



DESIGNING A COMMUNICATION PLAN WHEN AN ASSESSMENT CHANGES

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This document was designed to provide guidance to support education leaders in developing a communication plan when there are changes to statewide assessments. The goal is to make sure people understand what is changing, why it is changing, and what that means for them—before results are released. A strong communication plan is important to ensure assessment results are interpreted and used as intended. It also supports clear and consistent SEA messaging about the assessment by aligning staff around shared core messages and communication tools.

For the purposes of this document, an assessment change refers to any change that disrupts the comparability of results across administrations, including the adoption of new academic standards, substantial changes in test design or content and/or the establishment of new performance standards.

This guidance is structured around three key questions:

1. **Who** needs to know about changes to the assessment—and *why*?
2. **What** do different users need to know based on how they use the results—and *when*?
3. **How** should this information be communicated—and by *whom*?

Question #1: Who needs to know about the change and why?

Group	Why?
1. State Board of Education	The state board plays a significant role supporting the quality of K-12 educational systems. As the board is typically charged with establishing statewide education policies, monitoring school performance and tracking district adherence to state/federal laws, it is essential that the board is aware of any changes that may influence how the academic health of the state is evaluated or perceived. This includes changes that influence how assessment results can/should be interpreted within and across years to evaluate state, district and school performance and determine how the state's resources should be distributed.

Group	Why?
2. Media	<p>Many people’s interaction with assessment information is limited to media outlets and - increasingly - social media. The media can play a powerful role in building public understanding if informed early and consistently. Clear communication helps avoid misinterpretation of assessment changes and enables media to present accurate, accessible stories to the public. Inviting reporters to press briefings—before and after standard setting—allows the state to explain why a test is changing and how those changes impact the interpretation of results.</p> <p>One of the most important and highest-profile assessments in the country—NAEP—provides strictly embargoed results to the news media and briefs them days in advance to promote a broad public understanding of the results.</p>
3. District and School Leaders	<p>District and school leaders rely on state summative assessment data to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • understand student and group performance • evaluate the effectiveness of programs and interventions • identify professional development needs • inform high-stakes decisions (e.g., graduation, promotion, summer school eligibility, teacher bonuses) <p>They are also responsible for explaining assessment results to parents, school boards, educators, and the broader community. Because of these responsibilities, educational leaders must be informed early about any changes that affect how results should be analyzed, interpreted, or communicated. This is especially important when shifts in standards or scales may lead to apparent changes in performance that could be misunderstood without context.</p>
4. Educators	<p>While state summative assessments are not designed to guide day-to-day instruction, educators use these results to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • reflect on their own practice, strategies, and materials • collaborate in teams to identify areas where students may need additional support • understand patterns in incoming student performance <p>In addition, as often the first point of contact for parents and students, educators play a central role in helping people make sense of assessment results. As such, they need a clear understanding of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • what the scores mean • how the new performance standards and scale differ from past years • why student or school results may appear different even if underlying performance has not changed

Group	Why?
5. Parents and Students	<p>Students invest time and effort into taking state assessments, and they, along with their families, deserve timely and accurate information about what their results mean.</p> <p>While summative assessments offer only a snapshot of learning and are often reported after instruction is complete, the labels or scores students receive can influence perceptions of achievement and shape expectations for the future.</p> <p>For this reason, clear communication is essential to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • explain the purpose and limits of the assessment • clarify how results should (and should not) be used • ensure students and families understand how to interpret changes in performance under the new standards

Question #2: What do different users need to know and when do they need to know it?

Information Needed Before Standard Setting	Key Considerations
Why the state test changed	All users should understand why the assessment changed and how the changes are intended to better reflect current standards and student learning.
How the test changed (e.g. blueprint, item types, content representation)	District and school leaders and educators need clear information about what has changed in test design and content so they can ensure instruction aligns with what is assessed. High-level design information should be publicly available.
What it means to set standards and why it is best practice to do so when a test changes	All users should understand what standard setting is, who participates, and why new performance standards are required when an assessment changes. Timing and depth of communication may vary by audience.
How standard setting influences how assessment results can be used	Information about appropriate and inappropriate uses should be shared early and tailored to different audiences. This is especially important for districts and schools, which often rely on trend data to inform high-stakes decisions. Because districts and schools frequently develop local dashboards and reports, they also play a key role in presenting results in ways that promote appropriate interpretation and use.
The types of participants involved in standard setting and how participants are selected (i.e., selection criteria).	This information may be most relevant for the state board, other high-level policymakers, or the media. It might also be of interest to constituents who desire a deeper understanding of standard setting methodology.

