

Motivating Students to Put Forth Their Best Effort and Other Tips for Administering the *High Schools That Work* Assessment



Since 1988, the Southern Regional Education Board's (SREB) *High Schools That Work* (HSTW) Assessment has been providing high schools and technology centers with information on their progress in improving student achievement as well as school and classroom practices. During even-numbered years, more than 1,000 HSTW and TCTW sites in 37¹ states assess more than 60,000 seniors using subject tests in reading, mathematics and science, which are based on the 2009 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) frameworks and modified to serve as measures of college and career readiness. A survey of student experiences and course-taking patterns is administered in conjunction with the subject tests. The HSTW Assessment includes teacher surveys for HSTW and TCTW sites that capture school and classroom experiences of all teaching staff.

Despite increases in accountability testing and data collection in participating states over the past few years, more than 1,300 schools continue to administer SREB assessments. The reason they do so is relatively simple: The data provided by these unique assessments fill an important need. While state tests illustrate how high school students are doing in meeting state standards in core subject areas, the results of the HSTW Assessment also paint a picture of the quality of experiences students have had in school and how those experiences affect student achievement. This information enables schools to continue to engage their faculties in understanding why they must make fundamental changes that will result in deeper implementation of the HSTW and TCTW designs and ultimately improve student achievement.

There is no question that administering the assessments requires careful planning and effort on the part of schools. Each year a variety of questions arise from both new and experienced HSTW and TCTW sites on how they can give the best assessment possible and encourage students to put forth their best effort to attain valid and reliable results. This document is designed to answer frequently asked questions and share tips from SREB staff members, HSTW and TCTW state coordinators, and schools that have been successful in administering the HSTW Assessment.

SREB and Educational Testing Service (ETS) provide materials and guides for administering the assessment, but schools across the country are using a wide variety of strategies to get students and teachers to take the assessment seriously. Individual schools should take into account their location, history with the assessment and student population in considering these ideas. The schools that are most successful in administering the assessment have not only carefully planned, but also adopted the HSTW or TCTW Goals as their own and foster an environment of high expectations in which all students are expected to do their best every day.

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¹ While HSTW has 31 member states, the HSTW Assessment is administered to schools in 37 states.

Tip One: Plan ahead.

Successful planning and preparation for the assessment takes time. Schools receive the most valid results when they carefully prepare for and administer the assessment in accordance with the official instructions and materials provided. Schools that scramble to administer the assessment at the last minute not only convey a message that the assessment is unimportant but also are more likely to make errors in the data collection process.

Some tasks, such as preparing for the course experience section of the *HSTW* Assessment, may take more time than schools anticipate. Therefore, among other administration materials, SREB provides a list of recommended tasks and an associated timeline. The first step toward administering a successful assessment is to review that list and set a schedule to ensure the school is ready for the assessment before the actual administration. One of the first tasks includes selecting testing dates, placing them on school and district calendars, and communicating these dates to the appropriate people.

While schools have great flexibility in administering the assessment, they should ensure they adhere to all testing guidelines and carefully consider all recommendations. For example, schools may administer the assessment at any time during the official testing window; however, SREB recommends schools be mindful of other commitments that must be met during that window, such as the school's break and state testing schedule. Another important consideration is the climate in which the school is located. If snow or other inclement weather is likely during the testing window, it is best not to select the last week of testing in case such weather causes school closures or delays that might interfere with testing. Assessment materials returned after the deadline cannot be scanned and results cannot be provided by ETS since the acceptance of late materials causes delays in reporting results to all participating schools.

Schools also have flexibility in the order in which they administer the assessment components (reading test, mathematics test, science test and student survey) and the number of days used for testing; however, SREB recommends that the assessment be given over two to three days, with an additional day reserved for make-up testing. Schools should consider local conditions and patterns of student attendance in advance to maximize scheduling time for the assessment. Be sure to reserve the appropriate amount of space needed for the number of students assessing.

Planning ahead and being well-prepared for the assessment is perhaps the most important tip in administering the assessment successfully and conveying the message that participation is important.

Tip Two: Download and review the Administration Materials.

After ordering the assessment and setting a schedule, schools should familiarize themselves with the assessment Administration Materials (available on the SREB Web site). Hard copies of these materials will not be mailed to schools.

