Data literacy and its direct influence in guiding instruction, alongside a balanced approach including the use of formative and interim strategies ensures all children have fair and equitable opportunities to obtain a high-quality education and reach, at a minimum, proficiency on challenging academic content standards.

**Defining Standards, Instruction, and Assessment:**

- **Standards** are what students should know and be able to do to be college and workforce ready.
- **Curriculum** is the instructional strategies and resources teachers use to ensure students are making progress towards the knowledge and skills they are expected to learn as they progress through their K–12 education.
- **Assessment** is the gathering, organizing, and evaluation of information about student learning in order to monitor and measure the effectiveness of the instructional program (see Administrative Rules for Montana [ARM 10.55.602](#)).

Assessment is a process for eliciting evidence of achievement from the learner. The outcomes from that process can be used to immediately inform the instruction while actively engaging in the learning (formative assessment) to help monitor the student learning progress and proficiency and perhaps predict future success through interim assessments. The end-of-year marks the end of the instructional sequence as the summative assessment which “sums-up” the learning.

These data can inform educators to make decisions and leverage resources to improve instruction and supports for students.
What is a Balanced Assessment System?

Per ARM 10.56.101, “A balanced assessment system including formative, interim, and summative assessments aligned to state content standards, will provide an integrated approach to meeting both classroom learning needs and school and state level information needs…”

- **What is a System?** A thoughtful, coordinated, and comprehensive process for assuring that the curriculum, the instructional program, and the assessment process are in fact part of a cohesive vision.

- **What is Coherence?** All components of the curriculum, instruction, and the assessment process are aligned and form a coherent set of expectations for learning.

- **What is Balance?** Appropriate weighting and distribution of learning. Balanced assessments are used for (1) different purposes, (2) at different times, and (3) to fulfill different data needs.

Balanced assessment system is needed is because state assessment systems that focus on once-a-year summative testing do not provide sufficient information to improve student learning and school capacity. Balance occurs when we don't rely on one measure to tell the entire story of a student's growth as a learner. The idea is not to have an equal amount of each type of assessment, but rather, as many different data points from assessments to guide teaching that will, in turn, improve student outcomes.

Reference:
To ensure continuous education improvement, the Montana Board of Public Education established the requirement for a continuous school improvement plan. The school district and each of its schools shall develop, implement, and evaluate continuous school improvement plans and make the plans available to the public. These plans shall be reviewed on a yearly basis to reflect a continuous improvement process (ARM 10.55.601).

Below are some ideas to support the annual Continuous Improvement Cycle using the resources from the Smarter Balanced Assessment System:
- Review the Montana Content Standards so you are familiar with the grade level requirements for each subject;
- Make sure the district curriculum aligns with the Montana Content Standards and goes through the district review process every five years;
- Use data-driven instruction practices guided by the Montana Content Standards, district curriculum, and assessment feedback loop;
- Provide immediate feedback combined with formative strategies to enable educators to individualize instruction for all students;
- Use end-of-year summative assessments to review progress toward district goals and system programmatic effects;
- Annually evaluate district, school, and student summative results to ensure the district is meeting content standard goals and showing growth; and
- Send home individual score reports from summative tests to engage parents in the district plan.

Content Specifications
The content specifications in ELA/literacy and math ensure these assessment tools cover the range of knowledge and skills within the Montana Content Standards for math and ELA. These specifications serve as the basis for summative, interim, and formative assessments.
Mathematics Content Specifications
ELA/Literacy Content Specifications
(1) Review the Content Standards

Per ARM 10.55.603, “The information obtained [from statewide assessment score reports] shall be considered in curriculum and assessment development.” Standards review should always be coordinated with properly aligned assessment score reports.

**Montana Content Standards**

Montana Content Standards define what students should know and be able to do. Montana uses the Smarter Balanced assessment that is aligned to Montana’s Content Standards for mathematics and English language arts (ELA) as adopted in the fall of 2011 and implemented July 1, 2013. Review the Montana Content Standards to understand the grade level benchmarks for each subject area:

**Smarter Balanced Content Explorer**

This is a site designed for educators to understand the connection between the Smarter Balanced interim and summative assessments and the Montana Content Standards.

