

## Michigan's Required Administration of Interim Benchmark Assessments (PA 149 of 2020, Section 104)

### Background

Section 104 of Michigan's "Return to Learn" package (PA 149 of 2020) stipulated that districts must administer at least one benchmark assessment (from an MDE-approved provider) in English language arts and mathematics to all students in kindergarten through 8<sup>th</sup> grade in the first 90 days of instruction. P.A. 149 also mandated that districts assess students again prior to the end of the school year. Districts that failed to comply would be at risk of losing state aid. The law also required the Michigan Department of Education to approve at least four assessment providers. It also provided the opportunity for districts to develop their own assessments and have them approved by the State. Of these, the State was to make at least one benchmark assessment available to districts for no cost. Districts were also encouraged to maintain consistency by administering the same benchmark they had used in previous years, "to the extent possible."



MDE approved four benchmark assessment providers: i-Ready (Curriculum Associates), MAP Suite (NWEA), Star Assessments (Renaissance Learning), and Smarter Balanced Interim Assessments (Data Recognition Corporation). MDE selected Smarter Balanced as the no-cost option for districts. Smarter Balanced also maintained the "Tools for Teachers" website (<https://smartertoolsforteachers.org>) that created lessons plans and other resources for teachers to use to respond to their students' performance; the Tools for Teachers resource was made available to all Michigan school districts, regardless of which interim assessment they chose to use.

### Purpose of this Policy Report

This policy report is intended to better understand how local educators made sense of and responded to the new benchmark requirements in the first year of the new law. Specifically, this study was designed to answer the following questions:

### Interim Benchmark Perceptions and Use

- How aware were educators about the new benchmark mandate?
- Which interim benchmark assessments were more commonly used to satisfy the mandate?
- What were educators' initial impressions of the new mandate?
- How did educators use the interim benchmark results?
- How useful did educators believe the interim benchmark results to be?

## Tools for Teachers Perceptions and Use

- What percentage of educators had accessed the Tools for Teachers website?
- What percentage of educators used the Tools for Teachers website?
- How useful did educators believe the Tools for Teacher resources to be?
- How can the patterns of Tools for Teachers access, use, and perceptions of quality be explained?

## Opportunities for Professional Learning

- What opportunities, if any, did educators have to learn about benchmark assessments and how they might be used to improve teaching and student learning outcomes?
- Furthermore, because the interim benchmarks schools and districts were using were not new, how likely would it be for them to receive recent professional development on the interim benchmark currently being administered?

## Emerging Challenges

- What challenges, if any, have been created by the benchmark mandate in PA 149, Section 1104, combined with the district response?

## Methodology

In order to answer these questions, the research team at the Michigan Assessment Consortium designed a two-step study. The first step included a survey of the individuals who had access to the Tools for Teachers secure site at Data Recognition Corporation. This list was chosen since it contained the name and e-mail address of the individuals who had been given log-in privileges.

## Survey Population

The survey population was determined by obtaining email addresses for educators who had accounts in the Tools for Teachers system. The information was provided by Data Recognition Corp (DRC), the organization that manages Tools for Teachers. We conducted a census rather than a survey sample. That is to say, we surveyed the entire population of educators who had a Tools for Teachers account (n = 138). A total of 45 educators responded to the questionnaire, which represents a 33% return rate. The respondents held diverse professional roles (see Table 1) that included teachers, site administrators, district administrators, and ISD administrators. We suspect that the return rate was not higher because many of the people in the survey population may not have actually accessed the Tools for Teachers site. Because of the link between Tools for Teachers and the Smarter Balanced interim assessments, it is likely that the total percentage of respondents whose school adopted the Smarter Balanced assessments would be much lower if the entire state were surveyed.

Table 1. Survey Respondent Professional Role Overview

Role	Percentage
Classroom Teacher	28.89%
Site Administrator	37.78%
District Administrator	17.78%
ISD Administrator	11.11%
Other	4.44%

## Interviews

The second part of the study included interviews with a subset of respondents to the survey. These individuals were selected if they were aware of the new interim benchmark requirement and they had accessed the Tools for Teachers Website. Of the seven educators we selected for interview, six

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participated. The interview subjects included a teacher, an instructional coach, an elementary school principal, two principals who also worked as curriculum directors at the district office, and one full-time curriculum director. Each of the six semi-structured interviews was transcribed in its entirety and coded using categories that aligned with our research questions. All data were collected in the spring of 2021 (the first year of the new law).

