

Oregon Department of Education
Office of Teaching, Learning & Assessment
<https://www.oregon.gov/ode>

How does Oregon ensure its assessments are fair?

Introduction:

Welcome to the Oregon Department of Education's learning session on *How does Oregon ensure its assessments are fair?* In this session Wen and William will discuss:

- The use of academic standards to define what is taught and assessed in Oregon classrooms and schools,
- Development practices that help ensure fairness including standardization, Universal Design, and accommodation, and
- How assessments are reviewed, piloted, and revised to ensure a lack of bias as well as accessible content for all students.

Let's listen in on the conversation Wen and William are having around assessment fairness and accessibility here in Oregon!

Wen: Hi, William! How's it going?

William: To be honest, I've got something on my mind at the moment.

Wen: What's going on?

William: It's about my son. He's in fifth grade. The other day, he came home with questions after taking the state assessment in math. He told me that he couldn't answer some of the questions and he didn't understand why.

Wen: So... are you wondering how we know state assessments are fairly assessing what they're supposed to?

William: Yes, maybe. I am wondering how we know if these assessments are actually assessing what he learned in class. For example, how is it fair to ask him questions he's never seen before?

Wen: Hmm. I'm really glad you came to me. Has anyone ever explained to you the process that assessment developers go through when they are designing state assessments? I'm thinking that might help you understand what the state does to make them fair for all students.

William: Not yet, but I am willing to listen.

Wen: Well, developing state assessments involves a lot of people and a very careful design and review process.

William: Okay. Go on.

Wen: First, assessment developers begin by identifying the content that students are supposed to know and the performance expectations that they are supposed to meet. Here in Oregon, the state academic standards outline the knowledge and skills that students are expected to have in the different content areas, like language arts, math, and science at each grade level.

William: I've heard about them, but where can I learn more about these standards?

Wen: The content standards for *all* the content areas and grade levels can be found on the Oregon Department of Education's website. The website is publicly available. The Department wants parents and teachers to know what grade-level content is taught in each year.

William: Hmm. So, you're saying that this same information is used by the people who make the assessments?

Wen: Exactly. The assessment developers want to assess what's being taught in Oregon's classrooms, so they use the state standards to make an assessment blueprint. This blueprint includes the content that Oregon educators help the state develop and is basically a plan that makes sure assessments cover what is being taught and that they are given to students using standardized procedures.

William: So, it sounds like the standards create an even playing field for both teachers and assessment developers.

Wen: Yep. It's like designing and building a house: architects make a blueprint based on state and city codes, and then, contractors use that blueprint to actually build the house. The blueprint makes sure there are things like electrical outlets in all the rooms, and that everything is installed to the standard building codes.

William: But, Wen...houses aren't all the same, and building codes change.

Wen: Yes, that's true. The point I'm making is that even as codes change, at any time they apply to everything being built. Content standards and assessments work the same way. Standards can and do change over time, and our assessments shift with them. Take math and science assessment. Our expectations for what students need to learn have changed a lot in the last fifty years.

William: So, basically what you are saying is that what my children are being taught and the state assessments they take—or any assessment, really—should *both* follow state standards.

Wen: Yes. We call that “alignment.” There really shouldn’t be many surprises on Oregon’s statewide assessments. By design, all state assessments are aligned to the state’s content and performance standards and administered using standardized procedures over time and across students.

William: Well, that makes sense. I’m glad the assessments test what is being taught in the classroom. But, I’m not sure what you mean by “across students.”

Wen: I mean, all students everywhere should have the same opportunity to show what they know and can do. When an assessment provides an advantage or disadvantage to groups of students because of their personal characteristics, such as race, gender, socioeconomic status, or religion, that’s called “bias.” The state takes bias very seriously. A biased assessment can make content less accessible and mask real learning that is taking place.

William: I don’t know exactly how to say this, but I’m wondering if that’s what happened on my son’s test. Maybe he had a bad experience because the test was biased—maybe he didn’t quite understand some of the examples because he hadn’t experienced them growing up in a very rural part of the state.

Wen: Well, let’s talk about bias then. Assessment items are written using Universal Design, a set of detailed principles and guidelines that allow for clear and unbiased access to assessment content for all students.

