



Still on the Right Trajectory

State Teachers of the Year Compare Former and New State Assessments

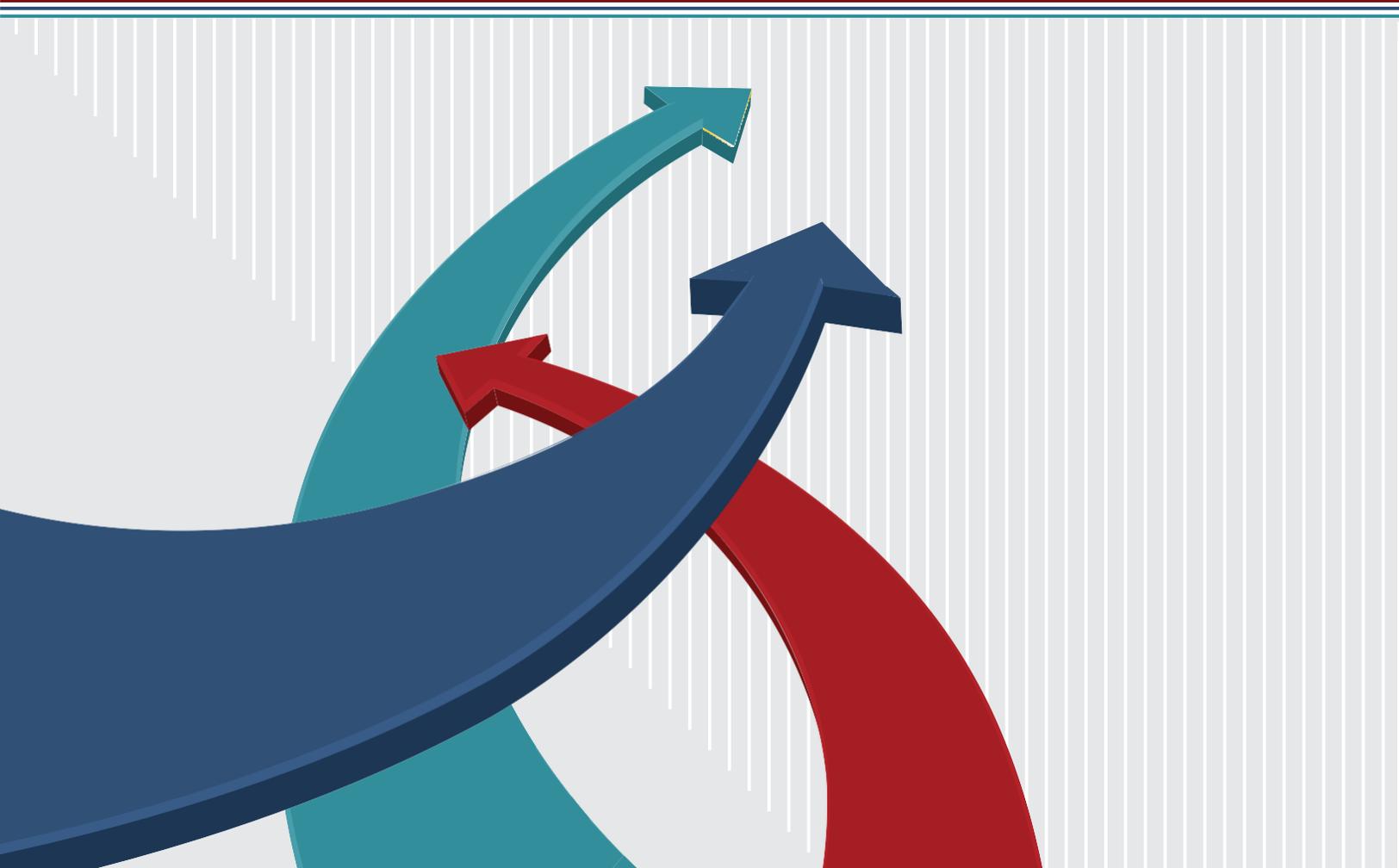
National Network of State Teachers of the Year

Catherine McClellan, Ph.D.

Jilliam Joe, Ph.D.

Katherine Bassett, M.Ed.

