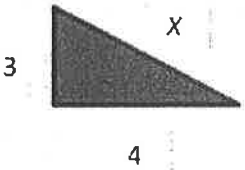
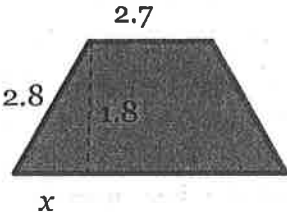


August 24, 2015

Dear Vermonters,

Vermont schools recently got their scores on the new Smarter Balanced Assessment. Fewer students scored as “proficient” than on the previous assessment. Nationwide, State Agencies of Education predicted lower proficiency rates on the new Smarter Balanced assessments, and this prediction is proving to be true. What are we to make of this?

In Vermont, we expected lower scores for several reasons. First and foremost, the test is just plain harder than the previous tests. As any teacher can tell you, even when two tests measure the same standards, one can be more difficult. For example, look at these two pretty traditional problems (below). On which “test” would you do better?

<p>Grade 8: Apply the Pythagorean Theorem to determine unknown side lengths in right triangles in real-world and mathematical problems in two and three dimensions.</p>	
<p>Test 1 Solve for X.</p> 	<p>Test 2 Solve for X.</p> 

Both tests measure the same standard, but the second holds students to a higher level of performance. When test developers put a test together, they start with standards and then come up with a set of test items that “sample” those standards. If they pick harder items, the test will be harder. If the items are easier, the test will be easier. However, “grade level proficiency” on the Smarter Balanced assessment is a much higher level of performance than that on previous tests.

What does this mean for Vermont? We need to push “pause,” and reflect on what these scores do and don’t tell us about our schools and our children.

The fact that fewer students score as proficient does not mean Vermont’s standards are slipping, our schools are failing, or the sky is falling. It does not mean that a child who previously scored



well is suddenly failing, unprepared for college and unlikely to succeed in life. It means the test is a harder test than previous tests. This gives us more room to grow. If seeing low scores makes you panic, remember that a recent study out of the US Department of Education put Vermont 4th and 7th in the world in science and math. We know that in several states, people who are successful adults, including adults with advanced degrees, have taken the high school test and also failed to score as proficient.

There are other reasons scores might seem to slip in the first few years of a new test. In some pretty important ways, the content on the Smarter Balanced assessment is different than what teachers were expected to teach previously. The Smarter Balanced assessment, like the new standards, asks students to engage in tasks which involve more complexity, problem-solving and integrated learning. This is not the multiple choice test of years past—students actually have to grapple with practical applications in new contexts and complex tasks that take a lot of time to solve. Eventually students will have more experience with the foundational learning related to the Common Core standards, starting in the early grades. Over time, we will see our children improve their performance as they gain these skills.

So how do we use these tests? Remember first of all that this is the first year of these tests. We really have no idea what level of performance on the Smarter Balanced assessment predicts a student will be well prepared for college and careers. We need to look at this data over time before we can come to any defensible conclusions about school quality based on these tests.

So why give them? Because they DO give us useful information that we can use to evaluate the size and direction of our achievement gaps, as well as the mastery of individual students on specific content. At the state level, we will look closely at scores to assess challenges related to equity and set goals. At the local level, educators will use individual scores, along with other locally collected data, to assess students' needs and plan instruction. For parents, the tests can help them ask good questions when they meet with teachers, and provide one benchmark for monitoring their student's progress and success.

Let's learn what we can from these tests and use them to improve. Let's NOT use them in ways that misrepresent or distort the true story of education in Vermont. And most importantly, let's not let testing become the focus of the education we provide our children. Our schools, our communities and our children deserve so much more.

Sincerely,

Rebecca Holcombe, Secretary
Vermont Agency of Education