## Findings

The findings section is organized to reflect the research questions and therefore includes the following topics:

- Educator Awareness of Interim Assessment Mandate and Selection of Interim Benchmark Assessments
- Educator Use of Benchmark Assessment Results
- Tools for Teachers Use
- Professional Learning Opportunities
- Emerging Challenges

The beginning of each section includes the research questions to be answered in that section.

### **Educator Awareness of Interim Mandate and Selection of Interim Benchmark Assessments**

#### Research questions answered in this section:

- How aware were educators about the new benchmark mandate?
- Which interim benchmark assessments were more commonly used to satisfy the mandate?
- What were educators' initial impressions of the new mandate?

The survey yielded several interesting findings about respondents' awareness of the interim benchmark mandate and the types of benchmarks districts had chosen. First, nearly all of the survey respondents (95%) were aware of the new interim benchmark assessment mandate. Furthermore, the large majority of the sample (84%) were familiar with the interim benchmark provider their district was using. Of the interim benchmark assessments, the NWEA MAP was by far the most popular. Slightly over 60% of the sample reported that their district was using the NWEA MAP. The Smarter Balanced interim assessment (provided to districts at no cost to districts), the second most common choice, was selected by just over 21% of districts in our sample. The other approved interim benchmark providers constituted only small minority of our sample. These providers included Renaissance STAR (13%) and Curriculum Associates iReady (5%) tests. Very few individuals indicated that their district had opted to develop their own interim benchmark assessment (3%). This information is shown in Figure 1.

Awareness of the new interim benchmark assessment mandate was coupled with experience using the interim benchmark assessments. Importantly, for all those educators interviewed, administering interim benchmark assessments was something their school was already doing and had been doing for some time. For instance, an instructional coach at a virtual high school with more than a decade of experience said, "we've been doing [interim benchmarks] my entire career." A district administrator and school principal in our sample said, "We have been an NWEA district...This is like maybe our third or fourth year, I think. So, we had already planned to give interim benchmark assessments three times a year. For us, that was just, like, a practice that was part of a balanced assessment system." A principal from our sample added that when she heard about the new requirement she was "indifferent...assessing the kids within the first 90 days of the school year is something that you do, naturally, anyway just as best practice... It was something that we would use regardless of whether we had to do it for a report and turn it in or not."

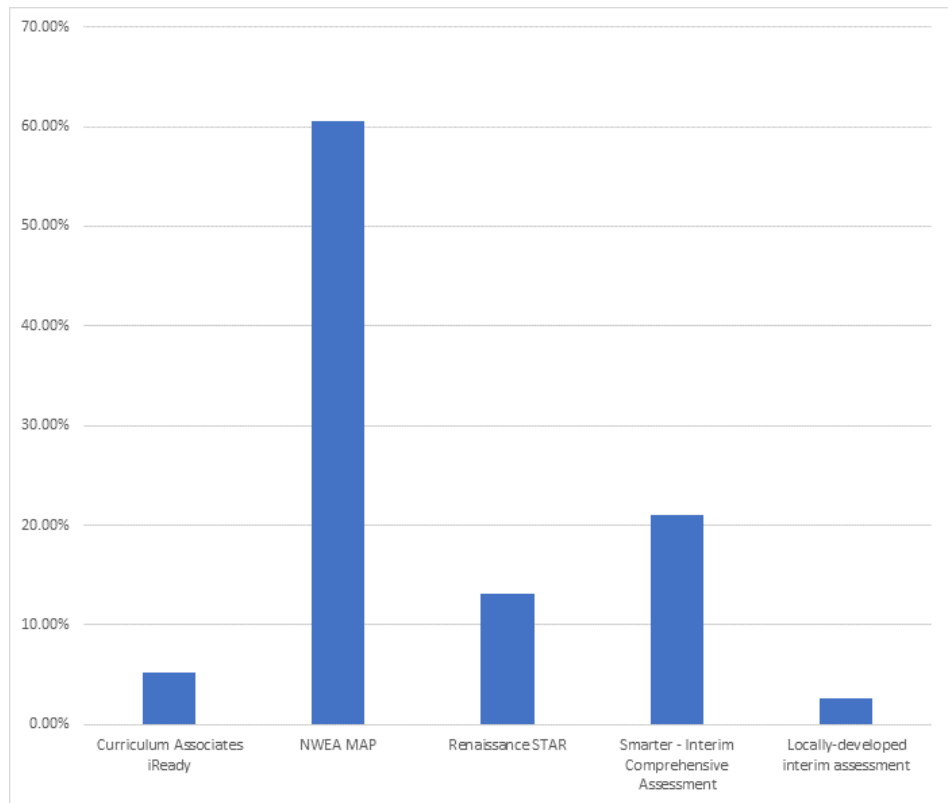
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Thus, extensive experience administering interim benchmarks made the new requirement an established, unmarkable “business as usual” practice. This finding of familiarity also helps explain why only 21% of the survey respondents reported having used the SBAC interim assessments. Districts had pre-established contracts with providers (most commonly NWEA) that would satisfy the demands of the new mandate. Nevertheless, SBAC interims could be an attractive option for financially strapped districts, as this quote from a district administrator explains:

“Before the CARES money came through, we anticipated a massive budget cut being necessary this fall, which most districts did...Our superintendent being very proactive, started cutting the budget. And near the top on the list—NWEA. Right? We knew we wouldn't get the assessment grant. We had heard the assessment grant would be cut, which it was, and he said, ‘It's \$10,0000 dollars. It's got to go.’ So, we cut NWEA.”

In sum, the educators in our sample were very aware of the new benchmark assessment mandate and they responded to this mandate with a level of indifference that can be explained by the fact that they had already been satisfying the mandate's demands through long-established routines and practices already in place. This also explains the infrequency of the adoption of Smarter Balanced interim assessments, as districts opted to stick with the familiar providers except in the case of significant fiscal concerns.

Figure 1. Overview of Interim Benchmarks Used to Satisfy the Mandate



## Educator Use of Benchmark Assessment Results

### Research questions answered in this section:

- How did educators use the interim benchmark results?
- How useful did educators believe the interim benchmark results to be?

Next, we turn to educators' perceptions of the use of the interim benchmark results. Educators used interim benchmark assessment results for varied and multiple purposes. For instance, 87% of the survey sample indicated that they used results to monitor student growth. Seventy-three percent reported that they used results to meet the needs of individual students and 53% said that they used

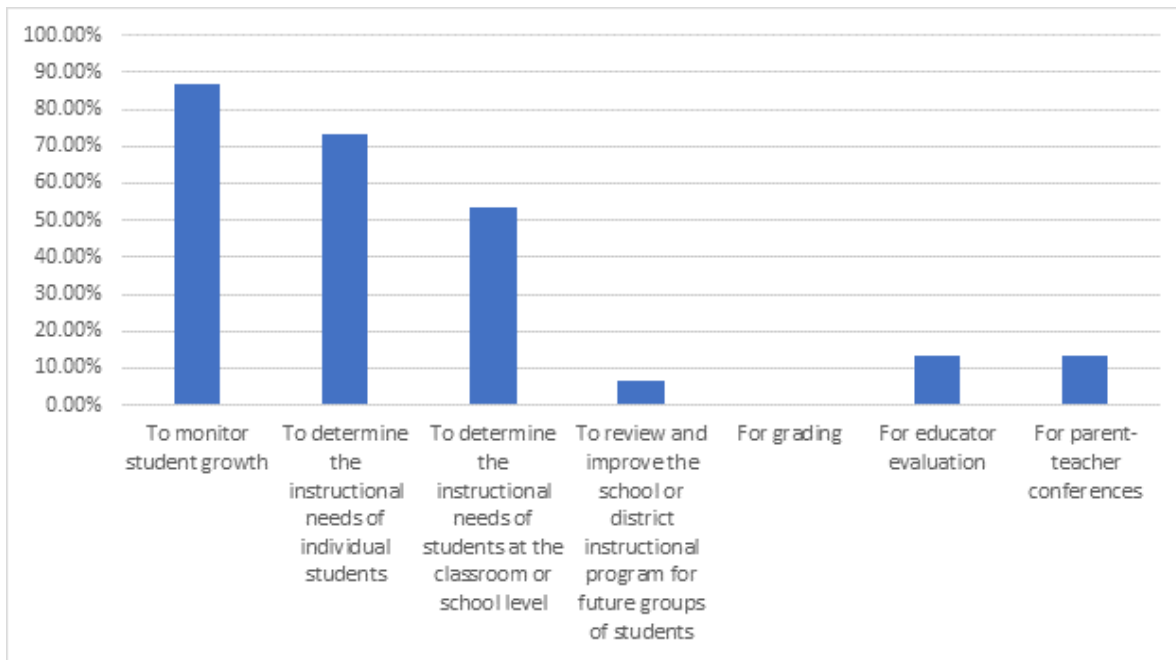
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the results to make whole-class decisions (see Figure 2). However, there was considerable variation of use in schools.