December 2016





Still on the Right Trajectory: State Teachers of the Year Compare Former and New State Assessments

Executive Summary

Still on the Right Trajectory follows *The Right Trajectory* (2015) with additional insight on the value new state assessments add to the measurement of student outcomes. A panel of the best teachers in the country convened to give voice to critical questions about the quality of former and new state assessments, with particular attention paid to the new consortium test under study. These front-line experts believe that despite challenges still to be overcome, Smarter Balanced is an improvement on the former assessments and represents movement in the right direction for students and for education in their states.

What do great teachers think of the new assessments compared with the previous ones?

As part of state transitions to college- and career-ready (CCR) standards, including the Common Core State Standards in more than 40 states (NGA & CCSSO, 2010), states are for the first time administering new summative assessments aligned to those standards and aiming for a higher bar in assessment quality. For a majority of states, this means the “consortia assessments” – the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) or Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (Smarter Balanced). In this supplement to the original *Right Trajectory* study, we evaluate only the Smarter Balanced consortium assessment.

Assessment of student learning has always been an important part of education, but in recent years the use of assessment data to inform everything from instruction to accountability to policy decisions has made test quality a topic of much discussion. As the National Network of State Teachers of the Year (NNSTOY), we are deeply interested in understanding what excellent teachers – given the opportunity to closely examine new and an additional set of former assessments side by side – would think about Smarter Balanced, and informing the field accordingly. Simply put: *Does the new assessment still serve as a better reflection of what great teachers are doing in their classrooms? Does it still reflect higher quality than former state tests? Does the assessment still represent movement in the right direction?*

To answer these questions, we assembled a group of former State Teachers of the Year (STOYs) from multiple states, each of whom has been recognized at local and state levels for their teaching excellence. The panel reviewed the 5th grade Smarter Balanced and two prior state assessments: OAKS from Oregon and the Nevada state assessments (both states currently use Smarter Balanced).

What we found is clear: There was consensus across participating teachers that the new consortium assessment – Smarter Balanced – is an improvement and still the right trajectory. When compared with the prior state assessments examined in the study, Smarter Balanced illustrates where we should be headed in summative assessment.

Outstanding teachers can be powerful champions for assessment. As those closest to the process of preparing students for and administering new assessments, teachers often have the most

trusted perspective on the transition for students, parents and other educators. Their voices and support are essential if these new initiatives are to be successful. Several significant results from the study are highlighted below.

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.** Teachers in our study spent time meticulously examining Smarter Balanced and the former state assessments. They rated the items on the cognitive challenge required to respond to each. And while no summative assessment can capture the full range of knowledge and skills reflected in CCR teaching and learning, there was clear consensus among the teachers that the consortium assessment better reflected and measured those expectations for 5th grade students, including higher-order skills.

For example, when asked whether they agreed with the statement: “This test measures an appropriately broad sampling of the ELA/Math knowledge and skills in instruction in an excellent 5th grade classroom,” 67% of participating 5th grade teachers agreed or strongly agreed when referring to the consortium test, but less than 30%, on average, agreed when referring to the former state tests. One teacher explained: “Smarter Balanced does a better job than the other two assessments; however, the most important and authentic ELA skills are difficult to assess in this controlled type of setting.”