The Administration Materials are very detailed and contain important information about the assessment. These materials include: a memo from SREB Senior Vice President Gene Bottoms, a list of tasks and the approximate time it will take to complete them, a checklist of everything that your site should be doing to prepare for and administer the assessment, instructions on how to take a random sample of students, a student roster form on which you can list your assessing students, a course description guide and a course matching chart for Section 1 of the *HSTW* Student Survey, a bulletin of important information for sites, a test description guide with sample questions for students and teachers, and a draft of the test administration guide (the final version to be used during testing will be mailed to sites with official testing materials). The answer to almost any assessment-related question can be found in these materials. In addition to the Administration Materials, the SREB Web site contains important information about the assessment, how it was developed and how to administer it.

Tip Three: Know what the assessment measures.

The *HSTW* Assessment is based on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) frameworks in reading, mathematics and science.² The content for each *HSTW* subject test is based on the 2009 NAEP frameworks, which were modified to reflect the college- and career-readiness goals of *HSTW*. In addition to measuring continuous school improvement, the *HSTW* Assessment measures readiness for postsecondary education and the workplace.

Components of the HSTW Assessment

Reading: The reading test is 75 minutes and is composed of multiple-choice questions. It is designed to measure students' skills in reading in two areas: Reading to Gain Information and Reading to Perform a Task. Beyond asking normal reading comprehension questions, the test encourages students to extend their own ideas about a passage, interpret what is written and evaluate or judge the point that the author is making. It includes meaning vocabulary and paired texts (to assess critical analysis).

Mathematics: The mathematics test is 80 minutes. The test consists of multiple-choice questions. It requires students to apply reasoning and analytical skills to solve a problem and to judge the reasonableness or correctness of a solution. Calculators are permitted on certain sections of the mathematics test.

Science: The science test is 55 minutes and contains multiple-choice questions. It measures student knowledge of the facts, concepts, principles and methods of science. Students need to be familiar with scientific terminology and be able to interpret information and apply scientific tools and strategies of observation to draw conclusions about real-life situations or problems. Questions will be drawn from life, physical, Earth and space science areas that students have taken in high school.

Student Survey: The Student Survey is untimed but takes about 45 to 60 minutes to complete. The first section asks students about courses they have taken in high school and can be completed prior to test administration by teachers or staff at the school. The next two sections ask students about their perceptions of their high school experiences. Sections 2 and 3, while untimed, can be completed in about 35 to 45 minutes.

Tip Four: Communicate with students and parents.

Once administrators and teachers understand the purpose of the assessment, they will be better able to convey the importance to students and parents who will be involved. There are a variety of ways to distribute information about the assessment. It all starts with mentioning *HSTW* and/or *TCTW* frequently in the schools. Displaying a banner at the front of the school or at athletic events allows the community to become more familiar with the school's involvement in the network. Some schools involve families by sending letters to parents or by including information and reminders about the assessment in their parent newsletters, e-mails and school calendars. If your school has a parent association (e.g., PTA, PTO, PTSA), be sure that the parent-leaders are well-informed about the assessment and all that it provides for the school. Again, mentioning *HSTW* or *TCTW* on a regular basis allows parents to become familiar with the improvement efforts happening in schools.

Schools can use many different methods to inform students that they will be participating in the assessment. At one school in Ohio, assessment coordinators hand-deliver letters to randomly-selected students informing them of their selection and inviting them to participate. These students feel that it is an honor and privilege to participate and that they have a responsibility to do their best. At other schools, a letter is sent home, typically from the principal or site coordinator, congratulating the student for being selected and informing the parents that their son or daughter will be representing the school. Informational sessions are another way to inform students about the assessment, share important details, answer questions and supply students with sample test questions.

² While the *HSTW* Assessment is NAEP-like, it is not the NAEP. For more information on NAEP, please visit <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/>.

Along with providing information about the assessment, many schools inform high school students and parents that each participating senior will receive an individual report detailing his or her performance. Additionally, they inform students and parents that participants are eligible to earn the *HSTW* Award of Educational Achievement. It is also a good idea to ask students and parents to sign an agreement to participate and have students pledge to give their best effort. As schools plan for the next assessment, they should consider how they will provide information and communicate with students and their parents.

Tip Five: Use student reports and the *HSTW* Award of Educational Achievement as an incentive.

