California Department of Education

Executive Office

SBE-002 (REV. 11/2017)

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# MEMORANDUM

**DATE:** February 18, 2025

**TO:** MEMBERS, State Board of Education

**FROM:** TONY THURMOND, State Superintendent of Public Instruction

**SUBJECT:** California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress: Update on the Proposed Revisions to the Reporting Achievement Level Descriptors.

## Summary of Key Issues

This information memorandum provides an update on the outreach conducted in response to the State Board of Education (SBE) request at the November 2024 meeting for additional feedback from parents/guardians, educators, students, and other interest holders on the proposed revisions to the reporting achievement level descriptors (ALDs) and labels for the Smarter Balanced Summative Assessments for English Language Arts/Literacy (ELA) and Mathematics and the California Science Test (CAST).

In response to the SBE members’ request for additional outreach, the California Department of Education (CDE) worked with the testing contractor, ETS, to gather further feedback from parents/guardians, educators, students, and other interest holders.

## Background

On November 13, 2024, the CDE sought approval from the SBE for the proposed revisions to the reporting ALDs and labels for the Smarter Balanced Summative Assessments for ELA and Mathematics and the CAST. In addition, the CDE proposed revisions to the Student Score Reports for the Smarter Balanced Summative Assessments for ELA and Mathematics and the CAST. As a result of the discussion of the proposed revisions to the ALD labels, the SBE members requested that CDE conduct additional outreach to parents/guardians, educators, students, and other interest holders through focus groups. The purpose of the outreach was to gather further feedback and provide an update to inform the board’s future discussion.

## Overview of Outreach

The CDE worked with ETS to arrange a series of three focus groups with parents/guardians, educators, students, and other interest holders. The three focus groups took place virtually from December 3 through December 5, 2024. Two of the focus group sessions consisted of adults and included parents/guardians, educators, and interest holders. One session was conducted in English while the second was conducted in Spanish. In addition to the focus groups, an online survey was created and posted on the California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP) and English Language Proficiency Assessments for California website as well as sent to all registrants for each focus group session. A summary of participation in these focus groups can be found in the December memorandum to the SBE at <https://www.cde.ca.gov/be/pn/im/documents/dec24memoadad01.docx>.

After reviewing the feedback from the December focus groups and online survey, it was determined there was a need for additional feedback from a larger sample of participants. As a result, five additional focus groups were held virtually in January. Two of the focus group sessions consisted of parents/guardians, with one session conducted in English and another in Spanish. Other focus groups included local educational agency testing coordinators, students (from grades six through twelve), and classroom educators, respectively. A summary of participation in these focus groups can be found in table 1.

##### Table 1. Summary of January Focus Group Participation

| **Session and Date** | **Number Registered** | **Number Attended** |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Session 1: Parents/Guardians (English)January 14, 2025 | 15 | 11 |
| Session 2: Testing CoordinatorsJanuary 17, 2025 | 15 | 14 |
| Session 3: Students January 20, 2025 | 10 | 7 |
| Session 4: EducatorsJanuary 21, 2025 | 15 | 11 |
| Session 5: Parents/Guardians (Spanish)January 22, 2025 | 15 | 10 |

### **Summary of Focus Group Feedback**

#### **Current Achievement Level Descriptor Labels**

The current ALD labels were presented to all the focus groups both to determine the participants’ familiarity with the current ALD labels and to gather any feedback the participants may have as to the clarity and usefulness. Feedback gathered from the focus groups revealed that while the majority of participants were familiar with the current ALD labels, a number of parents/guardians and educators expressed confusion regarding how to interpret what “standard” actually means in all levels. There was particular confusion about how to interpret “Level 2: Standard Nearly Met.” More specifically, these participants noted that it was unclear if Standard Nearly Met indicated that a student was clearly below the standard (which was often misinterpreted as a “grade level” benchmark) and in need of additional support or if the student was near or approaching the standard and considered on track for success without the need for additional support. Regarding the current Level 1 label, some participants perceived “Standard Not Met” as the student failing and noted that it was often received as discouraging or demotivating.

#### **Proposed Achievement Level Descriptor Labels**

Participants were provided with newly proposed alternative ALD labels (Level 1: Inconsistent, Level 2: Foundational, Level 3: Proficient, and Level 4: Advanced). While a large majority of participants expressed a clear understanding and approval of Level 3: Proficient and Level 4: Advanced, many participants expressed confusion or concern with the proposed labels of Level 1: Inconsistent and Level 2: Foundational. Focus group participants were provided with additional options for Level 1 and Level 2, some of which were suggested by participants in the December focus groups (e.g. Level 1: Below Basic, and Level 2: Basic). The January focus group participants were also provided the opportunity to share their own suggested revisions to provide clarity and prevent misunderstanding. Other terms that were discussed included Minimal, Emerging, Developing, and Approaching.