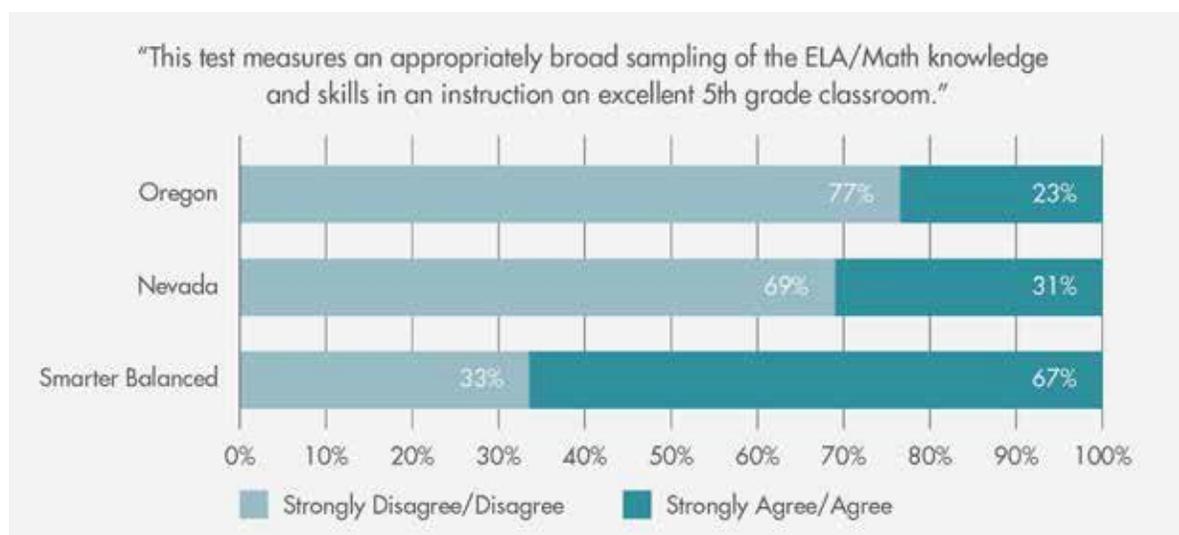


Figure 1. Percent agreement with the statement: “This test measures an appropriately broad sampling of the ELA/Math knowledge and skills in instruction in an excellent 5th grade classroom.” Detail may not add to total due to rounding.

2. **The new consortium assessment is designed to include items that better reflect a full range of cognitive complexity in a balanced way at the 5th grade level.** Teachers found that items on the new consortium test required a variety of levels of cognitive demand, whereas prior assessments were characterized as lacking questions that demanded higher levels of cognitive complexity from students. One teacher commented: “When I scored the test in terms of the depth of knowledge, ... the balance [on] Smarter Balanced to me was astonishing actually.” When asked whether they agreed with the statement: “This test strikes a balance between the number of items that require recall responses and responses that require higher-level cognitive skills,” 85% endorsed it for the 5th grade consortium test, but only 12%, on average, did so for the former state tests.

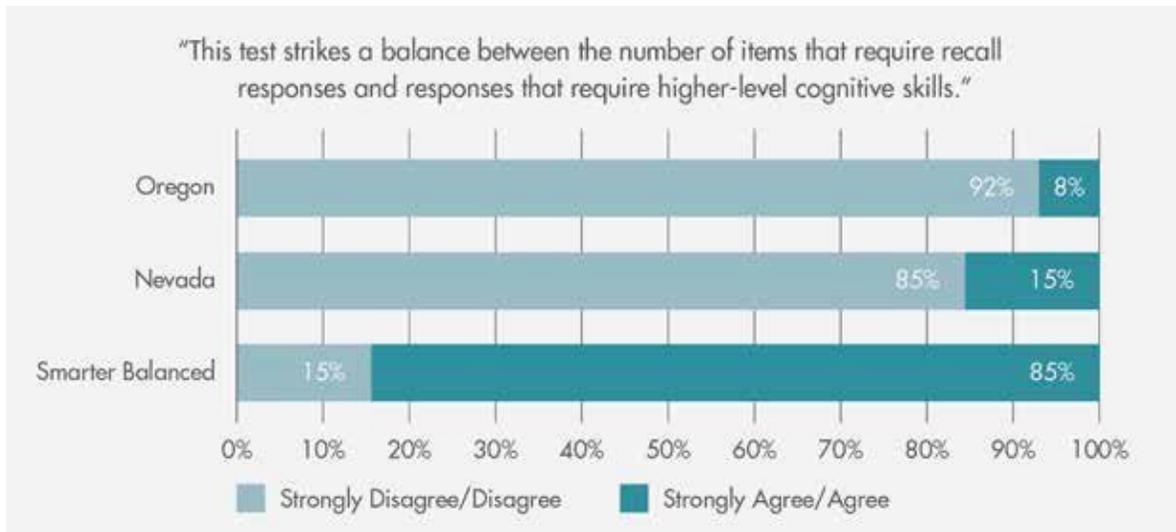


Figure 2. Percent agreement with the statement: "This test strikes a balance between the number of items that require recall responses and responses that require higher-level cognitive skills." Detail may not add to total due to rounding.