As one high school math teacher whose school was using the Renaissance STAR explained, teachers used results to varying degrees, and they learned from one another over time:

“As a teacher, we can go into STAR and look at the results for just our students or just our homeroom students or individual students in our class, how they performed on individual standards. I personally haven't done that much with the data except to look at, overall in my class, what are the things that they struggle with the most? And what is the level, overall, of my students? Now, some teachers will look at that, and some teachers have. I just met with a different teacher at our school earlier this week and she showed me how she looks at their STAR, looks at the students who are most needing intervention, and she made custom assessments in STAR based on those standards that are focus standards that were listed as "needing intervention" for those students. And so, she made individual practice for students based on the report that STAR gave on their STAR tests.”

Table 2. Use of Interim Benchmark Assessment Results



She went on to explain that interim benchmark results can also be used to identify struggling students and design whole school interventions:

“We also are starting a math lab...and we just hired a math support teacher, and he works with students who need intervention and one of the things that we base that need on is their STAR score. So, we looked at STAR scores and I think that was the first thing that we used to pull the list of students from. And then teachers verified, "Ok, STAR says this student needs\_\_\_\_\_; do we think this student really needs assistance or do we think that maybe they rushed through the test?" And then, he works with those students in small groups to provide them some extra assistance with math.”

Other uses, like educator evaluation and parent-teacher conferences were less popular (both 13%), but still noteworthy. Finally, a large majority of the sample believed that the interim benchmark assessment results were either useful (66%) or very useful (8%). Of the minority of the sample who felt the benchmark results were not useful, most indicated that this was due to uncertainty of whether the



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students took the assessment independently or received help from parents (more coverage of this topic is provided below).

Our interview sample included one administrator whose district had adopted the Smarter Balanced interim assessments as a cost-saving measure. As might be expected, the shift to Smarter Balanced after years with NWEA had generated some frustration that often comes with a change in practice and the learning curve that comes with it. However, even this district administrator who was frustrated by the Smarter Balanced assessments at first began to see the value and utility of the assessments in helping teachers identify student learning needs. Her district had administered the lengthy Interim Comprehensive Assessments (ICAs) at the beginning of the year but later switched to the much shorter Interim Assessment Blocks (IABs). She explained:

“We might use those IABs because I think they're a nice benchmark. If I said to teachers, ‘When you give your test over fractions I'd also like you to give the IAB fractions assessments.’ Because, let's be honest, teachers are many good things. They're not sophisticated psychometricians. Sometimes you need an assessment written by a third party to make sure you got ‘what do the kids know’ versus “what did I tell the kids” or “how much do the kids remember that I told them?” Or ‘How much did they internalize what the textbook focuses on?’ And that's a nice outside source and it's a reasonable exam. If we got to that point, I think Tools for Teachers would be a great MTSS (multi-tiered system of support) tool; and as we recover from this year, really strengthening the toolbox that we use in MTSS is going to be a priority.”

In sum, educators believed that interim benchmark assessment results were useful for a wide range of purposes. In one case, the switch to a new interim benchmark provider surfaced some additional learning needs, but, even so, the results soon became useful.

### **Tools for Teachers Use**

#### Research questions answered in this section:

- What percentage of educators had accessed the Tools for Teachers website?
- What percentage of educators used Tools for Teachers website?
- How useful did educators believe the Tools for Teacher resources to be?
- How can the patterns of Tools for Teachers access, use, and perceptions of quality be explained?

Just over half of our sample (51%) had accessed the *Tools for Teachers* (TfT) website at the time of the survey, but very few had actually used any of the resources. Of the 51% of respondents who had accessed the TfT website, only 17% reported using a TfT resource. Thus, less than 10% of the total sample (4 educators total) had both accessed the TfT website and used a resource they found there. Although a small minority of the sample, respondents found these resources useful (75%) or very useful (25%).

It is remarkable that 50% of the sample had accessed TfT at any point. Finding out about the Tools for Teachers website was idiosyncratic. For instance, the instructional coach in our sample went to TfT after she received a request from a state administrator. One of the curriculum directors said she could not remember how she had heard of TfT, but she believed that it may have come up in a webinar that she attended. She explained that during online meetings, “and I tend to as I'm listening, you know, check out whatever links are in the agenda, and I don't know if it was through a MAC or other webinar that I ended up there.” Other educators mentioned following up on TfT after hearing about it at a conference, or in a conversation with a colleague.

