Guidelines on Academic Preparation for State Assessments

The best academic preparation for state assessments is good instruction. This can be broadly defined as instruction in the content specified in California's academic content standards, employing the instructional principles and practices set forth in the content-area frameworks. It is the standards and frameworks, not the tests, that guide instructional programs. Instructional programs are designed to ensure that students master the standards at their own and earlier grade levels.

Education Code Section 60611

Appropriate academic preparation for state assessments must be designed to allow students a fair opportunity to prepare academically while ensuring that such preparation does not invalidate test results. Academic preparation is guided by *Education Code (EC)* Section 60611 (a) and (b) as follows:

a) A city, county, city and county, district superintendent of schools, or principal or teacher of any elementary or secondary school, including a charter school, shall not carry on any program of specific preparation of pupils for the statewide pupil assessment program or a particular test used therein.

b) A city, county, city and county, district superintendent of schools, principal, or a teacher of an elementary or secondary school, including a charter school, may use instructional materials provided by the department or its agents in the academic preparation of pupils for the statewide pupil assessment if those instructional materials are embedded in an instructional program that is intended to improve pupil learning.

The *Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing* (1999), also states, "The integrity of test results should be maintained by eliminating practices designed to raise scores without improving performance on the construct or domain being tested" (Standard 15.9).

Further, the National Research Council, in *High Stakes Testing for Tracking, Promotion, and Graduation* (1999), recommends that "all students are entitled to sufficient test preparation so their performance will not be adversely affected by unfamiliarity with item format or by ignorance of appropriate test-taking strategies. Test users should balance efforts to prepare students for a particular test format against the possibility that excessively narrow preparation will invalidate test outcomes."

Determining Appropriate Academic Preparation for State Assessments

To help determine whether their academic preparation practices for state assessments are appropriate, school and district personnel may find it useful to answer the questions noted below. Those who can answer "yes" to all five questions are likely using academic preparation practices for state assessments that are consistent with the *EC* 60611. However, schools and districts are expected to monitor their preparation practices to ensure that they are consistent with *EC* 60611.

1. Are all students in my school/district being provided with a standards-based instructional program employing the instructional principles and practices set forth in the content-area frameworks?	Yes	No
2. Are the preparation materials and/or practices being provided to students meant to improve student learning rather than to achieve a score on a particular test?	Yes	No
3. Are students in my school/district being taught test-taking skills designed to assist them in taking any type of test rather than a particular state test?	Yes	No
4. Are the released test items and other materials used in academic preparation being embedded with our school's/district's standards-based instructional program?	Yes	No
5. Are the released test items and other materials used in academic preparation in my school/district included for the limited purpose of familiarizing students with the structure and format of the items and with strategies for taking multiple-choice tests?	Yes	No

Specific Guidelines on Using the Released Test Questions from the State Assessments

Released test items are available on the Web pages for the California High School Exit Examination (CAHSEE), the California Standards Tests (CSTs), and the California English Language Development Test (CELDT). In selecting test questions for release, three criteria were used: (1) the questions adequately covered a selection of the academic content standards assessed; (2) the questions demonstrated a range of difficulty; and 3) the questions presented a variety of ways standards can be assessed.

The academic preparation practices outlined below will facilitate the appropriate use of the released test questions. The suggestions also apply to materials produced by test-preparation companies as well as those prepared by individual teachers, schools, districts, and county offices of education. By limiting the academic preparation for state assessments to the types of practices described here, schools and districts can be reasonably assured that their preparation is consistent with *EC* 60611.

Teachers may use materials provided by the California Department of Education. It is permissible, for example, to use released state test questions to familiarize students with the structure and format of multiple-choice questions and with strategies for answering such questions on state tests. In addition, released state test questions can be embedded in an instructional program that is intended to improve pupil learning.

Appropriate Academic Preparation for State Multiple-Choice Assessments

■ Teach standards-based curriculum using state-adopted or locally-adopted instructional materials.

■ Use the practice tests (grades two and three only) that are provided by the Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR) test publisher for the purpose of familiarizing students with the use of the answer sheets and the format of the test.

■ Prepare students with test-taking strategies designed to improve their performance on

tests included in the CAHSEE, STAR Program, or the CELDT. This practice may, in fact, make the test more valid by reducing the influence of factors such as previous testing experience.

■ Examples of appropriate test-taking strategies might include:

- Using time efficiently

- Understanding directions

- Placing answer correctly on answer sheets

- Checking answers

- Using the problem-solving tactics of educated guessing, estimating, and working problems backward

- Exposing students to various test formats, including questions that contain "none of the above," "all of above," "not here," negative wording, and true-false statements

■ Use released test questions to teach test-taking skills rather than to drill students on a narrow set of questions. Examples of test-taking skills might include:

- Analyzing released items to understand why standards are assessed in a particular way

- Analyzing released test questions to distinguish between the correct and incorrect answers

- Analyzing released test questions to help students determine what and how standards are assessed

■ Use released test questions to gauge the effectiveness of classroom tests. Appropriate use of questions might include:

- Analyzing whether classroom assessments address standards with the rigor that the state assessments do

- Analyzing whether current classroom assessments adequately cover the academic content standards

- Analyzing whether current classroom assessments present a variety of ways standards can be assessed

■ Prepare students to take tests by focusing on curriculum and standards. Use the CAHSEE, STAR, and CELDT blueprints to address standards to be assessed. The CAHSEE blueprints are found on the California Department of Education (CDE) CAHSEE Program Resources Web page at http://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/tg/hs/resources.asp. The STAR blueprints are found on the CDE STAR Program Resources Web page at http://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/tg/sr/resources.asp. The CELDT blueprints are found on the CDE CELDT Resources Web page at http://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/tg/el/resources.asp.

Appropriate Academic Preparation for CAHSEE, STAR, and CELDT Writing Assessments

■ Have students write regularly in all content domains. The *Reading/Language Arts Framework* contains standards that describe writing strategies, applications, and conventions for these grade levels as well as teaching strategies for implementing the standards effectively.

- Have students write regularly in all genres that may be assessed on a particular test.

- Have students edit their own or others' writing for English language conventions.

- Share scoring rubrics and sample papers with students and help them use these materials to evaluate their own writing.

- Provide written directions for writing prompts throughout the school year and teach students to identify key words in them.

- Teach students to reread directions for the written assignments and then read their responses to verify that they have fulfilled all requirements.