- The new consortium assessment 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.** The consortium assessment was perceived as a better reflection of the teaching and learning practices that occur in our very best classrooms. No standardized test captures all the activities of a classroom, but the most important skills and knowledge were represented on the consortium test. In addition, questions were asked in ways better aligned to the instructional practices of excellent classrooms than the previous assessments. As one teacher noted: "I think there are real pockets of excellence in the tests that you can see. Especially in some of the more complex questions and in some of the more in-depth questions, particularly with [Smarter Balanced]." Another told us: "I do believe that the [Smarter Balanced] tests are aligned for this. The [other] tests are moderate level tests with limited higher level critical thinking."

These teachers found the new assessment more representative of meaningful instruction, both in content and delivery, in well-taught classrooms. All of the teachers agreed or strongly agreed "preparing students for this test would require meaningful lessons and learning, beyond skill and drill practice," but only 35%, on average, agreed or strongly agreed with the statements for the prior state tests.

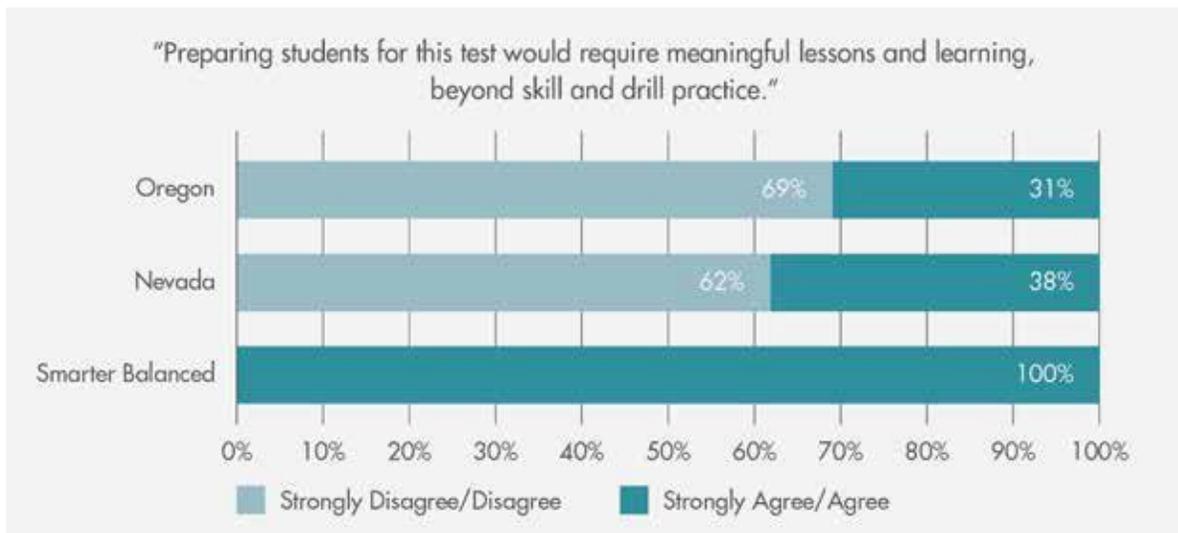


Figure 3. Percent agreement with the statement: "Preparing students for this test would require meaningful lessons and learning, beyond skill and drill practice." Detail may not add to total due to rounding.

4. **While the new consortium assessment is still more rigorous and demanding, it is grade-level appropriate, even more so than prior state tests.** The decision by states to increase the rigor of standards means that the expectations of new assessments aligned to those CCR standards also would be higher. It is important, however, that the assessment remains developmentally appropriate to the tested grade level. A strong majority of the teachers found the depth and range of content on the new test to be appropriate for 5th grade students. There was variation between state assessments in teachers' opinions of the appropriateness of the range of content; 62% strongly agreed or agreed the range was appropriate across the Nevada assessment items, compared with the 46% who strongly agreed or agreed across the Oregon assessment items.

