting. These scores, which fall along a continuous vertical scale (from approximately 2000 to 3000) that increases across grade levels, can be used to illustrate students' current level of achievement and their growth over time in a relatively fine-grained fashion. When aggregated, these scores can also describe school- or district-level changes in performance on the tests and can measure gaps in achievement among different groups of students.

Smarter Balanced has also developed a set of initial, policy **achievement level descriptors** (ALDs) for English language arts/Literacy (ELA/Literacy) and mathematics that are aligned with the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and the Smarter Balanced assessment claims. The purpose of these descriptors is to specify, in content terms, the knowledge and skills that students display at four levels of achievement (i.e., Level 1, Level 2, Level 3, and Level 4), which in some contexts may also be described qualitatively in terms such as “novice, developing, proficient, advanced” or others.¹

Defining these levels of achievement (“Achievement Levels”) is a reporting feature that is federally required under the No Child Left Behind Act, and one that has become familiar to many educators. However, characterizing a student’s achievement solely in terms of falling in one of four categories is an oversimplification. Achievement Levels should serve only as a starting point for discussion about the performance of students and of groups of students. That is, the Achievement Levels should not be interpreted as infallible predictors of students’ futures. They must continuously be validated, and should be used only in the context of the multiple sources of information that we have about students and schools. Achievement level descriptors do not equate directly to expectations for “on-grade” performance; rather, they represent differing levels of performance for students within a grade level. Additionally, the Achievement Levels do not preclude or replace other methods of evaluating assessment results, including measures of year-to-year growth that use the underlying scale scores.

¹ The Achievement Level Descriptors were developed based on the feedback of reviewers who engaged in a validation process based on examining the Common Core State Standards in each content area and the items on the examination. Additional research will be needed to validate the achievement level descriptors in relation to the actual success rates of students when they enter college and careers.

Although the Achievement Level Descriptors are intended to aid interpretation of Achievement Levels, they will be less precise than scale scores for describing student gains over time or changes in achievement gaps among groups, since they do not reveal changes of student scores within the bands defined by the achievement levels. Furthermore, there is not a critical shift in student knowledge or understanding that occurs at a single cut score point. Thus, the achievement levels should be understood as representing approximations of levels at which students demonstrate mastery of a set of concepts and skills, and the scale scores just above and below an achievement level as within a general band of performance.

As Smarter Balanced states consider these Achievement Levels, they will continue to investigate and apply a variety of methods of analyzing and reporting the data that provide information to their students, parents and teachers, including but not limited to student and student subgroup averages, medians, and other descriptive statistics that utilize the underlying vertical scale.

The Achievement Level Descriptors presented here are linked to an operational definition of **college content-readiness** to inform score interpretation for high schools and colleges. In particular, a score at or above “Level 3” in 11th grade is meant to suggest conditional evidence of readiness for entry-level, transferable, credit-bearing college courses. Since college readiness encompasses a wide array of knowledge, skills, and dispositions, only some of which can be measured by the Smarter Balanced assessments, “college readiness” in this context is defined as “content-readiness” in the core areas of ELA/Literacy and mathematics.

High schools may combine scores at 11th grade with additional data (courses completed, grades, portfolios, performance assessments, other test data) to determine appropriate courses of study and supports for students in the 12th grade. Similarly, as colleges interpret scores on Smarter Balanced assessments, they are encouraged to evaluate additional data (courses completed, grades, portfolios, performance assessments) to determine admissions, advisement, and placement in developmental or credit-bearing courses.

Smarter Balanced does not yet have a parallel operational definition and framework for **career readiness**.

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