

California Department of Education

Executive Office

SBE-003 (REV. 11/2017)

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# California State Board of Education March 2025 Agenda Item #04

## Subject

California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress: Request for Approval of the Proposed Revisions to the Reporting Achievement Level Descriptors.

## Type of Action

Action, Information

## Summary of the Issue(s)

The California Department of Education (CDE) seeks approval of the proposed revisions to the reporting achievement level descriptors (ALDs) for the Smarter Balanced Summative Assessments for English Language Arts/Literacy (ELA) and Mathematics and the California Science Test (CAST).

## Recommendation

The CDE recommends that the State Board of Education (SBE) approve the proposed revisions to the reporting ALDs and labels for the Smarter Balanced Summative Assessments for ELA and Mathematics and CAST as provided in Tables 1B, 2B, and 3B.

## Brief History of Key Issues

On November 13, 2024, the CDE sought approval from the SBE for 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 (SSRs) for the Smarter Balanced Summative Assessments for ELA and Mathematics, CAST, and Initial English Language Proficiency Assessments for California (ELPAC). As a result of the discussion of the proposed revisions to the ALD labels and SSRs, the SBE members requested that CDE conduct additional outreach to parents/guardians, educators, students, and other interest holders through focus groups, gather the feedback, and provide an update to inform the board’s future discussion.

### Brief History of Proposed Revisions to Reporting Achievement Level Descriptors

In November 2014, the SBE approved the full implementation of a technology-enabled assessment system and the first operational administration of the Smarter Balanced Summative Assessments for the 2014–15 school year. In November 2017, the SBE approved the assessment blueprints, general achievement level descriptors, and score reporting structure for the CAST. The Smarter Balanced Summative Assessments for ELA and Mathematics and the CAST are part of the California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP) system and scored on a continuum of success that reflects students’ increasing accuracy and complexity in the demonstration of knowledge and skills.

Test results for overall performance are categorized into four achievement levels that describe the relative accuracy and complexity of students’ performance within their grade level. The four achievement levels are currently labeled Level 4 (Standard Exceeded), Level 3 (Standard Met), Level 2 (Standard Nearly Met), and Level 1 (Standard Not Met). Each of these four achievement levels is accompanied by a reporting ALD. The current reporting ALDs for the Smarter Balanced Summative Assessments for ELA and Mathematics can be found on the ELA and Mathematics Understanding Results web page at [https://caaspp-elpac.ets.org/caaspp/Understanding  
SBResults](https://caaspp-elpac.ets.org/caaspp/UnderstandingSBResults); and the current reporting ALDs for the CAST can be found on the CAST Understanding Results web page at [https://caaspp-elpac.ets.org/caaspp/Understanding  
CASTResults](https://caaspp-elpac.ets.org/caaspp/UnderstandingCASTResults).

To support better understanding of assessment scores, the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium released a one-page brief titled “Smarter Balanced Assessments: What Do the Scores Mean?” The one-page brief can be found in the September 2024 SBE Agenda Item 02 Attachment 1 at <https://www.cde.ca.gov/be/ag/ag/yr24/documents/sep24item02a1.pdf>. In addition, the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium released a Q&A to provide further information related to the one-page brief document. The Q&A is available at <https://portal.smarterbalanced.org/wp-content/uploads/QA_What-Do-the-Scores-Mean.pdf>.

### Summary of Focus Groups

To support clear interpretation of student achievement, the CDE recommended revisions to the reporting ALDs and labels for ELA, mathematics, and science during the November SBE meeting. The reporting ALDs proposed during the November SBE meeting are listed in Tables 1A, 2A, and 3A. During the November SBE meeting, the SBE members requested that CDE conduct additional outreach to parents/guardians, educators, students, and other interest holders through focus groups.

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 other 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 CAASPP and ELPAC website and was sent to all registrants for each focus group session.

After reviewing the feedback from the December focus groups and the online survey, it was determined there was a need for additional feedback on the ALDs and ALD labels from a larger sample of participants. As a result, five additional focus groups were held virtually in January 2025. Two of the focus group sessions consisted of parents/guardians, one in English and another in Spanish. Other focus groups included local educational agency (LEA) testing coordinators, students (from grades six through twelve), and classroom educators, respectively.

