

# Benchmark Assessments Technical Support

## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

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## Purpose and Requirements of the Benchmark Assessment Administration

### 1. Why are we being required to administer benchmark assessments now?

Under the Return to Learn legislation, districts are required to create an Extended COVID-19 Learning Plan for the 2020-21 academic year; the plan must include the educational goals the district expects to achieve during the year. The plan must also include an assurance that the district will administer a benchmark assessment or assessments to determine whether students are making meaningful progress towards mastery of state academic standards in reading and mathematics. In addition, the legislation seeks to determine what, if any, learning loss resulted from the COVID-19 pandemic.

### 2. What does my district need to do in order to meet the benchmark provisions of the Return to Learn law?

Districts must administer a benchmark assessment (or assessments) that meet the following requirements:

- The benchmark assessment(s) must be administered to all students in kindergarten through grade 8.
- The assessment(s) must measure proficiency in reading and mathematics.
- The benchmark assessment(s) must be administered at least two times: once in the first nine weeks of school and again before the end of the school year.

- Districts must administer a benchmark assessment or assessments chosen from
- an MDE-approved list of providers of benchmark assessments
- an assessment(s) that provides progress monitoring tools and enhanced diagnostics in reading and/or progress monitoring in math
- a local benchmark assessment or assessments
- or, any combination of the above

### 3. Will the results of the benchmark assessments be used for accountability purposes?

No; the law explicitly states these data cannot be used for accountability purposes.

### 4. Will the results of the benchmark assessments be used for teacher evaluation purposes?

There are no requirements in the Return to Learn law to use the results for teacher evaluation purposes. Districts could make the local decision to incorporate these results in teacher evaluations as part of Student Learning Objectives or other measurements.

### 5. Where can I find information on the benchmark provisions of the Return to Learn law?

Information specific to the benchmark assessment provisions of the Return to Learn law is located on the [MDE Benchmark Assessments for Return to Learn Legislation web page](#).

## Options Provided Under the Return to Learn Law

### 1. Who are the assessment providers on the MDE-approved list and where can I find information on their products?

The four approved benchmark assessment providers are:

- Curriculum Associates
- Data Recognition Corporation (DRC)
- NWEA
- Renaissance

You can find contact information and other vendor-provided documents on the [MDE Benchmark Assessment web page](http://www.michigan.gov/mde-benchmarkassessments) (www.michigan.gov/mde-benchmarkassessments).

## **2. Do we have to choose an assessment from the MDE-approved list?**

No; the Return to Learn legislation gives districts broad flexibility in making choices regarding the benchmark assessment or assessments they administer. These choices are:

- a benchmark assessment or assessments from an assessment provider on the MDE-approved Provider List, or
- a benchmark assessment(s) or tool(s) that provide progress monitoring and enhanced diagnostics in reading and/or progress monitoring in math, or
- a local benchmark assessment or assessments, especially if used in prior years, or
- any combination of the above

## **3. Do we have to use the same assessment for all grades (K-8)?**

No; the law does not require districts to use the same benchmark assessment in all grades.

Districts interested in monitoring progress in state academic standards across grades and years may find it easier to perform this comparison if they use a consistent benchmark assessment in all grades.

## **4. Do we have to use the same assessment for reading and mathematics?**

No; the law does not require districts to use the same benchmark assessment in reading and mathematics.

## **5. Do we have to administer benchmark assessments, and progress monitor virtual students as well? Does this have to be the same as for in-person students?**

There is no exception in the Return to Learn legislation for students who are not receiving in-person instruction: a benchmark assessment must be administered to them and a progress

monitoring tool is one of the allowable options. Nothing in the law says the same assessment must be administered to both remote and in-person students. That being said, keep in mind that part of the purpose of this law is to provide comparable data on how your students are performing.

## **6. If our district is using a math assessment that is not provided by a vendor on the approved assessment provider list, but it addresses what we are teaching, can we use it for our benchmark assessment?**

The law allows districts the option to choose which benchmark assessment(s) to administer, including local assessments. The chosen benchmark assessment(s) must allow districts to determine if meaningful progress is being made towards the state academic standards in mathematics. If the current assessment your district is using does that, then it is allowed.

## **7. Can we use <insert the name of your assessment>?**

The law provides districts with broad options when choosing the benchmark assessment or assessments to administer. These options include benchmark assessments from a vendor on the MDE-approved provider list, assessments that provide progress monitoring and enhanced diagnostics in reading and/or progress monitoring in mathematics, local assessments, or any combination thereof. Just remember, the assessment(s) must be administered at least twice a year – at the start and at the end of the school year – and it must allow districts to determine if meaningful progress is being made towards the state academic standards in reading and mathematics.

