

## **FAQ Regarding Benchmark Exam Proficiency Levels**

### **How were the benchmark exam proficiency levels determined?**

The proficiency levels for the benchmark exams were set such that the distribution of scores across the district would mirror the districtwide distribution of California Standards Test (CST) scores. For instance, for the past several years, about 30 percent of Grade 3 students in San Diego Unified School District have scored at the "Advanced" level on the Mathematics CST. Therefore, the cutpoint for the "Advanced" level on the benchmark was set so that about the top 30 percent of students would fall into that category.

### **What is the rationale behind the cutpoint-setting process?**

This approach was decided upon based on our work in correlating performance on the 2007-08 benchmark exams with end-of-year CST performance. For that analysis we used three different statistical approaches to determine the cutpoints that would most accurately predict performance on the CST. In the end, we found that the distribution-matching approach described above resulted in almost identical cutpoints to those that were determined by using the combination of the three more complex statistical analyses. This approach allows us to set cutpoints for the 2008-09 benchmark exams that we expect to be predictive of CST performance.

### **How can a score of 60 percent correct be called "Proficient" on one exam and "Below Basic" on another?**

The distribution of CST scores varies considerably among different grade levels and subjects. For instance, each year nearly 35 percent of Grade 3 students score "Advanced" on their Mathematics CST, compared to less than 25 percent of students in Grade 5. The benchmark exams also vary in terms of their level of difficulty. For example, while 32 percent of Grade 2 students answered at least 80 percent of the questions correctly on in Mathematics Benchmark 1, only 13 percent of Grade 4 students scored 80 percent or higher on their ELA Benchmark 1. Because of this variability, different benchmark exams often have very different performance-level cutpoints.

### **How can a student be called "Proficient" when 40 percent of his answers are incorrect?**

As with the CST, benchmark exam cutpoints are often lower than one might expect or than one might use for a classroom assessment. To score at the "Proficient" level on most elementary-level CSTs, students only need to answer between 65 and 75 percent of the items correctly. Similarly, on some benchmark exams students can score "Proficient" with 60 percent or even fewer of their answers correct.

Because a multiple-choice test cannot measure the range of skills and knowledge necessary to meet state standards, nor fully capture the nuances of the trajectory toward proficiency, the meaning of the labels "Basic," "Proficient," etc., on the benchmark exams is different than the meaning of these terms on the Standards-Based Report Card (SBRC). Performance on the benchmark exams should be considered as just one element in the body of evidence used to report student performance on the SBRC.