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?  
   Since No Child Left Behind was passed in 2001, every state always has used a combination of state and federal funding to develop statewide assessments to measure statewide academic standards and to administer these assessments at the end of the school year. Idaho has used a combination of about 70% federal funding and 30% state funding. Idaho has joined a consortium of states working together to develop a new assessment that will meet the needs of all of our states that have agreed to raise our academic standards in mathematics and English language arts. The consortium applied for and received a federal grant to develop the Smarter Balanced Assessment. The federal grant funding is only used for the development of the assessment; it will not be used for the administration of the assessment. To administer the assessment, each state will continue to use its own combination of state and federal funding it has always used. Idaho will continue to use the 70% federal funding and 30% state funding it has used since 2002 to administer the ISAT.
2. What is the source of funds and amounts needed to administer the test?  
   As stated above, Idaho will continue to use the same funding sources it has used since the ISAT first began in 2002. Idaho has always used a combination of 70% federal funding and 30% state funding. The cost to administer the Smarter Balanced Assessment is estimated to be the same as the cost to administer the ISAT.
3. What is the relationship between the SBAC test and the federal waiver to NCLB?  
   There is no relationship between the Smarter Balanced Assessment and Idaho’s waiver from certain provisions of No Child Left Behind. To clarify, the Smarter Balanced Assessment is a year-end assessment that measures how well students are performing against the goals we have set for them at each grade level. The waiver we received has given Idaho flexibility to move away from many of the onerous provisions of No Child Left Behind by allowing the state create its own system of increased accountability based on multiple measures, including academic growth.
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.  
   The U.S. Department of Education changed its process on waiver renewal. Idaho will make revisions/amendments to our waiver using the same process that has been ongoing since the waiver was approved. If Idaho wants to make changes to the agreement, it goes through the State Board of Education, the policy making board for the state of Idaho, as set forth in the Idaho Constitution.
5. What testing agreements is the SDE entering into with the federal government concerning the SBAC test?  
   The Idaho State Department of Education does not have any testing agreements with the federal government. The Idaho State Department of Education has signed a Memorandum of Understanding with partner states to secure a federal grant that funds the work of developing the Smarter Balanced Assessment and to outline the governance structure of the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium. The grant does not dictate the content of the assessment of the assessment or the administration of the assessment. The grant does not obligate Idaho to use Smarter Balanced as its operational test.
6. If the SBAC test is voluntary, what requirements does the federal government have concerning testing?  
   Under the federal No Child Left Behind Act that Congress passed in 2001, all states are required to set academic standards for students, and states are required to measure how students are performing against those standards by administering a statewide assessment aligned to the standards to students in grades 3-8 and once in high school in mathematics and English language arts. In addition, states are required to measure how students are performing in science once in elementary, middle and high school. In addition, states are required to measure how students are performing in science once in elementary, middle and high school and administer tests of English proficiency – to measure oral language, reading and writing skills in English – to all limited English proficient students. The federal law gives states the flexibility to set academic standards, choose the assessment, and develop their accountability systems. With this flexibility, Idaho has voluntarily adopted the Idaho Core Standards in mathematics and English language arts and is working with other states to develop the Smarter Balanced Assessment to measure against these standards in grades 3-11. Idaho has set its science standards and plans to continue to use the science ISAT in grades 5, 7 and 10 as well as end-of-course assessments in high school. Idaho will continue to use the Idaho English Language Assessment for Limited English Proficient students. Idaho’s decision to participate with other states in the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium is completely voluntary. The federal government does not now and never has mandated to states what standards or tests must be adopted.