The focus group participants were asked to provide feedback on the current ALDs and ALD labels, the ALDs and labels initially proposed at the November 2024 SBE meeting, and additional options that were proposed by participants in the December 2024 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 ALDs and labels.

While a summary of focus group participation and feedback can be found on the SBE February 2025 Information Memoranda web page at <https://www.cde.ca.gov/be/pn/im/documents/feb25memoadad02.docx>, some highlights include:

* Regarding the current ALD labels, participants expressed some confusion about what the “standard” was meant to signify generally. Further, many felt that “Level 2: Standard Nearly Met” lacked clarity. “Level 1: Standard Not Met” was interpreted by some parents as their child failing, and some students and teachers viewed the label as discouraging.
* A majority of participants expressed a clear understanding and support for the initially proposed alternative ALD labels for “Level 3: Proficient” and “Level 4: Advanced.” However, participants found “Level 1: Inconsistent” and “Level 2: Foundational” to be difficult to understand. The December 2024 focus group participants offered the alternatives of “Basic” for Level 2 and “Below Basic” for Level 1 as simpler and more familiar language. The January focus group participants were given the opportunity to respond to those labels and to share their own proposals. Other terms discussed included: Minimal, Emerging, Developing, and Approaching. Among the January focus group participants, “Basic” and “Below Basic” were generally favored for their clarity and familiarity. Some participants also supported terms like “Developing” or “Emerging” for Level 1 and “Approaching” for Level 2.
* Participant feedback on the ALDs focused on the need for more concise, straightforward information to be conveyed. In particular, participants asked for more information about how to improve their child’s skills.
* Respondents indicated a need for resources in multiple languages to learn about the changes and recommended parent guides, teacher training modules, brief videos or webinars, handouts, and student-facing resources.

The CDE has reviewed the feedback collected regarding potential revisions to the CAASPP ALDs. The proposed reporting ALDs listed in Tables 1B, 2B, and 3B reflect the proposals that received the broadest support during the focus groups and online survey. Approval of the proposed reporting achievement level descriptors and labels will not impact the comparability of student assessment results from year to year as they do not change the level of rigor in the assessments, nor do they change the cut scores for each achievement level.

**Table 1A. 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. |

**Table 1B. Currently 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— 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 ability 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. |

**Table 2A. Previously Proposed** Reporting Achievement Level Descriptors and Labels for the Smarter Balanced Summative Assessment for Mathematics

| **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 mathematics 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 mathematics 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 mathematics 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 mathematics needed for likely success in future coursework. |

**Table 2B. Currently Proposed** Reporting Achievement Level Descriptors and Labels for the Smarter Balanced Summative Assessment for Mathematics

| **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 mathematics 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 mathematics needed for success in future coursework. | The student demonstrates **basic** grade-level knowledge and skills and shows a fundamental understanding of and ability to apply the knowledge and skills in mathematics 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. |

**Table 3A. Previously Proposed** Reporting Achievement Level Descriptors and Labels for the California Science Test

| **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 associated with the performance expectations of the California Next Generation Science Standards. | The student demonstrates **proficient** grade-level skills and shows a thorough understanding of and ability to apply the knowledge and skills associated with the performance expectations of the California Next Generation Science Standards. | The student demonstrates **foundational** grade-level skills and shows a basic understanding of and ability to apply the knowledge and skills associated with the performance expectations of the California Next Generation Science Standards | The student demonstrates **inconsistent** grade-level skills and shows a minimal understanding of and ability to apply the knowledge and skills associated with the performance expectations of the California Next Generation Science Standards |

**Table 3B. Currently Proposed** Reporting Achievement Level Descriptors and Labels for the California Science Test

| **Grades** | **Level 4— Advanced** | **Level 3— Proficient** | **Level 2—  Basic** | **Level 1— Below Basic** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Grades five, eight, and once in high school (in either grades ten, eleven, or twelve) | The student demonstrates **advanced** grade-level knowledge and skills and shows a sophisticated understanding of and ability to apply the knowledge and skills associated with the performance expectations of the California Next Generation Science Standards. | The student demonstrates **proficient** grade-level knowledge and skills and shows a thorough understanding of and ability to apply the knowledge and skills associated with the performance expectations of the California Next Generation Science Standards. | The student demonstrates **basic** grade-level knowledge and skills and shows a fundamental understanding of and ability to apply the knowledge and skills associated with the performance expectations of the California Next Generation Science Standards. | The student demonstrates **below basic** grade-level knowledge and skills and shows a minimal understanding of and ability to apply the knowledge and skills associated with the performance expectations of the California Next Generation Science Standards. |

As noted above, a number of respondents in the focus group also proposed alternative language for Level 1, including “minimal,” “emerging,” or “developing,” which may also be considered.