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Interviews with educators also help shed light on the survey findings of how Tft was mostly unused but at the same time potentially useful. First, while Tft use was low, this may be attributed to the website's newness. For instance, a high school math teacher explained that that she had not "used [Tools for Teachers] much other than kind of exploring the website, seeing what kind of thing are on there" but she "did download some ideas that I could use, maybe, next year." This suggests that use might lag behind exploration. Other evidence also suggests that educators first explored the website to get a sense of the resources that can be found there without a specific plan for how and when the resources might be used. In fact, educators who had spent time on the Tft website were enthusiastic about the potential, as one instructional coach explained:

"I logged on and I was like, 'Oh my gosh! This is phenomenal.' So, I reached out to my principal and said, 'This is a Christmas gift. This is it! This is going to solve all of our problems.' I got in and I searched around, it was a very good resource in itself. I think I just got overwhelmed and then just didn't get back in. And it's difficult. I think the most difficult thing about Tools for Teachers is the idea that it's one more thing that I'm asking my teachers...it's a great resource. If I were to say, 'Hey, guys. This is your resource. Use this exclusively to....if today you're teaching Y axis. Type it in Tools for Teachers and it will bring up the information you need.' There's just so much in there."

This quote surfaces several interesting points that capture the sentiments of the other educators interviewed. First, educators believed that Tft contains many good resources that they might use or suggest to others. Second, educators may feel a bit overwhelmed by the sheer volume of resources and this may lead to them perusing the website without selecting any resources for immediate use. Third, as valuable as using Tft might be, it can also be "just one more thing" teachers are asked to do. The



instructional coach quoted above went on to say, "I'm going to have to sift through the materials and I can't feel good about throwing that at my teachers until I've played around with it." This instructional coach, like other non-teacher educators in our sample, assumed the role of vetting the resources for teachers to spare them the time and energy of having to do so themselves.

A district administrator shared a similar experience he had visiting Tft with an instructional coach with the purpose of culling resources for teachers:

"So, that was the idea and vision behind us going [to the Tft website] and our vision for using it moving forward. I think it's easy for me to say how flexible it is and how easy it is to plug and play. It's another thing to change the mindset of teachers that, 'Oh, I can create this? I can find resources?' You know, sometimes they do. They go to Teachers Pay Teachers sometimes and they buy lessons and things like that. And I happen to be an open educational resource....somebody who believes in that. I think it's wonderful that I can find high-quality curriculum and it doesn't cost me six figures to be able to implement. So, there's an equity and access piece there with open educational resources like the things that are on Tools for Teachers where I can just go."

These quotes suggest that the educator who accesses the Tft website may not be the same as the educators who are putting the resources to classroom use. One of the curriculum directors in our

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sample shared a similar experience that supports these points. When asked about her experience on the Tft website, she recalled:

“I remember thinking that I'd really like to dig into [Tft] more, take some more time with it. I have a curriculum and instructional coach staff meeting every Friday morning and so I also was considering “do I put the link into my agenda, and we take some time to look at it together?” but then also realizing that we had a lot of other things that we've been digging into. So, trying to balance how much I share and, just, again, SOOO many resources out there. How do you decide which one is the one to devote your time with?”

Only one of the educators in our interview sample worked in a district that had adopted the Smarter Balanced Interim Assessments. In theory, using SBAC should facilitate the use of Tft, as Smarter Balanced has provided a “Connections Playlist” that links student outcomes on SBAC assessments to relevant Tft resources. And yet, this administrator found the layout of Tft frustrating, although the following quote also suggests that this frustration may be diminishing over time with increased experience:

“We just started using [Tft]. I have a teacher who's working on this for me. A teacher leader. So, one of the things about Smarter Balanced is the instruction. The training is not great and [the Tft website] is not intuitive. So we finally got, recently, about to the place where they were really looking at the Smarter reporting. And you've got to get there in order for the Tools for Teachers to really help you target what you need. Right? We had to get them using [the DRC website] and then get them to [Tft], and then say, “What I need is” and then you say, “Ok. Tools for teachers has that.”

At the same time that Tft was both useful and under-used, it was also overwhelming and yet not comprehensive, as one principal lamented, “the Smarter Balance didn't have anything for the lower [elementary], so it was a really helpful tool for the 3-5, but they didn't have anything for the lower [elementary]. And so, when you want consistency, for them not to have examples at the lower grade levels, you know, that was frustrating, I guess. But I was still pretty, pleasantly pleased with all that we got done and where we're headed. There's still lots of work to do.”