Among all of the options provided, “Below Basic” for Level 1 and “Basic” for Level 2 received the broadest support. This proposal was generally favored for its clarity and straightforward representation of achievement levels, avoiding the ambiguity of other alternatives. However, there were a number of educators and students who found the “Below Basic” label discouraging and suggested other alternatives that might communicate a more developmental approach, such as “emerging” or “developing.”

#### **Proposed Achievement Level Descriptors**

The previously proposed ALDs as provided in table 2 below were presented at the November 2024 SBE meeting and shared with the focus group participants.

##### **Table 2. Previously** **Proposed** Reporting Achievement Level Descriptors and Labels for the Smarter Balanced Summative Assessment for English Language Arts/Literacy

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Grades** | **Level 4— Advanced** | **Level 3— Proficient** | **Level 2— Foundational** | **Level 1— Inconsistent** |
| Grades three through five and grade eleven | The student demonstrates **advanced** grade-level skills and shows a sophisticated understanding of and ability to apply the knowledge and skills in English language arts/literacy needed for likely success in future coursework. | The student demonstrates **proficient** grade-level skills and shows a thorough understanding of and ability to apply the knowledge and skills in English language arts/literacy needed for likely success in future coursework. | The student demonstrates **foundational** grade-level skills and shows a basic understanding of and ability to apply the knowledge and skills in English language arts/literacy needed for likely success in future coursework. | The student demonstrates **inconsistent** grade-level skills and shows a minimal understanding of and ability to apply the knowledge and skills in English language arts/literacy needed for likely success in future coursework. |

The participants were asked to provide feedback on the clarity of the proposed ALDs. A number of focus group participants commented that the ALDs should be revised to remove the labels of “Foundational” and “Inconsistent” for reasons previously shared. A potential proposal to address the focus group feedback on the ALDs is provided in table 3 on the following page.

##### Table 3. Potential Alternative Reporting Achievement Level Descriptors and Labels for the Smarter Balanced Summative Assessment for English Language Arts/Literacy

| **Grades** | **Level 4— Advanced** | **Level 3— Proficient** | **Level 2— Basic** | **Level 1— Below Basic** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Grades three through eight and grade eleven | The student demonstrates **advanced** grade-level knowledge and skills and shows a sophisticated understanding of and ability to apply the knowledge and skills in English language arts/literacy needed for success in future coursework. | The student demonstrates **proficient** grade-level knowledge and skills and shows a thorough understanding of and ability to apply the knowledge and skills in English Language arts/literacy needed for success in future coursework. | The student demonstrates **basic** grade-level knowledge and skills and shows a fundamental understanding of and abiity to apply the knowledge and skills in English language arts/literacy needed for success in future coursework. | The student demonstrates **below basic** grade-level knowledge and skills and shows a minimal understanding of and ability to apply the knowledge and skills in English language arts/literacy needed for success in future coursework. |

A number of the focus group participants indicated that they would like additional information about what the scores mean. CDE is currently working with the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium to create a resource document that would include additional information as part of the larger plan to communicate revisions to the ALDs and ALD labels with parents, students, educators, and community members.

Throughout all the focus groups, a large number of participants indicated that they held the misconception that students performing at Level 1 or Level 2 were performing below grade level, and students performing at Level 3 or Level 4 were performing at or above grade level. This is an inaccurate understanding since each assessment within the CAASPP is a grade-level assessment aligned with the standards for that grade level only and, for that reason, can only be used to make statements about student achievement in reference to the standards for that grade level and not in relation to the standards for other grade levels.

The Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium brief titled “What Do the Scores Mean” was released in July 2024 to help clarify this misunderstanding. This brief will continue to play a role in the CDE’s communication plan to reinforce understanding and engagement of the CAASPP ALDs and results. The brief can be found at <https://portal.smarterbalanced.org/wp-content/uploads/WhatDoTheScoresMean6.pdf>.

#### **Suggested Communication and Outreach Strategies**

During the focus groups, participants were also asked to share their recommendations regarding the types of resources that would be useful in communicating potential changes to the ALD labels. Respondents indicated a need for resources in multiple languages to learn about the changes and recommended parent guides, teacher training modules, and student-facing resources. They recommended leveraging multiple communication channels to introduce the new ALDs and labels, including:

* Brief videos or webinars
* School websites were frequently mentioned as a primary source for updates and guides
* Parent-Teacher Associations are seen as trusted spaces for information sharing and discussions
* Many parents/guardians expressed they would turn to educators for detailed explanations
* Printed materials and handouts were specifically highlighted as helpful for non-tech-savvy parents/guardians or those with limited internet access
* District communications such as email newsletters or district-level announcements were suggested for clear and centralized updates
* The CDE website was mentioned by a few parents/guardians as a reliable but underutilized resource for such changes

The CDE is working with its testing and communication contractors to create resources for communicating the changes to parents/guardians, students, and educators.

## Next Steps

The CDE will provide an update item on the proposed changes at the March 2025 SBE meeting for information and action.