7. How can the SBAC test be reliable if it has never been given?  
   Idaho is going through the process right now to determine the validity and reliability of the Smarter Balanced Assessment before it becomes fully operational in Spring 2015. As explained in committee, this is the reason we conducted an initial pilot test and this is the reason for a Field Test. Developing a valid and reliable test requires a systematic approach to test development. Test development must include the following: cognitive labs during early item development, pilot testing, and field testing. This is the process the state used for the ISAT in the early 2000s. The state is actually using a more extensive process for the Smarter Balanced Assessment. When the state first implemented the ISAT, only one field test had been conducted to ensure reliability and validity. By the time the Smarter Balanced Assessment becomes fully operational in Spring 2015, the state will have conducted an initial pilot test in Spring 2013 and a full Field Test in Spring 2014.
8. How long will it take before there is reliable data? Is it one year, two years or longer?  
   Idaho will have reliable and valid data the first year the Smarter Balanced Assessment is given as an operational test in Spring 2015.
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?  
   If you change the standards, you must change the test; otherwise, the test will be an invalid measure. We must remember why we have standards and why we administer tests. Standards are the goals the state sets for what each child should know and be able to do at the end of each grade level. This helps ensure we as a state are meeting our constitutional responsibility for *“a general, uniform and thorough system of public, free common schools.”* While the state sets the goal, classroom teachers work to ensure every child reaches these goals within a given school year so they are ready to move on to the next grade level. The state leaves it up to local school districts and classroom teachers to decide the best way to reach these goals. It may vary from school to school or district to district. Good teachers give tests throughout the year to monitor a student’s progress and make sure they are on track toward meeting the goals. At the end of the year, the state administers a statewide assessment to measure how every child is performing and whether or not they reached the goals. We provide this information not only to the classroom teacher, but also to schools, districts, parents, and policymakers. If the statewide assessment is not aligned to the standards, then there would be no way for the state to measure a student’s progress toward these goals or to give meaningful information back to students, parents, teachers or policymakers. That is why you must change the test at the same time you change the standards.
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?   
    No. Tests do not control how teachers teach. Good teachers have always used tests to measure how students are progressing toward meeting the academic standards and whether or not they need intervention along the way. It is the same with the Smarter Balanced Assessment. The Smarter Balanced Assessment is aligned with the Idaho Core Standards. If Idaho’s teachers are teaching the Idaho Core Standards, their students will perform well on the Smarter Balanced Assessment, including the performance task. The performance task portion of the assessment measures a student’s critical thinking, writing and analyzing skills. These are skills a student will learn in the classroom throughout the school year and be evaluated on through the Smarter Balanced Assessment.
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?  
    No one at the State Department of Education has ever said the SAT is an invalid measure. In fact, under Superintendent Luna’s leadership, we have worked to establish Idaho SAT School Day in Idaho. However, we have always been transparent in the fact that SAT and ACT are college entrance exams. These exams are developed by two different companies for different reasons than the goal of the year-end tests that Idaho and other states are currently working together to develop. Colleges and universities use the SAT and ACT to make decisions about college admissions. These tests are not aligned to state academic standards, or the goals that Idaho teachers and state leaders have established for Idaho students. If these tests do become aligned, Idaho plans to explore using the SAT as the 11th grade test in the future. Until then, Idaho’s colleges and universities have already agreed that they will be able to use student scores on the 11th grade Smarter Balanced Assessment for a student’s placement in college. In other words, if a student scores at a certain level on the 11th grade Smarter Balanced Assessment, they will be exempt from having to take any remedial courses once they arrive in college. This is great news! Idaho’s colleges and universities have not had this type of resource before to assist them as students transition from K-12 to higher education.

