

Superintendent Rick Schmitt's Monthly Update

December 2015

Superintendent Schmitt regularly updates the greater San Dieguito Union High School District community through our local media with a monthly update. Topics may include academics, facilities, budget, enrollment, safety, and other specific and special interest topics. Today's update focuses on a variety of student assessment topics.

Earlier this fall, many of our families received the results of the 2015 California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP) which measures the achievement of students in the areas of English language arts/Literacy (ELA) and Math at grades 3-8 and 11. Spring of 2015 was the first time students in our district and across the state took these assessments and received scores. Previous administrations of the test were part of field testing and did not yield individual or collective results. The CAASPP replaces the California Standards Tests (CST's), also known as STAR tests, which had been in place since 1996. The CAASPP represents a significant shift in both what skills and knowledge are assessed and how student learning is assessed. The CAASPP assesses student mastery of our new state standards for ELA and Math which place greater emphasis on deep conceptual understanding, critical thinking, and application of knowledge and skills rather than rote memorization, recall and decontextualized facts and knowledge. The CAASPP assessments are entirely computer-based and include a variety of assessment items types, most of which are not multiple choice, and which require students to analyze text and data and use evidence and writing to explain and justify conclusions. The shifts in our state standards and the related assessments reflect an emphasis on the skills that our students need for post-secondary success in college and the workplace.

Any time our students take an assessment for the first time, we never know quite what to expect because we don't have a basis for comparison, but, as usual, SDUHSD students performed extremely well on the CAASPP. In ELA, only 7% of our students performed in the "Standard Not Met" range while 25% and 30% did so in San Diego County and California respectively. In Math, 13% of SDUHSD students scored in "Standard Not Met" range while 31% and 37% did so in the county and state. This level of achievement is a reflection of the great students with which our families entrust us as well as the dedication and skill of our teachers and site administrators. All these factors work in unison to support the success of our students.

While we are proud of the performance of our students, because 2015 was the first time our students took the CAASPP, these scores serve as a baseline against which we will measure future growth. While it's tempting to do so, it's important to remember that the CAASPP measures a very different set of knowledge and skills than the previous tests (CST's) and therefore student achievement on the two tests cannot be compared with any validity. We will use the 2015 scores as a starting point to measure both individual and collective student growth and the identify areas in which we can improve.

While the shift to new standards for ELA and Math, as well as to the new assessments tied to these standards, has not been without its challenges, we continue to believe that these shifts are in the best interests of our students as they more accurately reflect the knowledge and skills our students need to find success in whatever path they choose after high school, whether that be college or a career. The new state standards and the CAASPP also align more closely with other high stakes external assessments that most of our students will take during their high school careers. Advanced Placement (AP) tests have always placed an emphasis on analysis, critical thinking, and writing and the SAT and ACT, the two major assessments used for college entrance, both already do or will more heavily emphasize these skills. The ACT was revised in 2014 to align more closely with the College and Career Readiness standards that are at the heart of the new California State Standards and in March of 2016, a revised SAT will also reflect a greater emphasis on these skills. We very much believe that emphasizing these skills in our curriculum not only prepares students for success on important external assessments, but, more importantly, prepares them with the crucial skills they will need to actually be successful in college and career. One additional benefit of the CAASPP is a reduction in the amount of time our students spend taking standardized tests. The old STAR tests required all students to take tests in every grade from 3rd through 11th grade. The CAASPP is administered in grades 3-8 and then again in grade 11 which means that 9th and 10 graders do not take the assessment. The CAASPP is also a computer-based adaptive test, which means that the difficulty level of questions an individual student faces during the assessment is adjusted automatically based upon how the student answered previous questions. This allows for more precise assessment of an individual student's mastery of content and skills while reducing the number of assessment items, and therefore the amount of time, a student takes on a test by up to 50%. So with the CAASPP, our students take fewer tests, spend less time taking the tests they do take, and get a more accurate assessment of their learning.

As a district, our focus is on how to improve student learning. We've spent the last three years engaged in ongoing professional development with our teachers to align our curriculum and instructional and assessment practices with the new state standards. We've approached this shift as a gradual, multi-year process with teacher learning at the center. While we are not "finished" with this shift and despite learning some lessons along the way, we are very happy with our transition to date and we see our students' strong performance on the CAASPP as validation of our work. This year we are focused on continuing professional development with our teachers while also working to identify the essential learning outcomes for each core academic course. With these learning outcomes identified, we will build formative assessments designed to measure student achievement of these learning outcomes throughout a school year. During the 2016-17 school year, we will administer these common internal assessments to measure student progress toward our essential learning outcomes, to identify students in need of additional support, and to assess and improve our own practice. This is an ongoing process by which we improve our own professional practice and by which we improve student learning.

I am very proud of our students for their many accomplishments and of our outstanding staff for their collective efforts to support our students' academic and personal growth. I am proud to lead a district where students, staff, and parents work together and collectively achieve great things. Thank you for your ongoing support of our students and schools.

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