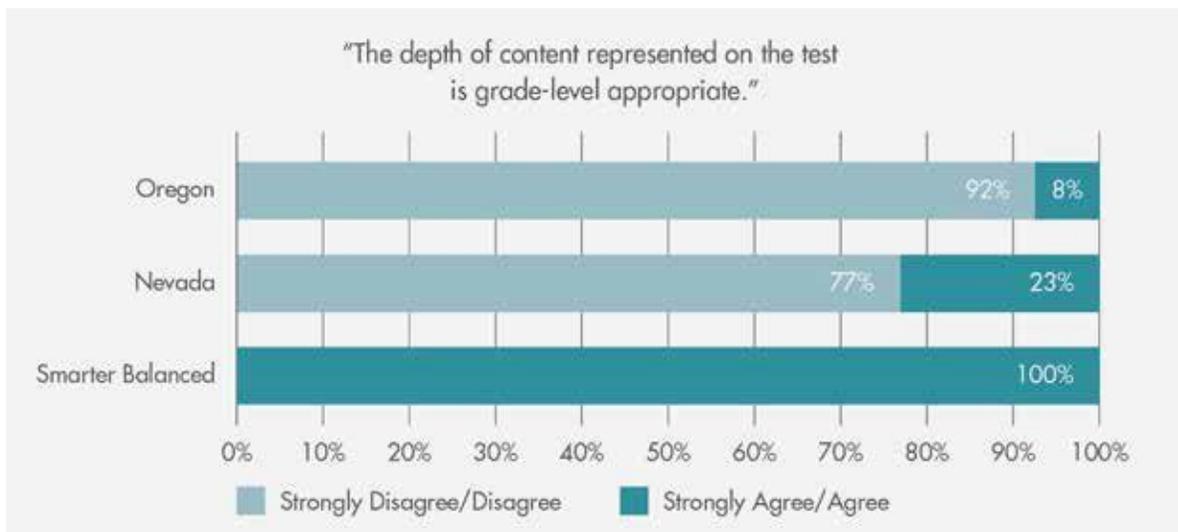


Figure 4. Percent agreement with the statement: "The depth of content represented on the test is grade-level appropriate." Detail may not add to total due to rounding.

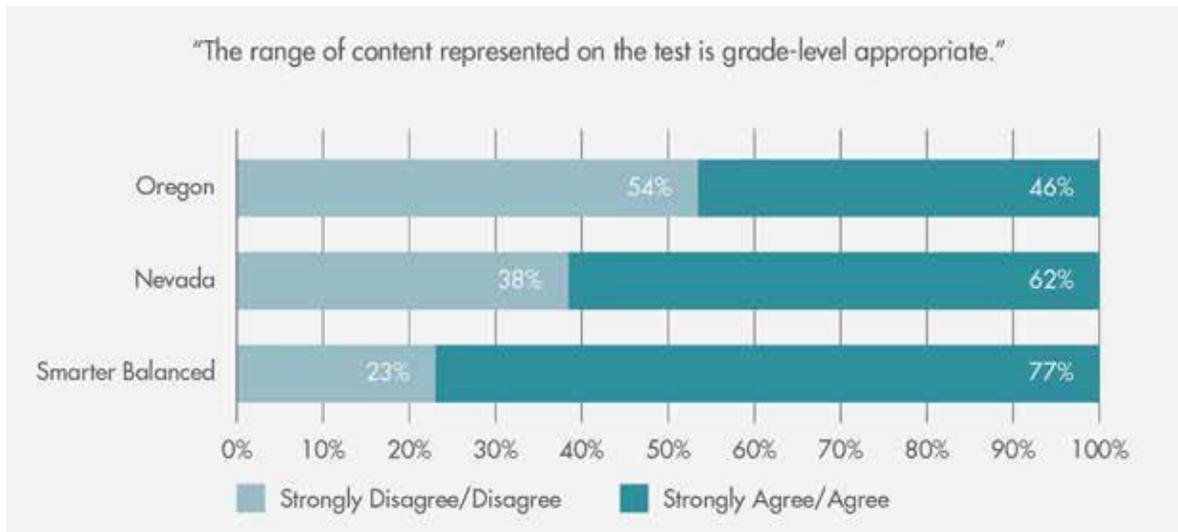


Figure 5. Percent agreement with statement: “The range of content represented on the test is grade-level appropriate.” Detail may not add to total due to rounding.

Summary: The Transition to the Smarter Balanced Assessment is Still Worth it

The data gathered from our best teachers are compelling and continue to indicate that transitioning to the Smarter Balanced assessment is still worth it. Our teachers emphasized a need for alignment between assessments and excellent classroom instruction.

The Smarter Balanced assessment remains on the right trajectory toward meeting that goal. Teachers also acknowledged the assessment not only reflects what they do in the classroom, but it also has the potential to inform improvements to their practice and help move the teaching profession forward. One teacher expressed this idea in this way:

“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 gives 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 [in the classroom].”