In addition, it is important to point out that Idaho currently has no control over the content on the SAT or the ACT. These tests are developed by private companies. Idaho has control over the Smarter Balanced Assessment. More than 100 Idaho educators are working to develop this assessment today, and Idahoans serve as voting members in the Consortium.

1. If we are trying to measure college readiness, why not use the SAT or ACT?  
   Please see the answer above.
2. 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?  
   Smarter Balanced is a test governed by states, for states. If the change is as simple as a test question, it can be removed. If it is a more significant change, it will be handled by the entire Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium, which is governed by consensus of state leaders who each have an equal vote. A copy of the Smarter Balanced governance document is available online at <http://www.smarterbalanced.org/about/governance/>.
3. 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?  
   As stated above, Idaho is working with a consortium of states to develop the Smarter Balanced Assessment. Once this assessment is developed, Idaho will select its own vendor to administer the test in Idaho, just as we have selected a vendor to administer the ISAT since 2002. Based on estimates we have analyzed for more than a year, we know it will not cost Idaho any more to administer the Smarter Balanced Assessment at the end of the school year than it has cost Idaho to administer the ISAT. The vendor has not yet been selected.

Idaho has not estimated the cost of a multiple-choice-only test because this is not the direction our state has wanted to head. We had a multiple-choice-only test through the ISAT, and educators, parents and policymakers have wanted to move away from this test for years.

For Idaho to produce a test with the kind of quality items that measure critical thinking and problem-solving skills, it would likely cost twice as much as the ISAT because Idaho would realize no economies of scale. In addition, Idaho would not be able to compare information between states. It would cost the state more to develop its own assessment beyond a multiple choice test. For example, Washington State currently spends approximately $90 per student for a test similar to Smarter Balanced. The Smarter Balanced Assessment will cost approximately $22.50 per student because of the economies of scale we are able to realize.

The Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium is governed by a Memorandum of Understanding that established the Consortium as a state-led organization in 2010. The Consortium if currently funded through a federal grant, and the State of Washington serves as the fiscal agent. The Consortium is governed by State Education Chiefs of the governing states. They have appointed an Executive Committee and hired a small staff for the development of the assessment.

1. What is the cost of the performance section of the test? Who has done the estimate?  
   The cost of the performance section of the test has not been separated from the computer adaptive portion of the test because both components are required to get an accurate measure of the new, higher academic standards we have set for our students.
2. 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?  
   The ISAT is being used for science in grades 5, 7, and 10. In addition, some juniors and seniors across Idaho will take the ISAT this year in Math, Reading and/or Language Usage if they did not pass the ISAT in their sophomore year to meet graduation requirements.
3. 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?  
   Yes.

1. 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?  
   Similar student data is used to administer the Smarter Balanced Assessment as is used to administer the SAT statewide. The data required to administer Smarter Balanced will be nearly identical to what was required to administer the ISAT. Here is what is included:

* An identification number (the Consortium recommends that this number is different from the state’s official unique statewide student identifier, so that only the state can tie back to the student’s official education record);
* Information on students’ race/ethnicity, gender, grade level, school attended
* Data regarding eligibility for English language development services or special education services provided to students;
* Data regarding eligibility for Title I compensatory programs; and
* Test scores, achievement levels, and responses to test items.

The data required to administer the ISAT, Smarter Balanced, or SAT is never sent to the federal government. This data is only sent to the vendor that the state chooses to contract with to administer the assessment. The vendor always must adhere to strict privacy conditions as outlined in the statewide contract.

1. 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?  
   I am not sure which articles you are referring too, but here are the facts from the State of Kentucky: <http://education.ky.gov/comm/news/Documents/R%2013-092%20Unbridled%20Learning%20FINAL.pdf>. As you know, Kentucky was the first state in the country that voluntarily chose to adopt the Common Core State Standards in 2010. It measured its students against these standards for the first time in 2012 and again in 2013. Because it was an early adopter, it has not had access to either PARCC or Smarter Balanced. Both of these assessments are still piloting and field testing assessment questions at this time. Instead, Kentucky is using a paper-and-pencil test it developed at the state level for grades 3-8 as well as end-of-course assessments in the high school grades because it has not ever conducted online testing before, like Idaho has. It is true that these tests are similar to the ones that you will see through Smarter Balanced because they include multiple choice as well as writing and performance task components. They are just not administered online. Kentucky is looking to go out for bid for a new assessment in the high school grades soon because it would like to transition to a new, online test, if possible, in the future.

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.

As stated many times before, we as a state have a constitutional responsibility to ensure “a general, uniform and thorough system of public, free common schools.” Therefore, we must measure our students against the goals we have set for them. The SAT is an important test because colleges and universities still use it for admissions purposes; however, it does not tell us as a state – or as parents – whether or not our students are meeting the goals we have set for them at every grade level. If the SAT does better align its test with our standards, we are open to exploring this. However, we as the State Department of Education are not willing to align our standards with a private company’s test that could change at any time because we have no control over it. That is not fair to Idaho’s students. As a state, we should set the goals we want and then create a test that measures those goals – not the other way around. I think you believe this too, as you stated earlier you do not want testing to control what a teacher teaches.