**Common terms within the Smarter Balanced system surrounding standard alignment include:**

- **Subjects** are defined as a department of knowledge, (i.e. math and ELA).
- **Claims** are broad categories that summarize the knowledge and skills students are expected to demonstrate for a specific aspect of the content standards. Both ELA and math include four claims.
- **Targets** are at a more granular level than claims in explaining the knowledge skills, and/or abilities expected at a grade level as defined by the standards. A target can be aligned to one or more standards. In fact, some are aligned to part of a standard.
**Align the Curriculum**

Per [ARM 10.55.603](http://example.com), “local school districts shall ensure their curriculum is aligned to all content standards and the appropriate learning progression for each grade level…,” which includes using assessment results to “…examine the educational program and measure its effectiveness.”

**Suggested Steps** for selecting high-quality instructional materials:

1. Establish district process, parameters and a timeline,
2. Create a curriculum review group,
3. Engage educators early and often,
4. Collect key evidence-based research and resources,
5. Evaluate materials,
6. Make a decision,
7. Create a rollout and implementation plan, and
8. Continue to assess the effectiveness of the selected instructional materials and implementation.

**Review Schedule**

Montana’s school accreditation rules require that school districts review curricula every five years while also reviewing the materials necessary for implementing those curricula.
(3) Data-Driven Instruction

Per ARM 10.56.101, “A balanced assessment system is structured to continuously improve teaching and learning…” by including the use of formative and interim assessments.

A) **Interim assessments** offer Montana teachers the option to periodically check student progress throughout the year, giving actionable feedback to improve instruction and help students meet the Montana Content Standards. There are three types of interims:
   a. **Interim Comprehensive Assessments (ICAs)** measure similar content to the summative assessment and may be helpful for determining the knowledge and skills of students who are new to the district or state.
   b. **Interim Assessment Blocks (IABs)** focus on smaller sets of related concepts and provide more detailed information for instructional purposes.
   c. **Focused Interim Assessment Blocks (FIABs)** are the smallest set of interims that are often between 5-10 questions and can be completed as a warm-up with immediate feedback.

B) **Formative Assessment: Tools for Teachers** is a website for instructional resources and professional development built by educators, including Montana classroom teachers. A few of its features include:
   a) Interactive Connections Playlist that help guide next steps after interim assessments are given
   b) High-quality lesson plans aligned to learning standards,
   c) Embedded formative assessment strategies in every lesson,
   d) Accessibility instructional strategies, and
   e) **Interim Assessment Item Portal (IAIP)** that allows educators to customize interim items, download to a PDF, print and administer in a paper-pencil format.

C) **smART** is newly-developed and provides a collection of annotated student writing samples for each score level to be used as part of the formative process.
(5) Annually Assess
Per ARM 10.56.101, “the Board of Public Education adopts rules for state-level assessment in the public schools and those private schools seeking accreditation” to include annual summative assessments recognizing that “a balanced assessment system is structured to continuously improve teaching and learning and to inform education policy.

Test Development & Design
Test blueprints describe the content of the ELA/literacy and math end-of-year tests for grades 3–8 and high school and how that content should be assessed.

ELA & math (Smarter Balanced) Test Blueprints
- ELA/Literacy Blueprints
- Mathematics Blueprints
- Estimated Testing Times

Testing Calendar
The assessment windows (i.e. dates) are available for review on the OPI Assessment Unit webpage.

Accessibility
Accessibility resources provided on Smarter Balanced assessments must be turned on/off at the local level to ensure equitable access for students with diverse needs and preferences. See the Montana Accessibility page.

Participation & Eligibility
Montana state law and accreditation rules require all students to participate in the Board approved grade and content specific statewide assessments. As a local control state, the Montana OPI relies on districts to work towards student inclusion to the fullest extent possible. Review the Six Things Stakeholders Should Know About Participation and Testing in Montana document.
(6) Evaluation: Using the Data
Per ARM 10.55.603, “The district shall use assessment results, including state-level achievement information obtained by administration of assessments pursuant to ARM 10.56.101 to examine the educational program and measure its effectiveness.”

Data Literacy
Data literacy is the single most important component in any balanced assessment system; without such the value of assessments is curtailed. The following resources are the essential starting points in using data to drive instruction:
- Reporting System manuals, tutorials and user guides to access district, school, and individual student level score reports within the Montana testing portal.
- Data Literacy Course on the Teacher Learning Hub.

Parent Engagement
Under the ESSA State Plan, districts are required to provide parents/guardians with their child’s summative score reports and an accompanying letter of support.
- Starting Smarter is a website for parents and families to better understand their child’s test scores.

Public Facing Reports
Score reports are aggregated to permit the general scores to be published for a public audience. The public facing score report sites are:
- GEMS is Montana’s state-wide longitudinal education data system.
- Montana Report Card provides annual state, district, and school report cards to show how Montana’s schools are performing.