Information Needed Before Standard Setting	Key Considerations
The department's plan for communicating what is changing and its potential impact on constituents	The department should share its communication plan within the agency (e.g., with content area experts, school improvement, and special education teams) as well as with the state board to support consistent messaging, particularly outreach to the media and the public.
How to interpret student results (with examples of appropriate use and misuse)	Students, parents, and educators need clear explanations of what individual scores mean, how they should be used, and what conclusions should be avoided. This information should minimally be embedded in student-level reporting and may also be noted in more widely available resources discussing the impact of standards changes on assessment results.
Information Needed After Standard Setting/ Before Reporting	Key Considerations
The process that was used to set standards and arrive at the resulting recommendations	Being transparent about the process is necessary to ensure state and local leaders have confidence in the standard setting results. Similarly, it is important for educators to know that their colleagues had a key role in supporting the recommendation process.
The story the new assessment tells about student performance and why it might differ from previous years	New assessment and performance standards may result in shifts in reported performance that reflect changes in expectations rather than changes in student learning. Users need to understand how and why these shifts might occur before assessment results are reported.
(When applicable) How and why the reporting scale changed	<p>Users—particularly state and district leaders familiar with the prior reporting scale—should understand whether the reporting scale was intentionally redesigned after standard setting to discourage direct comparisons with results from the previous assessment. Because what it means to earn a certain score or be “proficient” has changed, maintaining the prior scale could invite misleading interpretations of trends or performance.</p> <p>In cases where a state retains the same reportable scale despite a new assessment and standards, additional communication and reporting safeguards are needed to support appropriate interpretation and use.</p>
What resources, training, and guidance will be provided to support the appropriate use and interpretation of results	<p>Clearly identifying available support helps leaders and educators prepare for the release of results, ensures consistent messaging across districts, and reduces the risk of miscommunication or ad hoc/conflicting explanations.</p> <p>These supports may include talking points, sample media releases, and templates for letters to families.</p>

Information Needed After Standard Setting/ Before Reporting	Key Considerations
How to interpret and use school/district level assessment results to inform decision making	Districts and schools need examples of appropriate and inappropriate uses of results, particularly for accountability, program evaluation, and improvement planning. These clear examples may be incorporated into some of the resources referenced above.
How to interpret student results (with examples of appropriate use and misuse)	Students, parents, and educators need clear explanations of what individual scores mean, how they should be used, and what conclusions should be avoided. This information should minimally be embedded in student-level reporting and may also be noted in more widely available resources discussing the impact of standards changes on assessment results.

Question #3: Who has the primary responsibility for sharing key information with each group and what methods should they use for sharing?

Group 1. The State Board of Education
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Primary responsible party: State education agency leadership ✓ Illustrative communication methods: Regular updates at state board meetings; presentations by Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) members and testing contractors ✓ Examples of supporting tools/resources: Presentation decks, summary briefs, and communication rollout plans
Group 2. Media (education reporters; local news)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Primary responsible party: State education agency communications office ✓ Illustrative communication methods: Press releases, press conferences, media briefings; personal outreach to reporters who cover education; office hours or briefings for on-background or off-the-record sessions to build reporters' background knowledge and understanding ✓ Examples of supporting tools/resources: Press kits, Q&A documents, media-specific talking points

Group 3. District and School Leaders

- ✓ Primary responsible party: State education agency assessment and communications teams
- ✓ Illustrative communication methods: Webinars, newsletters, emails, direct outreach, updates via superintendent networks
- ✓ Examples of supporting tools/resources:
 - FAQ documents
 - One-pagers illustrating appropriate/inappropriate data uses
 - Concordance tables (if developed)
 - Slide decks for internal use

Group 4. Educators

- ✓ Primary responsible party: State education agency (assessment & teaching and learning divisions), assessment vendor(s)
- ✓ Illustrative communication methods: Webinars, teacher-focused guidance, collaboration through districts
- ✓ Examples of supporting tools/resources:
 - Interpretive guides for classroom and team use
 - Crosswalks showing blueprint and content shifts
 - Slide decks for professional learning communities or faculty meetings
 - Talking points to support teacher/parent communication

Group 5. Parents and Students

- ✓ Primary responsible party: State education agency communications team, district/school leadership, educators
- ✓ Illustrative communication methods: Website resources, school newsletters, parent meetings, materials sent home
- ✓ Examples of supporting tools/resources:
 - Parent-friendly FAQ
 - Dedicated section on State education agency website
 - Score report cover letters with a plain-language description of what has changed and how to interpret results



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