All the of the interview sample educators expressed intentions of returning to the Tft website, although it was not a pressing intention likely to be satisfied immediately, as a principal in our sample made clear:

“I know we definitely will probably be going back to it at some point. Like I said, we started the proficiency standard, so we've got to do some more with that. And I could see us using it because then our next step is to come up with the tests to assess the different standards. And there are some good examples. And there are some lesson plans and things like that. So, I could definitely see us going back and digging a little bit deeper into some of that. But I think, again, if I wanted my teachers to really use it and be successful with it, I would have to do some prep to take away the heavy lifting.”

In sum, just over half of our survey sample had accessed the Tft and less than 10% had actually used a Tft resource. Educators found the Tft website through various and idiosyncratic means and most were not classroom teachers but rather educators who intended to make sense of the website and vet resources in order to lessen the burden on teachers.



## Professional Learning Opportunities

### Research questions answered in this section:

- What opportunities, if any, did educators have to learn about benchmark assessments and how might they be used to improve teaching and student learning outcomes?
- Furthermore, because the interim benchmarks schools and districts were using were not new, how likely would it be for them to have had recent professional development on the interim benchmark currently being administered?

The interview respondents did not report that their district provided any professional learning opportunities specific to the new interim benchmark mandate. However, this does not mean that they had *never* received training on the interim benchmark assessment their district was using or how to use benchmark results effectively. Because the benchmarks districts used tended to be an extension of what they had used previously, professional learning opportunities had often occurred in prior years. As one math teacher and department chair explained, “We had some school-wide training on just how to navigate the STAR website and how to make use of the reports that are in there. We’ve had quite a bit of training, actually...we have been trained on how to use those reports, which reports give us what information, that kind of thing.” When asked if her schools had received any recent professional development opportunities, one curriculum director said, “No, we’ve had it in the past, because I think this is our tenth year with Renaissance [STAR] so the first couple years we had Renaissance training and then after that our administrators are pretty veteran, so we’ve been able to almost, like, everybody just knew what to do and just remind people of protocols.” She did add, however, that she had recently designed a training for teachers explaining how to administer the assessments in a virtual environment. An educator in our sample who was both a site principal and a district administrator had a similar experience. He explained, “we’re in the second or third year [using NWEA]. There was a lot of PD frontloaded, to, ‘these are right reports to look at for these purposes. This is the learning continuum, how interpret where kids fall on the learning continuum, how to differentiate and design lessons based on what is in the continuum based on their RITS score’ all those things. A lot of that had already been done.”

Even when the benchmark assessment provider was new, as it was for one district administrator whose district adopted SBAC as a cost-saving measure, professional development was extremely limited. She reported that she had to learn on her own from the Smarter Balanced website and relay her findings to other administrators and teachers in her district. No formal or comprehensive opportunities to learn were provided.

Formal opportunities to learn about Tft were no better. However, as noted above, the educators in our interview sample were already involved in or on the cusp of learning about Tft and detailing the website’s utility for teachers. For example, one principal from our sample took great pains to connect the teachers in her school to the Tft resources. She explained, “I made a whole step-by-step PowerPoint how to get in and look at it and then we had a whole to-do list, like, ‘once you’re here and you’re looking at it, this is what you need to do next.’ They were pretty successful. We were really happy about the amount of progress they got done.”

Professional learning about interim benchmarks and Tft can be summarized by the phrase “already and not yet.” Any professional learning for the benchmark assessments had already occurred, as in all but one case the educators had been using the district-selected benchmark for several years. Learning about Tft had not occurred yet, but several of the educators in our interview sample expressed vague and tentative plans to facilitate greater teacher learning about and involvement with Tft in the future.

## Emerging Challenges

This final section of the findings examines emerging challenges that surfaced during data collection and analysis.

### Research question answered in this section:

- What challenges, if any, have been created by the benchmark mandate, combined with the district response?

This section includes three primary challenges that emerged from our data: Potential for over testing and student motivation; uncertainty of student independence; and alignment with state content standards.

### *Potential of Over-testing and Student Motivation*

Educators often wondered if students were being tested too frequently. Over-testing had two potential adverse consequences. First, educators believed that testing students too often would crowd out instruction. Second, over-testing might lead to student assessment fatigue that would lead to questionable results, as the following quote from a high school instructional coach makes clear:

“I feel like it could have the potential to render this data that could be so valuable to a school, but I feel like it gets muddled with the idea that I'm giving [students] a beginning-of-the-year, middle-of-the-year, end-of-the-year test, plus they're taking MSTEP and PSAT or SAT. How many times can we test a kid until they're like, 'I don't care'? So...what test are we going to say to a student is the most important?”