Unique to the *HSTW* Assessment are the student reports and the *HSTW* Award of Educational Achievement. Students participating in the assessment will receive an individual student report detailing their performance. This report will include the student's performance level for each subject test (reading, mathematics and science), how far the student has gone in completing a college-preparatory course of study (English/language arts, mathematics and science) and a concentration (career/technical, mathematics/science or humanities), and if the student earned the *HSTW* Award of Educational Achievement. The student report also will contain detailed information about the *HSTW* Assessment to enable placement officers at community colleges or employers to interpret a student's performance with regard to college and workplace readiness. Many schools have found that student motivation has increased with the knowledge that they will receive, and their parents will see, their individual results.

For more than 10 years, SREB has used the *HSTW* Award of Educational Achievement to recognize students at *HSTW* and *TCTW* sites who complete a rigorous high school curriculum and perform at a college- and career-ready level. To earn the award, students must complete a college-preparatory course of study in at least two of three subject areas (English/language arts, mathematics and science); complete a concentration in a career/technical area, mathematics/science or the humanities; and meet the readiness goals on all three subject tests on the *HSTW* Assessment.

A parent of an *HSTW* Award of Educational Achievement recipient explained that "the idea that a company or business might give a helping hand to my daughter is saying something very important to our young people." Another recipient was offered a job because of the *HSTW* Award of Educational Achievement and said "the award was a great gesture to me, and I loved the opportunity it gave me." Some schools and states have been able to use the Award to obtain scholarships for their students. Schools can work with their community employers and postsecondary institutions to have them recognize the Award.

To promote the *HSTW* Award of Educational Achievement, students should be made aware of the Award and what it can offer them. Schools could consider holding a short informational meeting for students who receive the Award to explain how to include it on their resumes or college applications. Schools should also publicize the Award and publicly recognize the students who earn it. Schools have hung banners in the front of the building with the names of recipients; congratulated recipients on a marquee outside of the school; recognized these students at an awards ceremony, academic banquet or graduation; and honored them in the local or community newspaper. At some schools, students who earn this Award are given color cords to wear during graduation ceremonies. Consider these ways to spotlight the students who did exceptionally well on the assessment.

Tip Six: Appeal to a culture of continuous improvement.

The schools that have been the most successful in getting students to take the assessments seriously are those in which leadership and faculty understand the importance of the assessment and its role in school improvement efforts. While it can be difficult to explain to principals, vice principals, guidance counselors and teachers that they should focus some of their valuable time and hard work on the *HSTW* Assessment, it is absolutely vital to have everyone on board. Often, students can be motivated to take the assessment seriously simply by understanding its importance and their role in improving the school.

It Starts With the State in Ohio

To get schools and site coordinators organized and ready for the administration of the assessment, Susanne Davis, *HSTW* Assessment Coordinator for Ohio, e-mails weekly tips to her Ohio sites. Topics addressed include attending a regional workshop; scheduling the assessment; components of the assessment; informing others at the school about the assessment; motivating students; random sampling; reading, mathematics and science test composition; course matching and transcript analysis; use of calculators; student and teacher surveys; returning materials; and general FAQs. Davis believes that “sending these out weekly keeps the assessment work in the forefront and breaks up much of the work into more manageable pieces. It also gives us the chance to reinforce things like the importance of random sampling and course matching correctly.” These tips are updated weekly and include the latest information from SREB and ETS.

How SREB consultants make a difference

SREB Consultant Donald Westerman believes that preparing students before the assessment really affects the success of results. Because SREB consultants are neither teachers nor administrators at the particular school, students may be more likely to listen to what the consultants have to say about taking the assessment seriously. He uses a PowerPoint presentation to explain the assessment and why it is necessary and to answer students’ questions. Westerman tells faculty and students that although this is not a high-stakes assessment and there are no sanctions against the students or school for not doing well, the results show how practices and policies at the school affect student achievement. In other words, the results of the subject tests and student and teacher surveys influence priorities for school improvement and classroom practice. He motivates students by letting them know that their school’s results will be compared to other rival schools in the district and state. Westerman tries to convey the message that this is students’ chance to make a difference in their school. He believes that schools that prepare students and faculty receive more accurate results.

Count on parents to provide.

Schools that have a Parent-Teacher Association (PTA), Parent-Teacher Organization (PTO) or Parent-Teacher-Student Association (PTSA) should utilize this committee to publicize the assessment and motivate students. These organizations could provide snacks or goodie bags for students taking the assessment. In the past, PTAs, PTOs or PTSAs have provided goodie bags with pencils, hard candies, bottles of water, school paraphernalia, free passes to school events, small gift certificates and information about the assessment and the *HSTW* Award of Educational Achievement. If your school has a committee of volunteers who are willing to help, have them find ways to reward those students who complete the assessment.