## **8. If our district chooses to administer a benchmark assessment that provides progress monitoring and enhanced diagnostics in reading, do we have to administer it in grade 9?**

No; while administering an assessment tool that provides progress monitoring in grade 9 is allowed under Return to Learn, it is not required.

## 9. Is progress monitoring required?

Under the Return to Learn legislation, you are required to administer a “benchmark assessment” in the first nine weeks of school and again at the end of the school year. A progress monitoring assessment or tool that provides progress monitoring and enhanced diagnostics in reading and/or a progress monitoring

assessment in mathematics is one of several options districts can choose from to meet the benchmark assessment requirements in the law.

## 10. Do we have to give a reading benchmark in grade 9?

No.

# Free Benchmark Assessments Provided Under the Return to Learn Law

## 1. Is the Smarter Balanced assessment the only assessment MDE will pay for?

The Smarter Balanced Interim Assessments are being provided free of charge to districts under the existing Data Recognition Corporation (DRC) contract. These assessments are available for students in grades 3-8 in ELA and mathematics.

The MDE-developed Early Literacy and Mathematics Benchmark Assessments for students in grades K-2 are also available at no cost to districts.

## 2. Where can I find information on the Smarter Balanced Interim Assessments and the MDE-developed Early Literacy and Mathematics Benchmark Assessments?

Districts interested in finding information on the Smarter Balanced Interim Assessments should contact DRC directly:

- **Christi Linton**  
[clinton@datarecognitioncorp.com](mailto:clinton@datarecognitioncorp.com)  
301-865-9859
- **Ryan Nelson**  
[rnelson@datarecognitioncorp.com](mailto:rnelson@datarecognitioncorp.com)  
763-268-2361
- **DRC Customer Support**  
[misupport@datarecognitioncorp.com](mailto:misupport@datarecognitioncorp.com)  
877-560-8378 option 2

Districts interested in finding information on the MDE-developed Early Literacy and Mathematics Benchmark Assessments can visit the [MDE Early Literacy and Mathematics Benchmark web page](#). They can also call 877-560-8378 option 3 or email [mde-oeaa@michigan.gov](mailto:mde-oeaa@michigan.gov).

## 3. If we do NWEA or iReady (or some other benchmark assessment), can we still use some of the Smarter Balanced tools that are available?

Yes; Tools for Teachers is available to all districts regardless of the benchmark assessment(s) they are administering. Tools for Teachers is an easy-to-use website with lessons and activities created by educators to enhance instruction, save time, and prepare students for college or a career. For a quick overview, watch a demonstration on [YouTube](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jPSTH7vM37s) (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jPSTH7vM37s>).

## 4. Can we do NWEA (or some other benchmark assessment) and some of the Focused Interim Blocks or Block-based assessments with Smarter Balanced?

Yes; but you will need to carefully consider your purpose and the type of information each assessment will provide. Districts should be thoughtful and careful when choosing and administering assessments and avoid administering multiple tests that provide similar information.

## Students with Disabilities and English Learners

### 1. The law says all students will be administered benchmark assessments. What about Students with Disabilities, especially those with severe disabilities for whom these assessments are not educationally appropriate?

The Return to Learn Legislation did not address assessment requirements specific to Students with Disabilities. Nevertheless, districts must remain compliant with students' Individualized Education Plans (IEPs).

The law requires benchmark assessments be provided within the first nine weeks of school and again at the end of the school year, to measure progress in reading and mathematics. However, although the Return to Learn law uses the term "benchmark assessments", it does provide broad flexibility by allowing the use of either a benchmark assessment offered by an assessment provider on the MDE-approved Provider List, a progress monitoring tool, or a locally determined assessment.

MDE suggests districts reach out to the assessment providers on the approved provider list to determine if they have options for these students. For students for whom commercial benchmark assessments are not appropriate (such as a student with a significant cognitive disability or one who is not able to engage in an online assessment), the district should use whatever assessment they typically use to monitor the student's progress in reading and mathematics.

### 2. The law says all students will be administered benchmark assessments. What about English Learners?

The Return to Learn law does not allow exceptions for English Learners. As with the guidance offered earlier, if your district has English Learners for whom commercial benchmark products are not appropriate because of their current level of language skills, remember there is broad flexibility available under the Return to Learn law and consider the current progress monitoring tools or local assessments you are currently using with this population of students for monitoring progress towards proficiency in reading and mathematics.