Furthermore, educators had limited control over student motivation. One educator said she discussed growth mindset with students and extolled the value of always doing your best. She added, “There are extrinsic consequences. I hate to use that term, so we have the ability to....what we do is we have participation points in their ELA and math courses where they get 10 points for simply taking it.”

Other educators were concerned with the amount of time required to complete the test. The only educator in our interview sample to be using the SBAC interim benchmarks contended the assessments were far too long:

“When you look at what the requirements are, it looks like you've got to take the ICAs [one of the three SBAC interim assessments] and so that's what we gave them in the fall, which is a test over the whole year...It has a performance task. It has an essay in English. It has three extended problems in math. It takes hours. And our kids who are online were online a whole day taking these assessments with a camera on them so that we knew they weren't cheating.”

By the middle of the year, however, as this district administrator learned more about the different types of SBAC interim benchmarks, she insisted that her district move away from the Interim Comprehensive Assessments (ICAs) and administer the Interim Assessment Blocks (IABs) instead:

“[In the middle of the year] we gave the IABs. The IAB is 12 questions instead of 52. Twelve multiple choice questions, no project. And we gave them the base ten number system and



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asked them 12 questions and that was much better. It took them 45 minutes or something. Then the teachers were able to look at the data.”

### *Uncertainty of Student Independence*

Motivation was not the only thing that threatened to undermine the validity of the results. Educators questioned if students who took the assessment remotely had help from a parent or another family member, thus inflating their score. As one curriculum director said about her concern that parents were helping their early elementary school children:

“I'm not even sure about the data, right? I think the other point is, is the data really that accurate? Do we really trust the data? After the fall, we gave NWEA Map Growth reading to our K,1,2 kids, like we normally would except they were taking it at home. And we set up all these protocols and procedures from NWEA about the best way to do that, right, and, look, I had more kids in kindergarten in the 99 percentile this fall than I've ever had in the combined years that we've been giving it fall, winter, spring. So, what does that tell you? That's moms and dads can read at a kindergarten level. I mean, I've got kids in the 99 percentiles. That's not accurate.”

### *Alignment with State Content Standards*

Other questions arose with how well the interim benchmarks aligned with either state content standards or the teachers' course of study. As one math teacher explained of the STAR assessments her school was using, “I know that it's adaptive...so every student is going to get questions from different levels...I can't look at standards for algebra 1 for every student because not every student has made their way up to algebra 1 standards.” Even so, this teacher found the adaptive nature of the test informative and preferred results over what she would have received if every student completed the same, grade-specific assessment:

“[The adaptive assessment] gives me a better picture. Instead of just saying ‘Well, they didn't meet the high school standard,’ this tells me, ‘Oh. But they did meet the 3rd grade and 7th grade and 8th grade standards’... They met these specific standards, and I wouldn't get that much detail if it was one standardized test, if everybody was taking the same thing...I have students who are already a year behind or are taking [algebra 1] for the second or sometimes third time...So, that's really helpful for me that it's adaptive and gives me more than just ‘they didn't meet high school standards.’”

When asked about the alignment between the interim benchmarks and teachers' course of study, one curriculum director said, “I guess I haven't asked that question. I don't have teachers indicating otherwise, but we also don't....that's not the purpose, I think, it's more is it like an MSTEP-type prediction, right? And are we able to predict what a student may be doing on MSTEP, which then predicts are they getting the learning or the type of experience that they should be getting out of our instruction.”



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Not having the test be computer-adaptive posed challenges, too. The district administrator whose district abandoned the NWEA assessments when budget shortfalls threatened, explained that her experience with the grade-level SBAC assessments had been frustrating. When comparing the NWEA to the SBAC, she explained:

“[With NWEA] if you're an 8th grader and you read at the first-grade level, you're going to get a test pretty much at the first-grade level. The Smarter Balanced assessment is a test over that grade's Common Core standards. So, when you give the 8th graders a Common Core, the SBAC in the fall, you're giving a test that takes about 6 hours to take over everything they're supposed to be taught in the coming year. When a kid has just spent 12 weeks at home and is worried about how school's going, the best thing we should do is probably not give them a test over something they've never been taught that takes them six hours. Right? I mean, that's just humiliating, but that's what it is.”