What can school leaders do?

Support for the assessment must start with the principal. Sue Smith, former director of career/technical education in West Virginia, believes that communication with teachers is critical. “Administrators must convey the message that the assessment is important if they want teachers and students to take it seriously,” Smith said. The principal should meet with teachers and explain how important the assessment and the data it provides are to the school. For teachers who are skeptical of the assessment, an involved principal can ease doubts. After the assessment is administered, it is helpful for principals to receive feedback from teachers who had concerns or problems. A critical action is for administrators to share and discuss results with teachers. Teachers will be more supportive of the assessment if they see the results and are involved in using them to improve the school.

Students also appreciate the encouragement and involvement of a principal. When principals refer to *HSTW* or *TCTW* on a regular basis, the student body is more likely to care about the assessment. Students enjoy special recognition, especially when it comes from their school principal. Keith Baker, principal at Bauxite High School in Arkansas, cooks burgers for all of his students during the lunch break on an assessment day. Peggy Fillio, former principal at Indianola Middle School in Iowa and current SREB School Improvement Consultant, would proctor the assessment along with the eighth-grade guidance counselor at her school. David Talley, Director of Calhoun County Career Technical Center in Alabama, provides students who complete the assessment with a \$10 gift card.

What can teachers do?

With the support of school leadership, each teacher carries significant weight in the success of the assessment. Teachers have the most contact with students and can be very helpful in motivating them to do well. Also, cooperation from teachers whose classes might be interrupted by the assessment is imperative. Teachers should understand that some students will miss their class due to the assessment, and it is important for students not to feel penalized for not being in class.

The “Student Bulletin with Sample Questions Booklet,” which can be found in the *HSTW* Assessment Administration Materials, is a helpful guide for students and teachers. Department chairs of English/language arts, mathematics and science, as well as other teachers of seniors may review these sample items and content areas that students will see on the assessment. Several high schools in South Carolina believe that reviewing terminology, especially what is used in the student survey section, is beneficial to students. Because the surveys are administered in 37 states, SREB uses generic terminology for many questions. Schools may have specific programs or initiatives that address the questions but use different terminology. If students do not understand the survey language, they might not provide the best answer.

Create an Assessment Team to Assist the Site Coordinator and Complete the Course Experience Section of the HSTW Student Survey

Several schools in South Carolina believe that creating a team of counselors and teachers to assist with the assessment is a great way to get needed help and have more faculty “in the know.” Consider having the Site Coordinator put together a committee of guidance counselors and teachers of seniors who will be assessing. The assessment team members can serve as proctors for the assessment and help complete the Course Experience section of the *HSTW* Student Survey.

The first section of the *HSTW* Student Survey asks a series of questions about the courses students will have completed by the end of high school. Schools are given the option of having teachers or counselors complete the course experience section of the survey rather than having students do so. SREB recommends that teachers complete the course experience section because students are not always familiar with school transcripts and errors are often made. This is particularly important when career centers are assessing students from multiple feeder schools. The career center should work with the home schools to complete the course-matching chart. Additionally, when teachers complete the first section of the survey, the total testing time for students is reduced by about 30 minutes.

Tip Seven: Determine what motivates your students to do their best and act accordingly.

Even with an eager faculty and a smooth assessment administration, schools will not receive the data they are looking for if students don't put forth their best effort. Motivating 12th-graders to do just about anything can be a difficult task. However, *HSTW* and *TCTW* sites have implemented a variety of strategies to make students feel appreciated and important and to help them believe that their effort will make a difference for the entire school.

One successful tactic is free food. Many schools provide a healthy breakfast for students to enjoy before taking the assessment. Students are almost always excited about free food, and the breakfast can also give them the energy they need for the assessment. Some schools make available hard candy or water bottles for students during the assessment. A pizza lunch is also an easy way to feed students. If your school doesn't have the funds to provide breakfast or lunch, think about setting aside some time between subject tests for students to visit the vending machine or eat a snack that they have brought from home. Also consider asking local restaurants to donate food on assessment days.

