Questions from Senator Thayn to the SDE concerning the SBAC test

This paper is divided into two parts. The first is a series of questions generated by a presentation given by the Idaho State Department of Education in the Senate Education committee on January 29, 2014 concerning the SBAC test. These questions are being turned into the State Department of Education for response.

The second section deals with concerns and possible recommendations on how to proceed in the future.

Section 1: Questions

1. What is/was the funding source for the development of the SBAC test? I am not aware of any state funding being used in this project? Was state money used?
2. What is the source of funds and amounts needed to administer the test?
3. What is the relationship between the SBAC test and the federal waiver to NCLB?
4. Is a copy of the waiver that is now being developed available for the legislature to view or is the waiver being developed without the input of the legislature? I would like to see the 13-14 addendum/letter or the 14-15 draft to be submitted in February.
5. What testing agreements is the SDE entering into with the federal government concerning the SBAC test?
6. If the SBAC test is voluntary, what requirements does the federal government have concerning testing?
7. How can the SBAC test be reliable if it has never been given?
8. How long will it take before there is reliable data? Is it one year, two years or longer?
9. How can the standards be changed at the same time the test is changed and student performance measured? How can changing the unit of measure and what is being measured result in reliable data?
10. What is the relationship between the performance section of the test (where the student has to create a written artifact or show work on a math problem) and controlling how the teacher actually teaches in the classroom? Isn’t the SBAC test actually a method to control how the teacher teaches in the classroom?
11. Common Core and the SBAC test are supposed to create “college ready” individuals. The SAT and ACT also measure college readiness. Yet, in the hearing it was indicated that the SAT was not a valid measure. How can this be when SAT began in 1901 and has been used for years and is either a valid measure or a waste of time? If the SAT, which the state has given to every high school junior last two years, is a waste of time; how can there be any confidence that the SBAC test is, in fact, reliable when it has never been given?
12. If we are trying to measure college readiness, why not use the SAT or ACT?
13. If Idaho does not like something about the SBAC test, what is the process to change or adopt changes to the SBAC that is acceptable to Idaho? Can this be done unilaterally or does this require a majority of the other states in the SBAC to agree? Where is the process defined and explained? Can the SDE provide a copy of this procedure?
14. It was mentioned in the hearing that Idaho could just use the adaptive part of the test (fill in the blank-multiple choice) or use the performance and/or use the classroom formative section. That it would cost more, as more of the SBAC product is used. How much more will it cost? Who gets the money? What is the vendor? What is legal structure of SBAC?
15. What is the cost of the performance section of the test? Who has done the estimate?
16. Is the ISAT still in existence? Is it being used in Idaho this year by any students in any school district? If so, what portions?
17. In the hearing, the superintendent indicated that Idaho has more input into the SBAC than in the SAT or the ACT. However, the SAT and ACT are optional. Idaho can walk away from the SAT or ACT at any time. Can we walk away from the SBAC without federal approval?
18. What data goes with the ACT or the SAT? What data will accompany the SBAC? Does more student data accompany the SBAC than the ACT/SAT? Will student data accompany the SBAC this spring during the pilot or will the data accompany the SBAC next year? In the department’s opinion, is data a greater concern under the SBAC or the ACT/SAT?
19. It was indicated that Kentucky was making huge progress toward college readiness because they have given this type of test beginning in 2011. Yet, the articles I find on the internet use the word ‘grim’ and ‘disappointing.’ Could you provide documentation that justifies statements given?

Section 2:

1. I do not see the reason to have the SBAC test after the 8th grade. The SAT has been given for two years and Idaho already has the data on every student in Idaho that has taken the test and if they are college ready or not. Superintendent Don Coberly has compiled this data in several scatter charts showing how students do in each high school in the state and the data is on the SDE website.
2. I am deeply concerned with the performance portion of the test. The SDE showed a question on the test concerning the minting of pennies. The topic causes no problem. The problem was the instructions given. The instructions said that the student needed to read the accompanying resource material and create an argument using three sources from the text of the articles. Here are the problems with this approach.
   1. This does not lead to higher thinking. This method is controlled thinking. The student can only parrot back what information was given to the student. How can higher level thinking be encouraged when the test limits what can be said?
   2. This method of controlled thinking could be particularly harmful if the topic was a politically charged topic: global warming, redistribution of earnings, school funding, gun control, abortion, or any of a number of issues that could be choosen.
   3. This exercise is totally appropriate in a classroom setting if the skill being taught was to identify and support arguments. It is totally inappropriate for a multi-state assessment where higher level thinking is the goal.
   4. The problem is not that a student has to argue one side of the argument; but rather, the argument is controlled.
3. I believe that the test is too long. It is estimated that it will take 3rd graders up to 7 hours to take the test. Because much of the test is taken on a computer and keyboarding skills are needed, the SBAC might actually end up testing keyboarding skills rather than language or math.
4. I believe that school superintendents need to be invited into the legislature, this session, to offer suggestions on how to minimize the length of the test.
   1. For example, the SBAC is divided into four parts: language adaptive, language performance, math adaptive, and math performance. I would suggest not participating in the language performance or the math performance. This would shorten the test by 3 hours. These questions should be given in the classroom through the year as part of normal instruction.
   2. Also, give the math adaptive test in the 4th, 6th, and 8th grades while giving the language adaptive in the 3rd, 5th, and 7th. This would shorten the test to only 1.5 to 2 hours per student per year.
5. Going forward, school superintendents need to be invited in, with legislators, to consider options to the SBAC. If some of it can be used? What data concerns there are? If there are other options that should be considered?
6. Finally, the legislature needs to have input into the waiver now being developed by the Idaho State Department of Education what is obligating the state for year 2014-2015.