1. 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?  
      The test in no way limits or controls what can be said or written. Students will read the three sources of information, but they are free to write whatever they want. These texts offer varying and diverse opinions so students can analyze the information and use these texts to offer evidence to support whichever argument they choose. This is the same strategy we want all students – and adults – to use in real life. No matter your opinion, it should be based in fact and supported by evidence. The new English Language Arts Standards emphasize the use of evidence to support informative/explanatory and argumentative writing.  Using evidence to support arguments is the foundation of writing required in college and the workplace.  Smarter Balanced provides a set of sources because it is unfeasible to allow unlimited access to the internet during the assessment. The set of sources are selected to support more than one viewpoint, and they are selected and reviewed by teachers, including Idaho teachers. What is assessed is a student‘s ability to demonstrate the use of research and writing skills, regardless of the viewpoint chosen.
   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.

This is why the state conducted an initial pilot and is now going through a Field Test. The pilot test and the Field Test are a dress rehearsal to assist schools and districts and to “test the test.” In addition, all topics and texts are reviewed for content and bias and sensitivity by several committees. Politically charged topics are rejected.  Students are never judged on their opinion; only on how they write and show evidence to support that opinion. Every performance task includes evidence from both sides of every argument.

* 1. 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.  
     The goal of a statewide assessment is to measure if a student has learned the statewide academic standards. This is part of Idaho’s Core Standards to ensure every student is prepared with the skills and knowledge they will need in postsecondary education and the workforce. Writing is a critical skill. Therefore, it is completely appropriate for Idaho’s new assessment to measure higher-order thinking, writing, and analysis in a statewide assessment. This is part of the new Idaho Core English Language Arts Standards.
  2. The problem is not that a student has to argue one side of the argument; but rather, the argument is controlled.

As explained above, the argument is not controlled. The performance task will present texts will varying viewpoints, and the student must use evidence from the text to support his or her argument, whichever argument they choose. The goal is to measure a student’s ability to conduct research and write persuasively based on evidence.

1. 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.  
   As explained during the committee, we recognize that the Smarter Balanced Assessment will be longer in total than the ISAT was; however, the test itself will likely be less onerous for students and teachers than the ISAT because it can be broken up over days or even weeks, depending on how a school wants to structure it. No student will test for more than 1 or 2 hours in a single sitting. In total, a student could test for up six hours in elementary school and 7.5 hours in high school. Those are maximum times. Most students will finish in less time. As for keyboarding, it is important to remember, that students in younger grades will only have to type a sentence in responding to questions or, at most, a paragraph. In addition, I think Steve LaBau put it best in responding to this question during the legislative panel discussion in saying that keyboarding is an important life skill. “Whether you learn it in third grade or fifth grade, it is a strategy that will benefit you for a long time,” he said.
2. 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.

Superintendent Luna has established a Smarter Balanced Advisory Committee made up of superintendents, principals and testing coordinators to work before, during and after the Field Test to address concerns about logistics.

* 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.   
     Idaho’s new standards require critical thinking skills. To remove performance items takes Idaho backwards to a test that only measures lower-level thinking.
  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.

Yes, this would shorten the test, but it also would stop short of giving students, parents, teachers, and policymakers the information they deserve on how Idaho students are performing in meeting the goals we have set for them. As one superintendent said to recently, “Many superintendents want to be able to compare their kids to others around the U.S. I don't just want something like the NAEP so that I can say Idaho is ahead or behind. I want to know if my district is ahead or behind! How can I compare otherwise?” They want this information every year, not just some years for a sample of students.

1. 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?  
   They have been invited to do so. Superintendent Luna has ongoing conversations with superintendents and others about their concerns and questions. He recently that he has established the Smarter Balanced Advisory Committee. This was discussed in committee.
2. 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.

The State Board of Education is the policymaking body for K-12 education in the state of Idaho, as set forth in the Idaho Constitution.