### 3. Can you confirm if WIDA ACCESS for ELLs is required this year?

The United States Department of Education has stated they are not contemplating waivers around state summative assessment and accountability requirements under ESSA. Currently, WIDA ACCESS for ELLs and WIDA Alternate ACCESS are required for the 2020-21 school year.

### 4. Where can I find information on available supports and accommodations?

Available supports and accommodations will vary by benchmark assessment and provider. Contact your benchmark assessment provider directly for this information.

## Reporting Requirements

### 1. Do we have to join the Data Hub?

Yes; unless your district has chosen to administer local benchmark assessments, the Return to Learn law specifically requires benchmark data

be provided through the Michigan Data Hub. You can contact the Michigan Data Hub for information or assistance by emailing [support@michigandatahub.org](mailto:support@michigandatahub.org) or by calling 269-250-9240.

**2. When can we start posting our data to the Data Hub?**

MDE is working with CEPI, the Michigan Data Hub, and the assessment vendors on this and do not yet have dates. Information will be shared as soon as it is available.

**3. When will local assessment reporting information be available?**

The Return to Learn legislation states the form and manner of reporting information related to local assessments will be determined by CEPI. This information will be shared when it is available.

**4. Where, when, and how do I report to the State which benchmark assessment(s) my district is using to fulfill the requirements of the Return to Learn law?**

The reporting requirements differ based on the benchmark option chosen. MDE, CEPI, and the Michigan Data Hub are working together to prepare guidance for districts administering local benchmark assessments versus assessments provided by an assessment vendor on the approved list and assessments that provide progress monitoring tools. This information will be shared through the [Spotlight newsletter](#) and posted to the [MDE Benchmark web page](#) when it is available.

**5. Although benchmark performance is not tied to accountability, does MDE or CEPI plan to publicly release district or building benchmark assessment results?**

No; public reporting at the district or building level is not provided for under the law. The Return to Learn law addressed statewide aggregate reporting and MDE agrees these data can be useful at the state level.

**6. Understanding that MDE is still unpacking this legislation, and that districts will be implementing benchmark assessments within the first 30 days of school to simultaneously meet requirements of the Read by Grade 3 law and Extended Learning plans, is it likely that no new “ahas” will be unpacked after districts have already administered fall benchmarks?**

The big thing MDE and CEPI are still unpacking is the specifics around the data reporting requirements through the Michigan Data Hub versus reporting local assessment information. We do not want to surprise anyone with additional requirements. We do need some time to figure out how to do the reporting aspects of it, but the steps you should take now is to figure out your assessment plan, get on the hubs, and get the assessments administered.

## Miscellaneous – Related to the Return to Learn Law

**1. Are we expected to conduct a mid-year assessment?**

Districts are required to submit an extended COVID-19 learning plan that includes educational goals to be achieved by the middle of the school year and by the end of the school year. The goals must include increased student achievement or growth that can be validly and reliably measured using a benchmark assessment or assessment. By February 1, 2021, districts must also report the progress that was made in meeting the middle-of-the-year goals.

While a mid-year benchmark assessment could be used to help make the determination of progress towards the middle-of-year goals, the Return to Learn law only requires two benchmark assessment administrations; one in the first nine weeks of the school year and a second before the end of the school year.

The Michigan Association of Intermediate School Administrators (MAISA) has prepared a set of [Extended COVID-19 Learning Plan Technical Assistance Documents](#) to help districts meet the requirements of the Extended

COVID-19 Learning Plan under the Return to Learn legislation. Included in this set of documents is an [Extended COVID-19 Learning Plan Goal Reporting Template](#).

## 2. Can parents choose to opt their students out of the benchmark assessments?

The recently passed Return to Learn legislation requires districts to administer benchmark assessments in reading and mathematics at the beginning of the school year and again at the end of the school year to track students' progress in those two subjects. While MDE supports parents in making education choices for their students, the Return to Learn legislation does not allow for parental opt-out. Parents should be reminded that this type of progress monitoring is especially important in a year where we anticipate instruction may be disjointed or interrupted. In addition to tracking progress, many benchmark assessments provide valuable feedback to educators (and parents), which, when used with other classroom evidence, can help teachers quickly pinpoint the instructional needs of their individual students. Districts should make their best effort to comply with the law.

## 3. Is it allowable to still administer the MKEO (Michigan Kindergarten Observation Entry tool)?

KRA/MKEO is still fully available and districts may use that assessment voluntarily. Check in with your ISD KRA coordinator.

## 4. When developing the approved list of assessment vendors, how did MDE define "one of the most commonly administered"?

To identify those providers, we used data from the 2018-19 benchmark reimbursement grant and looked at the most common providers under that grant.