### Next Steps, Outreach, and Communication

If the SBE approves these changes, CDE will work with the assessment contractor to update the following:

* SSRs
* Communications and training for families, including the Starting Smarter website
* Reporting materials, communications, and trainings for LEAs
* California Educator Reporting System
* Reports on the Test Results for California’s Assessments website
* Other relevant CDE web pages and reports

Focus group participants expressed interest in resources to support the communication of ALD changes (such as parent guides, teacher training modules, brief videos or webinars, handouts, and student-facing resources), as well as additional information regarding what steps can be taken by parents and educators after receiving the student’s score report to support student progress. In response, the CDE is working with its testing and communication contractors to create an outreach plan and resources for communicating the changes to parents/guardians, educators, and students. The CDE is working with the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium to create a document that includes additional information and suggested next steps (see attachment 01). The CDE will provide updates on the communication plan at future SBE meetings.

## Summary of Previous State Board of Education Discussion and Action

In February 2025, the CDE provided an information memorandum on the proposed revisions to the reporting ALDs (<https://www.cde.ca.gov/be/pn/im/documents/feb25memoadad02.docx>).

In January 2025, the SBE approved the proposed technical amendments to the SSRs (<https://www.cde.ca.gov/be/ag/ag/yr25/documents/jan25item06.docx>) (<https://www.cde.ca.gov/be/ag/ag/yr25/documents/jan25item06a1.pdf>).

In December 2024, the CDE provided an information memorandum on the status of revisions to the reporting ALDs and SSRs (<https://www.cde.ca.gov/be/pn/im/documents/dec24memoadad01.docx>).

In November 2024, the SBE reviewed proposed revisions to CAASPP achievement level descriptors and SSRs and determined further feedback is needed prior to a decision (<https://www.cde.ca.gov/be/ag/ag/yr24/documents/nov24item05.docx>).

In October 2024, the CDE provided an information memorandum on the SSRs and Reporting ALDs (<https://www.cde.ca.gov/be/pn/im/documents/oct24memoadad01.docx>) (<https://www.cde.ca.gov/be/pn/im/documents/oct24memoadad01a1.pdf>) (<https://www.cde.ca.gov/be/pn/im/documents/oct24memoadad01a2.pdf>).

## Fiscal Analysis (as appropriate)

Not applicable.

## Attachment(s)

* Attachment 1: Suggested Next Steps (1 page)

# Attachment 1: Suggested Next Steps

Table 1 provides the interpretation of the Smarter Balanced achievement levels and associated grade-level performance with increasing accuracy and complexity and suggested next steps.

## Table 1. Suggested Next Steps

| **Interpretation of Smarter Balanced Achievement Levels and Associated Grade-level Performance** | **Suggested Next Steps** |
| --- | --- |
| Level 4: Students consistently demonstrate advanced grade-level knowledge and skills with deep understanding and a full range of complexity. | **Enrichment**: Students may benefit from engaging in activities like challenging projects and problem-solving tasks that encourage creative thinking and deeper application of their knowledge and skills. |
| Level 3: Students consistently demonstrate proficient grade-level knowledge and skills with a broad range of complexity. | **Support additional progress**: Students may benefit from opportunities that build on their strengths, such as enrichment activities, while also receiving additional support in areas where they are still developing. |
| Level 2: Students demonstrate foundational grade-level knowledge and skills with a limited range of complexity. | **Accelerate Learning- tailored support**: Based on additional performance information, students may benefit from identifying their strengths and areas for growth, along with tailored instructional support to help them make meaningful progress. |
| Level 1: Students do not consistently demonstrate grade-level knowledge and skills. | **Accelerate Learning- additional instructional time**: Using additional performance information, students may benefit from focused time to strengthen essential grade-level skills and receive personalized support to accelerate their learning journey. |