### **Discussion/Implications/Recommendations**

All told, the new mandate for schools to administer interim benchmark assessments in the first 90 days of instruction was not a disruptive requirement, nor did it seem to inspire schools to improve. Rather, the mandate settled easily into pre-established practices that supported a smooth implementation. In other words, the mandate was easily satisfied with what schools were already doing. In a word, then, the mandate can be summarized as *unremarkable*.

In this final section, we consider some of the trends we uncovered in the findings section to discuss recommendations that may enhance the impact of the benchmark assessment mandate, in general, and the use of Tools for Teachers, in particular.

**Recommendations begin next page.**

Thanks to John Lane for his research and preparation of this Policy Report.

## **Recommendation 1. Provide Professional Learning Opportunities for Educators**

Educators had only meager opportunities recently to learn about interim benchmark exams and this lack of opportunity may lead to frustration and under use. For example, in the lone instance when an interview subject's district was using the Smarter Balanced assessments, she was given no training about which of the three Smarter Balanced assessments (ICAs, IABs, FIABs) to use. With her lack of experience and training, she selected the ICAs, the lengthiest and most comprehensive of the three. She left this experience feeling frustrated and exhausted and, as a consequence, she was encouraging her district to look at other assessment options. Providing more opportunities for professional learning could have lessened the challenges of adopting a new assessment and enhanced the use of student assessment data to contribute to overall school improvement. Thus, we recommend ongoing and sustained professional learning for all educators, particularly those in districts that have adopted a new interim benchmark that they will be implementing for the first time.

## **Recommendation 2. Establish a Clearer Link between Benchmarks and Tools for Teachers**

Second, because educators had no clear and consistent path through which they could be connected to Tft, the resources on the Tft websites were rarely used. Even those educators who accessed the website (and these educators were in the minority) they most often left after a brief perusal without any concrete plans to put the resources to use. In conjunction with the first recommendation, educators should have the opportunity to learn about the Tools for Teachers resources, how they connect with benchmark assessment results, and how they can be used to improve teaching and learning. Without dedicated time to learn about, experiment with, and reflect upon Tft resources, these resources are likely to remain just another set of materials vying for teachers' attention in a crowded space of virtual resources (e.g., Teachers Pay Teachers, Pinterest).

## **Recommendation 3. Map Tools for Teachers with other Interim Benchmark Providers**

Only a fraction of the survey respondents were in districts that had adopted the Smarter Balanced interim benchmarks. Nearly 80% of educators surveyed were working in districts that had adopted another assessment. Because of the way we constructed our interview census (see the methodology section), it is likely that the percentage of Smarter Balanced districts is inflated and overstates the popularity of Smarter Balanced interim assessment adoption. As such, Tools for Teachers may remain underutilized because the connection between Tft and Smarter Balanced (used by only a fraction of districts) does not exist for the other, more commonly used benchmarks. For instance NWEA was the adopted benchmark for 60% of our panel, but the relationship between NWEA results and Tools for Teachers is unclear. Any efforts to construct a "crosswalk" between NWEA and Tools for Teachers and then to connect this crosswalk to educator opportunities to learn could improve the use of the Tools for Teachers website.

With these recommendations in mind, there are a few things that educators in different roles might consider (see next page).



# **MAC Policy Report:** Interim Benchmark Assessments

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## **What this means for...**

### **Policymakers:**

- Consider coupling fiscal provision for professional learning with the benchmark administration mandate.

### **State Education Agency:**

- Enlist ISD, district, and school leaders to develop benchmark provider-specific content for educators to learn about how benchmarks link to Tools for Teachers, and how they can use Tools for Teachers to promote greater student learning.

### **School leaders:**

- Consider how interim benchmark assessments fit into a larger vision for balanced assessment within their schools, and then begin to operationalize their vision.
- Provide resources (featuring opportunities to learn) and establish organizational routines in which teachers have the time to explore and experiment with the Tools for Teachers material.

### **Teachers:**

- Get involved in district and school efforts, including creating professional development content, networking within and across schools, and leading professional development sessions.
- Experiment with and reflect upon the Tools for Teachers resources and share experiences within the school and more broadly.

### **Students, Families, and Community:**

- Learn about which interim benchmark assessment is used in the local district, and ask how the school/district is using assessment results.
- Request regular reporting about your child's interim benchmark results, how those results fit within the broader picture of your child's achievement, and how they will influence instruction moving forward.
- Ask for specific ways the family can engage their child at home to further their learning, based on all assessment information for your child, including formative assessment in the classroom.