## 5. How does MDE apply the requirement for benchmark assessments to an ISD/RESA?

ISDs are not specifically required to submit a plan, but the law uses the word "district" and says "all students K-8". In some places in Michigan law, "district" means both LEA and ISD; in other places, these terms are separated out. The best advice for an ISD is this: if you directly educate students in K-8, you should be planning to give them a benchmark assessment. The clear intent of the law is that all K-8 students are to be given a benchmark assessment.

## 6. What suggestions do you have for virtual learners and for ensuring a test is being proctored correctly?

Most, if not all, of the benchmark providers have issued guides on how to proctor their test from home. Work directly with your benchmark assessment provider.

## 7. Where can I find information on all the Technical Support webinars?

The [Return to Learn Technical Support Webinar Series](#) can be found at the bottom of the [MDE COVID-19 Education Information and Resources page](#).

## Return to Learn Law (RTL) and Read by Grade 3 Law (RBG3)

### 1. How do the requirements to administer benchmark assessments in the first 9 weeks of the school year under RTL align with the RBG3 requirement to screen in the first 30 days of school?

The two laws are distinct, and the RBG3 screening requirements are not modified by the RTL benchmarking requirements. [The initial and extensive assessments](#) required by RBG3 are administered to identify students in grades K-3 who need an Individual Reading Improvement Plan (IRIP). The benchmark assessments required

by RTL are administered to students in grades K-8 to monitor progress towards mastery of state academic standards in reading and math. Where appropriate, the same assessment tool may meet the requirements of both laws.

## 2. Will there be any updates to the legislation around the Read by Grade 3 law that requires assessment within the first 30 days?

MDE is not aware of any plans to update the Read by Grade 3 law at this time.

## Fall 2020 SAT and PSAT Testing in High School

### 1. Are SAT and PSAT required this fall?

The State School Aid Act was updated at the end of September 2020 and provides the following clarification: Districts are required to make the PSAT and SAT tests available to eligible students this fall and to encourage, but not require, students to take the assessment.

### 2. Exactly which grades and College Board assessments are districts expected to administer this fall?

The College Board assessments districts are required to make available are:

- PSAT 8/9 to 9th graders
- PSAT/NMSQT to 10th and 11th graders
- SAT with Essay to 12th graders

### 3. Will the fall PSAT or SAT be used for accountability?

No; they will not be used for accountability purposes.

### 4. Will PSAT 8/9 count for the grade 8 benchmark assessment requirement under the Return to Learn Law?

Schools can choose to use the PSAT 8/9 as their benchmark assessment choice in grade 8 under the local assessment option. Schools will have to pay for the assessment in the fall and must understand that the results for the state-administered Spring 2021 assessments might not be available in time to meet the reporting

requirements of the Return to Learn law. Also, the Spring 2021 summative testing requirement is unrelated to the Return to Learn benchmark assessment requirements. Therefore, any changes in testing requirements for Spring 2021 statewide assessments may or may not translate into the similar changes to benchmark testing requirements under Return to Learn.

### 5. Are SAT and PSAT required this coming spring?

Currently statewide summative assessment is still required for Spring 2021. This means the following College Board assessments will be required in the spring:

- PSAT 8/9 in grade 8 – this is included in accountability measures
- PSAT 8/9 in grade 9 – this is not included in accountability measures
- PSAT 10 in grade 10 – this is not included in accountability measures
- SAT with Essay in grade 11 – this is included in accountability measures

### 6. Is the College Board working toward remote administration?

Currently there is no remote administration option for the College Board assessments.

### 7. Can we give the PSAT 8/9 to students in January if we are paying for it?

Yes.



## Miscellaneous – Not related to the Return to Learn Law

### 1. What are the dates of M-STEP this year?

The dates for the Spring 2021 M-STEP are included in the [2020-2021 Guide to State Assessments](#), which is located on the [M-STEP web page](#) ([www.michigan.gov/mstep](http://www.michigan.gov/mstep)).

### 2. Are there benchmark cut scores for the Michigan’s Early Literacy benchmark assessments?

Currently there are no cut scores associated with the MDE-developed Early Literacy and Mathematics Benchmark Assessments. We are planning to have some form of standard setting exercise and are setting the stage for the

development of cut scores after the Spring 2021 administration. Current reporting includes in-year comparisons of scores across the three assessment cycles—fall, winter, and spring—and a new 3-year trend report.

### 3. What is the timeline to hear back from the Feds about the test waiver?

Education Secretary Betsy DeVos has clearly stated waivers for annual summative testing in Spring 2021 are unlikely. Michigan State Superintendent Michael Rice has said, “We will be reapplying this winter for federal waivers from statewide summative test administration.”