Door prizes or raffles are a great way to motivate students not only to take the assessment, but also to complete all four sections. Schools can get the community involved by asking local businesses to provide free or reduced-price gift certificates or prizes. Restaurants, movie theatres, amusement parks, hair and nail salons, gift shops, or sports and outdoors stores are a great starting point. To set up a drawing, schools could include all students who assess or only those who complete all four sections. Students are more likely to focus and finish the assessment if there is a cool prize waiting for them. You could have small prizes for each completer or one large prize, such as an iPod, for one or more lucky raffle-winning students. The possibilities are endless — just be sure to let the students know that they will be rewarded for actually completing the assessment.

Special recognition of the participating students makes them feel valued. While this is not a high-stakes assessment, students will receive individual reports. Announcements on the PA system, at pep rallies, at athletic events, or at assemblies are an easy way to spotlight the students who are providing such a service to the school. Consider hanging a banner or plaque for special services to the school with the names of students who participate and/or receive the *HSTW* Award of Educational Achievement.

Corbin High School in Kentucky chooses its random sample of 60 students and designates them the "Senior Representatives." They become the go-to students throughout their senior year. Students receive t-shirts that designate them as senior representatives, and they are worn with pride!

Schools should keep in mind that the students who participate in the assessment are very conscious of what their fellow non-participating classmates are doing during the administration of the assessment. If the non-assessing students are watching a movie or doing something "fun," the assessing students might be jealous or annoyed, have their mind somewhere else, and be eager to finish quickly. Also, if the assessing students have a substantial amount of make-up work to complete as a result of their participation, they may exhibit a bad attitude toward the extra burden of taking the assessment. When all of the teachers in the school understand the importance of the assessment, they are more likely to work with students on getting caught up in regular class work. Schools and teachers can provide assessing students with some free time after they are finished with the test. Some schools plan a special field trip to a local park or museum for the students who assessed. Free tickets to athletic events, fine arts performances or other school-sponsored activities, such as prom, are always appealing to students.

How schools can reward their students who participate in and complete the assessment:

- Provide breakfast and/or lunch on the days of the assessment.
- Provide door prizes or a raffle to reward students for completing the assessment.
- Recognize students' efforts.
- Ease the make-up work-load for participating students who miss class.
- Provide free time after completing of the assessment (within school and district policy).
- Give students free tickets to school-sponsored activities.

New York Career Center Goes Above and Beyond

Genna Suraci, Principal of Ulster County BOCES in Port Ewen, New York, employs a variety of strategies to motivate her students for the *HSTW* Assessment. She begins by randomly selecting 150 students in November and inviting them to participate in a pep rally. After informing them that they have been selected to participate in a special assessment, she asks each student at the pep rally to complete a questionnaire that requests a commitment to participate. If the student agrees to participate, he or she is required to sign the document and adhere to their commitment. Suraci finds that a small minority of students decline but most agree to participate. A random sample of 100 students is then drawn from those who agree to participate in the assessment. The extra students who agreed to participate but were not randomly selected become alternates. After students are selected, a letter is sent home to parents congratulating them on their son or daughter being selected and agreeing to participate in the assessment. The letter explains that it is an honor to represent the school in this capacity.

To build a sense of ownership of the assessment, Suraci provides participating students with choices to maximum their experience. The questionnaire that students filled out at the pep rally collected information on when they would like to take the assessment during the three-week administration window. No matter when they assess, Suraci provides breakfast and lunch for participating students, even letting them vote on the lunch vendor. Students also are given an option of the reward they will receive after participating: a \$15 gift certificate to the mall or driving and parking privileges at the career/technical center. In addition, all students who complete the assessment receive a book of movie passes, which are donated to the school by local merchants who are solicited by the school's public relations and guidance committees. Additional funds for meals and other rewards come from student organizations, vending machines and a special budget for rewards that Suraci sets aside each year.

In addition to those choices and incentives, the 100 students who participate in the assessment are designated the "Fearless 100." These students are encouraged to wear a "Fearless 100" button, as teachers hand out raffle tickets during a four-week period in the fall to students seen wearing their buttons. A drawing is then held for prizes donated by local merchants. In addition to wearing the buttons, these 100 students are recognized and thanked during PA announcements at the school as well as through an official proclamation by the state legislature.

Suraci's hard work has paid off. In 2008, Ulster County BOCES had a 96 percent assessment completion rate, meaning 96 percent of participating students completed all four components of the assessment. By motivating students for the assessment, the school receives more thorough and accurate data.

For more information on the *HSTW* Assessment, please visit the SREB Web site (www.sreb.org).