As part of Universal Design, assessment developers focus on *precision*: precision means that assessments and items are accurate and clear. A precise assessment measures students’ knowledge and skills, not their misinterpretations or lack of background knowledge.

William: It makes sense that assessment content needs to be clear and accurate based on academic standards so that students have a fair shake at showing what they know.

Wen: Exactly. Assessments and assessment items also go through an extensive review process. Representatives ranging from teachers with grade-level and content expertise, to parents representing different homes, as well as diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, to disability advocates take part in alignment, bias, and accessibility reviews. The representatives identify items that appear to be unclear, inaccurate, or biased in favor or against particular groups of students.

William: Wow. Lots of Oregon educators and community partners are involved in reviewing our assessments.

Wen: Well, they’re all vital to helping make sure that all assessment items are fair to all students. Per your concern, an item that’s more confusing to students who live on a farm than to students who live in a city, for instance, is considered biased and would be revised or replaced so the assessment is equally fair to students who live in different parts of the state.

William: So...the assessment blueprint is written using both the state content standards and that process you just explained, what's it called? Universal Design?

Wen: Yes, Universal Design.

William: Okay, I get that. And then the assessment items are reviewed by teachers, parents, and advocates to make sure they are aligned and not biased for or against particular groups of students. But, is that all?

Wen: No, there's more. After the assessment items are reviewed and revised if needed, they are "piloted," or tested out, with actual students. The results are analyzed to see how different groups of students perform.

William: And, do these developers also check to see if items perform well for students experiencing disabilities?

Wen: They sure do. Items have to perform well for all students. This part of the process involves lots of statistical analyses. Biased items are discarded, or revised to remove the bias. Remember, the point is to ensure that all students have access to the content that's being assessed.

William: Wow. I had no idea there was so much going on.

Wen: Actually, there's even more! Statewide summative assessments in Oregon also include a variety of accessibility supports that help make sure students are able to show their actual knowledge and skills.

William: Wen, I'm not sure I know what you mean by "accessibility supports."

Wen: Well, for example, many math items include an option for having the item read aloud by the computer or by the person administering the assessment. Some provide translations into different languages to help make the assessment item more accessible to students needing language support services. Or, an assessment might include glossaries, which help students understand what key words mean.

For students who need even more or different supports, the state offers a variety of accommodations to meet their needs.

William: Accommodations? Are they like some sort of specialized supports?

Wen: Yes, you can think of them in that way. If it's on their Individualized Education Program (or IEP) or Section 504 plans, students can be given accommodations during assessment—things like having extra time to complete their assessments, taking their assessments in multiple, shorter sessions, with breaks in between to aid in refocusing. Some students need to have assessments presented in Braille. Others might need physical assistance or adaptive technology to provide their response to certain types of assessment items.

Just like the academic standards, the list of allowable accommodations can be found on the Oregon Department of Education website.

William: You know, you've really given me a lot to think about, Wen. Thanks for taking the time to talk with me.

Wen: No problem at all, William! I'm glad I could help. I'd like to add one last thing, though, if I may. Statewide assessments help maintain high academic standards, and because student performance is publicly reported, are part of the process to ensure greater transparency and fairness.

As part of this, the Oregon Equity Lens, also available on the Department's website, clearly articulates Oregon's goal of building an equitable educational system for all students. The Equity Lens is worth checking out, William, as it details accountability structures to ensure that we're making progress and that investments are going where they need to go to remedy inequities in the system.

William: So, basically, the statewide assessments help keep all Oregon educators on the same page, in terms of what they are teaching, and let the public know how schools and districts are performing.

Wen: Yes, that's the idea. Because they are aligned to the state academic content standards, and because teachers are expected to teach those standards, the state's variety of assessments provide a way for all of us in Oregon to find out if we're meeting students' needs. Then we can identify areas that need more attention, especially areas where we can do better in building a more equitable education system for all students and families.

William: Wow, Wen. This has been really great. Thanks again.

Wen: No problem, William. Talk to you soon.

Conclusion:

This concludes Oregon Department of Education's session on *How are Oregon's assessments fair?* During this conversation, Wen and William discussed the different ways in which assessments and assessment-related practices are designed and implemented to be fair for all students here in Oregon. We hope this information will help parents partner with teachers to support children. Please check out the other video learning sessions on assessment-related topics and ODE's website for more helpful information. Thanks for joining!